

The remote town of Nijanpur has never disclosed the secret that shrouds its past...

But the sudden return of Samargarh's Raja to his ancestral state revives memories of an old injustice and rekindles questions that have remained unasked for years: What is the cause of the mysterious ailment that grips the Raja's beautiful daughter? Is the cold, ruthless Heera the Raja's step-sister or his mistress and what is the hold she has on him? Why does the Raja walk the streets of Nijanpur in the dead of night? And then there is a terrifying new development: a man-eating tiger begins killing the defenceless peasantry in the area. The Raja undertakes to kill the beast and the stage is set for an eerie, nerve shattering encounter in the twilight forests of Nijanpur where the evil from the past is finally put to rest.

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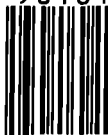
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JANOJ DAS



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Manoj Das was born in 1934. He published his first book, written in Oriya, when he was fourteen. After teaching for a short while in a college in Cuttack he joined the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in 1963 where, from 1985 to 1989, he edited *The Heritage* magazine. At present, he teaches English Literature at the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education in Pondicherry.

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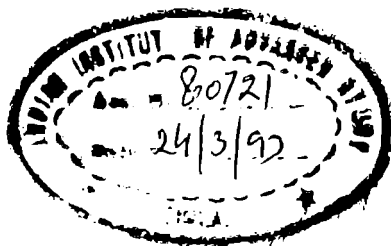
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To the 'Nijanpur' that was—now a fiction.

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For three long days and nights our lonely little valley was tossed by a violent gale that seemed to threaten its very existence. The frequent claps of thunder that echoed in the surrounding hills, seemed to be playing hide and seek; sometimes they made such a terrible noise that I plugged my ears and shut my eyes and imagined myself trapped in a desolate and dreary wasteland, its last blade of grass licked away by thunderbolts. At relatively sober times, the rumbling of the thunder was like the anxious cries of a brood of lion-cubs lost in the hills, yearning for its mother.

The heavy downpour and dark clouds at times either blotted out the world beyond my window, or revealed it in fragments, inspiring me to fill up the blank spaces with my own ideas of the shape of things. The sturdy, old hills were metamorphosed into fantasies, sometimes resembling a colonnade of the citadel of the gods and, at other times, giants in a conference.

In the still of the night, the wailing gusts sounded like incantations of a demoness who, in a frenzy, had taken possession of the valley. I was afraid of looking out too long into the night lest I should catch a glimpse of her weird face. In fact, every flash of lightning across the clouds threatened to reveal it—a huge face with a sinister laugh.

The intensity of the cyclone began to wear itself out on the fourth day. When not engrossed in a fairy tale—the only stuff I enjoyed reading—I had little to do except sit close to the window and gaze at the woods and at the distant hamlets that appeared and disappeared like mirages, depending on the intensity of the rain.

During one of those days of confinement I stepped into my twenty-fifth year. But there was no one to remember my

birthday now that both my parents were dead. I passed the day quietly and nostalgically. One of my earliest memories of a birthday bore the imprint of a storm. A mere child of four, I had suddenly found the sky growing dark and clouds gathering ominously before dashing against a stubborn peak and breaking into turmoil. This had been followed by a loud booming sound that, to a child, seemed to shake the earth's foundations. I had made a beeline for my mother and dived into her warm and comforting lap.

I missed my mother.

Horizon, the mansion I had now come to own, stood on a hill four thousand feet above sea-level. Behind it was a mountain, named Nagdev, its barren peak raised like the hood of a cobra, looming protectively over my mansion. On moonlit nights, the ashen peak radiated a bluish hue. There were local legends about fairies playing on it. On a full moon night when it looked particularly resplendent, I would often gaze at it for long, in the hope of stealing a glimpse or two of those legendary supernatural beings. I longed to believe that they would peep out of the peak or the clouds surrounding it at any moment. . . .

Except at such moments when I brooded over my loneliness, I relished my status as master of the mansion. With an extensive forest to its west and a river to its east, its location was enchanting. A rocky road meandered through a myriad barren rocks and tribal villages for fifty kilometres or so, linking our valley, Nijanpur, with the headquarters of the district, Samargarh. Before India won freedom and the feudatory states were liquidated, Samargarh, now an ordinary small town, was the capital of the principality known by the same name. Unlike some of the bigger states ruled by ambitious or progressive princes, Samargarh had hardly any links with the world beyond its boundaries with most of its habitable areas tucked in jungles and nooks of hills and half of its population constituting different hill tribes. I doubt if, barring the last of the rajas, who was away, and his father, any earlier raja of the dynasty had ever stepped out of his territory and the neighbouring territories of his close relatives. Some primary and 'minor' schools remained scattered over wide areas

and few students reached the only high school in the state, situated in Samargarh proper. There was an allopathic dispensary, but no hospital. There was no college or any other institution of higher learning. There was no printing press either. But nobody seemed to feel the absence of such institutions. Lately, of course, things had begun to change. They had built a hospital and even a college at Samargarh.

But hardly anything had changed in my valley. My happiness in owning the mansion here was tinged with pride. For it had been built by the last Raja of Samargarh shortly before he had surrendered his state to the Indian Government. Designed by an English architect who claimed to have studied the landscape well and, in his plan, had achieved a synthesis between Greek and Indian styles, the mansion stood on an elevation and was spacious and imposing. The lush, green lawns that surrounded it were ideal for a leisurely stroll as the site was always breezy, but seldom beyond a certain degree, for the fierce wind was always checked by the guardian-like Nagdev.

The young Raja had christened the mansion Heera Mahal in honour of a young lady named Heera, somewhat of a legend and an enigma during that era, for those were days when gossip had an uncanny way of circulating over and over again and yet remaining green and seldom reaching the ears of those who figured in it. Heera was the subject of many a rumour, some juicy and some fearfully weird.

Our Raja's father, on a visit abroad, had acquired a mistress who had just ceased to be a European nobleman's consort. The Raja, if he was in a good mood, said that he had married her. The truth remained a mystery. However, she remained in the Raja's bungalow in a distant city and was never seen at Samargarh. Heera, born to her in undue haste, was declared to be the old Raja's daughter, though nobody took her official genesis seriously.

After the old Raja passed away, it became evident that Heera was exercising an ever greater influence on his son and heir, older than her by ten years. The prospects of India winning freedom or the age-old feudalism coming to an end were not yet in sight. Hence, as was the custom, on the death

of the old Raja, the young prince ascended the throne amidst the traditional ceremony. It was on that festive day that Heera was first seen in public. She dominated the scene with her dazzling gaiety and glib tongue. In fact, she proved a far greater attraction than the prince in the process of his metamorphosis into a raja.

There were even those who firmly believed that she was a fairy child, trapped by the late Raja from the clouds once, while aboard a plane. Later he had tamed her with the help of wizards. My father's old servant swore that his brother-in-law had seen milk instead of blood oozing out of her toe when a blade of grass cut it.

Soon the fairy seemed to hold the new Raja in thrall. He did not take much interest in the affairs of state and spent most of his time in the cities in accordance with the whims of the restless fay.

Those who had seen Heera agreed that she was charming. But I noticed that those who had not seen her were more effusive about her charm and some of them attributed a certain magical quality to it. That way it was easier to explain her hold on the young Raja who was otherwise known to be intelligent, level-headed and sensible. I had never seen Heera; but her portrait stared me in the face when I first entered Heera Mahal. It was an oil painting executed by a gifted hand and it looked so lifelike that when I ordered my servant Subbu to remove it, I felt guilty of forcibly dislodging a lady from her seat.

The Rajas had a castle at Nijanpur, a huge structure containing several suites, a big hall and spacious but lonely corridors that had been built and rebuilt several times. But for most part of the year it lay almost deserted, looked after by a lone watchman, for the Raja's ancestors were accustomed to passing only their summers at Nijanpur. It was not so much for the beauty and excellent climate of the place as much as for the ancient deity, Vaneswari, a representation of the primeval goddess, that was housed in an old stone temple nearby.

Vaneswari had been the family deity of my forefathers. Though they had ruled a very small state, they were proud

of their ancestry which they traced to an illustrious sage, the offspring of a special couple, the lady of which was a sort of nymph. When, years ago, a ruler of Samargarh usurped our state as the climax of a long-drawn conspiracy he had hatched in collaboration with some other feudal lords, the deity's wrath struck his family and death began to stalk its members. Some of them died inexplicably—one of them in horror of his own shadow which he found to be headless!

The then Raja of Samargarh did everything prescribed by his priests and astrologers to propitiate the deity, but to no avail. Then, one moonless night, the chief priest of Vaneswari knocked on the doors of the Raja's bedchamber. Even the palace guards had not dared to stop him—so obvious was it from his appearance that he was not himself, but was possessed by some supernatural power. He whispered something in the Raja's ear. The Raja looked shocked.

One or two officials, who had followed the priest into the bedchamber and who had overheard a few random words from his strictly private message to the king, stood horrified.

The priest then left the palace, laughing and shrieking wildly, leaving a stunned Raja behind. It did not take long for the Raja's confidants to discover what the priest had said. If Vaneswari was to be appeased, the Raja must sacrifice one of his sons at her altar.

Needless to say, the priest was popularly believed to have been possessed by the spirit of the goddess herself. But I remember my father saying, 'It was neither Goddess Vaneswari nor, for that matter, any other goddess who possessed the poor fellow, but some fiendish vampire.'

The Raja was in a fix. Of his nine sons, seven had already died in quick succession. Now he must either sacrifice one of the remaining two and save the other, or be ready to see his dynasty come to an end. After some hesitation, the Raja took the painful decision to follow the priest's advice. A month later, upon the recurrence of the moonless night, under some pretext, the meeker and milder of the two surviving princes was led into the temple situated behind the castle at Nijanpur and was told that unless he was sacrificed, not even a kitten belonging to the Raj family would survive the deity's curse.

The prince was beheaded before he could speak. But the horror reflected on his face even after his head had rolled off his neck so overwhelmed the priest that he went mad and began confessing his terrible deed to all and sundry. No wonder the Raja was obliged to dispatch of him too!

'And that was the last bit of fun the diabolical power which possessed the priest had,' my father, a staunch believer in the manifold occult forces at work in our life, would comment.

The rulers of succeeding generations continued the practice, but in a modified manner. They would not sacrifice their sons, but would adopt an infant, generally an orphan, and sacrifice it before the child had grown up enough to understand what was in store for him. The rite was practised in absolute secrecy and the priests seem to have grown bolder than their ancestor who had initiated the rite. I do not know if they relished their status as performers of such an extraordinary function, but they were feared by all.

The Raj family was evidently spared from the original curse, for the dynasty did not become extinct; but the anguish and bewilderment of its victims must have ripened into another curse that struck the family of the priests. The last of them died rather young, leaving no heir behind. Thereafter, the secret practice was discontinued. That must have been three or four generations ago. Then a priest continued performing the daily rituals of the deity for some years. That too has stopped for at least two generations now. The Raj family had lost its awe of the deity.

Between the castle and the temple was a small lake that remained ice-cold for a greater part of the year. This too was shrouded in mystery and was said to be the abode of a *yaksha*, one of the demi-god guardians of the buried treasures of the earth. Each raja, after his coronation at Samargarh, would pay a visit to Nijanpur, offer obeisance to Goddess Vaneswari and throw a piece of gold or silver into the lake as his contribution to the treasure in the *yaksha's* custody. In return, whenever a raja faced a financial crisis, the *yaksha* would come to his aid: he would stumble upon a jarful of gold ingots. Since Vaneswari was no longer worshipped, it was almost certain that the last two rajas had not performed this rite either.

My forefathers, even when bereft of their state, continued the practice of ceremonies that characterized a ruling family till the time of my father who stopped such practices. Among the Kshatriyas, our line ranked higher than that of the Rajas of Samargarh. The people of our area held us in esteem mixed with the kind of pity a felled elephant inspired. Had they not been very poor, they would have restored our affluence to us with liberal shares from their own wealth.

After years of ineffective hostility towards the Samargarh Rajas, our sires reconciled themselves to their fate. But they would not tolerate any show of sympathy from the descendants of the enemy. The Rajas of Samargarh were ready to grant us numerous favours, including an indefinite lease of estates, only if we agreed to a marital alliance with them. But my proud patriarchs refused the offer.

The downward trend in the fortunes of our family which had touched the point of penury by my great-grandfather's time, was at last arrested by my grandfather, who had the singular luck of marrying into three families, each one of which had only one daughter as its heir. Thus he became the sole inheritor of three properties. His only child, my father, had been able to effectively shake off the feudal hangover. He was quite enterprising and had succeeded in consolidating his father's gains. But I had overheard him telling my mother more than once, 'The ghost of our past may shun me, but it is doubtful if it will spare our son.' He could probably see in my nature an atavistic appearance of the traits of idleness that had plagued his illustrious forefathers!

The last Raja of Samargarh had gone broke years before surrendering his state to the Government of free India. And, with the state gone, he found that living among the people who had overnight ceased to be his subjects was extremely uncomfortable. He sold his ancestral palace, which stood as an imposing backdrop to the small town of Samargarh, to the Government, and dismissed his personal staff and dependants giving each of them a generous gift in cash or kind. His officers, as provided for in the Instrument of Accession to the Indian Union, were absorbed by the Provincial Government. After putting his affairs in order, he left for some undisclosed

destination. His nearest kinsmen were two cousins neither of whom lived in Samargarh, and we seldom heard of his whereabouts.

My father, though friendly with the Raja, had been quite pragmatic in his dealings with him. He lent a large sum of money to the Raja with Heera Mahal pledged to him as security. The Raja expected to receive a handsome amount as compensation from the Government for surrendering his state to it. But what he received, after the Government had deducted its dues on several accounts, fell far short of his expectations. He was unable, or did not care to, get Heera Mahal released. The mansion became ours.

Meanwhile, Nijanpur had begun to gain in importance. The range of hills around the valley were found to be rich in mineral deposits. Added to that, an age-old spring with a natural pool that contained sulphate and other highly beneficent properties was discovered. An Englishman, who was a retired member of the Indian Civil Service, camped in the valley for some weeks, fell in love with it and, before leaving for England, sent his prophecy to a newspaper saying that Nijanpur was going to be the health-resort of the future.

It dawned upon me that I could take advantage of the situation. I entrusted my lands and house in our village to an old uncle and moved over to the Mahal. The move was quite exciting. I changed the mansion's name to Horizon and advertised it as an ideal lodge for nature-lovers, the health-conscious as well as for holiday-makers. My staff consisted of a cook, a servant and a gardener with myself ready to act as the manager-cum-clerk-cum-receptionist.

But the idea of tourism had not yet taken root properly. We received guests rarely, but they were enthusiastic about the place and promised to return with their families and friends.

I ran the establishment, subsidizing it with the income I received from my property in the village. I had nothing better to do.

'Are you happy?' my uncle once asked me. 'Well, I have never thought about it,' I fumbled. 'That means you are happy. If you ask a fish what water is, it will not be able to tell you, though it is always in water,' observed my uncle, pleased

with his conclusion.

Four days of vigorous rinsing and scrubbing by the cyclone had given the valley the elegance of an autumn star. The silence that had always pervaded the place, but which I became aware of only after the storm, made me feel as though the valley had really been flung into some remote region of space—resembling a lone star.

A dozen pigeons and sparrows had been sitting, stunned by the storm, in our skylights and in other safe nooks all these days of storm. Now, one after another, they flew out in search of their nests—or to rebuild them.

Coming out into the open was like stepping into a fresh, new world. The wind had calmed down so that its touch was as soothing as that of the water lilies and it carried the mild fragrances of wet earth and crushed leaves.

I strolled on my lawns surveying the valley and the landscape that had been washed anew. It was like seeing the place with different eyes, like meeting a familiar village maiden who suddenly looked so different when she emerged from bathing in the river. Soon I was out on the road.

The sun was dipping behind the forest. It seemed very weak, as if it could be easily extinguished. Yet it draped the valley in a tender golden hue. The few clouds that floated around it looked so detached, innocent and remote that nobody would believe that they had anything to do with the havoc just wrought on the valley or if they knew about it at all! Particularly active were the partridges, flitting between the bushes excitedly. Several cranes flew across the sky, their milk-white wings brilliantly gilded by the sun, a privilege denied to the trees and creatures below them in the valley.

I ambled along absent-mindedly till a jolly shout, 'Hello, Dev!' brought me to a halt.

It was Rao approaching from the opposite direction. He was accompanied by Pandit Indranath Sharma.

Rao owned a small mine on the outskirts of Nijanpur and had become almost a permanent resident of the valley. Sharmaji, an erudite scholar, hailed from Nijanpur, but served as headmaster in the solitary high school at Samargarh. In the

time of the Raja, he had even been honoured for his scholarship. During vacations from school when he came home to Nijanpur, he and Rao, the latter a graduate and a great lover of English poetry, constituted the intelligentsia of the valley.

They came closer. I bowed to Sharmaji. I had once been his student in the village school. And he had hated me. But that was because my friends and I had cut off the holy plaited hair-roll at the back of his head while he enjoyed a mid-summer-noon's nap on his table. Although the operation was a part of our routine mischief and was secular in spirit, it had been an outrageous sacrilege according to him and the other elders. No wonder Sharmaji continued to frown at me for a long time.

Even after I had passed out of the village school and Sharmaji had taken up a higher position at Samargarh, he never failed to advise me, whenever we met, on the ethics of living, and the value of rectitude. He did not approve of my wearing trousers. Once or twice I told him that while I had great respect for the dhoti and the kurta, I somehow felt that they were meant for good men only and not for people of an uncertain character like me.

One day he told me with some anguish, 'When I see people smoking cigarettes, what I really see is their souls going up in smoke!' Someone had told him that I had taken to smoking. That was the first time I contested his words with the help of a couplet I remembered from my father's daily recitation of the *Gita*. 'Sir,' I said, 'the soul can neither be dissected nor burnt. It cannot even be drowned. How then can it go up in smoke?'

'Stand up on the bench!' he yelled, in keeping with his habit of punishing students in the classroom, although we stood in the open. 'How dare you quote the *Gita* to me?'

Years had passed and Sharmaji, now in his early forties, had mellowed.

I was still in the process of greeting Sharmaji with folded hands when Rao took hold of them and shook them with the vigour natural to a budding mine-owner. 'So, Dev, how is the weather? Water, water everywhere but no pot to drink, eh?—I read the other day in a college poetry book I found in the city,'

Rao said, giving me a slight pull to induce me to change my direction, in favour of theirs.

'Sahoo!' called Rao, directing our attention to the man of enormous size descending from another ridge and drawing his attention to us. I rarely had any occasion to talk to Sahoo though, as a child, I was obliged to hear of him often. A prosperous merchant, he was also celebrated as frugality personified. Fathers and uncles of the region liberally cited the example set by him, to teach worldly prudence to their young. Hyperboles like his squeezing out molecules of his stolen property from the tummies of ants found in the jaggery bags in his shop, were in wide circulation.

'Out for a stroll? So am I. Nowadays I become an ascetic the moment the sun goes down. The sun and I stop work together,' said a beaming Sahoo. 'In my sixty years I have never seen such rain. I thought that the earth was going to be submerged. I wasn't wrong. A couple of hamlets down the valley, to the south of the forest, have been washed away.'

'I wish the rain could wash away the sins of man!' commented Sharmaji. Sahoo chortled in appreciation of the sagacious statement.

Sahoo had lately begun spending much of his time at Nijanpur, entrusting his equally prudent sons with his business at Samargarh. Camping at Nijanpur enabled him to supervise his growing timber business. He was also a money-lender to the tribals who never cheated and were always ready to be cheated. Besides, he had begun to speculate in the real estate business. He had foreseen Nijanpur's growth into a town and was buying land to sell it later at a price many times higher.

The sun had set. The roseate elegance of the hour was fast fading. A rain-soaked dusk, heavy as wet wool, was slowly spreading over the woods and the rocks around the valley. Birds were circling over the battered tree tops in an uncertain manner.

We advanced along the meandering slope, talking of things big and small—Rao frequently quoting and misquoting poetry and Sharmaji coming out with their Sanskrit equivalents whenever possible. A furlong down, in the bushes between

the lake and the deserted shrine of Vaneswari, the jackals had just resumed their ceremonial howling, heralding the advent of darkness, after a lapse of three days.

Suddenly Rao stopped and checked us from stepping on some marks on the damp sand. Curiosity was writ large on his face as he bent down, his gaze fixed on the ground. Then he swore in a suppressed tone.

'Why this sudden departure from poetry, Mr Rao?' I asked. But Rao had suddenly become very serious. He squatted and drew our attention to his discovery.

I recognized the soft but distinct imprints on the damp reddish sand.

Rao looked at me, still squatting. 'What is this?' he asked. 'Surely you know—the pugmarks of a tiger!'

The beast had passed from the bushes on the right to those on the left, obviously at a leisurely pace. It must have done so after the rains had stopped; not long before we chanced upon the marks.

Sahoo and Sharmaji seemed to freeze on the spot. If silence had volume, it had suddenly increased ten-fold.

I looked into the thickets on our left. After glistening a vivid green in the late afternoon light, they were now growing pale in the shadow of the dusk. Their quietness seemed to be the outcome of a conspiracy between them and the tiger.

'We ought not to tarry here. The tiger may still be close by. Who knows if it is not the very beast which struck at Dinpur the other day?' Rao observed, standing up.

The rain had made us forget all about the tiger's havoc at Dinpur, the seat of the only weekly market in the area. A farmer who was returning from the market at sundown was under the impression that someone else was walking behind him. He even made a comment or two regarding the hasty approach of darkness along the lonely road, but did not care to check why no response came from the fellow following him. At one point a narrow lane from a tribal village joined the main road. A villager emerging from the lane suddenly let out a shriek—and the next moment the farmer saw a tiger pouncing on the man and carrying him away. The tiger had stalked the farmer for quite some time, but the one to finally

become its prey was the other man.

'This is what you call the play of fate!' was the invariable comment of those, including Rao, whom I heard discussing the tragedy.

Although Dinpur was miles away, it suddenly appeared to have telescoped and come closer to us. Sharmaji and Sahoo grew pale.

The nearest house was the castle. Its caretaker, once known for his sinewy strength, had grown fat through sitting most of the time, or leaning against a wall and dozing, and occasionally breaking into song to relieve the monotony. He had probably taken to opium-eating as well. Even then, as an antidote to the fear inspired by the tiger, we instantly thought of him and advanced towards the gate involuntarily.

'Whom do you wish to see, gentlemen?'

The strange voice from within the mossy portals took us by surprise.

'Come in.' The castle itself seemed to gurgle out the command.

My companions faltered towards the gate, as though hypnotized. I followed them. I did not remember having come so close to the castle ever before. In fact, I used to avoid it like a haunted house.

From the other side of the gate emerged an extraordinary face, big and bright, dominated by a bold moustache.

It was Sahoo who first recognized the stranger. Before I guessed what he was up to, he had thrown himself on the ground in an extravagant display of reverence. 'Get up, will you?' said the stranger tenderly. Sahoo stood up, but his palms remained joined.

'Aren't you Sahoo? How hard old habits die!' the stranger commented, chiding Sahoo affectionately.

I realized that we were in the presence of the Raja of Samargarh. We were to learn later that he had arrived there during the rains, driving straight from the Samargarh Railway Station with vehicles provided by the District Collector who alone had been notified of his arrival. The Raja was keen on staying out of the public eye.

Rao, always ready to shake hands with others, for once

forgot to extend his hand, and bowed quite low; Sharmaji, accustomed only to blessing others, bowed even lower.

I gazed at the Raja with great curiosity for I had never seen him before. He wore well-fitting pyjamas and a silken kurta that helped enhance his noble and stately bearing. Rao, Sahoo and Sharmaji seemed to shrink in size and volume in his awesome presence.

'Come in,' said the Raja once again. I heard in his voice the roar of a tiger—but of an affable one. I shook off my hallucination and entered into a dusky hall along with the others.

A dozen chandeliers, wrapped in black linen, were suspended like sleeping giant bats, from the high ceiling of what was once the Raja's audience hall. Only one of them had been unwrapped and lit. The castle had not been electrified. I felt awkward about Horizon, dimly shining two furlongs up the road with a single bulb focused on its small signboard. The poles toppled by the cyclone had been set right and the power supply restored minutes ago.

'The collector had ordered temporary electric connections to my house without my asking for it. But I prefer to spend my evenings by candlelight and with whatever breeze comes from the woods,' said the Raja showing us to the thickly-cushioned old sofas scattered over half the hall. He sat down in the most archaic one of them, a sort of throne, and signalled us to occupy those before him.

I sat down immediately, but the Raja had to ask twice before any of my companions would even touch the seats. They tried to drag the sofas backwards, but were embarrassed by the screeching sound emanating from their actions. They sank into them one by one looking awkward.

I had seen printed copies of the Raja's standard portrait in the households of some of his former subjects who retained a distant loyalty towards him or the feudal institution. The picture showed him adorned with a bejewelled *choga* and a colourful turban. While his left hand rested on his waist, the fingers of his right hand, weighed down by diamond-studded rings, were spread on the hilt of an ornate sword.

But people had obviously realized that to display the picture nowadays was an anachronism. One by one, all the copies in existence had disappeared.

The Raja, however, looked quite different in real life; not so

much because of the intervening years or the absence of his regal costume and the diamond rings, but because of his disarming smile which was absent in his portrait. The smile looked capable of betraying everything he had in mind—intrigue and mischief included.

'Years ago I knew you all, didn't I? Let me test my memory,' said the Raja.

His eyes were fixed on Sahoo. 'You are of course the merchant Sahoo, grown remarkably healthier. Right?' The Raja seemed to enjoy his euphemism.

Sahoo looked at his own bulging belly and laughed gratifyingly. 'How can you be wrong, Raja Sahib,' he said with great humility. 'You have the memory of a god.' The Raja now concentrated on Sharmaji. 'Pandit! You have hardly changed except for growing wiser, I suppose.' The Raja pointed at Sharmaji's receding hairline. Sharmaji obviously took the comment literally and looked delighted. 'This humble subject of yours, Sir, has never stopped devoting his time to scriptures and classics and. . . .'

'And you are. . . .' the Raja sounded his memory fixing a curious gaze on Rao. 'I know. You are Khasu the butcher. No doubt, you have prospered. I am happy about that,' the Raja exclaimed his joy, chuckled and closed his eyes. I waited impatiently for someone to correct his error. But even Rao himself seemed to have quietly accepted the Raja's pronouncement on his identity. I was amazed.

'Raja Sahib, this gentleman is not Khasu the butcher, but Mr Rao, an up-and-coming mine-owner and an ardent lover of poetry—I mean English poetry,' I pointed out.

'How stupid of me! Much of my memory of the olden days has been washed away and the rest is hazy. But who are you, young man?'

'Devdas, son of Gautam Dev. They call me Dev. You knew my father well.'

The Raja straightened up and surveyed me with renewed interest. 'Knew your father?' he protested. 'We are friends! Yes, I knew that he had a son. I am glad to meet you. How is Gautam and where is he?'

'He is dead.'

'Oh!' The Raja shut his eyes and stroked his forehead. 'Good God! I should have known!' he muttered as if to himself.

He struggled to get over his uneasiness. His eyes still closed, he said, 'Our relationship was always tinged with embarrassment, a hangover from the past which we understand so little. It is ironical that sometimes the so called achievements of our ancestors become matters of regret to us.'

He paused and opened his eyes and resumed, 'My ancestors are believed to have usurped the possessions of your ancestors. Thank God, a flash of lightning in the firmament of recent times has struck me too, and I stand bereft of any vestige of them, earned or usurped. I can regard you with a clear—or is it empty—conscience, can't I?' The Raja smiled uncertainly.

I had not expected him to dwell on this subject at our very first meeting. Some of the embarrassment he had just shed crawled up my spine. I felt awkward too.

'Your Highness, may we know the expected length of your sojourn here?' asked Rao.

'I don't know.' The Raja's poignant voice betrayed a genuine sense of helplessness. 'I cannot say that I have reached my destination. At the same time I do not know what my next stop will be. I have a sick daughter. Doctors, failing in everything else, have suggested a total change of climate and atmosphere. What can be a more radical departure from our life in the city than a retreat to Nijanpur? Besides, since our fleeing what was once our state, Heera has continued to miss Nijanpur.'

The Raja stopped abruptly. Perhaps he thought that he had been speaking more about himself than was necessary. He looked at Sahoo. 'Why are you at Nijanpur, Sahoo? In quest of still more health?'

'Yes, *hazur*, the climate suits me fine. It is partly for health. . . .'

'And partly for wealth, Your Highness. Sahooji is buying land, to sell it later when Nijanpur gains importance,' I said.

'So, he is not only a pragmatist, but also a futurist!' com-

mented the Raja.

'His speculations rarely fail, Your Highness,' said Rao.

'I'm afraid, it will not fail in this case either—to Nijanpur's ultimate ruin. On my way here, even through the rains, I could see the forest line receding.' The Raja sounded sad. 'That is a sign of the shape of things to come, or to happen, to our old, obscure Nijanpur.'

'Sahooji has made some contribution to that too. He is in the timber business,' I informed the Raja. But his eyes had gone over to one of the doorways opening into the interior of the castle. I suddenly noticed a change in expression on the faces of my companions. They were unable to decide whether to stand or to remain seated.

I had no difficulty in recognizing the one who sailed in with a smile, for the only picture that had adorned Heera Mahal and which I had removed to a lumber room in the process of reshaping the mansion into Horizon was a portrait in oil executed by some European painter. And it was of Heera. She must have been in her teens when she sat for it, yet she did not look any different now. Her pink cheeks were still youthful and her hair was still the vivid auburn that it used to be.

The Raja signalled us to remain seated as Heera came nearer. Her milk-white complexion was complemented by the jasmine-soft white saree that she wore. Her only adornments were a pair of diamond earrings that gave her shining eyes the company of two tiny stars.

'Heera, meet our old friends, Sahoo, Rao and Sharma.'

The three almost blushed. 'And this young man,' continued the Raja, 'is Devdas, son of the Devs and, I suppose, the present lord of Heera Mahal.'

The Raja looked at me expecting either confirmation or denial. I nodded indicating that his guess was correct.

My eyes met Heera's and I had the sudden eerie feeling that a flash from her eyes leaped at me like a serpent's tongue. Was it my imagination—or was it the glint of her diamonds? I still do not know.

Heera sat down beside the Raja. Her gaze fixed on me, she asked in a resonant but acid tone, 'Does the mansion retain its old name?'

'No, only the first letter. Now it is called Horizon,' said Rao bursting into a false laugh. Since it only met with reluctant smiles from the rest of us and no smile at all from Heera, he laughed more loudly and nervously.

'The wonderful site once inspired a dream in me Heera reminisced. 'All I wanted was to have a cottage built of that very stuff. . . .'

Sharmaji who was bursting with eagerness to speak and had been clearing his throat for the past one minute, cut in, 'Of what kind of valuable stuff, please?'

There was the hint of a frown on Heera's face. She did not answer Sharmaji and continued, 'But the Raja built me a miniature palace—with the usual stuff of stone and mortar.'

'A castle in the air!' Rao butted in. Heera turned grave. Sharmaji's full-throated guffaw in appreciation of Rao's wit petered out like a damp cracker.

A few minutes passed during which Heera subtly goaded my companions to sing each other's glory. Rao spoke of Sharmaji as an elephantine pandit and Sharmaji returned the compliment by describing Rao as a man whose heart was as soft as butter—and both projected Sahoo as a philanthropist! I knew that Rao had borrowed large amounts of money from Sahoo at critical phases of his business and Sharmaji was perhaps just enamoured of his wealth. Or, maybe, they were all anxious to reduce the gap between themselves and the Raja.

Outside the castle the wind had started howling again. And the chandelier swung ominously. I was suddenly aware of our dancing shadows on the wall looking like a committee of hobgoblins in session.

'I hope it does not rain again!' said the Raja. 'Let me see,' I said and went out briskly. Though the wind was erratic, there were no ominous clouds in the sky. A palm tree flapped its fronds vigorously giving the impression that it was ready for flight.

'Young man, wait for a while. What the weather has in mind will become clear.' The Raja summoned me back to my seat. Sharmaji suddenly burst into a popular Sanskrit verse which said that in a duel between goats, in the funeral cere-

mony of a hermit, in the storm that gathers at dawn, much ado culminates in precious little! He then commented, in a bid to import some relevance into his show of scholarship, 'Since this is not dawn, but evening, the storm may break after all.'

'We should leave before that,' I said.

'Will you please initiate me into the study of the ancient works?' Heera asked Sharmaji.

Sharmaji seemed nervous. 'I know too little to be of any use to you. I'm only a small teacher. I'm. . . .'

'I have a volume of the *Panchatantra* with me. When do we begin?' Heera was not interested in Sharmaji's protestations.

'Since you are inspired, you are already initiated. Nevertheless, Sharmaji should not refuse to be your guide. Sharmaji, can't you report tomorrow? She has already begun to feel bored,' said the Raja.

'Maharaja, even Brihaspati, the guru of the gods, will feel honoured to be of any assistance to her,' Rao said unctuously.

'Oh yes. I'll gladly put myself at her disposal,' announced Sharmaji. 'I've nothing much to do here during my vacation and I'll be at your beck and call,' he said turning to Heera.

'Thank you. I will expect you tomorrow afternoon.' Heera stood up and walked towards one of the windows. 'Will there be yet another storm? How much I wish I could fly into its heart!' she added in a hiss as if to invisible elements listening to her appreciatively in the darkness outside. Perhaps she gazed at Horizon, faintly outlined in the meagre light.

The evening was deepening into night when we left the castle. There was a refreshing coolness in the atmosphere and the sharp-edged moon that was gnawing through the thick clouds seemed to have descended a number of steps on an invisible ladder and come quite close to our hills.

Desolation was the soul of Nijanpur at night. Behind us the castle lay like a huge carcass, a streak of yellow light creeping out through the slightly open door registering its faint desire to return to life.

The wind had suddenly subsided and was now no stronger than a whisper. Was it a deceptive lull? A spell seemed to hold the hills and woods in its grasp. The sorcerer was the lurid moon.

The Raja had seen us off to the portals of his castle. In his presence, my companions had behaved like a bewitched group, agreeing with whatever he said or making irrelevant and inane comments. The Raja had waved at us and I alone had waved back; my companions had just looked on.

'Good Heavens! We forgot to bow to Raja Sahib!'

The dismay in Sahoo's voice brought Sharmaji and Rao to a dead halt.

They seemed to contemplate going back and making good the omission, but since I did not stop, they were obliged to resume walking, confining their lament to their wrinkled brows and a self-reproachful silence. Each of them, otherwise so proud of himself, had suddenly grown so humble that my propensity to imagine bizarre scenes led me to think that had they been able to sprout tails, they would have perhaps run back into the castle and wagged them before the Raja for a while to atone for their omission.

And the thought prompted a giggle.

'What's the matter?' demanded Sharmaji gravely. 'Why do you laugh?'

'Sometimes the imp of laughter tickles my sides, that's all,' I said and since that amounted to impudence before my former teacher, I hastened to add, 'Can't Sharmaji apologize on our behalf tomorrow?' reminding Sharmaji of his great commitment.

'Oh yes, I'll do that,' Sharmaji agreed sprightly, like a soda bottle opened with a jerk. He was lapsing into reverie. 'Could anyone have imagined just an hour or so ago that I would be required to tutor Heera? How unpredictable are the tides of time! Like the real tides of the sea, they can toss you, throw you down or lift you!'

'Sharmaji, you can greet Raja Sahib with as much respect as you please, but not Heera. She is now your student. Now it is your privilege to receive her greetings without having to return them. You can, however, bless her aplenty.'

Before Sharmaji could react to my advice, some little creature hopped from one slender branch to another of a jackfruit tree bending over the road.

Sharmaji clasped my hand immediately. Although nobody had mentioned it, we all knew that we had suddenly remembered the tiger.

'It must be a naughty squirrel or a bird showing disapproval at our intrusion into its monopoly over the hour and its right to total quietude,' I said and Sharmaji released my hand. 'But the tiger could very well be near about, at a more convenient place to spring upon a passer-by than the branch of a roadside tree,' I said and Sharmaji's hand groped for mine again.

We walked in silence through the moonlight and shadows; for a moment Sharmaji, Rao, Sahoo and myself as well seemed as insubstantial as the chiaroscuro we were crossing.

When we had come close enough to Horizon for us to be able to see each other in its light, Sharmaji's relief suddenly found expression in an explosion of laughter, ostensibly because he had sighted my childish servant, Subbu, playing with my pet doe. Subbu fetched me my gun and we escorted the three gentlemen to their houses, Subbu leading us with a

torchlight. The slope from Horizon to the small village in the valley, in the direction opposite to the castle, was not absolutely desolate. A furlong down, to the right of the narrow road, a cluster of huts had lately sprung up housing a colony of labourers who worked for some timber merchants including Sahoo. Adjacent to that was a kiosk selling betel-leaves, *beedis* and perhaps country liquor. Some of the labourers and their women sat beside the kiosk around a turbaned man who was playing on a *dholak* and singing a mythological song.

'Should we tell them about the dangerous footprints?' I asked my companions in a low voice.

'Not necessary. I don't expect the beast will come near the light and the sound of drums,' said Sahoo.

'Just as contentment is a state of mind, so is fear. Both are within us and not in situations or factors without,' observed Sharmaji quoting half of a Sanskrit couplet.

'But, Sharmaji, so far as the revival of the philosopher in you is concerned, much depends on the situations and factors existing—a gun in Dev's hand and your increasing distance from the ominous footprints, for example!' quipped Rao. Sahoo laughed aloud.

Sharmaji had no skill for retorts. In any case we had reached his house—the very first in the village when approaching from Horizon. A boy stood on the veranda with a lantern in hand, probably alerted about Sharmaji's arrival by Sahoo's laughter. Since Sharmaji spent most of his time at Samargarh—at first because he had been adopted by his maternal uncle who lived there and then because of his job there—he came to Nijanpur only during vacations to take stock of his ancestral property.

'Take care, Sharmaji, don't open your door if someone knocks. It may be the tiger!' Rao's elation at our approaching his own house was evident. He had put up an elegant log cabin with a tin-roof. A little further from his was Sahoo's residence, large but clumsily built, on a grassy mound. I declined his offer to give me two escorts for my return journey.

Stars had begun to wriggle out of the clouds by the time Subbu and I returned to Horizon. Such nights, cool and

raven-dark, lured me to bed early, but an unusual curiosity was then getting the better of me. After a quick dinner I recovered Heera's portrait from the dump, dusted it off and carried it into my room. As I examined it, holding it close to the light, a slight shiver ran through me. What kind of woman was she who did not change with age?

I put the portrait aside and concentrated my attention on the pale moonlight filtering through the clouds and the untimely cooing of a dove, to get over my odd feelings regarding Heera.

I could not meet Rao or Sharmaji for the next three days. My servant Subbu who had become a friend of the watchman of the castle, reported that Sharmaji had fetched books from Samargarh and had started imparting lessons to Heera. 'But sir, he is stuttering violently before the Memsahib,' Subbu said, feigning the innocence of an objective reporter. 'What sounds like stuttering to your watchman friend, you fool, must be Sanskrit,' I told him. Subbu was not expected to contradict my interpretation. But he had a mischievous twinkle in his eye.

I learnt that Rao invariably escorted Sharmaji and spent hours talking to the Raja. The Raja's presence at Nijanpur was no longer a secret. Small groups of people, mostly tribals, had begun to pay regular visits to him. Most of them just bowed to him from a distance and departed after gazing at him in awe for a while.

Next to the Raja, the tiger had become the talk of the valley. My *mali* brought me this report: A small party of villagers, leading a bridegroom to the bride's house through the forest west of the valley suddenly discovered the tiger crouching by the roadside. It had been too late for them to avoid the route. They quietly continued on their journey, stealing glimpses of the proud beast. It was big, but its slobbering lips indicated that it was tired. It viewed the passers-by with contempt; then it stood up, shook off its tiredness and began to follow them. Somehow they managed to keep their legs moving though feeling numb in the rest of their limbs; the bridegroom giving up hope of ever meeting his bride. They

realized that the tiger had ceased stalking them, only after a dreadful hour of silence when they met a party of drum-beaters coming from the opposite direction, sent by their hosts to receive them.

It was a gentle dawn, though the distant ridges were draped in towels of pale cloud. Still lying lazily on my bed, I was telling myself what great fun it would be to hang on to the daily sun when it rose on one side of my valley and to descend with it on the other side, since the valley seemed to have shrunk considerably and the rising sun had grown nearer and more familiar.

Suddenly, I saw two tiny hooves appearing on my window-sill. It was my doe who'd managed to stretch its neck till its tender eyes met mine. She was desperately trying to get my attention pressing her muzzle against the bars.

'Princess!' I called out to her. She responded with a flicker in her eyes. She lowered her head when I put my hand out and fondled her. Satisfied that it had made its presence felt, it took its legs off the window and began to prance about on the lawns.

Further down, little birds chirped in the narrow strip of a nursery my *mali* had made. A current of inexplicable joy, reminiscent of the bright Sunday mornings of my school-days passed through me when an orange sunbeam shot into my room. I thought of climbing the barren hilltop behind Horizon, something I had not done in months. This was one of the very few things I could do when I was especially happy, apart from putting a record on my mother's old gramophone or switching on the radio I had bought lately.

I started the gramophone to allow myself some time to assess my keenness for trekking. Soon I heard hurried footsteps and agitated voices making enquiries about me. Then Rao and Sharmaji trooped into my room.

Rao was in shorts and boots, his double-barrel gun slung across his back. But what amazed me was Sharmaji who wore his dhoti in a new-fangled fashion, pulling it up tightly to his knees to make it look as close as possible to breeches. Perhaps he had toyed with the idea of inserting the tails of his shirt under the dhoti at the waist but had rejected it on second

thoughts, for a small part of the shirt still remained tucked under the dhoti at the back. His right hand remained clenched tightly.

'No merry-making, please!' commanded Sharmaji in the same manner in which he used to order silence in his class. At once I stopped playing the gramophone.

'Haven't you heard?' Sharmaji demanded of me. I blinked at my visitors. 'Don't you live at Nijanpur?' he took me to task. I felt a bit nervous.

'A tiger claimed a life last night. Right at our doorstep; I mean the outskirts of Nijanpur,' Rao informed me.

Rao gave me the details of the incident. Two miles from Horizon, in the plains where paddy fields mingled with open tracts of terrain and grasslands and where temporary rivulets were formed during the monsoon, there were a number of natural pools. One of the labourers in Rao's mine, a man from a distant village who had lately moved into the slowly expanding settlement in the valley along with his family, had set a small net in a narrow breach in an overflowing pool. This style of catching fish, involving little labour, was common in the valley. Soon after sunset he had gone with his son to collect his catch. While the boy waited on the rocky embankment, the man descended to the brink of the pool to lift the net.

It was dusk. The boy noticed a wave on the top layer of the bushes. He thought a jackal was heading in their direction. Suddenly the tiger sprang on his father dragging him away by the neck. The boy fainted and rolled down the embankment. He was lying close to the pool when his uncle, looking for them, chanced upon him.

Early in the morning the victim's friends had followed the trail for half-a-mile into the forest. They had not dared to proceed any further.

'Should we not request Raja Sahib to do something about it? After all, he used to be a great hunter,' said Rao.

'We must—that is what I say,' Sharmaji asserted.

'But is he still the great hunter he used to be?' I wondered aloud.

'Once a hunter always a hunter and a true hunter would

jump at a challenge thrown by a tiger. Besides, I saw Raja Sahib cleaning his rifle the other day. He must be intending to use it.'

'That is quite a sensible supposition, Mr Rao, why not ask Raja Sahib?' I said.

Sharmaji had suddenly fallen silent. That seemed unnatural. I cast stealthy glances at him while talking to Rao. Sharmaji's gaze was fixed on Heera's portrait. His fist was no longer clenched. The uneasy feeling I had had the other day—at realizing Heera's eerie immunity to the process of ageing—returned to me for quite a different reason now; I observed that Sharmaji's face was changing incredibly fast.

A mini durbar had already commenced by the time we reached the castle. Unlike the other day when a strangeness filled the atmosphere, it was now filled with gaiety. Those who had come to greet the Raja—among whom were two tribal sardars and some former officials of the Raj—squatted on the floor. The sofas and chairs were lying vacant but for the one occupied by the Raja.

'Here had we now our Nijanpur's honour roofed, were the graced person of our Sahoo present!' The Raja's jubilant parody of *Macbeth* amazed me, but my amazement was far greater at the high-pitched snigger that followed. It came from a slim little man sporting a goatee-beard who sprang to his feet and greeted me with folded hands. 'Do you recognize me? I'm Ketu Singh—Ketu the sly fox,' he said aloud and laughed again.

I had never met a person who would announce such an unflattering nickname with such jubilation. The nickname had been given to him by the Raja, perhaps at an auspicious moment—for it had stuck to him. And now Ketu Singh himself seemed to have accepted it as a sobriquet of honour.

Ketu Singh's presence intrigued me. He was known to be a trusted lieutenant of Mansingh, the man who spearheaded the movement against the British as well as the Samargarh Raj. Both were looked upon as the Raja's sworn enemies.

Ketu kept looking at me, perhaps expecting some exclamation of astonishment from me so that he could laugh again and explain his stand. I took care to keep my surprise to

myself.

'Mr Rao, you look accoutred for war!' observed the Raja.

'Your Highness, I propose to follow you, should you be pleased to. . . .'

'Thanks. I was about to send for you and this young man,' said the Raja, a bit impatient with Rao's politeness. It was obvious that he had decided to take action. He stood up and dismissed the assembly, but detained the two sardars, one armed with a muzzle-loader and the other with an impressive bow and arrow. They were to accompany the Raja into the forest.

Heera strode into the hall in her hunting attire complete with a gun. She walked towards Sharmaji and smiled meaningfully. No doubt, Sharmaji had grown quite familiar with her, but, I was afraid, there was nothing of a pupil's homage to a teacher in her smile, but the primeval coquetry of a woman out to conquer a man. And that too was fake, for she could not have been really interested in Sharmaji. Nevertheless, Sharmaji responded with a proud simper.

My suspicion that she was amusing herself at Sharmaji's cost was confirmed when, feigning seriousness after a closer scrutiny of Sharmaji's gallant demeanour and his innovative style of dressing for the occasion, she said, 'Leading an expedition against the man-eater, are you? We need not waste any bullets then. It will be an experience for us to see the tiger dying of a heart attack.'

As Rao and I chuckled, Sharmaji giggled foolishly. But Heera broke off as abruptly as she had begun laughing. 'Just a minute,' she said gravely. I marked the rapid formation of a kind of resolution in her eyes. 'Just a minute!' she said again with some suppressed excitement and disappeared into the interior of the castle.

The Raja began examining our firearms. Rao and I stood before him, answering his queries, ready to learn from his observations. Sharmaji stood apart, sort of helpless and confused, looking alternately at us and at the long dusky corridor which had suddenly grown mysterious for him.

Heera re-emerged from the corridor in a few minutes. 'Mr Dev,' she turned to me with a modest appeal in her eyes. 'Will

you please help Sharmaji to slip into these?' She handed a packet to me and showed us to an anteroom. Obediently we entered the small chamber, unused for years and smelling rather musty. I opened the window for some air and light. Sharmaji opened the packet and stared at its contents in disbelief—a pair of trousers and a shirt. To my knowledge, they were made of the costliest material. Although they appeared to have remained in the very state in which they had come out of the tailor's shop, they had not been made very recently.

The trousers were too loose for Sharmaji. I took off my leather belt and fastened it round his waist. He stood blinking but resigned to the operation, his arms raised in total surrender. I could not help feeling amused at strapping Sharmaji, who was once averse even to leather shoes, into a leather belt. Sharmaji, however, seemed enchanted with his new appearance. He grinned at me over and over again, forcing me to reluctantly assure him that he looked smart.

A metamorphosed Sharmaji re-entered the hall, shook hands with Rao and laughed. His laughter ate into my heart like termites.

It had been taken for granted that I would join the expedition. Much against my will, I sent the Raja's watchman to fetch my gun. A Kshatriya hailing from a feudal family was expected to be interested in hunting. My father had been a skilled shikari and had given me several chances to prove my fondness for this pastime. Had my response been positive, he would have arranged to train me. But soon it must have become obvious to him that I did not have much of an inclination for it. I am afraid, this was one of the reasons for his losing whatever interest he had in shikar.

I was nine when my father first took me out into the forest one summer morning. He and his friends shot down a number of birds, and a couple of deer. Since we could not have eaten all of them the same night, some wounded ones were allowed to live till the next day. Among them was a kochilakhai—the Indian hornbill.

We were camping in an isolated house on the western edge of the forest that belonged to a timber-merchant named Vasant Singh. Outside the house was a small, picturesque lake. We lay on the veranda of the house, enjoying the cool breeze. My father and the others soon fell asleep. But I could not. A huge bird circled the lake again and again and from time to time dived close to the courtyard of the house. Suddenly, a little after midnight, the wounded kochilakhai got loose and struggled out into the open. It was heading towards the lake, flapping its bleeding wings fitfully, when a servant got up and ran after it and struck it with a lathi. It fell dead, but almost instantly the bird circling above his head swooped down upon him and, with its sharp beak, tried to gouge out his eyes—or at least that was the motive the elders attributed to its determined attack. The bird then flew away into the

forest shrieking indifferently, probably with a touch of satisfaction, leaving behind a bleeding servant. The second phase of the expedition, planned for the next day, was abandoned. Although they made light of the mishap, I could understand how small the party felt because of the humiliation a mere bird had inflicted on it.

Only once had I witnessed a beat and that had been organized by Vasant Singh, because a tiger had been haunting his estate regularly, stealing sheep and cattle. Probably the menace was due to Vasant Singh felling the trees, thus destroying the forest at great speed and depriving the tiger of its sylvan territory and its usual supply of food. It was not a large beat like the ones the Rajas used to organize, with over two thousand people participating. Vasant Singh managed to collect only two hundred tribals and placed them under father's command.

The beat commenced early in the morning. The beaters, who had furtively made a semi-circle covering the area within which the tiger was expected to be lurking, began beating drums and shouting. They slowly pressed forward towards the opening where father sat on a machan ready with his gun. I sat on a taller and safer machan designed for merely witnessing the operation, with a servant by my side.

The sky was overcast and the chilly wind somehow enhanced the fear in the atmosphere. But as the ring of the beaters came closer, the excitement mounted. A number of smaller creatures came running towards the opening, but neither father nor his assistants shot at them lest the tiger should change its direction and jump the beat in its confusion.

The beating of drums and the shouts of the beaters grew louder and more frightening. They were enthusiastic because their labour was coming to an end. Suddenly the tiger sprang from a bush and headed in our direction at great speed. Father must have been extremely alert all the time, for he shot at the beast instantaneously. My companion on the machan saw the beast roll on the grass, but the next moment it had steadied itself and bolted out of the forest at great speed.

Father and the others tried to track down the wounded tiger. Drops of blood and faint stains on the grass led them

up to the emerald paddy fields that bordered the forest. Then the marks disappeared.

'It must be hiding in the paddy fields, waiting for death,' suggested father, and that was some consolation. The beat ended—it was difficult to say whether it was a success or a failure.

Vasant Singh was busy till late in the afternoon, feeding and paying up the beaters. Tired, he then entered his bedroom in the house by the lake.

Hearing a groan, two or three of his employees who had stepped onto the veranda behind Vasant Singh rushed into his room. Vasant Singh had fainted, holding onto his door. On his low rope-cot lay the tiger.

His people hurriedly dragged him out and bolted the room from outside. Father was summoned. Through a window, he fired another bullet, this time right into the tiger's forehead, though he was sure that it had already died.

Vasant Singh took some time to regain consciousness. His happiness knew no bounds when he realized that he was alive while the tiger was dead. He fell in love with that rope-cot, so much so that he would carry it to his home at Samargarh and bring it back when he came to his camp house. He would not sleep on any other bedstead. Years later, he died a natural death on the rope-cot and was cremated along with the cot. I do not know whether this was done in deference to his own wish or according to the decision of his family members who might have thought it proper to dispatch the spirit of the cot along with its master's to the world beyond.

Partly out of respect for the family tradition and partly to break away from the monotony of life, I used to go hunting once in a while, but never for any big game.

My reluctant practice of shikar came to an abrupt end the day I shot a doe, not knowing that she was then suckling her two fawns. I brought home both the fawns one of which survived, nurtured by Subbu and my *mali*. It grew up into a pert and healthy doe. We called her Princess.

It was after more than a year that I was entering the forest, if not against my will, then not with any enthusiasm either.

We were on our way to the spot where the tiger had struck. The relatives of the victim led the way. The Raja followed them, but Heera, instead of keeping pace with him, tended to lag behind. As a courtesy, Rao, Sharmaji, the sardars and I slowed down and walked, escorting her.

'I hope Mr Dev realizes that his is a mansion worthy of falling in love with,' Heera commented, turning round several times to have a look at Horizon which seemed to stand helplessly blushing in the mellow sunlight two furlongs behind us. If it was her design to embarrass me with false appreciation in her eyes, she did not quite succeed, but I felt awkward at the thought that she should have such designs at all.

A narrow rill had managed to carve a permanent passage for itself over the rocky ground, perhaps through hundreds of years of humble but relentless effort. The rill separated the forest from the valley and its small locality.

'Your Highness, all this was once yours!' said Rao, walking up to the Raja and throwing his arms wide in a burst of inspiration. In his enthusiasm he lost his balance on the mossy boulders rising over the small stream. The Raja, however, acted promptly to steady him and said, 'True, but the woods look poorer though now they belong to the nation!' He was fully justified in his comment. The forest had been and still was mercilessly plundered by timber-merchants. They did it illegally of course, in collusion with the officials appointed to protect it. They did a lot of poaching too. Once an enterprising travel agency had sought to make the forest its regular haunt, where it could bring its affluent clients and give them the thrill of the shikar. It had taken Vasant Singh's deserted camp on lease, renovated it and hired tribal hands to assist in the project. 'Babu, they are ready to hire even animals to fall to the shikari's bullet if that was possible,' Subbu had commented at that time.

But the enterprise came to an end under unfortunate circumstances, when the very first adventurer brought by the agency shot at a tribal instead of a beast. It was an error of judgement, but a rumour spread among the tribals that the agency intended giving its customers the thrill of manhunt.

There was a ferocious attack on the company's camp. Its officials fled, narrowly escaping a shower of deadly arrows.

The process of plundering the forest, however, had continued. The Raja felt that some tigers had been obliged to come away to this side of the forest, close to the valley, because the other side of the forest had grown thin. One of these refugees had somehow tasted human flesh and had developed a liking for it.

We were near the pool where the tiger had bagged its prey. On the muddy slope between the natural embankment and the water, the pug-marks were still discernible. The imprint of the beast's paws formed at the time it took the deadly leap was quite distinct.

The victim did not seem to have offered much resistance. He had been caught unawares, immobilized and dragged away. There were bloodstains on the grass.

Sunlight had erased the fear from the atmosphere; but not completely, for it still lurked in the dusky interiors of the bushes and thickets. This part of the forest was more or less familiar to me, but it was no longer the same with a tiger hiding somewhere, probably closeby. I had the feeling that, all said and done, it was the tiger who had a natural right to the forest. We were the intruders. The tiger was only trying to partly avenge man's inhumanity towards the forest and its creatures.

The Raja warned us against making the slightest noise. He and Heera, alternately, paved the way for us and we followed them as noiselessly as possible. I was amazed to see Heera feeling as much at home in the forest as a squirrel in the bush. The deeper we went, the brighter she grew. She was certainly much more her natural self here than in the castle. I later learnt that though she had never explored the forests in this area, she had never failed to accompany the Raja on his hunting expeditions elsewhere. Perhaps it would be more correct to say that the Raja was seldom out for shikar without her.

The tiger's trail became totally indistinct a furlong or so from the rill. Thereafter, we depended on the Raja's experience distilled into intuition. For him both silence and sound—

even a movement made by a tiny creature—had a message. We had failed to notice a large cobra slithering round an anthill only a few yards ahead of us, but the Raja stopped us in time to let it take the course of its choice before we could choose ours.

Beyond a range of anthills thriving over a few dead trees stood a cluster of thick, thorny bushes and clumps of tall grass. Following signals from the Raja, we slowed down before coming to a complete halt. His gesture indicated the presence of something significant inside the well-knit hedge in front of us.

I could see a piece of soiled cloth clinging to a forked twig that protruded from a shrub. The ground under our feet was slightly higher than the small turf enclosed by the hedge. Carefully following the Raja's gaze, I saw the tiger crouching at the foot of a tree, its back towards us. It was totally engrossed in devouring something, its head buried between its forelegs. Patches of light playing on its stripes imparted a dreadful vivacity to it. Heera noiselessly tiptoed closer to the Raja. The Raja raised his gun, brought it to position in slow motion and took aim. His finger was closing in on the trigger.

But a shock awaited us. Till then Sharmaji had been coping awkwardly, literally following Heera blindly, for I had observed that his attention was rarely swayed by anything else. For a while he had fallen behind us, I suppose taking out a thorn that had pierced his canvas shoe. He was too deeply immersed in his own world to reflect on the possible cause of our coming to an abrupt halt. It was when he came very close to Heera that, following her concentrated vision, he had discovered the tiger. Suddenly he burst into a cry of horror.

The tiger leapt up and spun around. Its eyes spouted fire for the lightning moment that it surveyed us. Then, in one bound, it disappeared from sight. Its reply to Sharmaji came from a distance. It was a growl of disgust.

A troop of monkeys on a banyan tree, quiet till then, suddenly began jumping and whooping. They were obviously amused.

The Raja took some time to lower his gun. I could imagine his anguish at missing such a sure target. But the severe scowl

on his face melted after he had cast a contemptuous look at Sharmaji who was still in the process of absorbing the impact of his own discovery. In fact he was shivering.

'Tiger!' he muttered, trying to raise his almost paralysed hand. Thus was the tense silence broken.

Heera peered at him, a mixture of boiling anger and utter disappointment in her eyes. 'Indeed, Sharmaji, how brave of you! To scare a tiger away is no joke!' she said through clenched teeth.

Sharmaji grimaced, quite uncertain about the import of Heera's observation. In no time the Raja had reverted to his usual mood of detachment and stepped into the deserted cover of the tiger. We following him.

The remains of the victim were a gruesome sight. Any violent destruction of a form built by nature always pointed out to me a kind of helplessness underlying our existence—and the wrecking of a human body was certainly the most poignant reminder of this fact.

'The beast has done a good job of his trophy,' said the Raja after a hurried inspection of the scene.

The victim's kinsmen collected the remains in a sack. If the tragedy had struck them dumb, the presence of the Raja stopped them from giving vent to their horror. They just looked stricken.

'What now?' I asked.

'We can go back,' replied the Raja calmly. 'Perhaps someone else is destined to end up in the tiger's jaws. We can then try again.'

We began our journey back to the valley.

'Don't you remember that tantric physician's advice? Balika should have deer meat as frequently as possible. Can't we bag a deer?' Heera asked the Raja, looking back. Her anger made her walk faster.

'Well, okay, if we see one.'

'We can carry a deer a day to the castle, Maharaja, if you so command!' said one of the sardars eagerly.

The Raja conveyed his thanks through a smile and a pat on the sardar's back, but said in a whisper, 'The problem is, my daughter refuses to eat any meat. I will tell you if she changes

her mind.'

Now the trekking proved tedious. The sun was on the meridian and the shafts of sunlight intermittently bursting through the trees were unbearable.

I felt a sense of relief when we reached the rill. Sweeping bushes and the rope-like roots of a banyan tree made ripples in the tender flow. Beyond a bend, the rill produced a sound somewhat similar to that of bells on the feet of some distant dancers.

At last one of the kinsmen of the tiger's victim spoke: 'Maharaja, but for you we would not have recovered these remains of our unfortunate cousin. Now we can at least perform his last rites in a humble manner, satisfying his spirit.' The Raja brought out some money from his pocket and pushed them into the man's hands. They were all in tears. Then, bowing to the Raja, they moved away with their grisly sack.

We came to a halt. We needed a few minutes rest. The Raja descended to the edge of the rill and splashed water on his face. Heera did the same. I sat down on a rock, relishing the subtle coolness in the atmosphere that was due to the presence of the rill. My other companions relaxed leaning against the banyan tree.

A deer was speeding past us like a streak of lightning. Perhaps it planned to leap over the rill. But it came to a dead halt when it unexpectedly confronted us.

I alone held a gun at the time. 'Shoot!' shouted Heera. The dumbfounded deer almost offered itself to me. The force of excitement in Heera's command made me raise my gun. However, I passed the stage of reflex action in a moment and checked myself from pressing the trigger.

'Shoot, will you?'

The repetition of the command struck my ears like bullets as the deer resumed its loping run. I lowered my gun.

Heera shifted her scorching eyes from me and probably swore in a groan. She had been rude to me, but I did not feel hurt. That I did not care to give any apology for my inaction was, I hoped, rebuff enough to her.

But Sharmaji's conduct amused me. His angry glances

convinced me that had I still been a boy under his tutelage, he would have twisted my ears or slapped me. My audacity in disobeying Heera had upset him terribly.

We walked on in silence. Heera, seething with anger, rarely took her eyes off the ground. But suddenly she jerked her head up and raised her gun. She fired before I was able to understand her intention.

It took me a few seconds to locate her target. From the top of a grassy mound I saw my darling doe, Princess, rolling down.

I threw down my gun and ran towards her. She lay completely still at the foot of the mound. Heera's shot had broken her neck. I lifted her velvet body, now soaked in blood. She was dying. Subbu, who occasionally brought her to this extreme part of the valley and who was picking berries nearby came running towards me. He cradled the doe on his lap and broke down like a mother over her dead child.

I looked at Heera. She stood staring at me, but immediately shifted her eyes. I shall never know whether Heera knew the doe was mine or not. But her eyes betrayed the very look she had cast at me the day she learnt that I owned her Heera Mahal. Her eyes were like flashes of will-o'-the-wisp. There was no question of her laughing at that moment. But I felt her laughter pervade the air, as if the eerie vibrations it created would scald and singe the greenest of trees. For a moment I forgot that she was a human being and not a vampire. I even looked around for my gun. I had a burning desire to destroy her.

But that was also the moment I realized that I was unable to act. I felt paralysed. I stood up, but faltered and sat down again as I experienced a reeling sensation in my head. In a sudden hallucination I saw the dreary landscape opposite the forest catching fire. The white flames leaped high enough to burn down a solitary pale cloud floating over my Horizon.

The day was so warm and sultry that it almost drove me crazy. I sat beside my window and let the passing clouds attempt to sweep the acute anguish from my heart. For the rest of the day I remained somewhat insensitive to time.

Beyond a hillock in the direction of the forest there was a very old banyan tree. Its top, like a green round hat, could be seen from my window. Chogan Baba was an old man who had lived and died under the tree. He was considered a savant by the tribals. He had once told me that a swarm of invisible little imps lived in the tree. He saw them and talked to them. They responded to him all right, though not through human speech. Yet he understood their language.

‘What do they do?’ I had asked.

‘Several things. You may not be able to appreciate their activities. They love to follow men, particularly strangers, in the forest. They shun some people and are quite excited about others. Again, don’t ask me why. One of them would sit on the barrel of a hunter’s gun or his arrow and decide whether he should miss the target or hit it. They cannot do this to a hunter like your father, a person with a very strong will. But with lesser men they play all sorts of tricks.’

‘What kind of tricks?’

Then Chogan Baba would tell me stories which he would not tell others. But I had to coax him before he warmed to the subject.

‘Do you remember Vir Kumar’s accident?’ he once asked me.

I remembered it well. Vir Kumar, a robust man in his forties, was a landlord of some sort. I particularly remembered his voice which normally sounded like the rumbling of distant thunder and, when agitated, like a regular thunderclap.

Efficient in all he did yet brutal to the core, he was a terror to many. Several people who had incurred his wrath were found dead in dubious circumstances.

He had a few equally brutal henchmen but surprisingly, the one servant whom he loved most was Bhiloo, a meek and mild young man, who could be frightened out of his wits by a springing rabbit! Bhiloo had joined Vir Kumar's household as his clerk-cum-valet, but had fast risen in his affection. Vir Kumar took an endless amount of trouble to teach him how to handle a gun, in order to make a brave lad out of a nincompoop.

Once Vir Kumar was out hunting with his regular entourage. It had grown dusky by the time he had shot a bear from his machan. He jumped down from the machan and followed the wounded creature. Unfortunately he was dressed in black. At one point in the treacherous twilight, Bhiloo mistook him for the bear and shot at him. Vir Kumar rolled on the ground giving out the last roar of his life.

My father, who had been camping nearby, had rushed to the spot on hearing of the mishap. Years later, I overheard him telling one of his friends, 'I can never forget the bewilderment, the utter helplessness and anguish in Vir Kumar's eyes when he realized who his killer was!'

Chogan Babu told me, 'I was watching both Vir Kumar and Bhiloo. I saw how a dozen or so of those imps were busy with Bhiloo. It is they who made Bhiloo act in that way.'

'To what end? Poor Bhiloo fled the land and nobody knows where he went?'

'What do the imps care for your calculation of gain and loss?' Chogan Baba had replied. He had several other tales to tell. Listening to him, one would get the impression that the forest we saw with its birds, beasts and reptiles was only the visible dimension of a reality which was far more rich in its invisible dimensions. There was at least one more forest invisibly embedded in the physical one—a forest inhabited by spooks, sprites and fairies. Chogan Baba seemed to walk along the thin line that divided both, passing into either one at will.

I used to enjoy Chogan Baba's stories and then dismiss

them once I had left him. In his presence you had to accept whatever he narrated as fact; such was the credibility he imparted to his stories. His gait, his look and his voice were an audacious contradiction of all that we knew to be common sense and rational.

Now, for the first time, I thought over Chogan Baba's experiences seriously. Had Heera been suddenly possessed by those playful spooks? I had never seen any supernatural beings. My father claimed to have seen ghosts on two or three occasions. He used to say, 'There was a time when supernatural beings mingled freely with men. But that was long ago. Then, as man's rational faculty developed—and that was necessary—his faculty that had been open to the supernatural world became dull and then almost dead. He could not see or communicate with those beings any longer. But there are always some people in whom the faculty remains active. Others can even open up that faculty if they follow a certain discipline,' he would explain to me.

Were Chogan Baba alive, I would have perhaps sought his help to solve my puzzle.

A little before sunset, I could see Sharmaji approaching my villa. His steps were hesitant. The prospect of having to talk to him didn't appeal to me. But I was soon relieved of my tension. Instead of heading straight into my bed-cum-study room as he was wont to do, he asked Subbu if he could see me. Subbu turned him away with the excuse that I was tired and still asleep.

I was looking forward to the night. I hoped to fall asleep when it would be dark, quiet and cool. And sleep, I hoped, would end my torment.

I relaxed in an easy-chair looking at the forest.

Birds flew from different directions into the verdant tree-tops. I could see some of them settling down and watched their activity till dusk slowly erased them from sight.

Night came at a leisurely pace.

I sat gazing at the sky till I had counted three shooting stars. Then, after eating dinner absent-mindedly, I retired to bed, but sleep evaded me even when the whole valley had fallen into a moon-charmed stupor.

I climbed to the roof as if in a bid to climb out of the day's memory. Pacing up and down under a tender moon was surely preferable to tossing in bed.

The castle—that looked like a congealed mass of darkness, containing in it a hapless Raja, an enigmatic lady and a sick girl—seemed to be meditating over the enchanted valley and communicating in silence with the deserted temple behind it. Should the tiger be on the prowl now, perhaps there would not be even a dog alert enough to bark at it.

But someone was on the move. A man in black was pacing along the road. I was intrigued, for the ambler could have no destination other than my house which was situated at the end of the road. And when I recognized him, more by his gait than by his contours which were still indistinct, I was surprised. I hurried down and opened the gate. 'Raja Sahib, I cannot imagine you walking up here at this hour of the night!' I fumbled while opening the gate and greeting him.

'I'm a kind of sleepwalker, you know!' He handed over his gun to me so that he could shut the gate behind him. He followed me, practically ordering me into my house through a gesture of his hand.

'I'm glad that I am not guilty of disturbing your sleep. Evidently you were wide awake,' he commented, patting me on the back.

I ushered the Raja into my drawing room. Subbu peeped in, his eyes bulging with disbelief. I asked the Raja if he would like to have some coffee or tea. 'No, thank you,' he said, but his thoughts were evidently elsewhere. I signalled Subbu to keep off. The Raja's gaze lingered on the moonlit valley outside. Five minutes passed in silence. He straightened up on the sofa and smiled at me. 'This is the very first time in my life that I have had to apologize to anybody,' he said.

I had begun to anticipate his statement and the response, usual in such circumstances, was on my lips: 'Well, Raja Sahib, it was not your fault. . . ' but I stammered and stopped and said in a subdued but firm voice, 'Indeed, what happened was most unexpected. I am yet to get over the shock.'

'I can imagine that. I regret the incident,' he said. His voice was intensely sincere and I felt that I had no need to be formal

with him. All my anguish vanished in the silence that followed. He glanced at me and I knew that he had successfully sensed my changing mood.

‘There is a reasonably bright moon over the valley. How about a walk?’ he asked in the process of standing up with his gun for support.

He expected obedience. Hence I said, ‘Why not?’ He looked happy.

While he stepped out into the open, I hurriedly went into my room to change my clothes and to get my gun. I joined him outside the gate in five minutes.

There was a certain majesty in the Raja’s way of walking, a style that seemed to suggest that a full entourage trailed him. It was I who plodded along like a sleepwalker behind him, uncertain of the purpose as well as the destination of the excursion.

To our right was a gentle slope with a small pool of water at its base. Some tiny creature splashed into it, shattering the moon’s reflection into a thousand pieces. The Raja stopped and gazed at the golden ripples that made circles on the water. ‘We could spend hours gazing at such things, at a leaf, a bud or a butterfly, only if we had a mind unencumbered by agonies of hours past and fears of hours ahead. Don’t you think that memories and anticipations are the two most deadly enemies of the possibility of our living fully in the present?’ he asked haltingly and resumed walking. I was unprepared for philosophy at that hour; nevertheless his reflections had their impact on me. I woke up to the charms around me.

We were near the castle. The Raja took a narrow diversion to the right and approached the building from the rear. A beam of pale light coming from a half-open window was veiled by the thin mist outside. I could also hear a murmur, as soft as the light and the mist.

‘I have not told you about Balika, my daughter, or have I?’ the Raja asked looking over his shoulder.

‘I have heard that the princess is unwell.’

The Raja pushed open the postern. Perhaps he had left through them and they had remained unbolted. Standing on

the threshold, he signalled me to follow him.

The spacious corridor leading to several rooms was dark. The Raja stopped in front of a room with a blue curtain hanging at its entrance. It was the only room that was lit. The meagre light filtering through the screen revealed a woman lying on the floor outside the room. She was obviously asleep.

The faint murmur continued. The Raja peeped through the curtain. The murmur stopped and I heard a voice that was soft and sweet, each word vibrating like the notes of a *jal-tarang*.

'Where were you, Papa? I was so afraid! There are tigers and wolves all around this house, aren't there?' the girl reclining on the cosy bed asked, her childlike voice betraying an amazing degree of credulousness. A thick green shade guarded her face from the glare of the kerosene lantern. To me she looked more like a distant mirage than a real form.

The Raja turned towards me and asked me to come in. I left my gun at the entrance and entered the room.

I was greeted by the fragrance of jasmine flowers arranged on the table and by Balika's gesture in sitting up on her old bedstead, panelled with crafted ivory. She was wrapped in a shawl up to her chin. Later I found out that she was eighteen, but her tender face with the curly locks straying over her temple could have been mistaken for an eight-year-old's.

The Raja showed me to a sofa, sat down near Balika, and began to stroke her head.

'How are you, child?' said the Raja, removing the shade from the lamp-stand to have a clearer look at his daughter's face. Balika looked me over quickly. In my memory flashed the eyes of my dying doe.

'Another physician?' she asked her father in a whisper.

'Oh no, he is Dev, the son of an old friend of mine. He is a brave, nice boy and he accompanied us into the forest when we went in search of a tiger which is becoming a man-eater. Hasn't aunty told you about it?' the Raja asked.

Balika gave me another lightning look instead of answering his question.

'Can he kill a tiger bare-handed as aunty does? He has no weapon!' she asked, lowering her voice further.

'He has a weapon child, but why should he bring it into your room?' said the Raja, but he did not contradict the awesome aunty's incredible prowess.

'Papa, are you going to take me away to some other place? This place is full of tigers and vampires, isn't it? But I like this house and the lake. I have never seen so many trees and so many birds anywhere. At noon today, two birds were perched on the lemon tree right outside the window. I presume they were asking me whether or not I had seen the forest, whether or not I could swim in the lake and whether or not I would like to fly with them. I could not say anything because I did not know how to talk to them. They repeated their questions and eventually flew away.'

'Why didn't you talk to them in your language as they did in theirs? They would have understood you as much as you understood them! But, Princess, don't the sweet birds prove that this place is not full of tigers and vampires, after all? There are friendly creatures too!' I said and felt surprised at myself, for I had never spoken so many words in the Raja's presence, nor was I in the habit of speaking freely to strangers. Perhaps an irrepressible curiosity about Balika and an eagerness to gain some access into her world, made me do so. And I was thrilled to be able to address someone as Princess—the name of my dead doe.

Balika blushed and stared at me with surprise, but the Raja looked pleased. 'What Dev says is so true! You must eat well and get well so that you can respond to the call of the birds,' said the Raja smiling. 'They are so concerned about you!'

'I'm glad that the deer which aunty had bagged for me was eaten up by a vampire. I swallow whatever aunty gives me because she loves me so much. But I hate to eat that stuff. Must I eat at all, Papa?'

'You must, child, for you can't live without eating.'

'Must I live, Papa?'

'You must, child, for we love you so much!'

I did not know that it was possible to hear such conversation in real life. I was partly amazed and partly charmed.

The woman who lay outside Balika's room had woken up—and standing on the other side of the curtain, peeped in.

'Come in,' the Raja called her. 'Be with Balika. We will take a stroll outside, keeping tigers and vampires at bay.'

Balika, obviously unwilling to let her father go, held on to his hand but perhaps felt shy to insist in my presence. The Raja gently slipped his hand free. As I stepped out of the room, the Raja leaned towards the woman and told her in a whisper, 'Surely you know what is not to be reported to Heera!' She nodded.

We picked up our guns and I followed the Raja through the dark corridor.

'Devu!' a soft voice called out from behind. I was taken aback. Since the death of my parents there was no one who called me by this variation of my name. The voice was familiar, though I could not recall the person behind it immediately. But the sound bored its way fast and deep into my memory and before long a loving face surged up to the surface.

'Is it Vimla?' I exclaimed, delighted and excited.

It was indeed my childhood nurse. She had left us after a quarrel with my mother on some petty issue. However, once accustomed to a feudal household a maid will never feel comfortable in any other atmosphere. She will look for a similar haven. Vimla had somehow joined the Samargarh Raj family.

My old nurse hugged me and I felt a warm tear on my cheek.

An official from the newly formed Department of Tourism of the State Government came rushing to Horizon to inform me of the impending arrival of five European tourists. I had hardly got ready to receive them when they descended on me, all smiles, enchanted with the valley, and totally unmindful of all inconveniences. They were ardent lovers of the wonder that was India and, after enjoying the Taj Mahal and Ajanta, Ellora and Elephanta, were longing for a few quiet days in solitude. One of them had read a brief reference to Nijanpur in an article by the Englishman who had spent a week at Horizon and had written a glowing account of it. For me, the article had made both exciting and amusing reading. Among other things, it said ' . . . my room, in the sole guest-house of the place, overlooked the valley. I passed practically a whole moonlit night awake, marvelling at the surprisingly quiet yet vivacious valley. I fancied that the valley in fact was a chunk fallen from the moon and it communicated with the moon, secretly, at certain phantom hours. The time I spent there was the most magical in my life. I spoke little, did little and even thought little, just like my mysterious young "innkeeper", a young man who at times appeared totally out of place there and at other times like the spirit-incarnate of the place. . . . '

After some more intriguing, if kind, words on me interspersed with poetic nostalgia, he concluded with this observation: 'It is not without a sense of guilt that I write this, for my write-up may result in people frequenting the place. Nijanpur will no longer be the same then. But I must write, for I cannot conclude paying tribute to India, before leaving the country, without remembering my finest hours. And I have a comfort. Some publicity to the almost hidden valley may bring a bit of business to my "innkeeper". But wait a

little. Will it really do that? I had to force the "innkeeper's dues" into his hands.'

There was no way the 'innkeeper' could convey his gratitude to the Englishman who had since departed to his own country.

Horizon had never received so many guests at one time. I was very busy arranging their lodging and meeting their varied, though modest, needs and answering their hundred-odd questions. My nocturnal visit to the castle, that bewildered and bewildering face in the dim light and the sudden meeting with Vimla, played in my memory like an irresistible, though distant, tune but I found no time to call on the Raja.

'Is it true, Babu, that the sahibs will come back to our country?' Subbu asked me when, on the day after the arrival of the tourists, I was having a relaxed dinner late at night.

'What makes you think so?' I asked, almost sure that he had taken the coming of these white men as the signal for a second conquest of the country by the sahibs.

'I hear that there will be elections!'

'So what?'

'Why are elections necessary when the sahibs have gone and the Gandhiwallahs have taken over, if not to bring the sahibs back? This is the question our *mali* asks, not I.'

'Henceforth there will be elections every five years, but always with the natives in the fray, not the sahibs.'

'I understand, Babu. However, sahibs or no sahibs, the Raja is getting back his throne,' Subbu said with certainty. 'Who doesn't know that!' added the cook who was inside the kitchen.

I gathered that they had heard that the Raja was going to become an independent candidate for the parliamentary elections from the constituency covering the erstwhile state of Samargarh. They were disappointed to learn from me that the Raja recovering his throne, even if he was elected, was out of the question.

The constituency, till then, had been represented in Parliament by Mansingh. He had been the leader of the local people in their fight for freedom which was also directed against the

Samargarh Raj, for the feudal houses were regarded as the pillars of British rule. An inspiring speaker, organizer and a man of integrity, he had replaced the Raja to a certain degree in the popular imagination.

But with the sudden appearance of the Raja on the scene, nobody could predict the outcome of the poll. The common villagers—more particularly the tribals, who accounted for half of the votes in the constituency, were hard put to accept the fact that there would be no Rajas any more. Such a prospect was as absurd to them as an assertion that there would be no more fairies or spirits. They were prepared to forget a hundred tyrannies perpetrated by the feudatory system for the sake of the Raja's symbolic worth for them.

'Strange are the days when the son of a mere farmer like Mansingh can topple a raja and still more strange are the times when instead of growing old, some people grow young,' observed my cook philosophically.

Unlike Subbu, he was a man of few words and hence demanded greater attention.

'Who is growing young?' I asked, quite mystified.

What he and Subbu told me was rather disturbing. They spoke of Sharmaji. Apparently he was changing incredibly fast. He had abandoned the dhoti and kurta, the kind of clothes to which he had been accustomed all his life, and taken to trousers and short-sleeved shirts, ready-made sets which he had bought at Samargarh.

'Who would dare to think that Sharmaji—but now we should call him Sharma Sahib—is fifty? He has grown as jolly and juvenile as a chicken experiencing the first sprouting of wings,' said Subbu, ostensibly addressing the cook, but really for my benefit.

The foreigners were prepared to leave on the morning of the fourth day of their sojourn at Nijanpur. They had spent their time enjoyably, trekking up the hill behind Horizon and bathing in the hot springs. I had tried to do my bit as a guide for them, but for the most part they were on their own. Their only regret was that they could not explore the forest. We had forbidden them to do so and they had understood it would not be wise to enter the forest unarmed.

One of them was filming the landscape, standing on the porch of Horizon. I watched him silently, thinking to myself that it was probably a significant moment in the history of Nijanpur, with its hills and forests being captured by a movie camera for the first time.

'And now a grand finale to the sequence,' mumbled the photographer, focusing on a bullock-cart that halted in front of Horizon. And I wonder if a bullock-cart had ever had the kind of passenger that alighted from it—a gentleman in an elegant, if dusty, suit, cropped hair and a distinguished moustache that forked out like two live sparks from the embers of a fire.

The youthful and sprightly Major Havelock was pleased to meet so many Europeans. He introduced himself to each one of them and, had they time to spare, would have liked to tell each one individually of the ailment he had developed in his heart and how he had learnt about Nijanpur and decided to come here to spend a restful month or two.

'I feel as if I have just begun to grow a new heart,' he exclaimed, placing his hand on his ailing heart, after I had assured him of reasonably comfortable accommodation.

The bullock-cart created fresh excitement among the departing guests. There was of course no question of their travelling all the way to Samargarh by the vehicle, but they decided to board it for a mile or two, their van trailing it. As they waved goodbye to me and my staff and the bullocks sped down the slope, Major Havelock clapped his hands. Suddenly I heard someone else clapping his hands. It was Sharmaji.

'What a metamorphosis!' I said, for not to say something in recognition of his changed appearance would have been unnatural. Sharmaji was not only in trousers, but also in shoes and socks. He had also subjected his meagre hair to a modernistic cut. What was even more horrifying, he was growing a thin moustache.

I was a little more courteous to him because of Subbu's discourtesy towards him on his earlier visit. As usual, I was going to fold my hands to greet him when he promptly shook hands with me. And no sooner had he entered my room than

he reached out for the tin of cigarettes on my table.

'I've taken to smoking,' he declared without the least hesitation. 'Heera herself offers me cigarettes. How could I refuse her?' He spoke between a puff and a smile, looking at me with a newly acquired confidence which, it was obvious, would brook no argument against his explanation.

He was eager to narrate his adventures with Heera—adventures in ancient literature. Sharmaji was required to read the works of Kalidasa and explain them to Heera, passage by passage. Heera could find time to sit with him only in the evening, but Sharmaji did not fail to present himself at the castle once in the morning as well, in the event of his worthy student needing a couplet to be annotated or a simile to be elucidated. 'Should her aspirations in scholarship run into difficulties even for a momentary lack of guidance?' he asked me and smiled benignly upon realizing that the question was too ticklish for me to answer.

The conversation was hardly of interest to me and I became absent-minded. I opened my window wide and spent the time Sharmaji took to finish his cigarette staring at the sky. But that did not dampen his enthusiasm. He lowered his voice when he disclosed to me how embarrassed he had felt when obliged to explain a few erotic passages in a classic to Heera and how she had solved the problem for him by simply asking him to stop for the day!

'How sensible of her,' I commented mechanically.

'Shy and sensible. That is what she is. But I was preparing myself to compare her to the beautiful nymph who was the cause of the poet's ecstasy in the classic. I shall wait for another occasion to do so.' Sharmaji radiated optimism. 'There are matters in which shedding embarrassment pays,' the indefatigable teacher in him instructed me. His effusiveness was checked only when his cigarette burnt down to its end, the glow touching his fingers. He flung it on the floor and smartly crushed it under his heel.

'Dev!' he said, bringing a degree of mellowness into his voice. 'Have I ever asked you for any favour?'

'No, I don't think you have,' I lied. He had asked me for numerous things, big and small, now and then, and had got

them without fail.

'Right,' he patted me on my thigh. 'But, Dev, now I'm going to ask you for such a prize possession of yours that I'm afraid you will be hard put to grant it to me. That is why I'd like you to first promise that you'd not refuse it to me.' My look of surprise made him anxious. 'Come on, Dev, let me see in you the benevolence for which your ancestors are remembered.' He fidgeted with the matchbox nervously.

'I don't understand you, Sharmaji, what do you want?' He looked pained at my dry response. He stammered for a few seconds and then burst out, 'I want her. Won't you give her to me?'

'Her?' I was perfectly bewildered. 'I don't understand you at all!'

'I mean that portrait of hers, so dear to you! You will not deny it to me, or will you?' He took my reluctant hands into his.

'Do you mean the portrait of Heera you perhaps saw the other day in this room?'

'Yes, yes, yes, my dear. What else!'

'Were it in good condition I would have sent it to the castle. Take it away by all means. Right now if you wish!'

'Right now?'

Sharmaji's thrill and gratification were nauseously emphasized all over his face—the new face with a blooming moustache.

I asked Subbu to fetch the portrait from the lumber room.

Obviously Sharmaji did not expect to win his prize so easily. In his excitement and his eagerness to please me, he said, 'Do you know? Heera felt quite bad over that incident. I was clever enough to understand that she even wanted me to convey her regrets to you. But I assured her that it was not at all necessary for her to feel guilty about it for in the epic *Ramayana* even Sita had coveted a deer!' Sharmaji laughed.

I was stunned. I was not much of a reader of epics or classics, but Sharmaji comparing Sita's fascination for the golden deer and her request to Rama to try and catch it with Heera's snatching away someone's gun and shooting down a tame doe, made me furious.

But Subbu reappeared with Heera's portrait before I had voiced my disgust—if I could have voiced it at all. I asked the boy to carry the thing to Sharmaji's house.

'No, no,' said Sharmaji eagerly. 'Don't deprive me of the chance to carry it myself!'

He waved Subbu out of the room and brought his face closer to my ear. 'My wife died before I could have her photographed. Let me at least have the portrait of the lady who—ah—ah—how to say it!'

'Who adores you?'

'You are quite close to being correct. But "she adores me" does not reveal the state of affairs exactly. It should be. . . ah—ah—how to say it. . . .

' . . . that she loves you?' I made bold to ask.

'Correct!' He patted me again, more lustily, and blushed. I felt the warm blood within my veins grown warmer with anger a minute ago, turn chill. Also I hated his speaking so close to me, for his tobacco-filled mouth smelled obnoxious and that in spite of my being a smoker.

'Do you really believe that Heera loves you?' I asked matter-of-factly.

Sharmaji did not answer. Instead, he laughed soundlessly, meaningful glints in his eyes suggesting that there were more things in heaven and earth than could be dreamt of by me.

'You are intelligent, aren't you?' he observed seriously. 'You can draw your own conclusions from a certain incident. Heera was engaged to a princely young man. But all of a sudden he died. That was years ago. Till today she had fondly preserved a set of clothes made for him—her prospective bridegroom. Now, now. . . ' Sharmaji's eyebrows danced a couple of times, 'would you believe it? The trousers and the shirt she offered me the other day were from the same suit! Dev! What do you make of of this gesture of hers?'

Sharmaji laughed loudly and then set forth the conclusion himself: 'Did you catch the symbolism in her action? In a most imaginative way, a way that could have been thought of by her ingenious brain alone, she quietly made me slip into the position vacated by the late lamented young man—her prospective bridegroom!'

Sharmaji's radiant glance dared me to contradict him. He stooped, took the picture reverently and, holding it under his right arm, marched out of my room triumphantly.

Absent-mindedly, I picked up a cigarette and lit it. But the very first puff repulsed me. I tossed it away. That was the end of my habit of smoking.

A gory dream woke me up that night. Sharmaji figured in it prominently. I saw his newly-cultivated moustache change into a monstrous leech. It throbbed and grew fatter and fatter. I knew that what it was sucking out of Sharmaji was infinitely more precious than blood.

I was surprised to see Sahoo's dusty jeep speeding up the serpentine road to Horizon. I was even more surprised when Sahoo, all smiles, got off his vehicle and declared, 'I told myself, it was high time I paid Devji a courtesy call.'

And the legendary tightwad's driver brought out half-a-dozen pineapples and handed them over to Subbu.

'This is from my own kitchen garden, grown under my personal supervision. Look how big the pineapples are, apart from being juicy and sweet. They are fit for an emperor's plate,' he said, wiping his face with the end of his dhoti.

'You should have sent a few of these to the Raja,' I said.

'I have, Devji, I have. Then, I decided to give some to the junior raja,' he laughed. 'Devji, the old rajas are gone, but there can be no *rajya* without rajas. How do you think the new rajas are going to be chosen—and when?' he asked me as he walked about, taking a round of my house. It did not seem to be a casual query for he repeated his epigram—there can be no *rajya* without rajas—and appeared to expect me to respond. I did not know why a purely academic question like this one should bother him. Maybe the sudden appearance of the Raja had stimulated many novel thoughts in the minds of the people around him.

'Sahooji, I'm sure you know that there is no question of a set of new rajas being chosen. The institution is abolished forever.'

'I know and I don't know, to confess to you. The rajas are still there—aren't they?—though without any power, like our Raja of Samargarh!'

'Only in their titles. And, I'm sure, the titles will soon begin to sound so hollow that the rajas themselves would be anxious to get rid of them.'

'But I knew at least two rajas who had no *rajyas*. They were, in fact, merchants like me, only more prosperous,' Sahoo asserted.

'Right. The British used to honour their favourites with titles of different grades: Rao Sahib, Rao Bahadur, Raja Sahib, Raja Bahadur, Khan Sahib, Khan Bahadur, Companion of Indian Empire, Knight Companion of Indian Empire, Grand Companion of Indian Empire, so on and so forth.'

Sahoo's confusion over the differences between the rajas who were ruling princes and those who were honorary rajas, was over, as I understood from his ready nods. He was thoughtful for a moment and then asked, 'But how does one obtain such a title?'

'One can no longer obtain such a title, Sahooji, for the British who used to bestow them on those who had proved their worth through philanthropy or sheer show of love for the King Emperor, are gone, as you know. The Indian Government does not give such titles.'

'Why don't they?'

I laughed. 'Why worry over that question Sahooji? Even if not a raja, you can surely become a *mantri*! All you have to do is get elected to the Legislature! You have money and you enjoy a wide reputation as a . . .'

'True, Babu, true, but a raja is a raja!' he sighed. I felt immensely relieved that he did not let me complete my sentence, for absent-mindedly, I was perhaps going to expose his reputation.

'Devji, one of the reasons for my calling on you is, the Raja wants to see you.'

'Any specific reason?'

'I believe he plans to go on a longer hunting expedition. The tiger you were looking for the other day has turned into a regular man-eater and has become a big menace,' Sahoo informed me.

On my way to the castle with Sahoo I heard that the beast's area of operation had gradually expanded. Its latest victim belonged to a hamlet beyond the valley, five kilometres from Nijanpur as the crow flies, though it was more than ten kilometres by a zigzagging road.

We greeted the Raja. He showed Sahoo to a sofa a little away from his while signalling me to sit closer to him. But Sahoo confidently occupied the place offered to me.

Sharmaji appeared at the door the very next minute, ushering Havelock into the Raja's presence. I knew that misery made strange bedfellows, but it was beyond me how Sharmaji could become so friendly with the Major.

The former army officer was conspicuously excited over his meeting with the Raja who, I realized from their conversation, had also done a stint in the army as was the fashion with princes. Havelock nodded smartly and approvingly at every syllable the Raja uttered. 'What a pity,' mused the Raja, 'that we should have a Major amidst us and yet we must go hunting without the benefit of his leadership!'

'What a pity, what a pity,' echoed Major Havelock himself and then, on second thoughts—or perhaps his first—said, 'Why, sir? I'm not disabled! I can surely accompany you! I can still kill any number of beasts!'

'All we need is to kill one beast and for that we ought not to bother you. Please relax. Sharma's company should be a tonic for you.'

Sharmaji grew pale. His face showed the emotions of a little boy whose parents had threatened to leave him out of a proposed picnic. 'But, Sir,' he stuttered, 'I can give Major Havelock company even while he is with you as a member of the hunting party. What I mean is, I can also be a member of the party.'

'No, Sharma, you need not take that much trouble,' said the Raja and burst into a hearty laugh, the kind that was rarely heard from him. In my imagination, his laughter was translated into this crude statement: 'Look here, Sharma, the tiger has to first survive your shriek to be shot down by us!'

Havelock joined in the Raja's laughter without realizing its significance.

Sahoo was fast growing interested in affairs that were not his business. He and Rao were both busy drawing up the Raja's itinerary. Obviously they were to be included in the expedition—Sahoo because of his jeep which he had placed at the Raja's disposal and Rao by virtue of his possessing a gun.

From the Raja, I received a detailed account of the man-eater's activities. While going after it the Raja had killed a panther and a common tiger, but the rogue still remained at large. The Raja was now making a comprehensive plan to finish it off. He was preparing to spend three or four days in the forest or close to it, beginning with Dinpur, the tiger's latest haunt.

'In fact I intend killing two tigers with one shot,' he said in a matter-of-fact tone. 'One is the man-eater; the other is—I must say he too is a tiger of a sort—Mansingh.'

I was naturally under the impression that the Raja wanted me to join the expedition. That he did not raise the question at all intrigued me. But as the assembly was dispersing, he looked at me. 'You seem tired. I can understand. You had a number of guests. Now that they are gone, you ought to relax,' he said. I felt relieved though I had started mentally preparing myself for the journey.

The Raja shook hands with Major Havelock and wished him a speedy recovery. 'Take care of the Major,' he told Sharmaji who had stopped talking from the moment he realized that there was no chance of his being a part of the expedition. I was leaving the castle along with the others, still wondering why I had been summoned, when the Raja signalled me to stay back.

'Heera desires to talk to you.' He went in, obviously to call her, without waiting to ascertain whether I was in a mood to see her or not. I was obliged to sit down, feeling a bit annoyed with the Raja and not without some trepidation. Fifteen minutes must have passed before she emerged from the corridor. For a moment, she halted at the dusky doorway smiling. Sharmaji had once compared her to a fresh morning rose, '... but without thorns'. I realized how appropriate the first part of his comparison was. I, however, suspected the presence of something far more galling than thorns; a scorpion or two lying in ambush behind the petals, the moment I looked into her eyes.

She resumed walking with a jerk and went over to the sofa facing me.

'I am ashamed of my conduct, Dev! I didn't know that the

deer was yours.'

She spoke contritely, but her words were as alluring as a magical incantation.

'We should forget it,' I mumbled.

'Should we?' she said unexpectedly. 'But why? Shouldn't there always be something between two persons for a dialogue or even for a momentary wrangle?'

I pretended to appreciate her philosophy through an uneasy smile. Two strangers came to my rescue. The Raja had brought a grandfather clock that had been set into motion after years and were installing it in a corner of the hall, behind me. Heera scowled at their intrusion, but after a minute straightened up, smiled to hide her irritation and said, 'Why does it happen so often that one is suddenly reminded of Time when one would love to forget it?'

Some jackals howled in the distance announcing sunset.

'I propose to secure a bright and bonny deer for you one of these days—during our campings in search of the man-eater. But you must cooperate with me. Honestly, I'm more interested in bagging a deer alive than the man-eater dead. When the Raja is busy mobilizing support for his human pet we can surely slip into the forest at such intervals—can't we?—to recruit a pet for you!' she said with the excitement of a child who had just discovered a new avenue of merry-making and was anxious to share it with its playmate.

'But I'm not joining the expedition.' I sounded dull.

'No? But why not?' The tone her voice suddenly assumed surprised the two men still busy with the grandfather clock.

'I am rather unwell,' I said, happy that I was defending the Raja's decision as mine.

'What's the problem with you?' She seemed concerned.

'Nothing serious. I'm a bit tired. I had too many guests to deal with.'

'Who's there to take care of you in your—she completed her question after a slight pause—'Horizon?'

My servant Subbu, my cook, my *mali*, . . .'

She stood up. I followed suit. She seemed to laugh silently.

'Well, I can do nothing about it, anyway! I hope you really

have somebody to look after you. . . .'

She was interrupted by the grandfather clock which was chiming for the first time in years. The Raja was back in the hall looking at the clock and beaming.

'I wish you could join us,' Heera said concluding the interview and left the hall abruptly.

It was already evening. I bowed to the Raja and stepped out onto the portico. 'We'll meet,' the Raja whispered behind me. I looked back. His smiling face had disappeared from the doors left ajar.

Alone on the lonely road to Horizon I wondered if the Raja had yet another nocturnal stroll in mind.

'Babu!'

I looked back. The two men who had fixed the grandfather clock were behind me. They introduced themselves. They had come from Samargarh to meet the Raja. Former employees of the Raj family, one of them had become a petty contractor and the other the owner of a grocery in the town. They had been at the castle for the last three days doing sundry jobs for the Raja simply out of a sense of duty.

'We are prepared to install electricity in the castle—at our own cost and under our own supervision. But Raja Sahib is stubbornly resisting the proposal. We don't understand why,' they complained.

I did not understand either. But I told them that I would reiterate their offer to the Raja with my recommendation added to it. Reassured, they bade me goodbye having seen me to my doorstep.

After dinner I sat near my window flipping through a book for a while and then losing myself in the hazy landscape. Remaining awake alone, watching a sleepy little valley, had its rewards. I felt myself transported into the mild mist spread over the woods and the invisible hamlets to become a privileged member of their secret alliance.

It was past midnight when the Raja appeared outside the gate and I hastened to open it. 'Let's take a walk,' he proposed straightaway. I was ready for it, amused that the Raja's conduct did not appear unnatural to me any more. Along the slope that gently meandered towards the castle I suddenly

realized how right the Raja was in not agreeing to the proposal for the castle's electrification. It would be an affront to the mystery of the moonlight and the majestic and innocent darkness that formed a backdrop to the castle. The castle itself, at that moment, looked like a faithful protégé of that mystery.

We were approaching the castle. But the Raja took the narrow diversion along which he had led me earlier. I followed him towards the ancient pool between the castle and the deserted temple.

'So, you are taking a plunge into politics!' I observed and almost immediately felt how alien my question was to the spirit of the time and the situation.

'You've heard wrong,' he corrected me calmly. 'I cannot plunge into politics or, for that matter, into anything at all! I am just having a little fun—snubbing that proud little Mansingh. He was too vociferously against the construction of Heera Mahal for Heera to live it down.' The Raja laughed softly but mischievously and added, 'I could do very well without it. But, well, I believe I have reached a stage when I find little difference between doing and not doing.'

'Mansingh may not dare to oppose you,' I observed.

The Raja looked at me with curiosity. 'Are you under the impression that I'm planning to be a candidate for the elections?' he asked, and he understood that his question surprised me. He clarified his position. 'All I'll do is a little canvassing for Ketu Singh. He can claim—and I'll also tolerate others saying—that he is my candidate.'

'Ketu Singh above all!' I could not contain my surprise any longer. Now I understood what Heera meant by the Raja's human pet.

'Yes, Ketu the goblin, who now loudly bemoans his past opposition to us under Mansingh's instigation, as if he had really ever mattered! Besides, his repentance is fake, but I don't care. The fact is, he has the resilience and vanity of a cat and Heera's delight lies in humbling the genuine with the help of the fake—if she hates the former. I could stomach the abolition of our *rajya* quite easily, but not Heera.'

I felt annoyed that Heera's whims and foolish sentiments

should be taken seriously by the Raja! But the Raja obviously revelled in moderate roguery. If Heera was to be believed, Ketu had been fielded by the Raja himself.

We reached the emerald patch between the lake and the rear wall of the villa. Before us loomed a brooding silhouette. It was the temple.

'Dev!' The Raja suddenly came to a halt. 'Heera rarely leaves Balika behind her. If she is doing so this time it is because of the prospect of shikar combined with the thrill of wreaking her vengeance on Mansingh. Should Vimla be in need of any help, she can count on you, can't she?'

'I shall be only too happy to render any kind of help she might need and at any time,' I said. I felt that it was quite unnecessary for the Raja to remind me of my duty for he should not have had any doubt on that score.

'Raja Sahib, may I know what the nature of Balika's illness is?' I asked.

'They call it catatonic stupor, but who knows!'

He gave an account of the events leading to her present condition: She used to be the jolly little cherub of an extremely indulgent mother—the Rani. 'What a radiant change the child had brought to my wife's personality! She would forget the world and lose herself in the child; the child would do the same. Sometimes, observing them, I had the sweet feeling that they had become one—like the twilight when you cannot distinguish the day from the night.'

But the Rani took ill suddenly. She had to be removed to the hospital—and then she died.

Vimla and the others decided not to reveal the tragedy to Balika. They kept assuring the child that her mother would soon be back with her.

Meanwhile Heera, unable to get on well with the Rani, had been living separately. One evening Balika was told that her mother was coming home. But the open arms into which she was expected to jump, and in her innocence did jump, were Heera's! Balika was shocked when she realized this. She reacted as if she had been singed badly. Yet the more the child rejected Heera, the more determined Heera grew in her efforts to make the child accept her.

'Did Heera succeed in her endeavour?'

The Raja evaded the question, or probably did not know the answer. Perhaps Heera really loved the child and she did her best to prove it, but Balika never came out of her depression. She was found to be afraid of hoping for or looking forward to anything and gradually slipped into a state of total melancholia. The world hardly existed for her beyond her small apartment. She had been taught but little; nevertheless, she developed a voracious reading habit and that became a great support to her in her self-imposed solitude.

Since I knew Vimla, I could imagine the care she would take of Balika, and with what love. The irony was, Heera had succeeded in making the Raja and Balika believe that the latter owed her survival to her love and her love alone!

'Heera is possessive of Balika, no doubt, but she is awfully attached to the girl,' the Raja said. He seemed to be apologizing for Heera's conduct.

As the Raja talked, we strolled on the stretch between the disintegrating stone lions guarding the temple and the rear wall of the castle.

'Have you ever entered the shrine?' the Raja asked me.

'Only once, when I was very small. I remember nothing except that I felt terribly scared inside it.'

'After the last priest's death nobody ever went in. It had become quite infernal inside. I have just got it cleaned.'

'Do you propose to revive the worship?'

'Then I have to begin with a human sacrifice. There hasn't been one for long. The elements which rejoiced in the ritual must be awfully hungry.'

He fell silent. All was quiet under the pale moon. An otter leapt into the pool and swam out instantly, perhaps with a fish in its mouth.

'I love to loiter here at night, all alone. I am often overtaken by an irresistible and weird sense of dejection. At such moments I have even considered the prospect of sacrificing myself. But I wonder if I'm not as hungry as these supernatural elements which once thrived on human blood or if the deity is not as dead as myself!'

The Raja laughed. The temple and the hill returned the

echoes.

'Sorry,' he muttered, forcing himself to stop laughing and, with determined steps, walked towards the rear door of the castle.

At a soft tap from the Raja, Vimla opened the door. We entered.

'Papa, a tiger roared and it sounded like your laughter!' Balika observed with some excitement.

'No, child, it was Papa who laughed and it must have sounded like a tiger's roar.'

'Oh!' She shut her eyes.

A jarring voice disturbed my peaceful afternoon nap. Someone was trying to impress upon Subbu that the nation's future depended on his waking me up at once.

I came out and found Subbu confronted by Ketu Singh who was glistening in the bright sunlight like a snake that had just shed its old skin.

If Subbu was puzzled, I was definitely surprised. Ketu almost pounced upon me in his bid to embrace me, passing on to me much of the sweat and dust that covered his person. He then took both my hands in his and stared into my eyes, keeping up his wide smile long enough for me to feel obliged to grin.

'Devji, it is the call of the country. Please respond and I guarantee that you'll be back here before nightfall,' he said, beginning to push me towards his jeep.

'I don't understand,' I said helplessly. 'Where do you want me to go?'

'Didn't I say that it is the call of the country? Who are we to disregard it? Come on sir, Raja Sahib is waiting for you.'

'Where?'

'At Dinpur, of course!'

Ketu was talking and behaving like a man possessed. But since I knew that the Raja was at Dinpur I decided to give him the benefit of the doubt on the factual part of his statement. I got ready as quickly as I could and climbed into his jeep. Ketu's joy found a noisy expression in his addressing his driver in a vulgar if endearing way and ordering him to drive carefully. 'We are carrying a life as sacred as a jarful of Ganga water!' he cautioned the driver, giving him a pat on his back and drawing his attention to me. Then he began digging into the complex roots of an unmanageably large family tree and

claimed kinship with me, mystifying me in the process.

‘When some ignorant chaps ask me whether I enjoy your support or not, I shoot back at them “Who but I have any claim on Devji’s love?” My blunt answer shocks them into silence. I’m forthright and honest, am I not, Devji?’

‘As if my support matters!’ I tried to avoid answering his question.

‘It matters very much, Devji! Don’t our people know that you are the scion of a great dynasty—though it lost its *rajya* generations ago? Isn’t your mud house in the village still called a palace? Let the people know that you’re with me—and that will be a heavenly boon to me,’ Ketu said, mercilessly squeezing my hand. ‘The truth is the truth. It must be announced at any cost.’

‘What truth are you speaking of?’

‘The truth, the undeniable truth that you support me!’

‘But don’t you think that Mansingh has all along been an honest worker and a trusted leader and he has done nothing to forfeit our support?’

‘Look here, Devji,’ Ketu’s voice became grave. ‘The question is not of personalities, but of principles. I stand for justice, honesty, integrity, equality and a lot of such other really good things, all printed and distributed for everybody to know. Our country is passing through a grave crisis. How much can Mansingh’s corrupt party do to tide us over it? Nothing, I say, nothing. It is only humble, selfless, very very good persons like me—I mean servants of the people like me—who neither fear nor flatter—who can usher in a new era. Please, please, you kind and compassionate Sir, my true brother, my well-wisher, my master, you must have pity on me, you must help me! I’m your servant, your slave, your serf. Who can appreciate a man of principles like me if not you? I’m willing to wipe the dust from your feet!’

We bumped down the rocky road, occasionally raising clouds of red dust. Ketu’s voice rose higher and higher.

Groups of men and women were emerging from the forests flanking the road and were heading towards Dinpur. Most of them were tribals who lived in small hamlets scattered amidst the hills and woods. Many were in their best attire with leaves

or feathers stuck in their one-band turbans. It was surprising how Ketu had managed to spread word of the meeting so fast. Although a jeep or a car was no longer a rarity for them, the young tribals greeted the vehicle with shouts of joy, and Ketu, all smiles, waved at them.

We were at Dinpur in half-an-hour. Even though the small village had lost two of its inhabitants to the tiger during the past week, it still wore a festive look. We drove to the venue of the meeting, a grove of huge banyan trees. An impressive bamboo platform had been erected and was covered by a colourful canopy. Ketu, no doubt, had enterprising and resourceful lieutenants.

The Raja Sahib relaxed in a chair on the platform, hardly mindful of the multitudes approaching him in fearful silence and prostrating themselves before him. Some, too shy to come closer, bowed to him from a distance—sometimes as far as half a furlong away. They had trekked miles to have a glimpse of the Raja. Among them were some naïve people—I was told by the village chief who received me with great enthusiasm—who believed that the Raja's return to his state did not mean anything less than the restoration of his throne to him.

The crowd kept gazing at the Raja reverentially. Hundreds of non-tribal women, their faces veiled, blew conch-shells from time to time.

Behind the Raja sat Heera. It was difficult for me to gauge her reaction to the situation—whether she enjoyed it or felt uncomfortable. I had, however, no doubt that she was gloating over Mansingh's inevitable discomfiture.

She smiled and the Raja nodded to me, inviting me to sit on the vacant chair beside him. I wanted to ask him if it was true that he summoned me or if it was all Ketu's scheming. But such a petty question, I was afraid, would not go well with the solemnity of the occasion.

The headmen of the different villages—to be accurate those who were headmen during the Raja's time and, though legally stripped of all authority, continued to be regarded by the people as their leaders—gathered in a cluster below the platform. Their hands folded, they were waiting for the Raja's

verdict. The Raja's instructions were clear and precise. They were required to ensure that Ketu was elected.

The strength of the audience was no less than five thousand when Ketu rose to address it. To my surprise and resentment he proposed my name as the president of the meeting. Sahoo, in his maiden speech, stammered out a well-rehearsed sentence by way of seconding the proposal. He wished to add something extempore. But the words got stuck in his throat. He groaned and, perhaps to relieve him of his predicament, the Raja clapped his hands. Thousands of hands followed suit instantly. Amidst all this the little daughter of the headman of Dinpur put a garland of camphor-beads round my neck.

The Raja was not likely to remember that I, because of the people's nostalgic regard for my ancestors, could count in Ketu's campaign for votes. The idea to impress upon the people my support for him must have been Ketu's, but in summoning me suddenly and making me preside over the meeting he could not have acted entirely on his own. I viewed the treatment accorded to me as yet another whim of the Raja's and decided to bear with it without a murmur.

The light from the setting sun glowed through the foliage and seemed to focus on Ketu's face imparting a kind of aura to him. He demonstrated his knowledge of the world by making references to England, Russia and America and mysteriously linking many global problems to Mansingh's failings.

Heera sat looking through her binoculars—perhaps she was observing the behaviour of some ravens resting on a tree at one of the farthest corners of the grove. The Raja's eyes remained shut. I watched the audience. Most of them kept gazing at the Raja and hardly any of those who paid attention to Ketu seemed to understand him; they just looked delighted.

The Raja suddenly opened his eyes and smiled at me. 'Bored?' he asked in a whisper and standing up, took a step forward. Ketu stopped in the middle of a sentence. The Raja did not bother to give him a minute more to conclude his speech. He signalled him to sit down. Ketu, of course, kept

standing with folded hands behind the chairs.

There was pandemonium, everyone anxious to alert the others about the chance of a lifetime descending on them; but only for a moment. It was followed by total silence.

'My sons and daughters,' the Raja began. I was amused, for there were many in the audience who were older than the Raja. 'I thank you,' he continued, 'for gathering here, coming from far and near.'

The innocent faces of the people who obviously considered themselves lucky to have had a glimpse of the Raja now betrayed perplexity at having to be thanked by him.

'I am told that you would have liked me to contest the elections myself. . . .'

'Yes, yes, yes, Maharaja! We will heap on you as many votes as you want, Maharaja!' said a large number of voices in unison.

'If enough votes are not available in Samargarh, we shall arrange to get them from elsewhere. We are ready to trek the hills and scour the forests and collect them,' said an enthusiastic old man, 'if only you tell us where they are available.'

'You are our raja. We are fortunate that you are back! We will not let you desert us once again,' shouted a minuscule headman who had been lifted up by two stout youths to be seen by all. He mopped his face nervously. People applauded him. It was almost as if he had said aloud the single thing that loomed large in all their minds.

The Raja signalled them to be silent. At once all was quiet.

'I was your raja,' observed the Raja gravely quite unmoved by the overwhelming emotional outburst of the multitude. 'Now, will you like the man who was your raja to become a mere *mantri* at best?'

The Raja paused for any possible answer from the audience. Those who understood the implication of his question were visibly embarrassed. After almost a minute some sober voices were heard saying, 'No, Maharaja, no.'

'Good,' the Raja resumed, 'Ketu should suffice. In fact, he is great. How much do you know of America or Russia? But he knows. I say, vote for him!'

The Raja waved his right hand in a gesture of farewell as

well as of blessing and returned to his chair. Amidst thunderous applause, someone raised a slogan hailing Ketu Singh. Only a few voices, obviously planted by Ketu in the audience, took it up. As the slogan was repeated the volume continued to increase.

Crows flew nervously from tree to tree as Ketu stood on the platform, glowing with delight that was heightened by the patch of soft sunlight still focused on his face. He raised his folded palms to touch his forehead everytime the slogan was shouted.

In the advancing twilight I witnessed the metamorphosis of petty little Ketu into a fearful bigwig.

'My bothers and sisters, my uncles and aunties, my friends and well-wishers, please remember our noble, honourable, revered, godly Raja Sahib's instructions and vote for me. Now, my request to you is, disperse before it is dark. I cannot bear losing one of my dear voters to the man-eater!' said Ketu Singh.

Needless to say, the meeting ended without any presidential address.

While the crowd began dispersing, albeit reluctantly (some of them bowing to the Raja and walking out backwards as turning their backs to him would be disrespectful) the Raja spoke, as if to himself but loud enough for me to hear, 'I feel sorry for Mansingh. One more meeting in the other part of the constituency and Ketu's victory is assured.'

'I wish people like Ketu were never elected,' I said in weak protest.

'Why? What's wrong with Ketu? Don't you see how active he is and how timid too? His timidity will check him from doing more mischief than he can get away with,' said the Raja and he laughed.

I did not laugh with him. He checked himself and said in a more serious tone, 'The average man swings between two poles of possibilities. Any of us can become either an angel's cousin or the Devil's godchild. I have seen even well-publicized angels shedding their wings and revealing a wee bit of tail. Why can't our Ketu shed his tail and at least hop, if not fly with a tiny pair of wings, newly grown or borrowed?' He

paused. 'In any case, the Ketu Singhs are a temporary phenomenon, symbolizing a missing link in the nation's political evolution.'

Meanwhile Ketu, all smiles, had come closer to us. 'This humble child is at your service, sir!' He touched the Raja's feet.

'Are you? I thought we are at your service!' commented the Raja with a chuckle.

'No, sir, who is this nincompoop to command your service? You are at the service of the country, of humanity, of God. . .'

'Good. At this rate you are sure to end up on a comfortable chair of power. But, for the present, be at Dev's service. Arrange for his return to Nijanpur.'

I was in half a mind to stay back so that I could keep the Raja company. He planned to sit the night out on a machan in the hope of getting a shot at the man-eater. But he seemed eager to see me off. I took leave of Heera hurriedly, pretending that I had not been able to read the strong disapproval in her eyes.

Ketu instructed his workers on what duties to perform during his hour-long absence and led me to his jeep. He dislodged his driver and drove the vehicle himself, sticking his head out again and again and smiling and waving at the crowd that had begun breaking up into smaller groups. Undoubtedly he was keen to demonstrate his driving skills before them.

A fog set in after sundown. Ketu enjoyed blowing the horn frequently and scattering the pedestrians—who also enjoyed it—to both sides of the road.

'Devji, how much I love these children of Mother Nature. Now I can serve them with a vengeance. Just help me to win in the contest.' He repeated the sentiment in different words even though I sat silent.

The jeep had hurtled along for a while when he brought it to a spluttering halt. 'Do you see?' he asked me gleefully. I thought he had spotted a dancing peacock or a strange animal. I looked out. Old Mansingh was crossing the road with a few of his followers, two of them with lanterns and the others holding sticks. I did not understand why Ketu should

find the scene attractive. He jumped out shouting a greeting to Mansingh, while a Satanic smile played on his lips.

'Come on, Sir, let this humble man have the honour of giving you a lift to your destination,' he said loudly.

'Thanks, Ketu, but we can walk.'

The people who were returning from the meeting stopped and gathered around the two.

'Look here, Mansingh Sahib, my dear, my respected Mansingh Sahib!' Ketu's voice rose shrilly, for it had perhaps cracked during his oration, and said, 'Noble souls like you and I can go on quarreling on matters of principle and still remain personal friends, can't we? Why can't we? Can I bear to see you walk while I ride a vehicle? How can I?'

Ketu was getting more and more excited as he observed the crowd around them swelling. 'What do you say, my uncles and aunties, my brothers and sisters?' Ketu folded his hands and threw the question to his amused audience. He snatched a lantern and held it high, revealing Mansingh's face as well as his own.

I could read the strain and embarrassment on Mansingh's sensitive face. Obviously he hated Ketu. He glared at Ketu, but Ketu's eyes shifted quickly, unwilling to be caught by his.

'Ketu, apart from the fact that your help is unwarranted, how can I accept your offer and let your brazen-faced hypocrisy triumph? Do you think I am unaware of all the nasty lies that you and your roguish followers are spreading against me?' Mansingh blurted out at last.

I wish he had kept quiet, for his observation inspired Ketu to launch into a harangue: 'Uncles and aunties, brothers and sisters, you be the judges, please! I swear, in Mansinghji I see my own, very own, elder brother. Can I ride my jeep without a guilty conscience, while this senior politician keeps plodding through bushes and boulders? Can I? Isn't that against the very grain of my nature? Tell me, my uncles and . . .'

Mansingh looked helpless. I decided to put an end to Ketu's delinquency. I got down and elbowed my way into the centre of the throng. 'Mansingh Sahib, why do you waste your time? Kindly resume your walk' I said, as I greeted the old man.

Mansingh returned my greeting and without a word more started walking. Ketu fell silent. He hardly talked for the rest of the journey.

An unfamiliar feeling of loneliness began to haunt me with the advent of darkness; unfamiliar, because I was always at home with solitude. I had no particular friends at Nijanpur and since the Raja's descent on the valley, Rao, the only person with whom I felt at ease, had no time to spare for me.

I did not let the feeling remain vague for long. I dug down to its root, which in any case was not very deep, and knew that it emanated from a strong urge to talk to Vimla, to find out if I could be of any help to her or Balika. No sooner had I hit upon the truth than I began to feel that the castle, like a magnet, was drawing me irresistibly towards it. I was there before long.

The revived staff of the castle, rather, the watered down version of it—the watchman, the cook and two servants—sat on the porch around a lantern playing cards. Behind them, leaning against the door and looking towards the road, stood Vimla. She seemed to be expecting me.

She took hold of me with the intense yearning of a mother for her long lost son. We sat in the hall. She had so many things to ask me and was so eager to know about my parents' last days that she was in a quandary as to where she should begin. She shed tears, perhaps somewhat repentant about deserting us.

An hour passed. She suddenly remembered that she ought not to have left her ward alone for such a long time. She stood up. 'Let's continue our talk in Balika's room,' she said, pulling me by the arm.

She noticed my hesitation and smiled. 'Why, Dev, wasn't it Raja Sahib himself who took you into her room? And how do you fail to understand that he loves you like his son?' After a pause Vimla added, 'It is of course different with Heera. She

would not tolerate even a pussycat befriending the girl!

I followed Vimla through a labyrinth of passages, dimly lit by a solitary lantern, towards the other end of the castle. The passage still reeked of birds and bats and one or two partridges flitted over our heads in a disoriented fashion. It seemed like a journey into an unreal world—into the fairy tale world which Vimla, I remembered, built around me when she used to cradle me in her arms and tell me stories.

I could hear the princess mumbling. Or was she reading aloud from some book? She fell silent as soon as Vimla parted the screen. And as we entered the room, she stared at me with the wonder in her big eyes undiminished.

'Isn't it a pity that a sweet girl like you did not have a brother till today? Here is my son, Dev. I have nursed him as I have nursed you,' said Vimla, sitting down beside Balika. Turning to me, she said, 'Won't you tell her stories? She is so fond of them! You know many stories, don't you?'

'I do.' I sat down facing the two. The shaded kerosene lamp lit only one side of Balika's face. She looked pleased.

'Dev! Is the banyan tree that leaned over the western roof of your house still there?' asked Vimla. 'Do you remember how you loved to be near the tree? You would always stretch your tiny hands upwards expressing your desire to climb it.'

'I remember. Its spreading branches, the play of light and shade in its foliage, the sudden sound made by a hidden bird—my love for all that.'

'How many ghosts are there in that banyan tree?' Balika asked Vimla in a whisper.

'Ghosts?' I said in some annoyance. 'None. What I saw in the tree—and beyond it in the clouds lit by moonlight—were innumerable fairies. They would play hide-and-seek and smile at one another. The tree seemed to me to be a world by itself. Yes, a world not limited to its physical form or size, for every branch of the tree was a ladder into a fascinating land. There were moments when clouds came incredibly close to the tree-top and I even faintly remember some dialogue between the tree and the clouds. Once I had dozed off in Vimla's lap. When the I woke, I saw the moon peeping through the leaves. For a moment I was bewildered. It was

so big, so charmingly golden! I could not recognize it. It was then that I heard the giggle of some fairies. Yes, I have just remembered something sweet, something beautiful.' I stopped.

'What is that?' For the first time Balika asked me a question directly.

'One of them looked like you.'

She was listening to me with wide-eyed wonder. Vimla was all smiles, though, I suspect, her eyes were moist with tears once again.

I was surprised, for I had never talked so much at a stretch to anybody! But I did not feel embarrassed. Perhaps Balika's obstinate, cloistered existence dared me to bring her out of it!

'Can he show me fairies?' she asked Vimla in a whisper.

'No,' I replied without waiting for Vimla to convey her question to me. 'Perhaps I could have if you were near me when I saw them. But I can still tell you when the hour of the fairies strikes. It is when the moon and the breeze and the clouds are together in a special mood that the fairies descend from nowhere. Did I say I don't see them any longer? I see them, rather feel them, in flowers and sometimes in stars and sometimes in the moonlit clouds or on hilltops. To be able to see them as I do, one must roam about in the open and wait with patience. You must come out into the sunlight for flowers and into the moonlight for the fairies.'

'Did you hear that? How can you see fairies unless you leave your room?' Vimla asked Balika mildly. Balika resolved the issue by swiftly hiding her face in Vimla's lap.

Never before had I felt so deeply interested in talking to anybody. But I checked my temptation and asked Vimla, 'Why is she like this?'

My question seemed to surprise even Vimla for a second. Perhaps she had got so accustomed to Balika's condition that her behaviour had ceased to appear abnormal to her. But, of course, before long she began to give me an explanation of Balika's condition as well as an account of the events leading to it.

It was a strange story—a story searching for a denouement.

The Raja had hardly begun to take an interest in matters of

the state when his father died. If his ritual coronation was a subdued affair, it was not because of any lack of popular enthusiasm, but because of his own awareness of the changing times. Then, with princely rule abolished, the Raja and Heera left Samargarh in a haste. Unsure of any destination, they moved from hill-station to hill-station and from one city to another. 'I will marry you to a real Prince Charming,' the old Raja used to tell Heera. The young Raja had taken it upon himself to fulfil his father's promise.

The pity is, Heera found those who came to court her anything but charming, though some of them were members of former ruling families. What was worse, she would humiliate them, the moment she started to feel bored in their company.

Vimla felt that Heera was a curse on the Raj family. Misfortune had stalked the dynasty since her arrival. The old Raja had died, the *rajya* was gone; the new Raja, already forty, had not re-married. He would not entertain any proposal for his marriage until Heera was married.

'I am not sure about Heera's relationship with the Raja,' I said after some hesitation.

'She has to be either the Raja's stepsister or no blood relation at all, remote or otherwise,' Vimla said. Then, lowering her voice, though there was no need for it, she added, 'And I can assure you that there is no question of her being the old Raja's daughter.'

'So, the Raja knows that she is not his stepsister. And yet he cares for her so much! That is rather surprising.'

'Rather intriguing,' Vimla corrected without trying to hide her own puzzlement over the situation. I had a suspicion that the two loved each other, but would not dare to destroy the myth the old Raja had done his best to perpetuate—that Heera was his daughter!

I suggested my theory through guarded words to steer it clear of Balika's comprehension. But Vimla had no inhibitions. What she said only reinforced her first spontaneous observation—that the relationship between the Raja and Heera was intriguing indeed. The Raja was much more indulgent towards her than an elder brother or even a lover

should be, but Vimla did not believe that he really loved her in an amorous sense—or in any other.

'She keeps him under a spell,' Vimla concluded. I laughed. 'Vimla, were you a little more sophisticated, you would have perhaps discovered in that spell the mystery of feudal India's surrender to white rule!' I observed.

Vimla was sure that the sooner the Raja got rid of the enigmatic Heera's hold over him, the better it would be for him. And marrying her off was possibly the only chance for the Raja to throw her off his shoulders.

Two or three ex-princes had feigned an interest in her, but they had quietly slipped away upon realizing that Heera would neither make herself available to them beyond a certain degree of companionship before marriage, nor would bring a sizeable dowry.

At first thrilled with her freedom, more so because she could unstring the Raja's purse at her will, Heera had gradually become disillusioned with her own dreams of an exciting future.

At last a chance-meeting with a gentle, if impecunious prince of a small frontier state had rekindled her dying hopes. After months she smiled, conducting herself beautifully in her manners and speech. That was the finest phase of her life.

And the Prince Charming who rarely spoke, had all the time to listen to the chatterbox that was Heera. His smile, like the vivid bougainvillaea, never faded. Heera seemed to have at last found the man of her dreams.

'Why don't you say something?' Heera would ask sometimes, but would resume her own chatter before he had opened his mouth.

The prince had a younger sister who was beautiful but melancholic. 'Only in fairy tales do you meet such maidens,' said Vimla with some emotion. Born when her parents had lost practically everything, her bearing, unlike that of Heera, was marked by a serene humility. The Raja who had seen her only once, consented to marry her with the tacit understanding that the prince would marry Heera.

Unknown to the Raja, the prince sold his last castle in his native town and performed his sister's marriage. It was now

the Raja's turn to get ready for Heera's marriage to the prince. He began his preparations in right earnest. But what followed was perplexing. The prospective bridegroom grew increasingly cool and shy. He avoided the Raja as much as he could and whenever Heera went to see him, he was found inebriated. 'Or at least he pretended to be so—if he was capable of pretending.' Vimla said.

The Raja, nevertheless, went ahead with the necessary preparations. Luckily they were not to be elaborate. The Raja had always remained aloof from his relatives. Those who maintained a nominal contact with him from their side, had no reason to feel enthusiastic about Heera's marriage. The Rani, the new member in the Raja's small household, was so good that she did not have the slightest hesitation in surrendering her jewellery to be re-cast to suit Heera's needs.

Came the wedding day. The Raja's party went to fetch the bridegroom. But the Prince's room in the hotel was found latched from within, a 'Do Not Disturb' sign hanging outside. When knocks and shouts failed to elicit response and the management was forced to break open his door, the prince was found lying unconscious. He died in a nursing home around the time set for the ceremony.

He had literally drunk himself to death—probably fully aware of what he was doing.

Heera appeared to take it well, if with a certain disdain for her unfortunate fiancé. She threatened to shoot herself if the Raja called off the dinner party scheduled to take place after the wedding. And apparently she found great amusement in announcing the death of her prince to the guests. The more awkward they felt, the greater seemed to be her amusement. That of course was only a facade. Once the party was over, she refused to talk to anybody and sat the night out in a fearful silence. 'I still remember her silhouette on the rooftop, against the night sky. She sat like a statue, though her hair flew about her like dark flames. Yes, I had the queer and fearful feeling that she was being consumed by those dark flames,' Vimla said. But it appeared from what she said subsequently that Heera, like a phoenix, was emerging from that dark fire-bath rejuvenated.

Soon she began darting like a bitten snake from place to place. After six months, she was back with the Raja, as if determined to avenge her tragedy. Alone, the unlucky Rani had to swallow all the poison Heera spat forth in every word she uttered. The Raja remained indifferent. In her shyness and her reluctance to speak, the Rani was like her twin-brother. 'But she was growing lovelier day by day,' said Vimla.

Then was born Balika, driving Heera to the height of her madness. Perhaps it was beyond her to bear the Rani's elevated status as the mother of the Raja's child. Perhaps life could have been somewhat tolerable for her if the Rani had occasionally fought back and if there were quarrels in the household. But the Rani had no enthusiasm even for a mild argument. Surely, things would have been different if her brother were alive.

Heera shifted to a hotel under the pretext of feeling insulted by the Rani's insolent silence. For five years she remained the reigning queen of a circle of lazy aristocrats, snobs and the extravagantly wealthy. The impact of her prodigal living was clear on the Raja's lifestyle. 'We were changing houses continually—from large bungalows to smaller flats,' Vimla said sadly.

Heera was back with the Raja as soon as the Rani died. She took charge of the Princess and developed a frenzied attachment to her. At first Vimla thought that it was like a child's fondness for its lifeless doll; but soon she realized that it was a boa constrictor's coiling grasp round its hypnotized prey.

The Princess herself was listening to Vimla with rapt attention, but I do not know if she regarded this tale as being any different from the fantasy stories she loved to hear.

'It is time for Balika to take her supper,' Vimla said and she got up to go and arrange for it. 'Will you join her? But how stupid it is of me to be formal with you. She just won't eat in your presence!'

I bade her and the silent Princess a hurried goodbye and stepped out of the room. I was groping through the dingy corridor, when Vimla whispered from behind. 'When are you coming back to tell her your stories? She insists on knowing.'

My eyes had grown accustomed to the darkness. I could see Vimla smiling. 'This is the first time she has even shown any interest in anything. Devu, my son, I've assured her that you'll come again. You should let me be proved right, shouldn't you?'

'I shall come again.' A surge of happiness almost choked me as I made the promise. Once in the open I felt that I had just woken up from a wonderful dream.

Thereafter for me, the sunset would signal the call of the castle, inaudible but irresistible. The vague and bewildered look of the Princess would change into one of joy and rapture as I told her story after story. Depending upon the note on which a story ended, she would show signs of cheerfulness or sadness.

'All these years she had heard tales of horror only—of bloodthirsty vampires, brutal killers and ferocious tigers—tales that Heera chose to narrate to her. There were occasions when the frightened child would shriek and Heera would clasp her and put her to sleep. Then Heera would retire to her own room. Once she fell asleep she would sleep undisturbed until morning. But the poor child would wake up in the middle of the night, shaking with fright because of some nightmarish dream. Then Raja Sahib or I would have to spend the rest of the night sitting by her bedside,' Vimla said, graphically describing the time when Heera took Balika into her care.

Only once in a while, as I told her my stories, would Balika ask a question. At first directed through Vimla, she slowly began putting them directly to me. And her questions were not always easy to answer. For example, once when I told her how inside the giant's desolate castle on the tiny island the captive princess lay asleep the whole day under the spell of the silver stick with which the giant had touched her, Balika's query was, 'What dreams did the princess dream the whole day?'

My grandmother or Vimla had never told me about the dreams of the sleeping princess. I fumbled, but Balika helped me out with her own suggestion: 'Of tigers?'

'Oh no, for there were no tigers on that island.'

'Of vampires?'

'Oh no, for there were no vampires either. But, there were numerous birds, squirrels and butterflies in the gardens and groves around that lonely castle.'

'I'll ask papa to take us to that island,' she had eagerly told Vimla.

It may not be easy to locate that island even for papa, but you can meet plenty of birds, squirrels and butterflies if you take just a little walk. And, walking but a little, you will breathe the charming breeze that comes carrying the touch of the hills, the forests, the flowers and even the clouds! When were your eyes last filled with stars? All you have to do for that to happen is to climb to the roof of this castle!

I was gradually able to induce her to venture out to the roof. The joy her face recorded under a clear starry sky was unforgettable. Her eyes seemed to become friends of the stars and her flowing hair intimate with the breeze.

The concluding part of the story of the enchanted princess—the straying young traveller waking her up by touching her with the golden stick—remained unsaid for a while. Strangely, I did not feel that usual dissatisfaction which goes with one's inability to complete a story. But she reminded me about it as she climbed down the stairs, supported by Vimla. I had to finish the story.

I spent almost the whole of that night in Balika's room. We had fewer tales and more silence. Vimla fell asleep. But Balika was wide awake. The moment I would look at her, she would smile and take her eyes off me, but then they would be drawn to me again.

Nothing could quite explain the blossoming friendship between Major Havelock and Sharmaji. They were often seen reclining on the lawns of Horizon and chatting or sitting on the parapet. When Havelock spoke, Sharmaji listened with rapt attention, chewing blades of grass and spitting them out. When Sharmaji spoke, Havelock focused his gaze on him like an owl, pouring tea from a flask and sipping it with visible relish.

Havelock had confessed to me that he had become an alcoholic and was now in the process of curing himself. 'For Heaven's sake, don't tell me if there is a liquor shop nearby,' he had warned everybody. The warning was not necessary. Nijanpur did not have such a shop.

I would usually see the pair in the distance, and I would always notice how happy Sharmaji seemed. He would raise his hand in greeting—with a wink and a fleeting smile to match—a totally new gesture. As far as Havelock was concerned, he always looked agog with excitement. That was rather puzzling. What could Sharmaji say to a man who had fought a war or two and had lived a full life, to keep him so engrossed? It was a mystery to me.

The Raja and Heera returned to the castle after five days. Though the Raja had never been a man for hectic activity, whatever he did meant an upheaval for the area. According to the reports that reached us, the crowd that had turned out to hear him—or maybe only to see him—was unprecedented. Hundreds of men and women shed tears when they heard that he had refused even to have a look at what was once his palace at Samargarh. The Raja had himself offered to sell the building to the Government and the latter had obliged him by buying it. It now housed a college. But, curiously, the Raia

acted and the people reacted as though he had been deprived of his ancestral property, as if it were because he had no house to live in that he was reduced to wandering from place to place!

A handful of Mansingh's followers tried to stage a black flag demonstration against the Raja. At first the crowd mistook the demonstrators for devotees of a local deity whose shrine traditionally displayed black flags; a shrine that was previously maintained by the Raj family. The demonstrators were cheered lustily. That encouraged them and their inspired spokesman began a fiery harangue, telling the crowd that the Raja was not only a reminder of the inglorious colonial white rule, but also a symbol of all that was reactionary.

Once the crowd had understood what the demonstrators actual intention was, it pressed towards them menacingly. They would have been manhandled, but for the Raja's timely arrival on the scene and his strict injunction to the crowd to leave the demonstrators alone.

The episode practically sealed Mansingh's political fate. The stable base the leader had built for himself over the years, through his continuous service to the common man and exemplary sacrifices, crumbled overnight.

Thus the Raja destroyed, more or less peacefully, one of his two targets. The man-eater, however, was still at large. Its latest victim was a youthful cowherd. His was a tragic story. He had waded into a pool in a meadow to pluck red lilies for a peasant girl whom he loved and who had stood coyly by the bank. Suddenly he noticed the tiger approaching the girl. In a shaky and subdued voice he asked her to jump into the pool, but the girl perhaps thought that it would be too romantic a plunge for her to take at the stage. She blushed but did not move. There was no time to lose. The young man splashed water furiously, shouted and made a dash at the tiger in a desperate bid to scare it away. He died, but his beloved was saved.

I was being pestered by the members of a government-sponsored committee lodged in Horizon, to fix up an appointment with the Raja for them. They were required to

prepare a report on Nijanpur's potential as a hill-resort. But I delayed calling on the Raja, for Subbu had passed word that the Raja was tired and was resting.

It was nearly evening when I finally set out to meet the Raja. The first person I saw as I left Horizon was Sharmaji. He signalled me to wait and reached the steps in long, hurried strides. Some kind of a premonition made me uncomfortable.

'Where are you going, Dev?' he demanded anxiously and holding onto my shirt, added, 'I won't allow you to move forward even an inch until I have opened my heart to you.' His voice sounded as ominous as the clang of a fire-engine's bell. He exuded an exotic fragrance, a perfume which Major Havelock used.

'Well,' I said helplessly, 'Let us then move backwards—into my room,' I turned to re-enter the house. He was happy. 'Thank you, thank you,' he said enthusiastically, thanking me probably for the first time in his life. He must have received such lessons in deportment from Major Havelock, though the source of his inspiration for educating and updating himself at this stage of his life, I had begun to feel, was his contact with Heera and the Raja.

'You have become plump, Sharmaji,' I observed as he settled down in a chair facing mine.

'Well, it is only natural, isn't it?' he said, smiling in gracious appreciation of my observation and adding, with a kind of brazen-faced frankness that shocked me, 'Heera desired that it should be so.'

It was embarrassing to look him in the face, for his smile proclaimed his witless infatuation with Heera.

'So, Heera wishes you to grow fat!' I tried to sound as unenthusiastic as possible, in order to impress upon him that I was too unromantic to appreciate the subtle and special nature of the law operating behind his prompt ascent to health.

'Here I am, fat enough to fit into the garments she presented to me, in keeping with her injunction that if. . . .'

Sharmaji stopped and blushed.

'If what?' I asked, more in my eagerness to put an end to the interview than with any real curiosity.

'If what?' he repeated, disappointed. 'Can't you guess the situation, Dev? Why then have you stuffed your racks with novels?'

'I'm sorry, Sharmaji, I fail to guess.'

'If I loved her, my friend, if I loved her. Believe me, Dev, that is exactly what she told me,' he simpered and giggled.

'And you think you love her, do you?' I asked in a deadpan tone.

'Dev!' Sharmaji appeared emotional, 'Is it merely a question of my thinking? Haven't I put on weight enough to fit into those garments as tightly as a pigeon fits into its feathers? Is this not one of those miracles of love?'

A sort of despair ran through my veins. His glazed eyes, and general manner, suggested he was in pretty poor shape. I had never known passion and self-reproach to twinkle so distinctly together. I wished I could run away from him.

'Dev!' Sharmaji said in a choked voice.

'Yes, Sharmaji, do you wish to tell me anything in particular?'

'Dev! Haven't I already told you? Now it is for you to tell her, Dev—and you must tell her,' Sharmaji implored, taking my hands in his.

As I sat speechless, he increased the pressure of his grip on my hands almost violently.

'Tell her? Do you expect me to tell Heera about your love for her?' I cried out my question, albeit in a suppressed tone.

'At last Dev, now you understand!' He smiled with great relief. Perhaps he was even wondering if he was not giving me a rare privilege. 'The situation is like this, Dev: not that she is not aware of my love. In fact, she is as aware of my love as I am of hers. But all said and done, she is a woman!' And he recited a Sanskrit dictum asserting that shyness adorned a woman more than her jewellery.

'Sharmaji, how can you be so sure about it?'

'Dev, in such matters, only fools wait for tangible proof, the wise are guided by their feelings.' He was beginning to recite yet another Sanskrit verse in support of his theory, but I stopped him saying impatiently, 'I know you are a wise man, Sharmaji, but, pardon my impudence, are you sure that your

wisdom in this matter compares with that which you quote from the classics?’

‘Absolutely sure. Between Heera and myself, all that is left is a formal declaration of love. The only question is, whether I should do it first or allow her to steal a march on me. Is it not the male lover’s duty to take the initiative? It is, I need hardly say. That is pure common-sense, right? But I cannot perform that duty properly as my voice chokes every time I begin and she asks me with concern if I should not cleanse my throat by gargling with salted water. She smiles at my plight. Somebody has to lend his throat to voice my sentiments. Well, Dev, who but you can perform that task for me? There is, of course, another gentleman who could be entrusted with the job. He has guided several people in love as efficiently as he has manoeuvred battalions through wars. He is Major Havelock, my greatest moral support—you are no less a support though.’

‘That would be just wonderful—I mean Major Havelock, in his impeccable manner, accent and style, conveying your heart’s desire to Heera!’ I said enthusiastically, for the proposition promised some hope of escape.

But Sharmaji impatiently shook his head in disapproval. ‘Do you think we have not weighed the pros and cons of that step? It is not practical. Heera is not used to him. It will not be easy for him to bring up a topic of such tremendous import unless they have talked of mice and men for a pretty long time. Secondly, he is a cardiac patient. No, Dev, there is no need for any rethinking on the issue. You have to do it and I have already paved the way for it.’

‘How?’ My heart began to palpitate violently.

‘I have told her this very morning that you would like to talk to her privately. Believe me, she understood at once. In fact, she fixed her gaze on me and I could sense her great expectation. When she asked me when you would like to talk to her, I suggested this very evening.’ Sharmaji squeezed my hand again. ‘Have you ever observed a cat about to lap up milk?’ he put the question to me assuming the grave stance so natural to him in his role as a teacher.

‘I don’t think so. But why?’

'She looked as thrilled as that.'

'Sharmaji, the simile is giving me the creeps, I must confess. What do you propose to do?' I asked impatiently.

Sharmaji looked at me with some disappointment. 'What do you mean, Dev? How do all the love affairs culminate? Don't you read classic romances?' he demanded of me.

'I am more fond of fairy tales. The lovers marry and live happily ever after.'

'Exactly.'

'You don't plan to marry Heera—or do you?'

'What else?'

The briefness and unambiguity of his response staggered me.

'But how?' I managed to ask.

'What do you mean by how?'

'Don't you think it would be rather unnatural, awkward. . . .?'

'What is unnatural or awkward in love, Dev?'

His clarity, strengthened by a certain philosophical air, dazed me.

'Sharmaji, I don't know what kind of response you expect from me, but please give me some time. Let me reflect on the issue,' I stood up, hopeful of some respite.

'Not necessary, Dev. All the necessary reflection has already been done by our valued friend, Havelock. You won't have to waste time on that exercise. Yes, Dev, time is the thing. As Havelock observes so wisely, there is a time for everything, a time to conquer, a time to retreat, a time to propose. And for the latter action, now is the time, most propitious. And Dev, can I be frank with you?'

I was surprised that he had still something guarded within him to be frank about. He lowered his voice, half closed his eyes and revealed the secret in a lugubrious tone, 'I shall die if you let this moment slip away.'

I felt like shouting, 'Is that all? So what? Who cares?' But my failure to shout and the silence that followed his proclamation convinced him that he had impressed me. He clucked and nodded in appreciation of what he imagined to be my

deep concern for him.

I stood up and crossed the door before he could stop me. He followed.

I began walking. On the road I controlled my impulse to suddenly disappear. Did he suspect my motive? He must have, for he kept pace with me, guarding me like a hound! Surprisingly, I read in his eyes the horror one notices in the eyes of goats on their way to slaughter-houses, although it was my condition which was comparable to that. His expression, however, convinced me that with him it was a matter of life and death. I did not wish to become the immediate cause of his death by refusing to undertake his errand and so I gritted my teeth and continued on towards the castle.

Sharmaji's garrulousness and speed began to decrease as the castle loomed nearer. He began clutching at my arm or tugging at my sleeve. It was apparent that he was growing nervous.

'Raja Sahib was thinking of sending me to fetch you, Sir,' Sahoo's driver confided to me in a low tone. He was dusting the jeep which, it seemed, Sahoo had placed at the Raja's disposal.

I regained my poise to a considerable extent on meeting the Raja. His hands resting on my shoulders, he surveyed me with what seemed to be affection. Perhaps he felt a little more drawn towards me. Maybe Vimla had spoken to him warmly about my humble contribution to his daughter's happiness. Or could it be that the Princess herself had spoken appreciatively of me?

Sharmaji was mute but restless, stealing glances at the doors leading to the inner suites. I conveyed to the Raja the visiting committee's desire to meet him and learn from him as much as he would care to speak on the antiquity of the temple of Vaneswari. The Raja showed no interest in the committee's mission but launched into a description of the legends and lores surrounding the deity and the shrine.

Sharmaji was getting impatient with the Raja's rambling. I too heard the Raja only in parts, all the while wishing that I could get away with meeting the Raja alone and without having to plead Sharmaji's suit.

Then an idea struck me. Yes, I could postpone meeting Heera, if I could satisfy Sharmaji with the argument that in my new role as a matchmaker, etiquette demanded that I spoke to the Raja, the legal guardian of the bride-to-be, before I carried my embassy to Heera.

But this avenue of escape was blocked when Heera sailed into the hall, looking vibrant in a dazzling orange sari with accessories to match. 'Can I have a word with Dev?' she asked the Raja sweetly, though abruptly.

'Why not?' But the Raja's brows were raised.

'But you must be tired and we can. . . .' I made one last attempt to wriggle out of the ordeal.

'Will you please follow me?' she cut in, and beckoning me with a nod, turned away from us. As I got up to comply with her direction, my eyes fell on Sharmaji. His hair appeared to be standing on end.

I followed Heera with faltering steps. She led me into her suite. I had never been there before but I was in no mood to observe anything, for I felt as if I had been suddenly dumped in a cell reserved for prisoners condemned to death.

She tried to make me comfortable on a sofa, pressing me to accept an extra pillow for my back, and then sat down facing me and smiled. She readjusted the lamp on her table to keep her face hidden. I sweated profusely. Though her eyes were in the shade, they held me in their grip like a pair of claws.

My head reeled. I passed a few seconds trying to locate an elusive moth around my face. The hands of the clock on the wall did not seem to move at all while its 'tick-tock' was magnified. I tried to persuade myself that since there was no retreat from the situation, the quicker the business was over the better.

'I wonder if you can guess what's on my mind. I'm not even sure that I'm doing the right thing. Perhaps I should have first spoken to Raja Sahib!' I fumbled out.

'Why? If it concerns me, am I not grown up enough to listen to it or participate in the dialogue personally?' she asked, feigning offense.

'I do not know how to put it. I have absolutely no experience in such matters. . . .'

‘Don’t I know that? Heera spoke so softly and tenderly that I was surprised. And I don’t know why the uneasiness that had momentarily left me, returned. The screech of an owl behind the castle, though faint, added to my feeling of discomfort.’

‘I knew how innocent you were the very evening we met for the first time,’ Heera shifted her gaze from me and fixed it on the floor.

‘You know and that is my sole strength at the moment.’ I stopped to take a deep breath and cast a lightning glance at her. Our eyes met.

‘Well, Dev, I don’t know if I really know what you think I know. I have suddenly begun imagining so many things rather too exciting to be true. But please go on.’

‘How glad I am that you have already imagined what I’d say. I was feeling so awkward and I had such terrific misgivings! I must have read a full dozen books of a certain kind to realize that the way of—what d’you call it—love—is mysterious. . . .’

‘O Dev! You’d kill me with surprises!’

‘Surprises? You’re being polite. Didn’t I hear you say that you had already guessed what I meant to say? Well, I take it that we can proceed to make the necessary arrangements. . . .’

‘Arrangements?’ Heera’s voice trembled.

‘That’s right, arrangements, for the wedding, of course!’

Heera gave a start. Absent-mindedly I turned the lamp and her face became clearly visible. She did not look unhappy; but she seemed intrigued. Then she clutched her head with both her hands and shook it. Obviously she was trying to resolve some confusion.

‘Dev, I knew you to be naïve, but I never expected you to be so rash. You’ll turn me mad—mad—mad!’

I decided to remain calm in the face of her excitement. I assumed the tone of a mentor.

‘To be honest, I had also thought that there were formidable difficulties in the way of a formal marriage. In fact, I am a bit orthodox in my ideas, and I was even going to suggest that perhaps both would do well to live as simple lovers. But I

have just discovered the astounding fact that Sharmaji is nothing short of revolutionary. I'm sure, you're no less progressive. I must confess that I feel rather small before you two!

I paused and looked at Heera. She looked rather shaken, but I interpreted it as modesty. I was keen to draw my mission to a quick close and to go out and breathe the fresh air outside. 'Once known to be somewhat conservative,' I continued, 'Sharmaji has now reached a stage—hats off to the miracle of love—when he does not care two hoots for worn out convention and anything that does not conform to the avant-garde ideas he has lately developed. The only thing that matters to him is his love for you and yours for him. He is determined to marry you, come what may, to marry you against all odds.'

Throwing the last ounce of burden off my mind, I heaved a sigh of relief and congratulated myself for having accomplished a ticklish mission reasonably well. I did not look at Heera in order to save her the embarrassment of being seen blushing.

'I had better leave now and carry the happy news to Sharmaji.' I stood up.

Suddenly, and I cannot recollect how it began, everything seemed to fade and I was wrapped in extreme confusion. Heera seemed to have disappeared. Where was she?

There she was, standing a little away from me, perhaps shivering. It could not but be Heera, but was it her face? Was it a human face at all?

Suddenly she cried out. But a kind of roar was all I could hear. Did she show me the door? Perhaps she did.

I tottered out of the room, my head reeling, and immediately stumbled on somebody who fell down, but managed to get up promptly. It was Sharmaji. Obviously he had been eavesdropping.

He ran along the corridor and I followed him. To my horror I could hear clumsy footsteps behind me.

No sooner had we staggered into the hall than Heera caught up with us. Like a wild cat she chased Sharmaji. Poor Sharmaji continued scurrying from one corner of the hall to another even after she had given up the chase and had

collapsed into a chair, gasping and fuming.

Sharmaji looked an utter wreck. I stood thunderstruck, expecting worse if Heera left her seat. But soon the Raja appeared at one of the doorways. Sharmaji's instinct for self-protection was active. He ran and stood behind him.

Before the Raja had a chance to comprehend this strange turn of events and its rationale, there was a thudding sound. Sharmaji had fainted. The Raja and I tried to lift him.

By then Vimla and a servant had arrived on the scene. The Raja asked Vimla for smelling salts and the servant for water.

Heera left the hall without a word. Under the silent care of the Raja and Vimla, Sharmaji opened his eyes, but his was a blank stare.

'Should I take him to Horizon? We can look after him till he is fit enough to go home,' I said, anxious to leave the place as soon as possible. I did not know how to explain the situation to the Raja. And I feared Heera's reappearance in the hall.

'That will be the right thing to do. He will feel more comfortable there,' said the Raja and he assisted me in carrying Sharmaji to Sahoo's jeep.

Silently, I thanked Sharmaji for fainting in the circumstances.

'You should have thought twice before carrying such a bizarre message to Heera, even though you had been instructed by the venerable Sharma.' The Raja said at our midnight rendezvous. This was the first time he had ever taken me to task.

I had been squirming with embarrassment as I tried to anticipate what he might have to say about the evening's incident, but his mild but straight accusation considerably soothed my feelings.

'But Sharmaji was so sure of her love for him!' I defended myself and then added, 'In fact I was literally driven to committing that blunder. I realize that it was my stupidity, but looking back I do not see how and when I could have backed out from discharging the commission thrust on me. Things happened at great speed!'

'The imp that presides over stupidity is not stupid; it is clever and cunning. It takes care to see that its victim is under a kind of spell, before any better sense in him has had a chance to check the process. Poor Sharma! How easily he let himself be fiddled about by misplaced passion!'

'And, sir, what havoc my own stupidity wrought on me, leading me to believe, even momentarily, that Heera would love and desire to marry Sharmaji! Now I wonder if I should not feel more puzzled by my own conduct than by Sharmaji's!' I said, but my voice betrayed more surprise than regret. I was in fact now more amused than embarrassed. I do not know why I did not feel truly repentant. Seen from one angle, the whole incident was so ludicrous and in some crude part of my being, I enjoyed that aspect of it!

Since my confession failed to provoke the Raja to come out with any word of sympathy or indulgence, I decided to keep

further conversation to known fact. 'Isn't it true that the suit Heera offered Sharmaji had been stitched for the one who was to be her bridegroom? Can Sharmaji be blamed if he took her gesture of making a gift of the suit to him as symbolic? I think anybody else in his position would have interpreted it more or less in the same way!'

No Dev, Sharmaji ought to have understood and behaved differently; a bit more prudently. Passion can be given a lot of concessions, but not beyond a certain degree. It was unpardonable of Sharmaji to forget the vast gulf between him and Heera in matters of personal and social culture. He had begun to live in a fool's paradise and build up his trust in an impossible situation; he knit a chimera out of some kind of bizarre darkness he had nurtured within.'

'But his wild fancy was so real for him!' I commented.

The Raja fell silent for a moment. 'That shows,' he observed, his articulation directed more at himself than at his listener, 'that we shall never know enough about men. Just now I said that Sharmaji should have conducted himself differently. But could he have really?'

'But surely, there are exceptions to this general rule of helplessness! For example, I can never imagine you losing your cool over anything!' I was suddenly roused to praise him. It was a very sincere offering to one whose company filled me with pride. He understood this and was not anxious to contradict me. 'I have just learnt enough from life not to react passionately to its vicissitudes,' he said.

'Why can't others learn that much?' I asked impatiently.

'That is difficult to answer. Perhaps at some point of time in my youth, I realized that while I could not forestall events or alter situations, the way I reacted to them remained my prerogative. We always try to make others understand us; little do we try to understand ourselves. If we did, we would no doubt become wiser. But what I have stated is a principle. Don't jump to the conclusion that I am a wise man. Wisdom is a ladder that touches the sky; its higher rungs almost hidden from our eyes. What pushes us up are often kicks or whips from below. A new kick may strike me any moment. But one day in the past I stopped being shocked or even

surprised by them.'

I decided to turn the conversation to less philosophical matters: 'Sir, you are yet to tell me why she should offer a prize possession of hers to Sharmaji unless she had developed some very special affection for him!'

'If by prize possession you mean the suit Heera presented to Sharma, I must tell you that it was Heera's way of avenging the man who, having agreed to wed her, chose death instead. Heera has not excused him. It has been her fond pastime—though she indulges in it very rarely—to locate the fool in the crowd around her and to adorn him with something or other bearing the memory of the young man she had perhaps once loved in her life. Once she persuaded a millionaire buffoon to shave his head—yes, the whole of it—and the chap had the most luxuriant mop of hair I had ever seen—so that her prince's hat could fit it. Another time she obliged a fellow, a vainglorious sycophant, to put on the pair of shoes I had got made for her would-be husband. The fellow had enormous feet and they must have been tormented like the djinn inside the jar. She has just been doing the same thing with poor Sharma.'

'What a pity!'

'A pity indeed. You pity Sharma; I pity both Sharma and Heera. I have my own theory about the conduct of men, though it's a bit funny. You know the absurdity and whimsicality for which the Rajas were notorious. Do you know what my father once did to a very famous poet who had come a long way to seek some favour from him? He led the poet on an elephant into the forest under the pretext of showing him some rare trees and flowers and left him in a dense and dangerous part of the forest and quietly slipped away. The poet passed an unforgettable night, perched on a banyan tree, shivering with fear all the time, only to be rescued by my father's officials early in the morning and be informed that the Raja expected a new poem from him out of the inspiration he ought to have received in the sylvan solitude of the night. But I doubt if the poet wrote any poetry at all in his life after the experience.'

The Raja laughed and I echoed his laughter. He resumed:

'The motive for such mischief, I believe, is generated by a genre of naughty little imps. No, I'm not joking about it. In our palace at Samargarh during those idle days between my return from college and my father's death, I spent hours in bizarre research: I would try to assess whether the thoughts and actions of the past left any lasting impact on the atmosphere around their occurrence. My conclusion was, they did. Some vibrations, very subtle, are left by such thoughts and actions that involve a certain intensity of emotion, be it of agony or joy, but of agony in particular.'

'Did you catch any such vibrations?'

'Rather the vibrations caught me. It began by chance. My father's guests, an Englishman from the Civil Service and a Raja, were keen to take me with them for shikar. I was in no mood to oblige them. Deciding to hide from them temporarily, I slipped into a remote chamber in the older wing of the palace then used as a lumber room. Though it had a small window, it was obviously designed to be a place shut out from the world, for there stood a thick wall only inches away from the window. But a part of the wall had crumbled and some light broke in. I dusted off an old easy-chair lying there and sat on it, reading a book.

'Soon I dozed off, What occurred next was terrifying. A pale face, I don't know whether a man's or a woman's, came close to me and snarled at me. It was a terrifying nightmare. Not that the face tried to scare me; it was only expressing anguish, anger and perplexity. The air was charged with deafening, blood-curdling cries demanding answers to questions which were unanswerable, though the cries were inaudible!

'An hour must have passed before an old servant, seeing the door ajar, peeped in. He gave a shout of surprise upon discovering me there. I woke up. From him I learnt that for long the chamber used to serve as a secret place to torture rebellious or disobedient subjects or criminals. Some of them never came out of it alive. A few did not even come out dead. They were buried right there.'

We were strolling on the lawns outside Horizon. The Raja leaned over the parapet overlooking the dark valley. His face was hardly visible, but I imagined that he had closed his eyes.

Perhaps he was engrossed in his recollections of the nightmare. Soon, however, he came out with the theory he had formulated out of his experience: 'There are beings, supernatural ones needless to say, who feed on these vibrations of human anguish and hapless suffering or, maybe, these beings are actually born out of the vibrations of violence, shock, treachery and similar abominable acts of men. And once born, they wish to thrive on more and more such vicious situations. They starve when they don't find any. They grow vengeful and look for victims. They catch some people in their weaker moments. I won't be surprised if Sharma was possessed by a legion of such phantoms, as effective as microbes.'

I was about to ask: 'Why Sharmaji alone? Wasn't Heera also possessed when she decided to play with the sentiments of Sharmaji, of all persons?'

The Raja had perhaps anticipated my unpronounced question, for he said, 'Something must have deeply incensed Heera. Could it be Sharma's audacity in aspiring to woo her? I wonder.'

'But Heera did not know of Sharmaji's motive! I put forth his proposal before her only now!'

The Raja looked askance at me. A shaft of light reflecting from the interior of Horizon revealed a twinkle in his eyes. If that was not my imagination, it must have meant his pity at my failure to understand human nature.

'Look here, my boy, Sharma's audacity might have borrowed your voice only now, but it was there brewing in his impish mind—rather in a mind corrupted by imps—from the beginning. Every human being has in him or her something animal-like which can smell certain things concerning himself or herself, which others cannot. Heera must have smelt Sharma's hopeless and strange desire.'

'But, to the best of my knowledge, Sharmaji had never betrayed any weakness for women,' I said in defence of my old teacher.

'How much do you know of yourself that you would know what was inside Sharma?' the Raja laughed. 'In any case, did I not take sufficient precaution by terming Sharma's desire as

strange? Like you, I too could not have imagined such hunger in him!

A waning moon appeared and was only effective enough to reduce the darkness to a lemon-green shade. We walked on slowly. We were not far from the castle when the Raja put a hand on my shoulder and said softly, 'But, Dev, I can assure you that the Sharma episode has not disturbed my happiness; it is so deep!'

The statement was unexpected, but it gave me a great deal of satisfaction. The faint feeling of guilt I still had in my mind on account of my role as Sharmaji's 'cloud-messenger', vanished.

'I'm glad to hear that. But is there any special reason for your happiness?'

'You have made Balika smile—something she had not done all these years. She now smiles at everything' He said this matter-of-factly, but it thrilled me and made me blush.

He took his hand off my shoulder and said, as though in a soliloquy, 'My daughter had become a symbol for me, a memory of my wife, my past and a reminder of my bleak future. She suddenly ceased to be the jolly little cherub pestering me with her babbling and her antics. Yes, she had become a symbol like a distant moon. You feel close to it without knowing whether it knows you or not. On a realistic plane I felt that she, my only dream of joy, would continue to remain a dream.'

I had never heard the Raja's voice tinged with such sadness.

Oblivious of my movements, I had already followed the Raja not only into the castle, but also into Balika's room. Only then did I become conscious of my environment, now dominated by a smiling princess so beautifully different from the picture of gloom she had been. The cool light from the flickering lamp had a rare sweetness about it, for all the louvres of the large window had been left open allowing in the breeze from the wilderness.

'Sit down, Dev, and tell her more stories. I shall be back after a while,' said the Raja.

'Where are you going?'

'I've a secret errand. But more of that later.' He smiled

mysteriously and waved to us before disappearing into the dark.

Vimla sat leaning against the wall. I sat in a chair facing the Princess who, instead of lying on her bed, sat up. Minutes passed. I believe, Vimla kept quiet deliberately, to force me to speak to Balika directly.

'Would you like to hear more stories?' I asked Balika at last.

She said nothing, but smiled. I opened the windows fully and sat idle, looking alternately at the fog-covered landscape bewitched by a deceptively weak moon and the Princess—and consciously let myself be entranced by her smiles which appeared spontaneously whenever our eyes met. Time passed for me as blissfully as it used to when, my head resting on my mother's lap, I would watch the moon appearing and disappearing amidst velvet clouds—looking more and more golden with every fresh appearance.

Suddenly I saw the old look of bewilderment and fear appear on Balika's face. I followed her gaze. At the door, like an apparition, stood Heera. Her silent and stern stance chilled my blood. My eyes searched for Vimla. She had dozed off.

Heera rushed up to the Princess and slapped her on the cheek. I stood up, shivering with fear, anger and disgust. It was an intolerable and disgusting sensation. I cannot say what I would have done had Heera not perplexed me once again with yet another unexpected action; she fell on Balika and began sobbing hysterically.

'How dare you linger here!' she shrieked looking at me, raising her head for a second or two to blurt out her command.

I walked out. Vimla stood at the door, dumbfounded. I brushed past her and walked on through the open door. I saw the Raja emerging from the fog.

'Was that Heera shrieking?'

'Yes. She has slapped your daughter.'

The Raja turned to look at me for a moment. But I could not read his eyes. He bade me a hasty goodnight and rushed in. I was surprised to see his clothes wet and plastered with patches of mud.

I waited with bated breath to hear what would transpire between the Raja and Heera. But all was quiet.

I was fast falling in love with the midnight hour at Nijanpur. It was a wonderful sensation to walk alone through the silent serene majesty I could feel as a palpable living thing; even the events of the night could not detract from the enjoyment I felt.

Back from the castle I passed some time in front of my gate. From time to time my gaze kept returning to the castle. The one face that kept appearing before me was Balika's. But in the new vision I was developing, a vision that showed me a wondrous fusion of things real with those of fancy, she was a part of the landscape of the valley, with a single floating cloud and the wild flowers shining faintly under the stars.

The moonlight looked more intense at certain places than at others. I found it intriguing and tried to trace the cause of the phenomenon. I could have easily spent an hour in pondering this but was distracted by the sound of footsteps growing louder behind me—they were coming from Horizon.

It was Havelock. He marched towards me, his arms stiffly locked on his chest.

A jackal howled in the bushes close by. Havelock at once unlocked his arms and picked up a couple of pebbles and hurled them at the bushes. He was obviously agitated.

'I did not expect you to be awake at this hour!' I said.

'It's going to be scandalous,' he rejoined, ignoring my observation.

I could see Subbu standing near the portico. What could be amiss at my Horizon, which stood aloof from all events, good or bad?

'... going to be scandalous. Better be prepared to accept the inevitable when it occurs. Therein lies prudence.' The

excitement he betrayed was tempered with a certain amount of satisfaction.

'What's going to be scandalous, Mr Havelock?'

'Our friend Mr Sharma, our dear Mr Sharma, has resolved to put an end to his life.' Mr Havelock's hands were restless inside his pockets like two captive birds. His facial muscles twitched.

I was hardly prepared for such news. Standing face to face with Mr Havelock, my hands too began to tremble like his and, I'm afraid, to some extent my face also began to twitch.

'Is it true?' I asked after a while.

'It is. He may do so any moment' Mr Havelock announced like a physician withdrawing from a patient's bedside, absolutely certain about the futility of any further treatment for the patient.

'Mr Havelock, he respects you so much. Surely you could prevent him from taking such a drastic step!'

'Pardon me, but I don't see what else here is left for him to do!' Mr Havelock coughed and added, 'I hate to mince words.'

Mr Havelock's words fell on my ears like hammer blows. A chill ran down my spine. His silhouetted figure, standing still before me, suddenly ceased to be human. It became a cold outline as stubborn and immovable as death.

I went over to Subbu who stood looking bewildered. Before I had even asked him where Sharmaji was, he showed me his room. 'He has bolted the door from inside,' Subbu reported in a trembling voice.

I knocked on the door. Sharmaji did not respond.

'What is this I hear, Sharmaji? Must you do such a horrible thing?' I cried out in anguish.

'I will, Dev, I will. Nothing can stop me. Perhaps there are better ways of doing it but, as Mr Havelock rightly observed, there is a time for everything. The time has come for me to end my wretched life. All—all is dark for me, and extremely painful too. Death alone can take me beyond this unbearable condition.' Muffled by the closed doors, Sharmaji's voice sounded like the desperate articulation of a creature from the remote Ice Age.

'Sharmaji, will you please open the door?'

'Naturally, he is reluctant to show his face to you!' commented Mr Havelock. I had not noticed him standing behind me. I did not respond to him and shouted again, 'Sharmaji! Will you please come out of the room?'

'I wonder if it is right on our part to insist on his coming out. He is feeling awfully embarrassed. He may blush to death before us,' said Mr Havelock in a determined bid to justify his policy of total non-intervention. There was no trace of anxiety in his voice. He appeared determined to let Sharmaji go his way.

'Blushing to death should be preferable to any other way of dying.' I deliberately sounded a bit stern, as I wanted to silence him. I renewed my pleas to Sharmaji with knocks on the door, 'Please come out, will you?'

'Dev, I will not. I am getting ready to step into the world beyond. Did I not tell you that death alone will end my agony?'

'But are you sure, Sharmaji, that it will? You ought to know better, but to the best of my knowledge, death in this manner is more likely to prolong your agony than end it. Don't you know of scriptural injunctions against suicide? Sharmaji, think of the helpless state of your being when the body is gone. All your desires, all your disappointments will remain intact, but you would have deprived yourself of the protection your physical sheath is giving you. A tribe of hobgoblins will mercilessly poke fun at you and heckle you and torment you. Must you let that happen, Sharmaji?'

This time Sharmaji's silence encouraged me to come out with the last ounce of knowledge I had lately gathered from a book on the subject of life after death. 'No godly power will come to your rescue because you have sinned against the sacred law of life by destroying your body!'

There was still no response from Sharmaji, but Mr Havelock took a step forward and said, 'I have told him all there is to be told, in a precise manner. There is no point in your wasting your breath over him. All said and done, birth and death are in the hands of destiny. This is common sense.'

I wondered how Sharmaji planned to commit suicide.

Perhaps Subbu could enlighten me. I beckoned to him and began climbing the staircase so I could get away from Havelock. His presence and attitude made me distinctly uncomfortable.

'Babu, he had gathered poison. It was in a small phial in the room he had occupied. But while he was talking to Hablu Sahib, I removed it,' he whispered to me.

I felt partially relieved. There was not even a fan in that particular room from which Sharmaji could hang himself. The bathroom attached to it had no shower rod. 'Lock the room,' I told Subbu. Surely, that would foil Sharmaji attempting to look for other means to kill himself. I also instructed Subbu to sleep on the veranda in front of the room.

After a brief and restless stroll on the terrace I returned to my room and sank into my bed.

A bat which had forgotten its resting place beat its wings restlessly overhead, but could not stop me from falling into a sort of stupor.

Jackals were announcing the end of the night when Subbu woke me up.

'Sharmaji is not responding to our knocks and calls.'

'So what?'

'Hablu Sahib thinks that. . . .'

'What does he think?'

'That Sharmaji has left his mortal frame and has departed to heaven!' Subbu was on the verge of tears.

'How could Mr Havelock be so precise about Sharmaji's destination?' I asked angrily, but within me anxiety was fast turning into panic. I hurried out despite all my reluctance to face the unavoidable. Subbu ran ahead of me and banged on Sharmaji's door. I too did the same in utter despair.

Mr Havelock stood behind me like a sentinel over Fate, arms locked across his chest. I looked to him for help, but swiftly took my eyes away. He looked too formidable and remote.

'Subbu, there is no alternative but to break open the door. Fetch the crow-bar. Or wait, we should perhaps inform the police,' I said. I was beginning to feel dizzy. I regretted bringing Sharmaji to Horizon.

Just then there were indications of life behind closed doors. They opened slowly. Sharmaji staggered out of the room, his eyes swollen and sleepy, and grinned sheepishly.

I heaved a sign of relief, feeling like a shipwrecked sailor suddenly chancing upon a lifeboat.

'O Sharmaji, thank you so much!' I said.

'Thank God,' Subbu exclaimed.

I was groping for words when Mr Havelock greeted Sharmaji in the most unexpected manner. 'So, you did not do it, after all! But you made me go without a wink of sleep the whole lonely night!' He broke into a fit of coughing and suddenly giving up his usual stiff facade, doubled up. His resentment shocked me and his coughing, echoing against the roof, sounded like laughter, at once eerie and pathetic.

Sharmaji looked at me with embarrassment. 'Mr Havelock has every right to take me to task. We had discussed the situation at some length and he had rightly observed that suicide was the only course open to any sensible man in my position. But Dev, you have always been so nice to me; I did not have the heart to do it in your house,' he apologized weakly.

'I'm grateful to you, Sharmaji, but please don't do it anywhere else either,' I told him in all sincerity.

Mr Havelock suddenly turned and marched into his room. Sharmaji lowered his eyes.

'Sharmaji, I think you need a bath and then a heavy breakfast, for I'm afraid, you did not eat any food last night. Maybe, you need more rest too,' I said. But Sharmaji insisted on going home. The fact that he did not miss the phial, believed to contain poison, which Subbu had stolen from his room, assured me that he had abandoned his plans for suicide. Later, we learnt that the phial contained some medicine left by another guest.

I accompanied him to the gate. The green slope descending towards the lower valley was still dusky, but mild sunlight flooded the hilltops and spilled over to the trees rising on the other side of the rocky fields and hamlets. A crow, which had some grievance against a kite, swooped down on its awkwardly flying prey again and again. I called for Subbu to

bring his catapult. I wanted to scare away the crow.

'Dev! The pebble you shoot may strike the kite instead of the crow. In any case, the kite will be as scared as the crow, for it is not likely to understand that you are out to protect it. Better leave Nature to its own course,' said Sharmaji while crossing the gate.

I was more happy than surprised. If Sharmaji had been swept off his feet by a tumultuous attack of passion, the equally forceful shock, received by him last night, had restored to him, his temporarily lost balance. He was a prudent man once again. I bade him goodbye, wishing him a restful day.

An hour later I was summoned urgently by Mr Havelock. He lay sprawled on his bed, looking utterly distraught. 'I'm sure, I'm getting a heart attack,' he muttered in a parrot-like broken voice, 'Is there any doctor nearby?'

Such an eventuality had never arisen before. It took a little time for me to collect myself. 'Yes,' I remembered, 'there is one downhill. I'll send for him.'

'But how much can a rustic physician do? Mine is a case for specialists. Can you arrange to send me to the railway station at Samargarh? When can I catch a train for the city?'

He became impatient like a child. Luckily I knew that Sahoo was on his way to Samargarh. There was no difficulty in arranging a seat in his jeep for Mr Havelock. Sahoo informed me later that as Mr Havelock's condition appeared to worsen on the way, he had admitted him in the town hospital.

The days that followed were filled with such hectic activity and bewildering experiences, that despite all my anxiety for Mr Havelock, I had no opportunity to enquire after him. It was not until a week later, that I learned of his death, though it had occurred the very day after he had been admitted to hospital.

I had had a restful day. It was sundown and I was enjoying a stroll on my lawns when I saw Sahoo alighting from his jeep. As I received him outside my gate, I suddenly realized how warm and affectionate I had grown towards him on account of his devotion to the Raja.

Ostensibly he met me to report about Havelock's condition and his admission into the hospital at Samargarh, but suddenly he grew jovial, looking at the dusky castle.

'It is a castle, isn't it? I mean, not only does it *look* like a castle, but it *is* a true castle, right?' he said with a mysterious smile. I could not have expected a more unusual statement from Sahoo, for his conversation was always matter-of-fact and pragmatic.

'It has to be a true castle, for it was built by the rajas,' I said.

'Right. Rajas build castles and those who live in castles are rajas! But I am not a raja and still it was so ordained that I must own a castle! What is a freak of fate if not this? What do you say?'

I looked at him blankly. His smile changed into a laugh as rapidly as the hiss of a cracker changes into a loud and fiery burst. 'I am going to own it. Yes, I have concluded negotiations with the Raja for buying it!'

I was taken aback and felt very sad too. The Raja must have been in dire need of money to sell away his last shelter. But clever as Sahoo was, he must have bought it cheap and the Raja must have agreed to the deal because he could have hardly expected any other customer to come forward with any lucrative bid for a unwieldy mansion in a lonely place.

'I have paid him the money and obtained a temporary receipt. Today I've entrusted my lawyer with the task of preparing a regular document for registration.'

His flabby face twitched with pride and happiness.

'I must apologize to you, my well-wisher, for having kept the deal a secret from you till today. But, believe me, you are the first person outside my family to be told about it. It is not wise to divulge an auspicious scheme before it matures, you know!'

'To win a castle is no joke!' I tried to make a statement that would match his happiness to some degree.

He became grave at once. 'No joke,' he affirmed. 'Did I not say that it is fate? My horoscope indicated that I will be crowned a king. For a long time, I thought that when I had enough money, I would buy some estates and become a zamindar and, if I was lucky, earn the title 'Raja' from the Government. But by the time I had accumulated enough money, the zamindari system had vanished! I was disappointed, but not disheartened. I traced the astrologer who had drawn my horoscope. The old man, living in a dilapidated hut, was dying for lack of proper food and medical care. I arranged for all his needs and when he had sufficiently recovered, I asked him to re-examine my horoscope. To my pleasant surprise, he confirmed his prediction. Now, I believe, in the changed circumstances, my coming to own the castle is the nearest that could happen to my getting a crown. What do you think?'

'It is fantastic.'

He laughed, gratified. 'Merely knowing destiny is not enough. One must lend a helping hand to it to lead it to fruition. What do you say?'

Sahoo, of course, was too sure of his philosophy to need any formal endorsement from me. After letting me in on a few more secrets of his life, he fixed his gaze once again on the castle. Evening had turned it into a massive silhouette. It was a different Sahoo I was seeing today, as he stood erect, his hands on his waist surveying the property that symbolized his great destiny. Once again it was an occasion for me to reflect on how little I knew of human nature.

It was getting dark. Sahoo had just got onto his jeep when a piercing cry, fading into the hills, startled us. It emanated from the darker side of the castle. The cry was followed by

the sound of two gunshots. I was surprised.

'What could have happened?' Sahoo asked, getting down from his jeep.

'We must go and see.' I fetched my gun and jumped onto the jeep. Sahoo got in reluctantly, but chose to occupy a rear seat.

Soon the headlights of our jeep focused on the veranda of the castle. We saw the Raja, gun in one hand and a torchlight in the other, as if waiting for us. He signalled us to remain in the jeep and squeezed himself in hurriedly beside me and directed the driver to take the vehicle to the meadow behind the castle.

He gave us a brief account of the sequence of events. He had sensed the presence of a tiger in the forest behind the temple; then, at sunset, he noticed a covey of partridges darting away in panic. He had climbed onto the roof of the castle and surveyed the area. But that was an exercise in futility. He did not even have a pair of binoculars.

He had come down when evening set in. Then through a window, he had seen someone rambling about on the banks of the lake. The man seemed quite uncertain and unsure in his movements. The Raja was intrigued. There was no habitation between the castle and the forest; the mysterious rambler, as was evident from the white clothes he wore, was not a tribal who could have come from some hamlet in the forest.

The Raja was watching the figure when, suddenly, his view was eclipsed. Then for a fleeting second, light from one of the windows of the castle lit up the spot and the Raja saw a pair of intensely bright eyes. He knew whose they were!

The man emitted a long howl while being dragged away. Through his window the Raja fired two shots into the darkness in a desperate bid to scare away the beast. He did not think that his action could have meant anything more than satisfying his own impulse to do something at the moment.

We had stopped talking and were driving at a snail's pace along the grassy banks of the lake. I signalled the driver to stop. With the engine silenced, the stillness of the place was broken only by the buzzing of cicadas. There was a faint splash in the water. Some small creature swam across the lake.

The moon looked almost full. A thin spray of fog covered the region, a physical corollary to the shadow of fear in our minds.

'Why did you stop?' the Raja broke the silence.

I took the torchlight from the Raja's hand and focused it on the ground to our right. Two sandals lay not far from each other.

'But are they not Sharmaji's?' I cried out.

'Oh no!' the Raja sounded horrified.

'Are they?' asked Sahoo from his seat behind us, more prepared than the Raja or myself to face reality.

'I'm almost sure they are,' I replied. The Raja swore in disbelief.

'They may not be Sharma's. How can we be sure that no one else used similar sandals? But the question is, whoever be their owner, what was he doing here?' The Raja's query was not directed at anybody in particular.

For a while my mind refused to record anything. Thoughts of Sharmaji monopolized my memory, my whole being. His childish insistence on my playing his emissary, the excitement writ large on his face while waiting for me as I was led away by Heera, his pathetic strutting about to save himself from her wrath, and the apologetic smiles he sported for his inability to stand up to Havelock's expectations and to commit suicide—a jumble of such scenes formed a sobbing surrealistic apparition in my mind. Could the tiger have finished all that in a single sweep? The Raja and Sahoo probably had some doubts about the victim's identity. Somehow I had none. I smelled Sharma in the atmosphere—rather I smelled his death, fresh and bloody, with every breath I took. I was bewildered by the sudden turn of events, but I was certain of Sharmaji's fate.

'Should we proceed?' the driver asked.

'Go on,' said the Raja.

The jeep started again. The hill loomed large in the forest beyond the deserted temple, leaving a narrow passage to its right. We took the passage till we reached a ravine not far from the temple.

It was not possible for the jeep to go any farther. There was

a gust of wind and the tall trees swaying over the uneven rocks jostled one another warning us against jumping into the ocean of darkness that surged before us.

The jeep came to a halt once again. I felt Sahoo's trembling fingers touching my neck. 'Let's go back,' he whispered. I realized that if he had sounded a bit less nervous a little while ago, it was because he had been too stupefied to react normally. Indeed, the experience could not but have been an anti-climax to his elation at having come to own the castle. If I was a degree less frightened, it was because of my faith in the Raja's capacity to handle the situation should it turn critical. The Raja, who sat beside me with one of his legs dangling outside, did not seem to know fear.

The moonlight did not penetrate the thick undergrowth in the forest. The silence exercised a paralytic effect on us and the darkness pressed in.

'Let's go back,' said Sahoo once again, this time a little louder; his voice was like a scratch on the giant silence. We waited for a few seconds, but the Raja did not respond. Perhaps all his attention had gone over to the darkness of the forest; he was trying to discern a ripple in that fearful stillness.

'Shouldn't you fire a few shots?' Sahoo asked impatiently.

'What for?'

'To frighten the beast!' Sahoo stammered out after giving a little thought to the question.

'You cannot frighten it enough to make it offer its prey to you. No Sahoo, there is no chance of our rescuing the man, whoever he be, from the tiger's clutches,' the Raja said with some anguish. 'It might forget and forgive my earlier shots in its excitement over its prey, but firing even a single shot now may destroy our chances of tracing it in the daylight.'

'Let's go back,' Sahoo pleaded. 'To be frank, I'm afraid.'

'Don't fear. For the time being the beast will remain satisfied and busy with what it has got. And it must have dragged the prey farther into the forest on hearing the shots,' the Raja said. 'But there is no point in our stopping here, of course. Let us go back and hope we meet Sharma alive,' he added.

We returned to the spot on the edge of the lake where we had seen the sandals. The Raja himself got down and col-

lected them. We drove to Horizon. Subbu identified the sandals as Sharmaji's. He also told us that Sharmaji had not been seen in the afternoon.

We then drove to his house. Only an orphan nephew lived there, working for him. The boy had not seen his uncle since the evening. We learnt that Sharmaji had not spoken to anybody for the whole day and had eaten no food either. He had devoted a long time, it seemed, to making a neat packet of something and then left home late in the afternoon.

Sahoo held out the sandals before the boy. 'They are uncle's!' he exclaimed and looked at us in bewilderment.

'You won't be afraid to stay alone at night?' I asked the boy.

He shook his head. 'Uncle was not here last night and I was not afraid. But I have cooked for him. He must come and eat,' he mumbled.

I visualized the tiger having its meal somewhere in the dark forest and shivered.

'Well, boy, eat your supper and go to bed. Your uncle may not need any food,' said the Raja kindly, patting the boy on the back. Then, leaving the boy to his loneliness, we headed towards the police outpost. The young officer-in-charge recorded our suspicions and offered to assist the Raja in tracking down the tiger.

We drove the Raja to the castle and then Sahoo dropped me at Horizon. Subbu had perhaps had some premonition. 'What happened, Babu? Is Sharmaji all right?' he asked.

'I don't know.' I was too depressed to say anything more. I remembered a group photograph of our schooldays—Sharmaji sat in the first row among our other revered teachers. What a solemn demeanour he'd had!

'Is it to meet with this end that you saved the tiger the other day by shrieking?' I wished I could ask Sharmaji.

I passed an uneasy night. Sharmaji's face and the tiger's growl appeared and disappeared like bubbles in an ocean of darkness. Try as I might, I could not curb my imagination from visualizing Sharmaji's last moments. His face took on bizarre shapes in my mind's eye, matching his last cry which continued to echo in my ears—waking me every time I fell asleep.

What was Sharmaji doing behind the castle? I had no clear answer to that question. But I was sure that he had been doing something foolish; maybe he was trying to catch a glimpse of Heera. Or, maybe, he hoped that Heera would take pity on him seeing him in that distraught condition.

As decided when we had dispersed at night, Sahoo picked me up early in the morning. I was happy to find that he had brought with him our friend Rao, who had been away to his hometown for some days. The Raja joined us as soon as we reached the castle. The police officer was already there. We parked the jeep in the portico and walked down to the site of the tragedy. The Raja instructed me to remain alert and concentrated on the marks on the ground.

'It's a tigress,' he said, examining the few visible pugmarks. Suddenly our eyes fell on a parcel, not far from the spot where Sharmaji's sandals had been found. It had rolled to the edge of the lake where it had got entangled in a jasmine plant.

I opened the neatly-made parcel. It contained the trousers and the shirt Heera had presented to Sharmaji.

I stood staring at it. Sharmaji had grown plump in his eagerness to fit into these garments. Obviously, in a highly sentimental moment, the jilted lover in him had resolved to slip the parcel into the castle when all was dark and silent. There was no other explanation for his hovering about there

carrying the parcel.

As I held that parcel in my hands, a strange sensation, one of seething anger, overwhelmed me. I knew how foolish Sharmaji had been. Even then I wept for him in the privacy of my inner self—and I felt like slamming those clothes on Heera's face as forcefully as I could. Perhaps, had I chanced upon Heera, I would have really done that. But Heera, I understood, was unwell. She refused to come out of her apartment or to talk to anybody ever since my fateful interview with her as Sharmaji's emissary.

There was no discussion on our discovery of the parcel. Perhaps the Raja's reading of the situation had not been different from mine. 'Let's proceed!' he said, without giving Sahoo or Rao an opportunity to raise any protest. The farther we went, the more grave Sahoo grew. He did not like our entering the forest at all, but silently suffered it, looking back again and again to measure the extent of the risk we were taking.

It was on the other side of the ravine behind the temple, only half a furlong away from it, that the tiger had feasted on Sharmaji. The beast had chosen the spot well; it was difficult to find and there was little danger of anyone disturbing it. There was a profusion of bushes and anthills marking the spot, and waist-high rocks and several bushy trees encircled it.

The Raja kept staring at the spot in silence. Sahoo did the same, but he looked perfectly horrified and mopped his face repeatedly. Observing the state he was in, I decided not to look at the scene of Sharmaji's death.

'She will come back. The memory of a hearty peaceful meal will prove irresistible for her,' the Raja predicted confidently.

'Must we wait around here?' Sahoo asked anxiously.

The Raja laughed. 'Don't you worry, Sahoo, the tigress would need time to grow hungry enough for any of us—particularly for you. Meanwhile, we can set up a machan and get ready to receive her,' he said.

Work on the machan soon commenced. A pair of well-formed branches of a big banyan tree, that projected towards a stunted date-palm came in handy for the purpose.

Since it was the Raja's need, even though the need was not publicized, three bony goats soon became available as bait sent by the residents of the hamlet near Nijanpur. I observed the Raja's momentary predicament—his painful hesitation in passing a death sentence on one of the innocent three. I was glad that he was no longer a ruling prince. With the sort of indecisive mind he possessed, he would have hardly been a success as a ruler.

Rao came to the Raja's rescue. He arbitrarily chose one of the goats and the other two were led away.

It was decided that the Raja and I would occupy the machan and Rao, Sahoo and the police officer would take their positions on the roof of the temple.

The machan was ready in two hours. For a rehearsal, the Raja and I climbed on it with the help of a ladder while the others were still debating the length of the rope with which the bait was to be tied to the date-palm tree.

The Raja caught hold of my arm while balancing himself on the machan. His hand was as hot as a kettle fresh from the fire. 'You are running a temperature!' I observed with some anxiety. I had not noticed earlier, but his eyes were red and he seemed quite unsteady.

'Is it not funny,' he asked me, making light of his condition, 'that my diving in a cool lake for so many nights should make me hot instead of cold?'

I suddenly remembered having seen him, the other night, returning to the castle drenched and with smudges of mud on his clothes. I had not had any opportunity to ask him about it earlier.

'May I know the mystery behind your diving in the lake, sir?'

'Yes, indeed, I ought to tell you all about it. And I cannot think of a more unusual situation than this to confide in you my unusual—and I must confess—abnormal activity. But keep it a secret. The fact is, I have been exploring the old hallowed lake.'

'For what?'

'For wealth.'

'You are still talking in riddles.'

There were wrinkles on the Raja's brow. Perhaps he was pondering over the best way to explain his action to me, although I did not wish him to tire himself by talking.

'Why, Dev, haven't you heard about our ancestors stumbling on buried treasures uncovered to them by the presiding spirit of the lake—a certain kind-hearted, if whimsical, *Yak-sha*? Why shouldn't the supernatural being realize that I need his patronage? I threw this question at him again and again while groping for a gold-filled jar or two in the waters. Should we be surprised if he responds?'

The Raja looked at me quizzically. 'What do you think of my adventures?' he asked me when I did not speak.

'I don't know, but your expectations appear so far-fetched—almost unreal!'

I was sorry for saying so, but was relieved to notice that my scepticism had no perceptible effect on the Raja. He lowered his already weakened voice and said, 'For your information, my groping, digging and diving have not gone in vain.'

I gaped at him in disbelief.

'Just when I was about to give up, frustrated, came the reward!'

'Reward?' I could not check my surprise.

'I should think so.'

'Am I to understand that you hit upon some hidden treasure?'

'I did. But I'm yet to know its exact form and assess its value. It was rather heavy, though not very large. My shoulders are still aching.'

The Raja squeezed his shoulders with his tired hands.

'What exactly is it that was so heavy, sir?'

'The chest. With great difficulty I carried it into the temple the night before last. It was a queer experience—to emerge from an enchanted lake at midnight, carrying a chest deposited by some scheming ancestor. I felt almost convinced that not only the moon, but also a number of invisible beings looked on from the treetops and the precincts of the temple.'

The Raja laughed and continued with his description of what he had seen: 'They were of somewhat sinister shape and

they applauded my feat. Amazingly, I could hear their applause, though I was sure it would have been inaudible to anybody else. The sound grew and reached a crescendo, almost deafening me by the time I dumped the chest inside the sanctum sanctorum. Then it suddenly stopped.'

'Why didn't you open the chest?' I asked eagerly.

'For the same reason for which the applause stopped—Heera's shriek. That made me rush back home. I wanted to open it last night but, as you know, Sharma quietly walked into the doom that awaited me.'

I sat speechless. The Raja laughed with great satisfaction, though not very loudly. 'Sure I was perplexed,' he explained, 'The *yaksha* may be a myth. And there is nothing really supernatural about my stumbling upon a treasure or two if you remember the practice of the ranis of yore. Many of them took care to bury their private wealth in the pools and tanks within their reach, in the hope of retrieving them at a propitious time in the future. For some of them the propitious time never came. For some others even if the time came, the treasure proved elusive.'

The Raja's eyes were growing bleary. He had forgotten the purpose of our climbing the machan. He did nothing to examine its strategic suitability or to see how freely he could move his gun. He was in a mood to talk. He wiped the perspiration from his forehead and resumed, 'I have a plan. . . .'

His condition alarmed me. I was anxious to stop him and suggest that he had better give up the proposed all-night vigil. But we were interrupted by Rao who sought the Raja's advice on the arrangements made on the roof of the temple to camouflage their presence.

'Stay here Dev, and check if you can see us clearly when we are on the temple,' said the Raja, descending from the machan. 'There should be some moonlight after an hour's darkness if those few patches of cloud do not disturb it. It is necessary that we settle down in our allotted places before dusk, allowing our eyes to get accustomed to the growing darkness.' The Raja moved away with the others towards the temple.

The sun had just set. A few enthusiastic cicadas had already

begun chirping. Homing birds circled some taller trees, preparing to settle down for the night. Their simple movements were the only vibrations my otherwise vacant and still mind recorded. The Raja, no doubt, had left me a bit dazed. I ought to have felt thrilled over his luck, but I did not. The urgency and the despair that must have forced him to grope for some help from his ancestors, in the mud and mire, depressed me.

The twilight was taking possession of the forest rapidly, if stealthily. The colour of the hour was in perfect harmony with my mood—pensive and passive.

I do not know how long I sat sealed in a state of vacuity. I woke up with a terrific jolt. It must have taken me a second or two to realize that what disturbed my peace was a shrill human cry. But I could not trace its origin instantly. Perhaps my sudden shock, together with the dusk, blinded me for another second. Then I discerned the figure of Heera, standing alone, petrified and staring at something in a dazed manner.

I followed her gaze and saw a giant beast facing her—perhaps it was the tigress we awaited. They seemed transfixed by each other.

I forced my gun into position. The man-eater roared and Heera gave a blood-curdling shriek—simultaneously. The shuddering impact of the sound shook me and I was sucked into a state that will ever defy my attempt at describing it. It must have been a combination of utter bafflement and stupefaction—though it could not have lasted more than a lightning moment—and in that time I could not distinguish between Heera and the beast. Looking at Heera I wondered if she was not the tigress and looking at the tigress I wondered if she was not Heera.

It was dreadful; the sensation was simply maddening. I felt like dashing my head against the tree. I thought I wept blood. But I could not know the human from the beast.

I do not trust the accuracy of my vision or my memory of that moment, but I think I saw them springing on each other with equal frenzy and fury. At once my power of discrimination was restored. I shot, aiming at the beast, before I fell into a dead faint.

I do not know when and how I was carried to Horizon. Memory returned to me in stages and with feverish jerks. When I remembered the scene and the situation that preceded my losing consciousness, I cried out in horror.

Subbu and Rao were by my side. I kept staring at them, afraid of asking them about the outcome of the weird encounter between Heera and the tigress. Subbu looked too stupefied to say a thing, but Rao had prepared himself to tell me all about it.

'You did your job very well. Your shot hit the left temple of the man-eater and penetrated it. It died almost instantly,' said Rao.

I found some relief in the knowledge that I had not hit Heera accidentally. But I sensed that Rao was speaking in an extremely guarded manner.

'And how is Heera?'

'Well, the beast mauled her badly.'

'So?'

'Nothing could have saved her. Her end came an hour later.'

Rao left, promising to return after a while. I asked Subbu to switch off the light and concentrated on recollecting the sequence of events in as orderly a manner as possible. Soon I was in a position to assure myself that I had no reason to feel guilty for any lapse in my conduct, however harrowing a crisis I might have experienced within me. My eerie confusion had lasted no more than a few seconds—practically the time I took to bring the gun to the right position and take aim at the beast. I would have needed that much time anyway, confusion or no confusion.

Even then the memory of the bizarre episode weighed on my chest like a vampire, sucking at my spirit. I could not muster enough strength to even sit up. Futile thoughts oppressed me: the situation would have been different if only I knew that Heera was visiting the spot; I ought not to have sat so absorbed in my rumination over the Raja's nocturnal adventures and what he claimed to be their successful outcome.

Heera's was an incredible end both for its suddenness and for the manner in which it came. No doubt I had developed an unreasonable dread of her, at least partly because of my own foolishness, but she had become a formidable presence for me, greatly influencing my thought, conduct and attitudes; she was as alive for me as the midnight hours I paced through; as trenchantly real as the death of my dear doe or the slow death of Sharmaji, I mean his real death preceding his physical death; she was as unforgettable as the slap she had planted on Balika's cheek which, I felt, had struck my jowls.

My mind had become a blind alley, jammed with confused thoughts and there seemed little hope of it recovering its clarity. Soon however, it became a vacuum, unable to accommodate or absorb any more distress and remorse.

Poor Subbu, who had been peeping into my room again and again, finally plucked up courage and walked in. My condition frightened him, but his desire to tell me the news overcame his anxiety. 'Babu, the carcass of the man-eater is lying at the police outpost. It needed no less than eight able-bodied men, some constables included, to carry it there. Even so, the bearers staggered, perhaps more because of their own nervousness than from their burden. It looked so fearful! You should have seen the crowd swelling around it. People are still arriving, some from distant villages, bringing their supper along with them, for they will not be able to return home at night.'

He fell silent when his report failed to provoke my interest. 'And, Babu,' he said gravely after a while, perhaps realizing that it was improper for him to totally black-out the tragic aspect of the event, 'the lady is to be buried in front of the

temple. Preparations are afoot. Raja Sahib wants to finish with the matter without delay.'

Rao returned around midnight. Heera had been given a burial in keeping with the traditions of the Raj family, he informed me, while Sharmaji's remains had been cremated not very far from her grave. A priest who had been promptly secured from a nearby village had performed the last rites for both.

'How has Raja Sahib taken it?' I asked, overcoming my hesitation.

'He looks very pale and we have all impressed upon him the need for rest. But he feels anxious about your condition. He told me that were he not drained of all vigour he would have paid you a visit. He has advised you to take it easy and relax,' said Rao, injecting some authority into his otherwise weak voice.

The Raja's message overwhelmed me. I knew the state he must be in. Yet his concern for me assured me that he still retained some of his composure.

I passed the night sleeplessly. My desire to meet the Raja and to feel the atmosphere of the castle, now that Heera had gone, was mounting, but after I had taken a bath early in the morning, sleep, which had eluded me all night descended on me with a vengeance.

Late in the afternoon my anguish was rekindled by a fresh cause for annoyance. A letter from the Government—the outcome of the expert team's visit to Nijanpur some days ago—stated that they were contemplating taking over my mansion and converting it into a sanatorium. They offered reasonable compensation and expected my cooperation.

For a moment I had the strange feeling of living inside a bubble that was about to burst. I tore up the letter on an impulse, but when I realized how childish and impotent that was, I felt even more annoyed and frustrated. I lost the desire to move out of my room. And, as darkness fell, a dreadful thought crept into me: this mansion had been built at Heera's instance. Was her death connected with it slipping through my fingers? Was her spirit wreaking vengeance on me? For what fault of mine? At which point in the stream of events

could I have swum against the current or broken away?

Night deepened as I kept staring vacantly at the dark hills. Yet another sleepless night awaited me. My tired eyes closed a little before dawn. But I was woken by Subbu. The watchman of the castle, gasping and sweating, had brought urgent summons from Vimla. She had to see me at once.

The sun was yet to climb over the eastern range of hills in order to shine on the valley. As I walked towards the castle, my old familiar road, surprisingly, looked different. Was it a projection of my experiences, my encounter with the unfamiliar aspects of my own self?

Vimla stood at the portals. 'Where is Raja Sahib?' she asked me anxiously.

The question was most unexpected. The last I had met the Raja was on the machan.

Vimla had not expected a reply, but was merely sharing her anxiety with me. She told me how he had almost collapsed, beset with high fever and exhaustion, soon after Heera's burial, and had become delirious. By midday he had looked better, but he would not let Vimla send for me or anybody else. Throughout the day he had tossed in bed or walked up and down the castle restlessly, peering through the windows at the temple again and again. He fell asleep late in the evening, but was found missing from the castle early in the morning. Vimla was aware that he had a habit of roaming around at night, but was now apprehensive because of his condition.

'He must have slipped out, as usual, through the rear door, soon after midnight, for I was awake throughout the last quarter of the night. He could not have gone unnoticed then,' said Vimla.

Her observation suddenly reminded me of the Raja's secret quest and the point of the narration at which he had stopped.

'Vimla, don't worry. I will find him in no time.' She looked consoled, though a bit surprised.

I made straight for the deserted temple, passing by the fresh mounds near the still lake—the grave of Heera and the cold funeral pyre of Sharmaji—bathed in the early morning light. Two squirrels were running around them at great speed,

chasing each other. I did not allow the unearthly sensation that was creeping into me to grow. A soft glow of sunlight that had filtered through the trees on the other side of the lake, had begun to play on the temple. The doors were bolted from within. I stood confirmed in my guess.

'Raja Sahib!' I called out in a subdued voice. There was no response.

'Raja Sahib, it is Dev,' I called out again louder and knocked on the doors. There was no response. I increased the volume of both my voice and the knock, but to no avail.

I lost patience and pushed the doors with all my strength. The wooden bar on the other side gave way and one of the two dilapidated frames almost fell off. I stormed in, to the consternation of a number of bats. One of them, flitting by me, crashed into my head. An owl screeched and flew away. Despite streaks of light piercing the forlorn space through the broken door-frame, it was dark inside. A putrid smell hung in the air, suffocating me.

I stood before the image of the forsaken idol till my eyes grew accustomed to the murkiness. The Raja was not in the sanctum sanctorum. I peeped into the narrow wing behind the seat of the deity. There he was—leaning against the wall, his legs outstretched. By his side lay a torch still switched on, but the light was too dim to reveal anything beyond its surface glass.

'Raja Sahib! Are you awake?'

He was not. I knelt down and shook him gently by the shoulders, calling him again. I realized that he was in a deep faint. For a moment, I did not know what to do. I hurried out, opened the doors wide to let a little more light and air in. Then I ran to the lake, soaked my handkerchief in water, and came back and squeezed it on his face. His eyelids rippled.

By then things had become distinct in the temple. I saw the mysterious chest he had hit upon. It lay upside down beside him, close to a dark nook, its mystery scattered on the floor.

It did not take me long to identify the contents. It was a human skeleton, now lying crumbled amidst clods of mud that had penetrated the chest.

For a moment I forgot my duty towards the Raja and stood

gaping at it, shivers running up and down my spine. It could have been the remains of a rebel punished by an ancestor of the Raja, or the remains of a country lass who had inspired the passions of a prince but had endangered his honour.

The victim had wreaked its vengeance on the last of the Rajas.

I did not want anyone else to see the Raja in that condition. I mustered all my strength and tried to lift him.

‘Devu! Did you find him?’

It was Vimla. She had seen me dipping my handkerchief in the lake and entering the temple for the second time and had come as quickly as possible. Together we managed to carry the Raja to the castle before any of the attendants saw us.

Nijanpur was not connected with Samargarh by telephone or a telegraph line. Sahoo’s jeep was the speediest means of transport and communication available to us. Rao took it and rushed to Samargarh, returning with an ambulance, a doctor and two medical assistants. Three hours had passed. The Raja had shown few signs of improvement. He had opened his eyes several times, but seemed to slip into a deeper slumber each time.

Vimla went to inform Balika that it was necessary to take the Raja to the hospital at Samargarh. I followed her and asked her in a whisper, ‘Does Balika know of Heera’s death? What is her reaction?’

‘She is bewildered, as usual,’ replied Vimla.

I could not hear what Vimla told Balika, but I saw the girl getting off her bed and struggling to walk. Vimla left the room in haste, for she found it difficult to keep her tears in check and a weeping Vimla was sure to shock Balika.

The doctor and his assistants transferred the unconscious Raja into the ambulance with great care and made him comfortable. I sat by his side. Rao and Sahoo followed us in the jeep.

We had barely crossed Nijanpur when, to our joy, the Raja

opened his eyes. 'He will be all right soon,' said the doctor with a reassuring smile.

The Raja surveyed us. He was obviously trying to comprehend the situation. 'Where are we going?' he asked, softly but distinctly.

'To the hospital at Samargarh,' I replied.

He closed his eyes for a while. 'Is it you who found me?' he asked. His mind had become alert incredibly fast.

'That is correct.'

He let a minute pass. 'Dev, I had no time to tell you of my plan!' He seemed to be murmuring his protest against the chain of events which ran contrary to his wishes.

'You will tell me, Sir, when you have fully recovered. There will be ample time for that.' I tried to sound absolutely confident of such a time arriving before long.

'What if I don't recover?' His feebly uttered question had an ominous ring to it. Suddenly he looked at the doctor and his assistants.

'Can we do anything for you, Sir?' asked the doctor.

'Will you mind leaving me alone with Dev for a moment?'

The ambulance was stopped. The doctor and one of the assistants went over to the driver's side. The third member of the team moved to the jeep which had also come to a halt.

Alone with the Raja, I told him again, 'I'm afraid, talking will be a strain on you now. We can wait, can't we, for a better time!'

He paid no heed to my words. 'Dev,' he said taking a deep breath, 'would you mind selling your mansion to me?'

While the abruptness of the proposition startled me, his next statement added to my bewilderment.

'But I propose to give it back to you—with one addition. My daughter. Won't you look after her when I am gone?'

He paused and added, 'Vimla, of course, will be a great asset to you. She is so good!'

I was at a total loss for words.

'But I forget my daughter's condition. How can I inflict her on you?' he sighed.

'Sir,' I managed to say at last, 'my home I am at your

disposal. You trust me, don't you? Please don't worry about Balika and Vimla.'

He looked relaxed, then rolled and strained his eyes perhaps to ascertain that nobody else had heard him.

'Dev, will you check if there is a key in my pocket?'

I searched his pockets and found it. 'Yes, there is.'

'Will you please keep it with you?'

'If that pleases you.' I put the key in my pocket.

'Good,' he said. 'It is the key to the chest in my bedroom. You will find in it an envelope containing money, the amount I received from Sahoo for selling my Nijanpur mansion to him and it is entirely for you. I had other plans. But the *Yaksha* failed me, as you must have found out yourself.'

'We can discuss such matters later. Please do not tire yourself,' I pleaded again.

A faint smile seemed to play on his lips. 'Yes,' he said, 'I shall speak no more. God bless you.' He closed his eyes.

As I sat beside him in silence my heart and mind were assailed by a jumble of emotions. I did not notice when we entered Samargarh. I woke up to a multitude of anxious faces when our vehicle came to halt before the hospital. The news of the Raja's sudden illness and his arrival had spread like wildfire. The District Collector, other officials and a large number of people were waiting to receive him.

I got down. 'How is Raja Sahib?' asked the Collector.

'He is better,' I said, 'and asleep.' Meanwhile the doctor and his assistants had gone in to examine the patient.

There was a grim silence. Five minutes passed. The doctor beckoned the chief medical officer of the hospital to come into the ambulance. After another five minutes, the chief was heard announcing to the Collector and the rest, 'Raja Sahib is no more!'

'But that cannot be!' I cried out. My voice was lost in the surging murmurs and exclamations. 'How will I face Balika and Vimla?' I asked Sahoo and Rao and broke down. My two companions held and consoled me.

'Young man,' said the Collector in a patronizing tone, 'I appreciate your sentiments, for I understand that you were

very dear to Raja Sahib. But who are we to question the ways of Providence? We must remain calm at such moments and perform our solemn duty to the best of our ability. You must rush to Nijanpur and break the news to the Princess. There is no time to lose. I am told that the tradition of the dynasty demands a dead body to be interred before sunset if the death takes place during the day. Once the Princess, the Raja's sole heir, is here, we can begin the preparations for the burial.'

The Collector provided me with a car. The talkative chauffeur went on and on about the good old days of the Raj, elevating facts to the plane of fairy tales. I responded occasionally and mechanically, but heard him only when he raised his voice to a high pitch at the end of every anecdote. His presence only obliged me to stomach my sobs. My father's death, five years ago, had been a big blow to me, but his physicians had already prepared me for the inevitable. The Raja's death was a shattering experience.

Vimla came out at the sound of the car. She stared at me for a moment and then began to weep.

'You have guessed it,' I said as I led her back into the hall, and reminded her of the need to appear as calm as possible for Balika's sake.

Vimla steadied herself and looked composed.

'Vimla, do you think Balika would like to, or be able to, come to Samargarh with us for the funeral?'

Instead of answering my question, Vimla went into Balika's room. I had no courage to accompany her this time. A moment later I heard an unbelieving 'No' followed by sobs.

I waited for nearly half-an-hour outside Balika's room. But Vimla did not come out. I was growing impatient. I stepped into the room and saw Balika in Vimla's arms still crying. I lingered for a few minutes more. 'I have to return to Samargarh. Meanwhile, let me assure you, Vimla, that you and the Princess will have no cause to worry about anything. Raja Sahib has made all the necessary arrangements for your well-being. You can look upon me as the trustee of the arrangements and demand all my attention,' I said. My words sounded trite even to my own ears.

Vimla followed me into the hall. 'Dev,' she said embracing

me, 'do you know, once Raja Sahib had told me how much he would like you to marry his daughter. Poor Balika! She had wept. And that was the only time I ever saw Raja Sahib emotionally moved and his eyes moist.'

I remained speechless for a moment. Then I made Vimla sit down and returned to the car.

By the time I was back at Samargarh the whole town was plunged into mourning. All offices and shops had been closed. The Raja's body had been carried to the lawns of what had once been his palace. It lay in state on a bed of flowers. Thousand filed past it, many shed tears and some sobbed. Most of the mourners had never seen him earlier.

He looked serene, more like a hermit than a king.

A procession of over thirty thousand men and women followed the cortege of the last Raja of Samargarh to the dynasty's exclusive burial ground. He was laid to rest, against a setting sun, amidst the ruins of the tombs of his ancestors. A pale twilight set in over the vast, grieving crowd.

EPILOGUE

The massive castle had suddenly begun to look like a haunted house. An inaudible cry—who could it be?—pervaded every inch of the atmosphere.

Or had it overnight become a house of cards, I wondered, for, despite its imposing solidity, I feared that a gust of wind would be enough to make it collapse. I remembered that it was no longer a Raja's residence; it was going to be the proud possession of a merchant who was perhaps still under the spell of his impossible dream.

It was morning. I crossed the awfully empty hall and walked slowly down the dimly lit corridor. Vimla lay asleep in front of Balika's room and perhaps sobbed in her sleep.

I peeped into the room. Balika was awake. I stood by the door in silence. She sat up. Tears began rolling down her cheeks. I let some time pass. She wiped her face and looked at me and did not take her eyes away immediately. Our shared grief had perhaps brought us closer.

'I propose to carry out your father's wishes faithfully. You and Vimla have to leave this house and come over to Horizon. You have never seen it, but it now belongs to you. Yes, your father's last act was to buy it for you,' I said while wondering how long Horizon itself would remain with us.

She broke into tears once again.

I was immensely sad; yet, at the same time, I was waking to the thrill of discharging my new responsibilities.

My hope of evoking some response in her by talking to her directly seemed to be in vain. I must wait for Vimla to rise, I decided, and went out for a stroll along the lake.

Crickets chirped. A few cranes stood gracefully by the edge of the lake. A pair of tortoises were crawling back into the water after a night spent on dry ground. And, from the dark green foliage glistening with dew, birds had started taking flight. The temple of Vaneswari standing at one corner of the lake, looked fearfully lonely. The Raja's bizarre discovery

must be still lying inside it. . . . the hurriedly dug grave of Heera and the pyre of Shanti . . . reminders of experiences I would like to forget.

The morning was growing brighter. I sat down on a rock overlooking the lake, a few yards from the rear door of the castle. I heard a door opening softly behind me and a rustling noise. I turned around and for once in my life I could hardly believe my eyes.

There was Balika, coming down the steps. The breeze was playing with her curly hair and was blotting out her tears. She smiled.

'You have walked—and without anybody's help!' It was with much self-restraint that I could keep my voice—and my tears of joy—in check.

Balika was in a light blue sari. In my heart, frozen by the recent events, her image shone like a bluish flame. I felt a delightful thaw set in.

I looked up at the meandering road leading to Horizon. I may have to lose the mansion, I thought, but if she can walk up there, she will surely be able to walk further.

