

CHANDRAKANTA

Devaki Nandan Khatri

Translated by Rohini Chowdhury



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Devaki Nandan Khatri (1861–1913) was born in Pusa, Bihar, in the home of his maternal grandfather, Jivanlal Mahato, a wealthy landowner. His father, Lala Ishvardas, descended from an illustrious family from Lahore. He shot to literary fame with his first novel, *Chandrakanta*, at the age of twenty-six. He subsequently set up his own printing press, the Lahari Press, in Banaras. His other popular works include *Chandrakanta Santati* and *Bhutnath*, and several tilismi and jasusi novels, all of which became hugely popular.

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Introduction

Humanity has long been fascinated by tales of love and valour, adventure and suspense, of beautiful princesses languishing in lonely prisons, and brave young princes riding to their rescue; evil enchantments and wicked opponents notwithstanding, the prince and his princess are united, and live happily ever after. *Chandrakanta*, Babu Devaki Nandan Khatri's extraordinary first novel, is one such wonder tale. First published in serial form in 1888, and in a single volume in 1891, the novel was a runaway success; written in the spoken Hindi of northern India rather than in any difficult literary idiom, it became an instant hit upon publication and was modern India's first bestseller. By 1904, six editions of the novel had appeared, and *Chandrakanta*, and its sequel—*Chandrakanta Santati* (published in 1905), together sold more than eighty thousand copies in the first decade of the twentieth century.¹ Interestingly, Devaki Nandan Khatri chose to write his novel in the Devanagari script, rather than the then more popular Urdu script. This did not, in any way, hinder the novel's astounding popularity; rather, thousands of readers learnt Devanagari in order to read *Chandrakanta*. Its success, therefore, represents an important step in the development of Hindi and its ultimate precedence over Urdu in northern India.

Khatri began writing *Chandrakanta* in 1887. He was all of twenty-six years old at the time, and this was his first foray into fiction.² As he explains in the preface to the first edition, 'I have never written a book before, this is my first attempt, so if there be errors and mistakes, it is not a matter for surprise...' The first part of his novel was published in 1888 in Banaras, by his friend, Babu Amir Singh, owner of the Hariprakash Yantralay. Khatri wrote his novel in four parts, his fans welcoming each new part with unabated eagerness and enthusiasm. At almost three hundred pages, and with a total of ninety-three chapters across the four parts, *Chandrakanta* became

the longest Hindi novel of the nineteenth century.³ All four parts were published separately in 1891, and then together in one volume, in 1892.

Chandrakanta was so successful that by 1894, Khatri was able to set up his own press, the Lahari Press, and start his own monthly fiction magazine, *Upanyas Lahari*. He also began publishing *Chandrakanta Santati* (Chandrakanta's Descendants), the sequel to *Chandrakanta*. He wrote the sequel in twenty-four parts, completing the final part in 1905. Khatri also published Urdu editions of *Chandrakanta*, and at least one edition in Nepali (Gorkhabhasha).⁴ Khatri continued to publish *Chandrakanta* and *Chandrakanta Santati* in various editions, Hindi and Urdu, to suit every pocket, under his own imprint of the Lahari Press, though printed by other presses. As *Chandrakanta* and its sequels continued to grab the popular imagination, readers would mob the premises of the Lahari Press whenever a new part of the novel was expected.

Khatri capitalized on his success by continuing the story in a second sequel, *Bhutnath*; this was based on a character from *Chandrakanta Santati*. He wrote and published six parts of this sequel between 1907 and his death in 1913. After his death, his son Durga Prasad Khatri took over the management of the Lahari Press; he also continued and completed *Bhutnath*, writing another fifteen parts of the story between 1915 and 1935. The novels continued to sell so well that Durga Prasad Khatri further continued the story in a third, six-part sequel called *Rohtasmath*.

Though never accepted as 'literature' by the Hindi literary establishment due to the levity of its subject matter, the very popularity of *Chandrakanta* makes it a landmark in the history of Hindi literature, and particularly so, in the history of the Hindi novel. As Francesca Orsini points out, from the point of view of commercial Hindi publishing, which was still in the early stages of development at the time, *Chandrakanta* (and its sequels) managed to create in readers the habit of reading novels in Hindi,⁵ introducing them to the conventions of the modern novel, a habit that later, more 'literary' writers in Hindi were able to exploit. *Chandrakanta's* success also gave birth to a whole new sub-genre of Hindi fiction—that of the tilismi and jasusi detective novels (to which Khatri himself contributed several works), which became hugely popular as well.

Khatri drew heavily on the Persian–Arabic tradition of the dastan and qissa⁶ for his novel; he was also influenced by the writings of the Bengali poet and novelist, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, and the English novelist, W.J.

Reynolds. In *Chandrakanta*, Khatri brings together all the narrative elements of a dastan; at the same time, he successfully makes the leap from the traditional, oral forms of storytelling to the modern conventions of the novel, so that even those critics who refuse to accept *Chandrakanta* as a work of literary merit, accept Khatri's role in introducing readers to the new literary form of the novel.⁷

The dastan was oral in nature, and usually recited by a dastango or professional storyteller. Full of *razm*, *bazm*, *ḥusn o' ishq*, and *aiyaari*,⁸ i.e. battle and warfare, courtly assemblies, beauty and love, and trickery, the form became hugely popular all over the Islamic world. In India, dastans acquired even greater popularity under the Mughal emperor, Akbar. One of the most popular dastans of the time was the 'Dastan-e-Amir Hamzah', relating the life and adventures of Amir Hamzah, the Prophet's uncle.⁹ Despite their popularity under the Mughals, dastans really came into their own in India in the nineteenth century, when they began to be composed in Urdu. By the middle of the nineteenth century, a few dastans had also appeared in print, including Ghalib Lakhnawi's hugely popular Urdu version of 'Amir Hamzah'.

Like 'Amir Hamzah' and other Urdu dastans of the time, Khatri's novel is set in the courtly world of princes and princesses, magnificent palaces and gracious gardens, where love and beauty rule the day and chivalry and honour are valued above life itself, where the beautiful Princess Chandrakanta, imprisoned in an ancient tilisma, must wait for rescue, while her lover, the valiant Prince Birendra Singh, must battle jealous rivals and break the ancient enchantment in order to reach her. Yet, as in the dastans, the real protagonists of the story are not the prince and the princess, but their secret agents, the 'spy-magicians' known as *aiyaars*. Both the prince and the princess have their own cohort of *aiyaars* and *aiyaaras*, and, as in most dastans, it is really the *aiyaars* who determine the direction and set the pace of the story. Thus, Khatri's tale has all the elements of a traditional dastan: descriptions of war and battles that help the prince prove his valour (*razm*); elaborate enumerations of royal splendour and details of courtly gatherings (*bazm*); beauty as embodied in women, and love (*ḥusn o' ishq*); complex tilismas, ancient enchantments, and clever and ingenious *aiyaars* with their inventive, and sometimes cunning, tricks and plans (*aiyaari*). A virtuoso dastan-go would often 'stop' the dastan in order to offer his listeners long lists and detailed descriptions of 'dastan-mandatory' items. Khatri, too,

offers his readers detailed descriptions of nature, feminine beauty and battles, and often gives lists of plants and trees, royal treasure and other items, but unlike the traditional dastan-go, he keeps his descriptions short, never allowing his narrative to pause or flag.

Khatri also maintains the swiftness of his narrative through the use of short chapters, which he calls bayaans. Here, we see the influence of contemporary theatre upon his work. Khatri scripts his chapters almost like the scenes in a play—each chapter begins in a new setting and ends abruptly at a critical moment, leaving the reader in suspense till the curtain rises again on the next ‘scene’. The sense of theatre is heightened by Khatri’s frequent use of the present tense to introduce new locales and the main players in a particular chapter or part of the story almost as though he were writing stage directions. Once the scene is set and the introductions performed, he switches back, without warning, to a narrative voice. These frequent and sudden switches of voice and tense add to the pace and increase the sense of drama in his narrative.

Khatri also chooses not to follow the linear narration of a dastan, but uses flashbacks, as well as, mysterious hints at events to come and explanations to be given in the future. His novel begins *in medias res*—in the very first paragraph, the reader is made aware of two men, who are deep in a secret conversation with each other. The men, continues Khatri, are Birendra Singh and Tej Singh. He tells the reader nothing more, who must therefore continue reading to find answers to the questions that arise: who are these men, what are they talking about that is so important, and why are they doing so in such a lonely and isolated place? Khatri thus manages to create in the reader a state of ‘ignorant curiosity’ with the first sentence of his novel. Khatri draws his reader into a mimetic narration, allowing him to watch the story unfold; but at no point, except once briefly, towards the end, when he invites the reader to eavesdrop on a conversation between the mysterious Forest Maiden and her companions, does Khatri allow the reader to know or see more than his characters. Strange happenings and inexplicable events follow one after another, but the reader must wait, along with his characters, for the explanation. He creates suspense at every stage of his novel—no sooner is one mystery resolved than another riddle pops up—and maintains it right through to the end. It is only at the very end that the reader finally has all the answers. There is much to be said for Khatri’s handling of suspense—with his complete drawing in of the reader into the involved and twisting

sequence of events, his slow release of information that increases curiosity and urges the reader to turn the pages more rapidly—it is sophisticated in the extreme, and manages to hold captive even the modern reader, who is used to far more complicated and complex fare in the form of fast-paced fiction, film and television.

In dastans and qissas, suspense was used mainly as a narrative device to move the story along, and puzzles and mysteries were seldom resolved. Khatri's use of suspense, in that he ensures that every loose end is meticulously tied up, and every curious puzzle resolved, is more in line with the requirements of the detective novel than of the dastan, and immediately lifts *Chandrakanta* from the medieval into the modern, and makes it a legitimate and valid precursor of the jasusi and detective novels that followed in its wake. Khatri refined his use of suspense in *Birendrabir*, his first jasusi novel, as well as in his later works of detective fiction such as *Kajar ki Kothri*.

In *Chandrakanta*, Khatri also introduces the Hindi reader to aiyaars and aiyaari for the first time. The aiyaar was a central figure in Persian and Urdu dastans; subordinate to the king or prince, he was nevertheless the real 'hero' of the story. In a world full of intrigue, plots and counter-plots, every king needed aiyaars to gather information and help him foil his enemy's plans. The aiyaars were thus spies or secret agents—with a difference. They could magically change their appearance to that of any individual, male or female; they were also skilled in every art under the sun, from warfare to poetry, and invested with encyclopedic knowledge. In his introduction to the first edition of *Chandrakanta*, Devaki Nandan Khatri states that though many novels in Hindi have dealt with the ways of royalty, he knows of none that have dwelt on the aiyaars, who once were an essential part of any royal court. The aiyaars, explains Khatri, were 'harfan maulas', accomplished in a variety of arts; they were masters of disguise, knew the use of drugs and medicines, could sing and play musical instruments, were trained to run at almost superhuman speed, were skilled in the use of weapons, would often perform the function of spies and detectives, and were held in great respect by king and commoner alike. He defines an 'aiyaar' in a footnote to the opening paragraphs of his novel as 'one who knows every kind of trick, every ruse and stratagem, is accomplished in every art and artifice, and whose main skills are disguise and escape'.¹⁰ But, laments Khatri in his preface to the first edition of *Chandrakanta*, the aiyaars of old have

disappeared, their place taken by bahrūpiyās¹¹, men whose only skill is disguise, and in that too, they are not very accomplished. If Hindi readers could be given a glimpse of these interesting matters, says Khatri, there would be several benefits, the most important of which would be that readers of such books would not easily be tricked by anyone. It is keeping in mind these facts, explains Khatri, that he has written his novel, *Chandrakanta*.

In addition to justifying the presence of aiyaars in his story in a contemporary context, Khatri also put in considerable effort to explain the superhuman skills of his aiyaars in rational, nonmagical terms (for example, the use of make-up by aiyaars to change their appearance). These explanations are not very satisfactory to the modern reader (make-up does not entirely explain how a man can make himself look so much like a woman that even her closest friends and associates are taken in), who must therefore willingly suspend disbelief to enjoy his tale to the fullest. Unlike the aiyaars of the Urdu dastans, Khatri's aiyaar, Tej Singh, does not owe his skills to magic, nor is he blessed with divine gifts like Amar Aiyaar of 'Amir Hamzah'. And, though he is the best at aiyaari, there is one thing he still lacks

an ointment, perhaps for the eyes, or amulet, which if applied or worn would make him invisible. And perhaps it was just as well he found no such aid, for then his aiyaari would not have been as praised and admired as it was—for if a man can disappear, he has no need of aiyaari, for an invisible man can do what he likes, unhindered.

Thus, in Khatri's formulation, the absence of supernatural and magical gifts and aids makes Tej Singh a greater, not a lesser, aiyaar.

Unlike the aiyaars of the dastans, who are 'greedy, humorous, mischievous'¹², Devaki Nandan Khatri's aiyaars are more sophisticated. Unlike Amar Aiyaar, whose sense of humour is often crude, Tej Singh's humour takes the form of irony. For example, Tej Singh teases Birendra Singh for falling in love with the Forest Maiden, commenting wryly that the prince 'falls in love wherever he goes and doesn't solve one problem before he is ready to take on another!' The only example of truly scatological humour in *Chandrakanta* comes from the aiyaar, Devi Singh, who questions the

wisdom of providing a captive and immobilized Badrinath with food and drink. When Pannalal requests the prince to

Either find a way to release Pandit Badrinath, or give us permission to fetch some food and drink for him. In fact, so long as you do not find the book and cannot break the tilisma and Badrinath remains imprisoned here, give us the freedom to come and go with food and nourishment for him.

Devi Singh replies:

...it is easy to arrange food and drink for Badrinath, but if he remains captive like this for several days, he will need to relieve himself! What will you do then? How will you throw it away and where? Or will you let him stay there upon a pile of his own excrement?

In *Chandrakanta*, the relationship between the prince and Tej Singh is one of friendship rather than that of master and servant. Tej Singh may scold the prince sharply for forgetting caution and falling a victim to the tricks of the enemy aiyaars, and the prince must meekly accept the reprimand. The prince depends on Tej Singh for everything, and Tej Singh puts the prince's welfare even above his own. Khatri's aiyaars are either Rajputs or Pathans, and, unlike the aiyaars of the dastans, are socially equal to the kings and princes they serve. They hold important positions at court, are granted gifts of land and treasure, and are invited to sit beside the king in his darbar. The aiyaars in *Chandrakanta* follow a strict code of ethics, and are ever vigilant of their master, the prince's, honour. They also follow a strict code of behaviour towards each other: no aiyaar will allow his master to harm or kill another aiyaar, even if he belongs to the enemy camp. The aiyaar's reluctance towards unnecessary bloodshed extends even to war—he will, through his aiyaari, seek to avert war, and that failing, attempt to minimize the loss of lives. In [Part Two, Chapter 5](#), the aiyaars Devi Singh and Badrinath, though on opposing sides, agree that single combat between their masters was preferable to hundreds of innocent soldiers being killed.

The aiyaar, with his first appearance in Hindi in *Chandrakanta*, became an important, even mandatory, figure in the numerous novels of adventure and magic that followed *Chandrakanta*. Given the aiyaar's abilities as a spy and investigator, it was almost inevitable that, with the advent of the detective novel in Hindi, he should be transformed into the figure of a jasus or detective. Though the writers of detective fiction, including Babu Devaki Nandan himself, went to great lengths to convince the reader that their detective did not have magical powers but achieved his results through rational means, 'aiyyar-like qualities, such as omnipresence, omniscience and perfect disguise are evident in the detective or detective-like characters in Hindi detective novels'¹³.

Devaki Nandan Khatri, borrowing freely from the dastans once again, also introduced Hindi readers to the specific type of enchantment known as tilisma. In the Urdu dastans of the nineteenth century, such as Muhammad Husain Jah's *Tilism-e-Hoshrub*a (the first volume of which was published in 1883), a tilisma is a magical place, an enchanted world full of palaces and gardens, and which could have multiple, smaller tilismas within it. A tilisma was usually created by sorcerers using a combination of occult sciences, including the creation of illusions, the manipulation of the physical properties of matter and the exploitation of the inherent forces of nature to create marvels. The sorcerers blithely transferred spirits between bodies, altered the physical laws of the universe, and made inanimate objects behave as though alive. In the dastans, the only purpose of tilismas was to serve the demands of the story as fantastical, magical places where certain strange events could play out, and thus their ultimate purpose was only one—the entertainment of the reader. Tilismas in dastans did not come with a sub-text of social values, as they do in *Chandrakanta*. Towards the end of the novel, Baba Siddhanath gives an explanation for the existence of tilismas that reflects the changing social values in late nineteenth-century India:

A tilisma is created by someone who owns great wealth but who does not have a male heir to leave it to. Such a man then calls together the best astrologers and jyotishis and asks them to determine when the next boy and male heir will be born in his family or, if he has any brothers, in their families. The astrologers and jyotishis make their calculations, determine when the next male heir will be born, and even prepare his

horoscope. A tilisma is then constructed to protect the treasure and wealth in the expected heir's name...

He also explains that while he could have reunited Birendra Singh and Chandrakanta long before, he did not do so because:

I also knew, as did everyone else, that the prince wanted to break the Chunargarh tilisma only to free the princess, and that he had no desire to take the treasure for himself. I also knew that the moment he realized that the princess was free, he would leave the tilisma and all its treasure intact. Now, I am amongst those who want your families to prosper. How could I allow all that wealth to go waste and lie buried there, reaching neither the prince nor the princess?

Thus contemporary, practical values replace courtly ones, and the accumulation and safeguarding of wealth takes precedence over the demands of romance or chivalry.

Devaki Nandan Khatri's greatest innovation in *Chandrakanta* was perhaps what Orsini terms the 'naturalization' of the dastan, that is, adapting the fantastical, alien world of the Persian-Urdu dastan to the more contemporary world his readers knew. Khatri's novel is set not in some exotic, faraway land that none of his readers would ever visit, but in the comfortable familiarity of the area around Chunargarh, a short thirty-five kilometres from Banaras. Much of the action is set in local towns and forests, and Khatri's descriptions betray his detailed knowledge of the area. Some two years before he began writing *Chandrakanta*, Khatri had been employed as a forest contractor by the raja of Banaras. His job involved roaming the forests of Naugarh and Chakia as he 'farmed' them for lac, timber, honey, resin and other forest produce. He thus came to know every tract of the deep forest and every mountain valley intimately; he discovered the secrets of the forests—hidden caves and secret springs, and crumbling ruins tucked away amongst the trees and forgotten. His descriptions of the forests and mountain valleys are thus not only detailed, but accurate as well. Consider, for example the following description of the forest around Naugarh and Vijaygarh:

The kingdoms of Naugarh and Vijaygarh lie in mountainous country. The rivers Chandraprabha and Karamnasa meander through the mountains, which are riddled with natural caves and caverns. In the dense forest that covers the mountain flanks there grow a variety of trees—sakhua, tend, vijaysar, sanai, korai, go, khajur, pehar, jigna, aasan, can all be found in the forest together with hundreds of parijat trees. These mountains are interesting—one moment you are in a village, and the next, only a mile or so away, you could be in dense forest, and have lost your way. In the rainy season, walk only a kos, and you will cross ten streams or more. Several species of wild animals can be seen in these forests, including sambhar, barasingha, cheetah, bear, leopard and monkey, and sometimes even tiger, though not during the rains when the rivulets and streams make it too wet for them, and they move up into the mountains to drier land. There are no deer on the mountains, but there are many in the valleys. Of the birds, there can be seen partridge and quail, though peacocks are the most numerous. These beautiful mountains and forests are still there today, just as they have been described here, and worth a visit.

Clearly, here, Khatri is describing a real forest with which he is familiar, and which his readers may also recognize from the description! So, though the story is imaginary, the action unfolds in real, often identifiable, locations, for example, the secret valley that Tej Singh uses as a prison. Khatri describes the secret valley in minute detail, right down to the jamun tree that grew by the stream that flowed through the valley, and the ripened fruit that had fallen into the stream and floated upon its surface. The valley is located near Chunar, in a place known as Siddhanathdari, which takes its name from Baba Siddhanath, a real yogi and sadhu who once lived there; ‘Baba Siddhanath’ is also the name that Khatri gives to one of the most important characters in his novel. Khatri’s description of Chunar fort (which now lies in a state of relative disrepair) is also accurate, as are the distances he records between various places (Naugarh and Vijaygarh, Chunar and Naugarh, and so on); and paths and winding routes through the forest, which his characters travel, are those that he himself had probably traversed.

In addition to the setting of his novel, Khatri also ‘Indianized’ his characters: all his important characters are upper-caste Hindus, either Brahmins (the two aiyaars, Pandit Badrinath and Jagannath Jyotishi) or Kshatriya Rajputs. The code of chivalry followed by the heroes of the dastans translates easily into the warrior code of the Rajputs. Hindu rituals are also highlighted (the prince and his aiyaars perform the ritual baths and pujas at dawn and dusk), as are Indian social customs (Tej Singh may marry Chapala only if she is of the same caste as he is). Class and caste, as practised and observed in north Indian feudal society at the time, is a constant backdrop in the novel. Once again, Khatri drew upon his own life experiences here: born in Pusa, in the home of his maternal grandfather, Babu Jivanlal Mahato, a wealthy landowner and minor raja in his own right, Khatri spent his childhood in the palaces and royal courts of the minor nobility of northern India watching and learning the ways of the kings and princes up close. Later, he joined his father, Lala Ishvardas, in his business of supplying gold and gold ornaments to various royal courts. His close association with the feudal aristocracy of northern India served him well when writing *Chandrakanta*, enabling him to create a world that was quintessentially Indian and recognizably ‘real’, even as it was inspired by the fantasy world of the dastan.

The novel shows a strong anti-Muslim bias—the aiyaars working for the villain are Muslims, and unlike Tej Singh and his comrades, they are weak, untrustworthy and easily outwitted. Tej Singh also easily dupes the Muslim palace guards with his offer of doctored tobacco, and it is notable that, despite the aiyaar code of honour not to punish other aiyaars with anything more than imprisonment, the Muslim aiyaars are flogged and then killed in cold blood by the other aiyaars. The Muslims side with the villain, and therefore all Muslims are removed from positions of authority in the army and the court; and when war breaks out with Chunar, Birendra Singh decides to send in the Muslim contingent first, followed by their ‘own’ men and some cannons, with instructions to wipe out the Muslims if they showed any signs of joining the enemy. Khatri’s characters thus operate within a social and political framework that is clearly Hindu, so much so that it may be safely said that Khatri not only Indianized his novel, but took it one step further and ‘Hinduized’ it. Perhaps Khatri deemed this necessary in order to appeal to the Hindi reading audience of his times.

Further, Khatri's characters—though kings and queens, princes and princesses—held the strong 'homely' values of India's emerging middle class, from which Khatri's readers were mainly drawn. The royal parents worried about a suitable match for their marriageable daughter, and about their son going into battle. When Tej Singh returns home after a long absence during which he has suffered imprisonment by the enemy, he is ordered by the king to go and see his mother at once and reassure her that he is well. And Maharaj Jai Singh, though overlord to Raja Surendra Singh, becomes subordinate to him socially since his daughter is to marry Surendra Singh's son, and as the father of the bride, he cannot accept Surendra Singh's hospitality. Khatri's readers recognized these reactions as their own, and thus, identified readily with his characters.

It is interesting to note that though Khatri takes great pains to set his novel in locations that would have been familiar to his readers, and gives detailed and accurate descriptions of these places, he chooses to ignore their place in history, and avoids all mention of the political realities of the time. The history and politics of Naugarh, Vijaygarh and Chunar are inextricably linked to that of the Mughals (Chunar fell into Mughal hands as long ago as 1537, almost four hundred years before Khatri wrote his novel), and later, to the British. Also, by the end of the nineteenth century, when Khatri wrote *Chandrakanta*, British rule was an established fact of life in India; yet, in Khatri's novel, the British are nowhere to be seen and neither are the Mughals. *Chandrakanta* thus seems to be set in an 'alternative' world, quite a distance away from the historical and political realities of nineteenth-century India. In the opinion of some critics, this failure to depict India as she was in the nineteenth century becomes one of the reasons that *Chandrakanta* cannot be considered 'literature'; in my opinion, this 'lack' only enhances its charm and appeal as a wonder-tale, and gives it a firm place as the first fantasy novel in Hindi.

Khatri does not entirely ignore the happenings of his time, particularly in the field of technology and applied science. Though *aiyaari* and *tilisma* form the core of *Chandrakanta*, Khatri is aware that contemporary readers not only want to hear of *tilismi* marvels, but also expect elaborate, and 'scientific' explanations of how they work—an expectation that was in keeping with the new age of science and reason. Thus, his *tilismi* marvels are not magic, but engineered through ingenious systems of levers, pulleys, wires and other devices—hidden doors and gateways are secured and opened

through complicated locks and levers, and a stone serpent that sucks in people into its open jaws is worked through hidden wires and bellows. Khatri's explanations are not always logical, nor even very convincing (as in the case of the aiyaars changing their appearance through make-up); what is notable though, is his persistence in offering these explanations. As Orsini points out, it seems as though 'the author and the readers, both well acquainted with the wonderful world of tilism and ayyars from the dastans, mutually shared a novelistic pact according to which one of the novel's new *expectations* was accountability, and natural or mechanical explanations had to be provided'.¹⁴ This incorporation of technology into the novel makes *Chandrakanta* different from the Urdu dastans, and reflecting as it does the new, contemporary era of mechanical inventions, takes the process of naturalization further. In the absence of a 'real' historical or political setting, this 'intrusion' of technology into the novel also becomes the main way to date it from within.

The application of reason to explain apparently supernatural events extends also to the character of the Forest Maiden. Mysterious and beautiful, she is modelled clearly on the paris or fairies of the dastans. Like a pari, she appears and disappears at will in the forest, and no one, not even the cleverest of the prince's aiyaars, can pin her down; and in the manner of fairies, she and her companions sometimes help the prince in his quest, and sometimes hinder him. But, as it finally turns out, she is not a pari, but a real woman in disguise, who succeeds in outwitting the prince and his aiyaars at every turn, not because she has magic at her command, but intelligence, information and shrewd advice.

The paradigm of wealth as opposed to that of courtly values that Khatri espouses in Baba Siddhanath's explanation of a tilisma, is present throughout the novel, though not quite so obviously. For example, Chandrakanta's beauty is described not so much through an enumeration of her physical charms as through the jewels with which she is adorned. As the prince gazes upon a life-sized portrait of the princess, he muses:

What a clear and accurate likeness this is—her slender form, exactly the right height; her eyes large and lovely, lined with kajal! How well has the artist shown the blush upon her cheeks, the deep red of her fine lips and the gentle smile that plays upon them! In her ears she wears fine rings of gold, upon her

forehead a fillet of pearls and in her nose a diamond stud. And round her delicate throat is fastened a necklace in the painting of which the artist has shown consummate skill! Observe the glittering rubies set in finest gold, how real they seem.

Similarly, the king of Chunar's first impression of Chapala is given more in terms of her adornments than her physical attributes:

The king saw a remarkably beautiful woman, fair of skin, dressed in a black sari which she wore with a green, embroidered choli; she had draped her sari in the southern style, leaving her head uncovered. Her hair, twisted into a knot behind her head, was held in place with a pin and adorned with a tiny, golden flower. She wore a round, vermilion bindi on her forehead, delicate gold rings set with jewels in her ears and in her nose a coral stud. A gold tika in her hair, a heavy gold collar around her neck, gold bracelets on her wrists and above them black bangles, around her waist a tasselled, golden girdle and silver anklets on her feet completed her ensemble.

The enumeration of the princess and Chapala's jewellery is in the tradition of the dastan-go's practice of list-making; but as Orsini points out, if taken together with Baba Siddhanath's explanation of a tilisma and the description of the tilisma's interiors, 'it is hard to escape the impression that the aesthetic invoked is one of wealth rather than princeliness'¹⁵. This, once again, reflects the changes in contemporary Indian society—the decline of courtliness and petty royalty, and the rise of commerce and the middle class.

Devaki Nandan Khatri's successful juxtaposition of the fantastical with the familiar increased the appeal of his novel tremendously. Chandrakanta and her companions—the prince, the aiyaars—though retaining their mystery and magic, were suddenly closer home: they behaved like ordinary people, held the same value-systems, were driven by the same compulsions, and had the same worries and concerns; what's more, their adventures, marvellous as they were, took place in a known and familiar world. Suddenly the ordinary reader could see himself helping the prince to break the tilisma, he could understand the baba's concern with wealth and the need for a substantial

dowry for the princess; or she could imagine herself wandering through the forest with the mysterious Forest Maiden, sympathize with Chandrakanta, a helpless prisoner, or break her heart with Chapala as she sets off alone in search of her beloved.

Devaki Nandan Khatri's use of colloquial Hindi is another distinguishing feature of *Chandrakanta*. The early Hindi novelists of the nineteenth century, eager for acceptance by the literary establishment, favoured a more formal style of Hindi that made heavy use of Sanskrit words. Khatri, though fluent in several languages, including Sanskrit, Farsi and Urdu, wrote his novel in everyday Hindi, choosing to make his characters speak in the language of the people. This made the novel accessible to the general public, rather than of interest only to the relatively small minority of the 'literary-minded'. His use of colloquial Hindi thus led to a much wider readership and became a major reason for the novel's resounding success.

Chandrakanta (and its sequels) has remained in print continuously for a hundred and twenty-five years, that is, since it first appeared in 1888. The family copyright on *Chandrakanta* expired in 1964, when the novel came into the public domain. Since then, it has been brought out by several leading Hindi publishers; Lahari Press, now headed by Babu Devaki Nandan's great-grandson, Shri Vivek Khatri, continues to print and sell about 2,500 copies a year as well. The family tradition of writing sequels to *Chandrakanta* is being continued by Vivek Khatri, who has recently added two more novels to the saga, *Heeron ki Ghati* (The Valley of Diamonds) and *Shersingh*. *Chandrakanta* was also made into a series for Indian television in 1904; although it took considerable liberties with the original novel, the series met with reasonable success. A second television series based on *Chandrakanta Santati*, and called 'Chandrakanta ki Kahani' (Chandrakanta's Story), was aired in 2011-2012. At the time of writing this book, Vivek Khatri has just finished the film script for a Bollywood film to be based on *Chandrakanta*; his script, assures Shri Khatri, is faithful to the original novel by his grandfather.

References:

1. Francesca Orsini, *Print and Pleasure*, Ch 6, 'Chandrakanta and Early Hindi Fiction in Banaras'; Permanent Black, Ranikhet, 2009.

2. Peter Gaeffke, *Hindi Literature in the Twentieth Century* (A History of Indian Literature, Vol. VII).
3. Pasha Mohamad Khan, 'A Handbook for Storytellers: The Tīrāz al akhbār and the Qissa Genre', 2010.

Notes:

- 1 Peter Gaeffke, *A History of Indian Literature: Hindi Literature in the Twentieth Century*, p. 25-26.
- 2 Babu Devaki Nandan Khatri was born in 1861 in Pusa, in the home of his maternal grandfather, Babu Jivanlal Mahato. His mother was Babu Jivanlal's only daughter. His father, Lala Ishvardas, came from an old and illustrious family of Punjab; unrest in Lahore during the reign of Maharaja Sher Singh had caused him to leave that city in the 1840s for Kashi (Banaras), where he had settled. In accordance with Babu Jivanlal's wishes that his son-in-law come to live in Pusa with him, Lala Ishvardas had moved to Pusa after his wedding, and lived there for several years. Babu Jivanlal, a wealthy landowner, enjoyed the status and lifestyle of a minor raja, so that the young Devaki Nandan spent his childhood in royal courts and palaces, watching and learning the ways of kings and princes up close, a familiarity that peeps through in *Chandrakanta*.
 Meanwhile, Lala Ishvardas, unable to get along with his father-in-law, moved back to Kashi, where he set up a successful business supplying gold and gold ornaments to various royal courts. When he was old enough, Devaki Nandan joined his father in Kashi, becoming actively involved in his father's business. Lala Ishvardas conducted business with several small kingdoms, including the tiny kingdom of Tekari in Gaya, where he had a large warehouse and office. Devaki Nandan learnt the business quickly, and very soon, he was given sole charge of the Gaya office, dealing directly with the raja of Tekari. Here he enjoyed an independent lifestyle, with a good income and plenty of money at his command. His was a colourful personality, and the story goes that on one occasion he spent Rs 5000, a minor fortune in those days, on flying kites! Soon though, his youth and impetuosity landed him in trouble, and incurring the displeasure of the raja of Tekari, he returned home to his father in Kashi.
 His father, greatly displeased, forbade him to leave the city. Raja Ishvariprasad Narayan Singh was king of Kashi in those days. As it happened, the raja's sister was married to the ruler of Tekari, and through his association with Tekari, Devaki Nandan's father had become a close associate of the raja of Kashi. Hearing of Devaki Nandan's troubles, the raja offered him a place in his court at Kashi. But Devaki Nandan did not want the life of a courtier, which would have bound him to the city and the court. He therefore asked that he be given the contract to farm the surrounding forests. The raja agreed, and he was awarded the contract for the forests of Naugarh and Chakia. Devaki Nandan embraced his new occupation with great enthusiasm, roaming the forests with a merry band of friends. Unfortunately for him, one of his friends shot and killed a tiger, a sport strictly banned by the raja of Kashi. As a consequence of this irresponsible act on the part of his friend, Devaki Nandan lost his contract and was sent home by the raja in disgrace. His father, Lala Ishvardas, was furious, and berated him for being a good-for-nothing who messed up every opportunity that came his way. Devaki Nandan, upset and despairing, decided to attend the Rath Yatra that year; clinging to the giant wheels of the chariot he wept and asked the god Jagannath for guidance. He returned home and sitting down at his desk, pulled out a sheet of paper and scrawled a single word across the top—'Chandrakanta'. He wrote furiously through the night, and next morning showed his writing to his friend,

- Badrinath. ‘A young man gave me this,’ he said. ‘What do you think? Should he keep writing?’ he asked his friend. Badrinath read the chapters through, and recognized Devaki Nandan’s stamp and style. ‘Of course he should keep writing,’ he replied, and declared that he had recognized this as Devaki Nandan’s own work. Thus encouraged, Devaki Nandan continued writing *Chandrakanta*. And the rest, as they say, is history.
- 3 *Chandrakanta* and its sequels together rival the length of the *Dastan-e Amir Hamzah* (one version of which is reputed to have taken up 46 volumes, each a thousand pages long!). Yet Devaki Nandan Khatri claimed that he wrote his tale ‘in brief’; in my opinion, by this he was referring not to the length of *Chandrakanta* and its sequels, but the manner in which he wrote them. Khatri did not write *Chandrakanta* in one sitting or even in one location—he wrote it in bits and pieces, wherever it was he found himself when the urge to write came upon him. He kept no notes, never needed to refer back to what he had written before, or ever re-read or corrected his first draft. He wrote *Chandrakanta* and its sequels over a twenty-year period, from 1887 to 1913, and not once did he need his memory to be refreshed, which made his memory even more stupendous than his imagination!
 - 4 Francesca Orsini, *Print and Pleasure: Popular Literature and Entertaining Fictions in Colonial North India*, Chapter 6, p. 199-200. Orsini also gives us the following information: *The Catalogue of Publications* also shows a 1892 edition of the four parts separately, printed by the Hariprakash Press, Banaras (1000 copies), 8 annas; it also shows an Urdu edition published by Devaki Nandan Khatri and printed at the Said ul-Matba’ Press, Banaras, in 1898 (600 copies), at Re. 1 for each part. Another Urdu edition published by Khatri was printed in 1898 by Dhundhiraj Press, Banaras (600 copies) for the same price. A reprint of *Chandrakanta Santati* appeared in 1896 by the Hariprakash Press, Banaras (1000 copies), at Rs 3 for 844 pages. A reprint of its second part in 1897 by the Amar Press, Banaras, cost Rs 2 for 470 pages.
 - 5 Francesca Orsini, *Print and Pleasure: Popular Literature and Entertaining Fictions in Colonial North India*, Chapter 6, p. 200.
 - 6 ‘Dastan’ and ‘qissa’ both mean ‘story’ in Persian, and belong to a narrative genre that may be traced to medieval Iran. There is little difference between the two, except perhaps of length (dastans are longer) and the terms are often used interchangeably.
 - 7 Francesca Orsini, *Print and Pleasure: Popular Literature and Entertaining Fictions in Colonial North India*, Chapter 6.
 - 8 This formulation of the genre dates back to seventeenth century Iran, to the storyteller Abd al-Nabī Fakhr al-Zamani, who defines a dastan by the presence of razm, bazm, ḥusn o’ ishq and aiyaari. One of the most successful versions of the story of the *Dastan-e-Amir Hamzah* was published in 1855 in Calcutta. Entitled *Tarjama-i Dāstān-i Šāhib-qirān* (Translation of the Story of the Lord of the Auspicious Conjunction), it was written by Mirza Aman Ali Khan ‘Ghalib’ Lakhnawi (not to be confused with the Urdu poet Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib). In his preface, Ghalib Lakhnawi reformulates the four elements critical to a dastan; these he says, are razm, bazm, tilisma and aiyaari, i.e, battle and warfare, courtly assemblies, enchantments and trickery. (*A Handbook for Storytellers: The Tirāz al-akhbār and the Qissa Genre*, Pasha Mohamad Khan, 2010.)
http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00urduhindilinks/srffest/txt_pasha_handbook.pdf
 - 9 Akbar not only memorized large sections of this dastan, but also commissioned an illustrated version of it which, known as the *Hamzahnama*, is regarded as one of the crowning achievements of Mughal art.
 - 10 Shri Vivek Khatri, Babu Devaki Nandan’s great-grandson, and the author of *Chandrakanta*’s continuing adventures in his novel *Heeron ki Ghati*, adds to the description of an aiyaar. According to him, very few men and women displayed the versatility and talent to be aiyaars;

they were usually picked for the profession at a very early age and trained in all the necessary skills which included yoga, mimicry (so that they could change their voices as well as their appearance), yudhkala (the art of war) and running very fast over long distances. Aiyaars, and their female counterparts, aiyaaras, had to be of medium height so that they could disguise themselves as either men or women. Thus the aiyaar could not be very tall, for he must be able to pass as a woman if necessary, and the aiyaara must not be so small that she could not pass for a man if required. The required height for an aiyaar, therefore, was about 5'5" or 5'6"!

- 11 Khatri's friends included poets, thinkers, writers, scientists, and even a couple of bahu-rūpiyās. Khatri based some of the characteristics of his aiyaars, on his bahu-rūpiyā friends; he also named the two aiyaars, Badrinath and Pannalal, in his novel after two of his closest friends.
- 12 Francesca Orsini, *Print and Pleasure*, Ch 6, 'Chandrakanta and Early Hindi Fiction in Banaras', p. 221.
- 13 *India's Literary History: Essays on the Nineteenth Century*, Francesca Orsini, 'Detective Novels, A Commercial Genre in Nineteenth Century North India', Permanent Black, Bangalore, 2004.
- 14 Francesca Orsini, *Print and Pleasure*, Ch 6, 'Chandrakanta and Early Hindi Fiction in Banaras', p. 211.
- 15 Francesca Orsini, *Print and Pleasure*, Ch 6, 'Chandrakanta and Early Hindi Fiction in Banaras', p. 210.

Part One



Narrative One

IT IS EVENING. In the waning light, on a lonely plain beneath a hill, can be seen two men; perched upon a rocky outcrop, they are deep in conversation. The men are Birendra Singh and Tej Singh.

Birendra Singh, who appears to be some twenty-one or twenty-two years of age, is the only son of Raja Surendra Singh, the king of Naugarh. The other, Tej Singh, is Prince Birendra Singh's closest friend, and the beloved son of Jeet Singh, Raja Surendra Singh's diwan. Tej Singh is quick and alert, and keeps a sharp lookout for trouble even while immersed in conversation with the prince; at his waist hangs a dagger, under his arm is slung a small bag, and in his hand he carries a coil of rope. Before them stands a horse, securely tethered to a sturdy tree.

Prince Birendra Singh is speaking.

'Tej Singh,' said the prince, 'see what an evil affliction Love is, to have brought me to this state! You have, often enough, brought me Princess Chandrakanta's letters from Vijaygarh and carried mine to her, and you know that this exchange of letters shows that Chandrakanta loves me as much as I love her. And even though our kingdom is only five kos distant from hers, we have not been able to come together. Look, even in this letter, Chandrakanta beseeches me to meet her soon.'

'I can take you to her easily enough,' replied Tej Singh, 'except that these days Chandrakanta's father, Maharaj Jai Singh, has set a strict guard around the palace. What's more, his minister's son, Kroor Singh the Cruel, has become enamoured of the princess. He is fully aware of the nature of your feelings for her, and has instructed his two aiyaars*, Najim Ali and Ahmed Khan, to keep a close watch on the palace all the time. Though Chandrakanta hates him, and he knows that the king will never give his daughter in marriage to a mere minister's son, Kroor Singh lives on hope and dislikes intensely your attachment to the princess. He has also, through his father, informed the king of your love for Chandrakanta, and it is on account

of this that the guard on the palace has been increased. I am not comfortable taking you there right now, not till I have caught those mischief-makers and taken them prisoner.'

'Let me go to Vijaygarh once more,' continued Tej Singh, 'and meet Chandrakanta and her friend, Chapala, again. Chapala loves Chandrakanta more than her life. She is also an aiyaara, and except for her, there is no one in Vijaygarh I can depend on to help me. Once I have discovered what our enemies are plotting, and investigated how far their cunning has taken them, I will return and only then will I give an opinion on whether you should go there or not. We should not do anything in a hurry and without understanding the situation fully. Otherwise, we may end up getting trapped or taken prisoner.'

'Do what you think is possible. I rely only on my strength, but you have both your strength and the skills and cunning of your aiyaari,' replied Birendra Singh.

'I have also learnt that Kroor Singh's two aiyaars, Najim and Ahmed, came here recently and paid a visit to our king. I wonder with what cunning scheme in mind they had come...' mused Tej Singh. 'It's a pity I wasn't here at the time.'

'Here you are trying to trap the two aiyaars of Kroor Singh, while they are scheming to capture you! May God look after you! Anyway, go now, and somehow make it possible for me to meet Chandrakanta,' said Birendra Singh.

Tej Singh stood up at once, and leaving Birendra Singh there, left on foot for Vijaygarh. Birendra Singh untied the horse from the tree, and mounting it, left for his fort.

Narrative Two

MEANWHILE, IN VIJAYGARH, Kroor Singh the Cruel is in his palace, in earnest conversation with his two aiyaars, Najim and Ahmed. Kroor Singh is also some twenty-one or twenty-two years of age; the two aiyaars are also young.

'See, Najim, it's like this—the Maharaj, as king, won't marry his daughter to a mere minister's son, and Chandrakanta herself loves Birendra

Singh. So our problem is—how do I get what I want?’ said Kroor Singh. ‘Suppose I kidnap Chandrakanta and run away with her—where will I run and where will I rest? And then, if I kidnap her, who knows what the king will do to my father? Better, and more practical than this would be if we can first somehow make Birendra Singh and his aiyaar, Tej Singh, our prisoners, and hide them in a such a place that they cannot be found for a thousand years. We then wait for an opportunity to kill the king. Once he is dead, I could become king in his place and, without hindrance, live a life of pleasure with Chandrakanta. But—and here is my problem again—*how* am I to achieve this? How can I ensure that I will get the throne after the king’s death, and that the people will choose me?’

‘In this kingdom, there are more Mussalmans than kafirs,’ replied Najim. ‘I can persuade them all to help us, and make them take an oath that after the Maharaj is dead, they will acknowledge you as the king. But I have one condition—that once you have what you want, you will accept our religion and become a Mussalman yourself.’

‘If that is so, then I accept your condition with all my heart and soul!’ promised Kroor Singh.

‘So that’s settled then,’ said Ahmed. ‘Write down what you have just promised us, and give me the document. I will show it to all our Mussalman brothers and bring them over to our side.’

Kroor Singh immediately wrote out his promise to embrace the Mussalman faith upon being crowned king, and handed the paper to Najim and Ahmed. ‘Now it is our responsibility to persuade all the Mussalmans to crown you king, so do not worry about it any longer,’ said Ahmed. ‘And yes, there should also be an additional document—for the two of us—stating that once you are king you will choose us as your wazirs. And then you will truly see what our cunning can do, and how we shall turn the world upside down in an instant!’

The two aiyaars watched in delight as Kroor Singh quickly wrote out the second document and handed it to them. ‘We shall now go and ask after Chandrakanta,’ said Najim. ‘The evening is very pleasant, and Chandrakanta must be in the garden with her friend, Chapala, discussing the state of her heart. So it won’t be very difficult to find out what is going on between Birendra Singh and Chandrakanta these days.’

And the two aiyaars took their leave of Kroor Singh.

Narrative Three

SOME OF THE day still remains, and Chandrakanta, Chapala and Champa are strolling in the garden. Flowers of many different hues are in bloom all around, and a light breeze carries upon it their gentle fragrance to delight the heart. A mango orchard lies to the west; its dense trees, with the glow of the setting sun shining through them, afford a fine prospect and lend a rare and unique charm to the evening. The paths between the flowerbeds have been well sprinkled with water, and the flower bushes have also been watered and washed. Beds full of roses, juhi, jasmine and motiya provide their own joy. On one side of the garden the high walls of the palace, and on the other, the elegant turrets and towers of the fort, show off their splendour.

Chapala, skilled in the cunning arts and Chandrakanta's dear friend, playfully drags Chandrakanta around the garden and, praising the beauty of the fragrant flowers, plucks and places them in Chandrakanta's hands. But Chandrakanta, forced to step out into the garden by her friends, cannot appreciate any of this in Birendra Singh's absence.

Chandrakanta's other companion, Champa, intent on gathering flowers for a bouquet, wanders off towards a grove of malati bushes. Chandrakanta and Chapala stroll slowly to the fountain in the centre of the garden, and stand there gazing at the play of water that pours from the glittering spouts.

'I wonder where Champa has disappeared,' said Chapala after a while.

'She must be wandering in the garden somewhere,' replied Chandrakanta.

'But she hasn't been with us for almost an hour now,' worried Chapala.

'Oh look! There she is now, coming this way,' exclaimed Chandrakanta, as Champa came into view.

'Her walk looks different...' muttered Chapala, suspiciously.

Champa handed Chandrakanta a bunch of flowers and said, 'See what a lovely bunch of flowers I have picked. If Prince Birendra Singh were here just now, he would have praised my handiwork and rewarded me handsomely.'

Hearing Birendra Singh's name, Chandrakanta fell into a strange and melancholy state. She remembered again that she was missing him, and her face, beautiful as a lotus, wilted with despair. She sighed heavily, tears filled her eyes and rolled slowly down her cheeks. Softly, she said, 'I don't know

what God has written in my destiny, nor do I know what sins I may have committed in another life that I have to bear this sorrow now. Listen to my father's newest whim! "I will keep Chandrakanta unmarried," he says! Birendra's father has begged and pleaded that we be married, but that wicked Kroor's father, Kupath Singh, he has my father completely under his control, and allows nothing to go ahead. Meanwhile, that wretch Kroor wants to push his own case forward with me!"

Suddenly Chapala caught hold of Chandrakanta's hand and pressed it hard, as though urging her to be quiet.

Chandrakanta, understanding, fell silent, and taking Chapala by the hand, resumed their stroll around the garden, surreptitiously dropping her handkerchief on the spot where she had been standing. Strolling ahead a little, she said to Champa, 'Champa, my dear, I think I have dropped my handkerchief by the fountain. Please, will you go and look for it?'

As Champa walked away towards the fountain to retrieve the handkerchief, Chandrakanta turned to Chapala. 'Why did you suddenly stop me from speaking?' she asked.

'My dearest friend,' said Chapala, 'I am somewhat suspicious of Champa. It seems from her mannerisms and the way she talks that she isn't the real Champa.'

As Champa returned with the kerchief and handed it to her, Chapala asked, 'Champa, have you done that which I asked you to do last night?'

'No, I completely forgot!' declared Champa.

'Do you at least remember what it was that I had asked you to do, or have you forgotten that as well?'

'Ah no, that I do remember!'

'Well then, repeat it to me, so I know for certain that you do remember it,' said Chapala.

Champa did not answer, but changed the subject so that Chapala's suspicion changed to certainty—this was not Champa. She drew her away into a corner on the pretext that she had something to tell her and after some small talk said, 'Champa, take a look inside my ear, is it smelling? I have had an earache since yesterday.' The false Champa fell into Chapala's trap and leaned forward to smell her ear. Chapala had cunningly inserted a little twist of cotton sprayed with a special potion into her ear, and as soon as Champa smelt the potion, she fell to the ground in a dead faint.

Chapala called out to Chandrakanta, ‘Come here, dear friend, and look at your Champa now!’

Chandrakanta came closer, and seeing Champa lying unconscious on the ground, grew worried. ‘Chapala, are you sure about this?’ she asked. ‘What if you are wrong, and this really is Champa? It should not be such that your actions cause us embarrassment later!’

‘No, they won’t, that will not happen,’ reassured Chapala, and picking up Champa, she slung her on her back and carried her to the fountain. ‘Throw handfuls of water from the fountain upon her face while I wash it,’ she directed Chandrakanta.

Chandrakanta did as Chapala asked while Chapala washed Champa’s face, scrubbing it vigorously. In a little while, Champa’s features began to change, and in their place appeared Najim’s face. Chandrakanta’s face flushed with anger. ‘Chapala, he has shown great disrespect!’ she cried.

‘Now watch what I do,’ replied Chapala and slinging Najim on her back once more, she carried him to a small dungeon at the base of one of the towers. She put down the unconscious Najim in the cell, and lit a candle that she pulled out from the small bag in which she kept her tools of *aiyaari*. With a piece of rope, she bound Najim’s feet and tied his hands tightly behind him, and when he was securely bound, she pulled out some strong-smelling *lakh lakha* from her bag, and held it under Najim’s nose so that he sneezed and came to—to find himself captive and helpless. Chapala straightened up, a whip in her hand, and began to flog him.

‘Forgive me, I have made a great mistake, I will never do this again! I promise I will never even *mention* this incident again,’ wept Najim.

But Chapala wasn’t listening. She continued to flog him and said, ‘Be patient, let me whip you some more, for the itch on your back could not have been cured yet! Why did you come here? Did you find the air of the garden so pleasant that you could not stay away? Or did you just feel like a stroll? Did you not know that your nemesis, Chapala, would be here too? You scoundrel! Son of a bastard! Perhaps it were your father’s instructions that you were following? Now watch me set your father right as well!’ And she flogged him even harder. At last she paused and asked, ‘Tell me the truth—how did you get here and where is Champa?’

The fear of being whipped even more made Najim tell the truth. He said, ‘I am the one who made Champa unconscious. I sprinkled a potion that causes unconsciousness on a bunch of flowers which I laid in her path. She

smelled the flowers and fainted. I dragged her into the malati bushes and changing my face to look like hers, I took her clothes and, dressed in those, I came to you. There, now I have told you everything! Now let me go!’

‘Oh yes, I’ll let you go all right!’ declared Champa, and gave him another dozen strokes with the whip, so hard that Najim began to sob in pain. At last she stopped, and turning to Chandrakanta said, ‘Princess, watch over him while I go and find Champa...just in case this crook is lying.’

Chapala reached the grove of malati bushes, and lighting a small torch, began to search for Champa. She found her lying unconscious behind a bush, her body bare of all clothing. She revived her with the same strong lakhlakha incense and asked, ‘So how are you feeling now? You were fooled properly, were you not?’

‘How was I to know that there would be aiyaari here at this hour?’ protested Champa. ‘A bunch of flowers was lying on the ground, I picked it up, and the moment I smelled the flowers, I fainted. After that I do not know what happened. Oh, I wonder who did this to me, and took my clothes away too! They were very expensive clothes!’

Najim’s clothes were lying at hand. Chapala used a couple of his garments to cover Champa, and said, ‘Come with me, and I will show you who reduced you to this state!’ Chapala took Champa to the dungeon where Chandrakanta stood guard over Najim.

‘Look,’ said Chapala pointing at Najim, ‘he is the one who did you this good turn!’

Champa, furious, glared at Najim and said to Chapala, ‘Sister, if you allow me, I too would like to whip him a few times to satisfy my anger!’

‘Yes, yes, beat this wretch as much as you want!’ replied Chapala. Champa needed no further encouragement. She picked up the whip and flogged Najim as much as her heart desired. Najim, terrified, silently cursed Kroor Singh, ‘This is all Kroor Singh’s fault! It’s thanks to him and his miserable plans that I am in this mess! May Allah destroy him!’

At last, binding Najim hand and foot and leaving him prisoner in that same dungeon, Chandrakanta, Chapala and Champa left for the palace. This small garden, in which these incidents took place, adjoined the palace and lay behind it. It had been made especially for Chandrakanta to walk in and take the air. It was because the garden was guarded by Mussalman guards on all sides that Ahmed and Najim had been able to find their way into it.

Narrative Four

MEANWHILE TEJ SINGH, having taken his leave of Birendra Singh, had reached Vijaygarh. All his attempts to reach Chandrakanta that evening had failed, for the guards were very vigilant. Tej Singh wondered what he should do next... Had it been a dark night, he would have scaled the palace walls with a rope ladder, but the moonlit night was too bright for that.

Finally Tej Singh found a secluded spot and there disguised himself as a chobdar, a palace usher, whose job it was to announce visitors to the king. He made his way to the palace entrance, where other chobdars and several foot soldiers stood on guard. 'Friend,' said Tej Singh, turning to one of the guards, 'I, too, am a servant of the king. Maharaj Jai Singh employed me four months ago as one of his attendants. I had some time off this evening, and while enjoying the beauty of this moonlit night, I happened to stroll in your direction. I saw all of you smoking tobacco, and I said to myself, come, let me enjoy a puff or two as well. You know how tobacco fumes affect an addict!'

'Yes, yes, do join us, sit down, have a smoke,' said the chobdars and foot soldiers, and placed the huqqa in front of Tej Singh. 'I am a Hindu, so I can't smoke a huqqa, though I can smoke the tobacco through the chilam,' explained Tej Singh, and detaching the part of the huqqa that holds the tobacco and the fire, he held it in his hand and began to draw upon it.

He had barely taken two puffs on the chilam when he began to cough, and coughed so much that he almost choked. 'Good sirs, you smoke very bitter tobacco!' he exclaimed when he had recovered his breath. 'I am not used to this! I smoke only the royal tobacco! You see, I have made friends with the king's huqqa bardar, who prepares the royal huqqa, and he always gives me some of the tobacco that the Maharaj himself smokes. I have become so used to that tobacco that now I cannot smoke any other!' And taking out a small pipe-worth of tobacco he offered it to the others. 'Why don't all of you take a smoke of this,' he said, holding it out, 'and see for yourselves how good it is!'

Of course, the other chobdars had never smoked the fine tobacco smoked by the king, nor had they imagined doing so, even in their wildest dreams. They accepted Tej Singh's offer with alacrity. 'Let's have some here, brother,' they said, eagerly holding out their hands for the tobacco. 'Thanks

to you, we will also smoke some royal tobacco! You are very fortunate that you stay so close to the king—you must enjoy a very comfortable life!’ And taking the proffered tobacco from Tej Singh, they packed a chilam with it, and offered it to him.

‘You smoke some first, I will have some after you,’ replied Tej Singh.

Now the huqqa began to bubble, and the gossip to fly.

In a little while the chobdars and the sentries became dizzy; their heads began to swim, and slumping forward, they fell on their faces in a dead faint.

With the sentries out of the way, Tej Singh slipped through the gate and entered the palace gardens. A young woman with a lantern in her hand was walking towards him. Tej Singh moved swiftly: approaching the girl, he threw a noose around her neck giving the rope a quick jerk in such a manner that she fell to the ground without a sound. Before she could move or protest, he rendered her insensible with the help of a potion he forced her to smell; picking her up, he moved into the shadows. There he pulled out various items from his aiyaari bag including a candle, which he lit; setting up a small mirror, he made up his face to look like the young woman’s. Dressing himself in her clothes and leaving her lying unconscious in the dark, he set off towards the palace where Chandrakanta, Chapala and Champa sat chatting with half a dozen other women. Tej Singh, in the guise of the young woman he had ambushed, joined the group.

Chapala, seeing Tej Singh, called out in surprise, ‘Why, Ketaki? Are you back? Have you done what I had asked?’

From Chapala’s remark Tej Singh understood that the woman whose likeness he had assumed was called Ketaki.

‘Well, I was on my way to do what you had asked, but I saw something strange and so came back to tell you,’ he replied as the false Ketaki.

‘Really? Is that so? So tell us then, what did you see?’ asked Chapala

‘Ask the others to leave. I will speak of this only to you and the princess,’ replied the false Ketaki.

Upon her request, the other women were sent away so that only Chandrakanta, Chapala and Champa remained. Ketaki laughed and said, ‘So reward me first! Only then will I give you my good news.’

Chandrakanta wondered what news Ketaki could have that deserved a reward. Perhaps she has news of Birendra Singh, mused Chandrakanta. But, wait, she had never mentioned Birendra Singh before Ketaki, so what could

Ketaki be talking about? Impatiently she turned to Ketaki, and cried, 'Yes, yes, I will reward you, but tell me first this news you bring!'

'First give me my reward, only then I will tell you! Or else I am leaving,' declared Ketaki, and stood up as if to go.

Chapala could not bear Ketaki's insolence any more, and burst out, 'Why Ketaki, what is the matter with you today that you are talking in this high and mighty manner? Do you want a kick from me?'

'Do you think I am so weak and afraid that you will kick me and I will give in?' flung back Ketaki.

Chapala could not restrain herself any longer—she lunged at Ketaki and grabbed her by the hair. As the two grappled with each other in the manner of wrestlers, Chapala's hand brushed against the false Ketaki's breast, and finding it quite flat, she became flustered and letting go, quickly moved away.

'Why have you run away? Come and fight!' laughed the false Ketaki.

Chapala drew a dagger from her waist. 'Aiyaar, tell me truthfully who you are,' she cried, 'or I will kill you right now.'

The false Ketaki did not answer Chapala, but placed Birendra Singh's letter in front of Chandrakanta. Chapala, too, saw the letter and recognizing Birendra Singh's handwriting, understood that the aiyaar was no other than Tej Singh, for Birendra Singh would never send a letter to Chandrakanta through anyone but him. Chapala, embarrassed, fell silent, her gaze shyly lowered. Her heart, though, was full of admiration for Tej Singh's skill and cunning—and if truth be told, it was not just admiration that filled her heart that night, but love, for that was the moment when she began to love him.

Chandrakanta read Birendra Singh's letter, her heart full of love for the prince, and turning to Tej Singh, asked, 'So, Tej Singh, is he well, in good humour?'

'No, of course not, how can he be?' replied Tej Singh. 'He can neither eat nor drink, his eyes are swollen with weeping, and thoughts of you occupy him night and day. He finds no rest without you. I try and explain matters to him, but he does not understand. It was just the other day that I had taken your letter to him, but given his state, here I am again today! He wanted to come himself; it was with great difficulty, and only after promising that I would make arrangements to bring him here in safety, that I could persuade him to let me come here alone. Anyway, good sense finally prevailed, and handing me the reply to your letter, he sent me here.'

‘A pity that you did not bring him here with you, at least I would have seen him,’ sighed Chandrakanta. ‘You see, Kroor Singh’s two aiyaars have created so much commotion here that the situation has become very uncertain. I try again and again to explain to my father that Kroor Singh’s two aiyaars are my enemies, but Kroor Singh has him completely in his control, and the Maharaj does not listen to a word I say. Kroor Singh has given him an exaggerated account of my meeting with the prince—and I don’t know what he has said to him, but the Maharaj now believes Kroor Singh to be Truth personified! Kroor is constantly filling my father’s ears with nonsense so that now he doesn’t listen to me at all. But yes, today I have been given the opportunity to explain many things to him, because today my dear friend Chapala has caught Najim in the garden behind this palace. Tomorrow I will take Najim to the king so that he can see for himself the honesty of his beloved Kroor Singh! My father had entrusted Kroor Singh with the responsibility of guarding me, and if Kroor Singh is indeed as loyal and reliable as my father believes, then how had Najim, Kroor Singh’s aiyaar, found his way into my garden? He could not have done so, except with Kroor Singh’s permission!’ And Chandrakanta told Tej Singh the whole story of how Najim had been caught in the garden and made prisoner in the dungeon there.

Tej Singh was amazed at Chapala’s cunning, and his heart stirred with love for her—though after some thought, he remarked, ‘Chapala was very clever, but she has been deceived.’

Chapala was astonished by Tej Singh’s words—what did he mean? How could she have been deceived? She considered the evening’s events from all angles, but could not see what she may have done wrong. At last she gave up, and unable to stop herself, asked Tej Singh, ‘Tell me then, how have I been deceived? I am impatient to know!’

‘Why did you leave Najim in the garden? Did you not realize that if Najim was in the garden, then Ahmed must have been there too?’ asked Tej Singh. ‘After taking him prisoner, you should have brought Najim to the palace and held him here, or sent him to the Maharaj right away. By now Ahmed would have rescued Najim and both would have fled!’

Chapala was struck speechless; shamefacedly she admitted, ‘That is true, that was a big mistake, no one thought of this possibility!’

‘Why should anyone else have thought of it?’ reproved Tej Singh. ‘You say you are clever, you call yourself an aiyaara. Should it not have been you

to realize this? Anyway, at least go and see if he is still there!’

Chapala ran towards the garden. As she neared Najim’s prison, she saw that the door to the tower stood open, and knew at once that Ahmed had rescued Najim—and sure enough, the dungeon was empty. Cursing her stupidity, she returned and said, ‘What can I say, Ahmed has in truth rescued Najim and both have fled.’

Now Tej Singh began to tease her, ‘You were proud of being an aiyaara, you thought you were clever, you said you were shrewd and cunning! But a single, insignificant aiyaar has managed to outwit you!’

‘My name isn’t Chapala if I don’t take both of them prisoner and kick them without count in this very room!’ snapped Chapala, annoyed.

‘Yes, of course you will! I have seen what you can do! Now watch me catch those two and take them back to my city, where I shall hold them prisoner!’ laughed Tej Singh, and recounted to Chandrakanta and Chapala the whole story of how he had come to them. He also told them where he had left Ketaki, and suggested that they go and rescue her. ‘I cannot return her clothes, because I need to leave here in this same disguise,’ he explained. ‘And please, make sure that no one except the three of you knows what happened here tonight, or else all my plans will go awry.’

‘Please visit us every two or three days,’ pressed Chandrakanta. ‘Your coming here keeps up my courage.’

‘Very well, I will do so,’ promised Tej Singh and prepared to leave.

Chandrakanta, seeing him turning to leave, could not contain herself, and cried out, ‘Tell me, Tej Singh, is a meeting with the prince not in my destiny?’ and unable to say more, she burst into tears.

‘Princess, these complicated comings and goings, all this plotting and planning—all this is being done so that you can be with him forever. If you break down now, how will we achieve what we want?’ consoled Tej Singh, and finally calming her down, took his leave. Still disguised as Ketaki, he reached the palace gateway. Three or four of the sentries had recovered from the effects of his tobacco, but the rest were still out cold; one still lay flat on his face, another had tried to stand up, but hadn’t made it, and sat hunched over in a heap.

The false Ketaki scolded the guards, ‘Do you stand guard or lie flat to smell the earth? Why do you take so much opium that you cannot keep your eyes open, and when you fall asleep you compete with corpses! Wait and see, I will report you to the senior queen!’

The chobdars who were awake, terrified by Ketaki's words, began to beg and plead, 'Ketaki, please forgive us. Today, a useless fellow, an attendant of the king, gave us some poisonous tobacco to smoke, which is why we are in this state. That scoundrel tried to kill us! Allah saved us, otherwise he had brought us *this* close to death! You know this doesn't happen every day. We were tricked. We beg you, if you ever see us in this state again, then by all means, punish us. But today, please let us go.'

The false Ketaki pretended to relent and replied, 'All right, I will let you go today, but make sure that such a thing never happens again!' Saying this, Tej Singh slipped out. The guards were so frightened that they did not even think to ask Ketaki where she was going at that hour.

Narrative Five

AHMED, HIDDEN IN a tree in the garden, had seen Chapala take Najim prisoner, and a while later, returning to the palace with Chandrakanta and Champa. Since Najim had not been with them, he must still be held captive somewhere in the garden, reasoned Ahmed. Jumping down from the tree, he began to search for Najim. As he neared the tower where Najim had been imprisoned, he heard shouts for help; recognizing Najim's voice, he hurried towards the tower, and flung open the doors to the dungeon to see Najim lying there bound hand and foot. Untying him quickly, he pulled him outside. 'Hurry, let's get out of this garden as fast as we can,' he whispered, urgently. 'And once we're out of here, tell me what happened!'

Ahmed and Najim escaped quickly out of the garden; once out of its enclosing walls, Najim related all that had happened to him, how he had fallen into Chapala's hands and how she had flogged and beaten him.

'Brother,' replied Ahmed, 'we will achieve nothing till we capture Chapala and make her our prisoner. She is very cunning. What's more, she is also training Champa to become as smart and wily as her. If we don't take her prisoner quickly, we will have two instead of one of them to contend with, for Champa, too, will become skilled enough in this work to help Chapala.'

‘All right,’ agreed Najim, ‘but let us not do anything more today for I have just about escaped with my life! Tomorrow, yes, this is the first thing we will do—we must, somehow, kidnap Chapala and hide her away in such a place where she can’t be found, and in such a manner that no one suspects us.’

The two aiyaars, talking quietly amongst themselves, soon reached the main gateway of the palace, and whom did they see but Ketaki, one of the handmaidens of Princess Chandrakanta, walking towards them.

Tej Singh—for it was him still disguised as Ketaki—also saw Najim and Ahmed, and recognizing them, thought to himself, ‘I have run into these two at an opportune moment, and conveniently, I am in disguise. This is the time to have some fun with them, and if possible, make at least one, if not both, my prisoner.’

Tej Singh passed by as close to them as he could. Najim and Ahmed, curious to know where Ketaki was going, fell in step behind him.

The false Ketaki turned around and asked, ‘Why are the two of you following me? Shouldn’t you be busy with your own work?’

‘And what work is that that we should be doing?’ asked Ahmed. ‘What do you know?’ he added suspiciously.

‘I know everything,’ replied Ketaki. ‘The task you have been given, and which you should be busy with right now, will earn you nothing but a beating at Chapala’s hands! Without a single one of the princess’s handmaidens to help you, how do you hope to succeed?’

Najim and Ahmed were taken aback at her words. ‘She seems to be very sharp and cunning!’ they thought to themselves. ‘If only we can get her on our side, we may be able to achieve what we want. From her words, it seems that given a little inducement, she will join us.’

‘Ketaki, our work needs cunning and deviousness,’ said Najim, aloud. ‘It wouldn’t do if we were to be afraid of capture or death. We live off the fruits of such work, and earn thousands upon thousands of rupees for what we do. By God’s grace, along the way we find people who are willing to help us—just as we have found you today. You can be of great help to us, and if you assist us, we will share our reward with you.’

‘Look here, gentlemen! I am not one who lives on promises,’ declared Ketaki. ‘I take advance payment for any work that I do! If you can pay me right now, I can deliver Tej Singh to you right away. Otherwise, be on your way and do whatever it is that you were doing.’

Ahmed and Najim were delighted at the possibility of taking Tej Singh prisoner. 'If you can help us capture Tej Singh tonight, we will give you whatever you want!' declared Najim.

'I will not accept less than a thousand rupees,' warned Ketaki. 'Show me the money if you agree!'

'Where will I find a thousand rupees at this hour, in the middle of the night?' protested Najim. 'I will definitely give you the money tomorrow.'

'Don't give me these excuses! I've already told you, I don't work on credit!' replied Ketaki. 'I will be off then!' she added, making as if to leave.

'Wait a moment, why are you angry?' cried Najim, stopping her. 'If you don't trust us, then wait here. We will fetch the money right here, right now for you.'

'All right, but one of you wait here with me, and the other can bring the money,' replied Ketaki.

'Very well, Ahmed will stay here with you, and I will go and fetch the money,' agreed Najim, and leaving Ahmed behind, he set off jauntily in search of Kroor Singh.

Ketaki and Ahmed chatted desultorily with each other for some time. After a while, Ketaki dug out a few pods of cardamom from her bag; she offered some to Ahmed and chewed on some herself. Ahmed, excited at the prospect of taking Tej Singh prisoner, did not stop to think and swallowed the cardamom. Soon, his head began to spin—he understood at once that this 'Ketaki' was some aiyaar who had tricked him. Swiftly, soundlessly, he pulled out a dagger from his waist and attacked the false Ketaki, but Tej Singh was ready for him—avoiding the blow he grabbed Ahmed's wrist, and threw him, insensible, to the ground. Tying his arms securely behind his back, and bundling him into a sheet, he hoisted the unconscious Ahmed on to his back, and set off towards Naugarh. Tej Singh walked briskly in glee at Ahmed's capture; of course, he was also eager to get away before Najim returned.

Meanwhile Najim went straight to Kroor Singh's palace. It was very late, and Kroor Singh was already deep asleep. Najim entered his chamber and shook him awake. 'What is the matter that you have woken me up so rudely in the middle of the night?' grumbled Kroor Singh.

Najim gave him a detailed account of all that had happened that evening—of how he and Ahmed had entered Chandrakanta's garden, how he had been taken prisoner and then flogged by Chapala, how Ahmed had rescued

him, how they had fled from there, and how, on the way, they had run into Ketaki who had promised to deliver Tej Singh into their hands for a thousand rupees. Kroor Singh was not much moved by the tale of Najim's travails and showed only the mildest concern at his story; but when he heard of the possibility of Tej Singh's capture, he jumped for joy. 'Here, I'll give you a thousand rupees at once! In fact, I'll come with you myself,' he declared, jumping out of bed. And swiftly counting out a thousand rupees from his money chest, Kroor Singh joined Najim.

When they arrived at the spot where Najim had left Ketaki and Ahmed, they found the place deserted. 'We've been deceived!' cried Najim, when he had recovered from the shock.

'Why Najim, what is wrong?' asked Kroor Singh.

'What do I say? They've disappeared!' cried Najim, distraught. 'I am sure now that that wasn't Ketaki, but some aiyaar in disguise, who has taken Ahmed prisoner!'

'Excellent, Najim, very well done!' declared Kroor Singh. 'You've already been whipped by Chapala; Ahmed stayed back, but he must be facing the same fate somewhere else right now! Both neatly taken care of, I can see! We are finished here!'

Najim searched carefully for signs of Ahmed and Ketaki, making doubly sure he didn't miss anything, but could find nothing that gave him any information. At last, weeping and wailing and cursing their bad luck, he and Kroor Singh turned back towards their respective homes.

Narrative Six

MEANWHILE, HAVING BID farewell to Tej Singh, Birendra Singh returned to his palace. He was restless, and could not bring his mind to bear on any work. To sit, head bowed, lost in thoughts of Chandrakanta, or, finding himself alone, to set up her picture and talk to her image for hours, or then to lie on his bed, his face covered, and weep his heart out—these were the tasks that occupied him these days. If someone asked him what was wrong, he would make up some excuse. Birendra Singh's father, Surendra Singh, was fully aware of his son's condition, but what could he do? He was helpless, for the

king of Vijaygarh was stronger than he, and as the more powerful monarch, held sovereignty over him.

Birendra Singh had asked Tej Singh to return from Vijaygarh the same night, but when midnight came and went with no sign of Tej Singh, Birendra Singh grew uneasy. Forcing himself to stay calm, he lay down upon his bed and spent the rest of the night in anxious waiting. It was almost dawn when Tej Singh reached Naugarh, carrying a large bundle on his back. The guards on duty, though astonished and confused to see him thus burdened, were too afraid to question him. Tej Singh walked into Birendra Singh's room to find him still awake.

Seeing Tej Singh, Birendra Singh jumped out of bed. 'My friend! At last! What news do you bring?' he asked eagerly.

Tej Singh told him of the state of affairs in Vijaygarh, and related all that had happened there. He put Chandrakanta's letter in his hand, and opening his bundle, showed the prince the insensible form of Ahmed. 'Here is your letter, and here is your present,' he declared with a flourish.

Birendra Singh was delighted. He read Chandrakanta's letter several times, and held it tenderly to his eyes. Turning to Tej Singh, he said, 'Listen well, Tej Singh. Keep this Ahmed prisoner, but in a place so secret that no one suspects we have him. If Jai Singh comes to know we are holding him prisoner, the discord between the two kingdoms will increase.'

'I have already thought of a solution to that,' replied Tej Singh. 'I will hold him in a mountain cave, the location of which is known only to me.'

Tej Singh, once again bundling up the unconscious Ahmed, sent one of the guards to bring an aiyaar called Devi Singh to him. Devi Singh was Tej Singh's student, as well as his close friend and his brother-in-law. He was no less skilled in aiyaari than Tej Singh himself.

Devi Singh hurried to answer Tej Singh's summons. 'Come with me, I have a job for you,' said Tej Singh, acknowledging his greeting, and slinging the heavy bundle that was Ahmed upon his back, prepared to lead the way out of palace.

'Guruji, let me carry this bundle for you. It is not fit that you should carry such a burden while I am with you,' said Devi Singh, and taking the bundle on his own back, he followed Tej Singh out of the palace.

They left the city, and choosing the most roundabout, secret paths, they made their way through dense forests and over steep hills till they came to a deep cave in a mountain, about two kos distant from Naugarh. The interior of

the cave was pitch black, and it was not till they had walked some distance into the darkness that they saw a glimmer of light. 'Put down your bundle,' said Tej Singh to Devi Singh, and stopped.

'Guruji, this is a very strange place! Even if someone finds their way here, they will find it difficult to find their way out again!' exclaimed Devi Singh, lowering his bundle on to the cave floor.

'Listen carefully, Devi Singh,' said Tej Singh. 'No one knows of this place except me, and now you. I brought you here since you are my close and trusted friend. There is a lot of work ahead of you now.'

'You are my guru, for you are the one who has taught me aiyaari. Ask anything you want of me—even if you need my life, I am ready to give it to you,' replied Devi Singh.

'Listen to me then,' answered Tej Singh. 'This stone door that you see in front of us—no one knows how to open this door except me, and my master who had taught me aiyaari. But my master is dead. So now there remains only me who knows the secret of this door, and I will now teach it to you. All those I take prisoner, you must confine them here so that no one can find out where they are and no one can help them escape. You will not need to tie up the prisoners or restrain them in any manner; all you will need, and that too for the sake of safety, is to fetter their legs with iron chains so that they may walk, but slowly. You will not need to worry about providing them with food or drink either because in their prison grow many fruit bearing trees, and a small, perennial stream provides clear, fresh water all year round.

'We shall imprison this aiyaar here. And once we are done, you must return to Naugarh, and ask the king for a month's leave on the excuse that you are not well and would benefit from a change of air. I will try to ensure that your request is granted. Disguise yourself and leave for Vijaygarh at once, and stay there as my spy and informant. Send me what news you can, and if you get the chance, kidnap the troublemakers, and hold them prisoner here.'

After explaining some other matters to Devi Singh, Tej Singh stepped forward to open the door. Upon the door was carved the face of a lion, its open mouth large enough for a man to easily insert his hand into. 'Devi Singh, put your hand into the lion's mouth and pull its tongue out,' commanded Tej Singh.

Devi Singh did as directed. As soon as he pulled the lion's tongue, there was a click, and the huge stone door swung open. Picking up their

bundle, the still unconscious Ahmed, Tej Singh and Devi Singh stepped through the doorway: before them lay a vast, open field, stretching at least a kos into the distance. High, unscaleable mountains ringed the valley, in the centre of which bubbled a spring of fresh water; a great number of wild fruit trees grew all around.

The valley is a strangely beautiful place. The mountainsides are thickly wooded, covered with trees and vines of every description—fruits and wild berries such as karjani, ghumchi, makoicha, ber and chiraunji grow in wild profusion. Huge boulders rear up through the trees, as massive and majestic as elephants. Brooks and mountain springs gurgle and babble pleasantly. The rustling of the wind through the trees, the murmur of flowing water, and the clamour of peacocks calling to each other, make the valley even more agreeable. The stream that meanders across the valley floor from west to east is lined on both sides by jamun trees—their ripe, purple fruit falls into the stream with a plop. The water is clean and so clear that the bed of the stream can be seen. In some places, the water is only a foot deep, in others it is waist deep, and in some places it is even deeper. The mountains are riddled with natural caves, as though God has made them for wanderers to shelter in. These mountains ringing the valley are very steep, the lower slopes more densely wooded than the peaks, where floating clouds cast small patches of shade and shadow.

The valley was so pleasing a place that it seemed possible to live there forever.

Dawn came, and the sun rose into the sky. Tej Singh undid the bundle containing Ahmed; removing the bag that contained Ahmed's tools of aiyaari as well as the dagger that hung at his waist, and tying a heavy, iron fetter to his leg, he brought him back to his senses. Ahmed opened his eyes and looked around him in wonder. 'I must be dead and brought here by angels!' he thought. Convinced that it was indeed so, he began reciting the Quran devoutly.

Tej Singh burst out laughing. 'Miyan sahib, look this way!' he called. 'You are our prisoner!' Ahmed turned and recognizing Tej Singh, grew cold with dread—if he hadn't been dead before, he was sure to die now! Mistress Ketaki's face swam before his eyes, his mouth grew dry, and his throat constricted in fear so that he choked and could not utter a word.

The two aiyaars, leaving Ahmed to puzzle out his predicament, left the valley. Tej Singh directed Devi Singh to close the stone door. 'Put the lion's

tongue back into its mouth,' he said. Devi Singh did so and the door closed with a quiet click. The two men returned home by the same roundabout, secret route that they had taken before.

One full watch of the day had passed by the time they returned to Naugarh. 'Where have you taken Ahmed that you were so long returning?' asked Birendra Singh.

'We've imprisoned him in a cave in the mountains, I will show you its location later,' replied Tej Singh. 'Right now, I think it is necessary for Devi Singh to go to Vijaygarh and live there in disguise. His presence there will be a great help to me.' Tej Singh explained to the prince all that he had already told Devi Singh in the cave; Birendra Singh approved wholeheartedly of his plan.

After their morning bath and puja, Birendra Singh and Tej Singh, taking Devi Singh with them, sought an audience with the king. Devi Singh put forward his request for leave, but the Raja, who was very fond of Devi Singh, was reluctant to let him go. 'We'll have you taken care of here itself,' he said. Finally, it was only when both Birendra Singh and Tej Singh pleaded on his behalf, that Raja Surendra Singh agreed to Devi Singh's request. The day's business done, the king adjourned his court. While Birendra Singh accompanied the Raja back to the palace, Tej Singh, taking Devi Singh with him, returned home with his father, Jeet Singh.

Tej Singh, uneasy with even the smallest delay in their plans, helped Devi Singh prepare for the journey, and, giving him some final instructions, sent him off to Vijaygarh that very same day.

The next day, Tej Singh took Birendra Singh to the hidden valley where he was holding Ahmed prisoner. 'Tej Singh, my dear friend, this place evokes so many wonderful thoughts in me!' he exclaimed, lost in wonder at the beauty and strangeness of the valley.

'When I first saw this valley, I was even more enchanted than you,' replied Tej Singh. 'My Guruji added to my wonder by telling me many strange and wonderful things about this place, so that I became speechless with surprise and delight. I will share with you another time the secrets that Guruji revealed to me.'

At this, Birendra Singh grew even more curious, and insisted that Tej Singh tell him at once all that he knew about the valley. After much persuasion by the prince, Tej Singh gave in and told Birendra Singh all that he had heard about the valley from his guru—facts which delighted Birendra

Singh even more. What Tej Singh said to Birendra Singh, what made him so happy, and what was so special about the secret valley—all that will be related later.

The two soon left the valley and returned home. ‘Ahmed’s capture has strengthened my resolve and given me courage, I am now tempted to declare war on Jai Singh,’ said the prince.

‘Your resolve and courage are all very well, but do not do anything in haste, or you will put Chandrakanta in danger,’ cautioned Tej Singh. ‘Why do you get so anxious? Be patient and watch how matters unfold. Tomorrow I will go again to Vijaygarh, and find out the effect of Ahmed’s capture on our enemies. And once we know how matters stand, on my next visit to Vijaygarh I will take you with me.’

‘No,’ protested Birendra Singh. ‘I will come with you tomorrow—sitting here, hiding in fear, is cowardly and does not become a man!’

‘All right, come with me, what harm can there be after all?’ said Tej Singh, giving in. ‘But, in that case,’ he continued, ‘it is necessary that you take leave of the king for five days, on the pretext that you wish to go hunting. Then pitch your tent and set up camp on the Naugarh border—Chandrakanta’s palace is only two and a half kos from there, which will make it very convenient for us to visit her.’ Birendra Singh liked this idea, and they decided to go ahead with this plan.

A few days later, Birendra Singh took eight days’ leave for hunting from his father, Raja Surendra Singh, and with a few chosen men, who owed allegiance only to him and would have given their lives to protect him, left the city. The day had almost ended when at last they set up camp on the border of Naugarh and Vijaygarh. All night they rested in the camp, and it was decided that before they took any action, Tej Singh would go to Vijaygarh and bring back news of the situation there.

Narrative Seven

MEANWHILE, AFTER AHMED’S arrest, Najim had grown morose and discouraged. As for Kroor Singh, he was terrified that it would be his turn next to be kidnapped by Tej Singh. He could not rest for worry, and kept a

sharp lookout all the time. Even in that state of terror, though, he made sure he attended Maharaj Jai Singh's darbar every day and took every chance he could to turn him against Birendra Singh.

One day, Najim suggested to Kroor Singh that he kill his father, Kupath Singh. 'Once he is dead, Jai Singh is sure to make you his wazir, and with you in power, we will be able to easily achieve all that we wish,' explained Najim. Kroor Singh found this to be sound advice, and accordingly had his father poisoned. Maharaj Jai Singh declared state mourning in honour of his minister, and did not hold court for a few days. The town, too, was plunged into mourning for Kupath Singh.

Kroor Singh made a big show of grieving for his father, observing the traditional twelve days of deep mourning in his memory. All day long he would weep and wail for his father, but at night he would sit with Najim and the two would dream up plots and schemes to kidnap Chandrakanta, and capture Tej Singh and Birendra Singh. It was also at this time that Birendra Singh, on the pretext of a hunt, set up his camp on the border of Naugarh and Vijaygarh. Najim hurried with the news to Kroor Singh. 'Birendra Singh has come to be near Chandrakanta, I am absolutely sure,' he declared. 'If only Ahmed were here, we could have done so much. Anyway, we shall see.' So saying, Najim left to find out what he could about Birendra Singh and his camp.

Tej Singh had also been busy with his own investigations—taking leave of Birendra Singh, he had come to Vijaygarh, where he had found the city in mourning for the king's minister. He had also learnt that in another two days, once the period of mourning was over, Maharaj Jai Singh would appoint Kroor Singh his diwan.

'Look at that! Kroor Singh killed his father for Chandrakanta! He may even be plotting to kill the king next! How can one know what such a man will do?' exclaimed Birendra Singh when he heard the news.

'That's true,' agreed Tej Singh. 'That worthless fellow will target the king at the first opportunity. So for the next two days, rather than visiting Chandrakanta in her palace, I think I will keep an eye on what goes on in the king's darbar. Of course, if in all this chaos, I find an opportunity to see Chandrakanta, then I will see what I can do.'

'No, no more excuses,' objected Birendra Singh. 'No matter what happens, tonight I will meet Chandrakanta.'

‘Please don’t be in a hurry,’ advised Tej Singh. ‘It is haste which ruins matters.’

‘No, no matter what—I will go to see Chandrakanta tonight,’ declared Birendra Singh, adamant.

Tej Singh reasoned with him and begged him to stay back, but Birendra Singh paid no heed to his entreaties—separated from Chandrakanta, he had no thought for his own safety, but wished only to be with her. Ignoring Tej Singh, he got ready to go to Chandrakanta.

‘All right, come with me then,’ said Tej Singh, giving in. ‘If you are determined to go to the princess, how can I change your mind? We’ll just have to take our chances and see what happens.’

As evening fell, the two stepped out of their tent and instructing the sentries not to worry in case they were late returning, they strolled out of the camp as though going for a walk, and made their way to Vijaygarh.

It was night when they reached Chandrakanta’s private garden, the same one adjoining her palace that has been described before. It was a moonless night, so they did not have to worry about getting in without being seen. Avoiding the sentries, they scaled the walls with the help of a rope ladder and jumped into the garden. There, they hid themselves in the dense shadow of a large tree and waited.

In the centre of the garden, on a smooth, white, marble platform, in the glow of a softly burning candle, sat Chandrakanta, Chapala and Champa, chatting with each other. Chapala was on her guard, keeping a sharp lookout for trouble, her eyes darting here and there, even as she joined in the conversation with the others.

Birendra Singh was so overwhelmed at the sight of Chandrakanta that he began to tremble and fell to the ground in a faint. Tej Singh, seeing his condition, did not hesitate, but opening his bag of aiyaari tools, took out some lakhlakha incense and held it under his nose till Birendra Singh opened his eyes. ‘You must not lose your senses like this in another’s palace,’ he reprimanded the prince. ‘Now pull yourself together and wait here while I go and talk to Chandrakanta. I will come back for you.’ And leaving Birendra Singh under the tree, Tej Singh went over to the platform where sat the princess and her two friends.

‘Where have you been all these days?’ chided Chandrakanta. ‘Is this how you keep your word? Even now, after all these days, you come alone! If this is how you choose to help me, go wear a woman’s bangles upon your

wrists! Why do you brag so much about your manliness and courage? And if this is all that his love amounts to, what is the point of my life?' And Chandrakanta began to weep with great, big, heartbreaking sobs.

Tej Singh was flustered and dismayed by her tears. 'Now this is what I call being silly!' he scolded her gently. 'You did not wait or bother to find out the truth, but started crying! If you are going to weep like this, then all right... I'll go and fetch him!' And Tej Singh went back to Birendra Singh and brought him to Chandrakanta.

Chandrakanta was overjoyed to see Birendra Singh. The two lovers, reunited once more, shed tears of joy; overcome with happiness, they fainted. They did not remain insensible very long—recovering quickly, they began to lovingly tease and chide each other.

Now consider the capriciousness of Fate! Patrolling, investigating, searching for signs of trouble, Najim, too, reached that same garden, and observing the joyful meeting of Chandrakanta and Birendra Singh, he was consumed with envy and anger. He returned at once to Kroor Singh.

'Why, what is the matter, why are you so agitated?' asked Kroor Singh in surprise.

'I have reason to be agitated! Exactly what I predicted has happened!' cried Najim. 'We need to be very cunning here! If we fail in our plans now too, then we have no option but to accept that Destiny is against you!'

'I cannot follow a word of what you are saying! Tell me clearly, what is the matter?' said Kroor Singh, puzzled.

'Clearly then, the matter is this: Birendra Singh has reached Chandrakanta, and at this very moment, the garden is resounding with their cries of happiness!'

At Najim's words, darkness descended upon Kroor Singh, and his world grew dim and hopeless. Here he had been, working hard at his nefarious plan, immersed in his false grief for his father, bewailing his death as loudly and incessantly as a frog in the rainy season, his head shaven, refusing to step out till the thirteen days of mourning were over—but hearing what Najim had to say, he saw his hard work come to nothing. He could not contain himself any more, and just as he was, half-dressed, his head as bald as an upturned pot, he stormed off to see the king.

Maharaj Jai Singh was astonished to see Kroor Singh in this condition. 'What is wrong, Kroor Singh, that you come here in this fashion, disregarding

your grief for your father's death, and while the days of mourning are still not over?' he asked, taken aback.

'Maharaj, though I came into the world because of my father, it is you who are my true father, for it is on your benevolence and generosity that I grew up. So when it is your honour that is at stake, then what do I, or anything else in my life, matter?' replied Kroor Singh.

'Kroor Singh, who is it that dare threaten my dignity?' demanded the king, roused to anger by his words.

'A contemptible, insignificant fellow,' answered Kroor Singh.

Now the king was truly angry. 'Tell me quickly, who is this fellow who is tempting Death?' he cried, grinding his teeth in fury.

'Birendra Singh,' replied Kroor Singh, tersely.

'What power does he have to challenge my authority? How can he, of all people, dishonour me?' frowned the king, puzzled. 'I don't understand what you are saying—explain yourself! Where is Birendra Singh?'

'In the garden of your palace,' answered Kroor Singh.

The king trembled with rage. 'Surround the garden at once! I will reach there by way of the castle ramparts!' he thundered.

Narrative Eight

BIRENDRA SINGH IS whispering sweet nothings into Chandrakanta's ear, Tej Singh is flirting with Chapala, and Champa, poor girl, is sitting there awkwardly amongst the lovers.

Suddenly, there leapt into their midst a hideous creature, a blackamoor, his skin as black as ebony, his eyes bloodshot, and dressed only in a loincloth around his waist. He stood there for a moment, frightening and repulsive; then, turning to Tej Singh, and baring his teeth at him in a terrifying grin, he cried out, *The king of your presence, he is aware! O Guruji mine, beware!* Singing thus, he leapt and danced about, and grabbing Champa, dragged her a little way with him. Then, just as suddenly as he had appeared, he let go of Champa and disappeared. Champa was screaming in fright, but the others sat as though petrified, unable to react.

Only Tej Singh knew what to do. He stood up and taking Birendra Singh's hand, pulled him up. 'Come on, quickly, we have to go! We have no time to sit anymore,' he cried. Turning to Chandrakanta, he said, 'Princess, don't show your grief at our leaving so suddenly! And the three of you, stay here, laughing and chatting as you were before, till the king arrives!'

'But what is the reason for this hurry?' asked Chandrakanta, bewildered. 'And who was that whose words have made you rush away like this?'

'There is no time for explanations now,' said Tej Singh as he left, dragging a reluctant Birendra Singh with him. Using their rope ladder, Tej Singh and Birendra Singh climbed as fast as they could over the wall and out of the garden.

Chandrakanta was deeply disturbed by Birendra Singh's sudden departure. 'Chapala, this is turning into a joke!' she wept, her eyes brimming with tears. 'That dreadful fiend, he frightened me so! Put your hand on my breast and feel how fast my heart is beating! I cannot understand what is going on. Can you?'

'I am not sure what to make of all this,' said Chapala. 'Yes, this much I did understand that the Maharaj has somehow come to know that Birendra Singh was here with you, and that he is probably on his way here to see what is going on.'

'I wonder what the fiend had against me,' complained Champa.

Chapala couldn't help laughing at Champa's grumbling, but she, too, was mystified at the events that were unfolding. As Chandrakanta, Chapala and Champa sat discussing these puzzling happenings, they became aware of a growing din and clamour outside the garden walls. Chapala realized what was happening. 'This is bad news,' she said. 'It seems that our garden has been surrounded by the king's soldiers.' She had barely finished speaking when they saw the Maharaj himself walking towards them.

The princess and her two companions scrambled to their feet. Chandrakanta stepped forward, her head lowered in respect. 'Father, your coming here...at this time of the evening and so suddenly...is anything the matter?' she asked.

'No, it's nothing, I felt like seeing you, and so I came,' replied Jai Singh. 'Now go into the palace, it is late, and you will catch cold with the dew,' he added, himself turning towards the palace.

Chandrakanta, Chapala and Champa followed him obediently.

The king entered his private chambers, ashamed and remorseful that he had doubted his daughter. 'See how that Kroor was accusing our innocent daughter! What is the matter with that good-for-nothing fellow that he, without any reason, cast such aspersions on her? If my daughter were to hear this, what would she say? I do not want to see that wretch again. He needs to be punished so that he never does such a vile thing again!' thought the king to himself, and ordered a chobdar, called Hari Singh, to bring Kroor to him at once.

Hari Singh went in search of Kroor Singh and found him at last where he stood with his men, still surrounding the garden, happily oblivious of events. 'So what is the Maharaj doing?' asked Kroor Singh.

'He has just entered his palace, and is boiling over with anger. He wants you to go to him at once,' answered Hari Singh.

Hearing this, Kroor Singh went pale with fright, and shaking with anxiety and dread, presented himself to the king.

'You wretch, Kroor!' thundered the king the moment he saw him. 'How dared you? To malign poor Chandrakanta, and ruin our honour and good name—is that how you serve us? All those men standing there surrounding the garden—what must they be thinking? You good-for-nothing scoundrel, on what basis did you say that Birendra was in the palace?' Maharaj Jai Singh was shaking with anger, his lips trembling, his eyes bloodshot.

Kroor, almost dead of fright upon seeing the king so furious, replied in alarm, 'I was given this information by Najim, who is responsible for palace security these days.'

'Bring Najim here!' ordered the Maharaj, and in a short while Najim, too, was brought before him. The king was so furious that he could barely speak for anger. 'You rascal,' he spluttered, 'what false information was this that you brought us?'

Najim, afraid for his life, somehow found the words to reply. 'I saw him with my own eyes, sire,' he said. 'Perhaps he ran away somehow by the time you reached the palace.'

The king could not bear this nonsense any longer. 'Fifty lashes for Kroor Singh, and two hundred for Najim!' he thundered. 'And if the two of you ever come up with such tales again, I'll take your heads off!' Glaring at Kroor, he added, 'You are not fit to be wazir!'

Kroor Singh and Najim returned home, arguing and quarrelling. 'Thanks to you, the king has lost all respect for me! Now there is no hope of my being

appointed wazir tomorrow! As for the whipping I received, only I know how much that hurt! And all thanks to you!’ grumbled Kroor.

‘I was also flogged, and all because of you! How does it matter to me what Chandrakanta and Birendra are up to? They can go to hell for all I care! Why should I get whipped on their account?’ flung back Najim.

And thus they quarreled the night away.

At last, Kroor Singh said, ‘You and I should be ashamed of ourselves if, after being punished as we have been, we do not even take Birendra prisoner!’

‘Well, of this much I am sure, that Birendra will now visit the palace every night—that is why he has pitched camp upon our borders,’ said Najim. ‘But I don’t have the courage any more to do anything—what if I see him and report him, and he once again manages to run away before he is caught? Then I will truly lose my life!’

‘Then we need a scheme that will keep us safe while ensuring that Maharaj Jai Singh sees Birendra Singh in the palace with his own eyes,’ mused Kroor Singh.

After some thought, Najim said, ‘In the kingdom of Chunargarh, in the court of its king, Shivdatt Singh, there is one Pandit Jagannath, who is skilled in divination and geomancy. He is so accomplished in the art that he can tell you, at any point in time, the whereabouts of any man, what that man may be doing, and how he may be caught. If we can ask him to join us, and bring him here to help you, then everything will work out to our advantage. Chunargarh is only twenty-three kos from here, not a great distance. So why don’t we, you and I together, go there and bring Pandit Jagannath back with us?’

Kroor Singh agreed, and taking a store of precious stones which he tied securely round his waist, he called for two swift horses and left with Najim for Chunar. He left behind instructions with his household that should the king send someone to inquire after him, they should tell him that he, Kroor Singh, was very ill and not available.

Narrative Nine

MEANWHILE, BIRENDRA SINGH and Tej Singh, eluding capture, had made it back safely to their camp. It was past midnight by the time they entered their tent again, but even so, Tej Singh did not rest. Leaving Birendra Singh in the safety and comfort of his tent, he made his way back to Kroor Singh's palace, this time disguised as Ahmed. Kroor Singh had already left for Chunar, and only the men he had left behind to guard his house were there. They were amazed to see Ahmed suddenly appear. 'Ahmed! Where were you all these days?' they exclaimed.

'I had gone for a holiday to Hell and am just returning from there!' retorted the false Ahmed. 'Tell me, where is Kroor Singh?' he asked.

The guards told him all that had happened. 'He has left for Chunar, and perhaps you should follow him there,' they said.

'Yes, I will not go home, but leave for Chunar right away!' The false Ahmed left Kroor Singh's palace at once, and returning to Birendra Singh, apprised him of the latest happenings. He rested for the rest of the night, and, as dawn broke, left once more for Vijaygarh, having once more altered his appearance.

His head bare, and covered in dust, weeping and wailing, he reached the court of Maharaj Jai Singh. The court stared at him in astonishment. 'Find out who he is and what he wants,' the king ordered his munshi.

Tej Singh replied, 'Sire, my name is Ram Lal and I am one of Kroor Singh's serving men. Kroor Singh has rebelled against the Maharaj, and has run away to the Raja of Chunargarh. I told him he should not betray your trust, upon which he kicked me and beat me and took away everything I possessed. Hai re, I am ruined, I do not have a paisa left! What will I live on, how will I go back home to my family? They will expect me to return with three years' worth of earnings, they will ask what I have done with my income at the palace. What will I give them? Oh the Maharaj be praised, the Maharaj be praised!' Tej Singh wept and wailed in this fashion for a while, and allowed the others to comfort him only with difficulty.

The king was furious. 'Where is Kroor Singh?' he thundered.

A chobdar ran off to inquire, and came back with the news, 'He is very ill, sire, he cannot get up from his bed.'

'The Maharaj be praised, this fellow is lying!' cried Ram Lal. 'He has also joined Kroor Singh! All the Mussalmans are on his side! A thorough investigation must be carried out!'

The king frowned in displeasure. ‘Munshi ji, go at once to Kroor Singh’s house, and find out what the matter is,’ he ordered.

The munshi returned after a while and reported, ‘Maharaj, Kroor Singh is definitely not in his palace, and his family and retainers are refusing to tell us where he is.’

‘Ah! He must be on his way to Chunargarh then,’ declared the king. ‘Fetch one of his foot soldiers here immediately!’

The chobdar ran off at once, and returned with one of Kroor Singh’s unfortunate men in tow.

‘Where is Kroor Singh?’ demanded the Maharaj.

The guard mumbled something, refusing to give a clear answer.

‘The Maharaj be praised, the fellow won’t answer without a flogging!’ cried Ram Lal.

The king ordered the soldier to be flogged, but even before his command could be carried out, the unfortunate soldier, terrified of the beating, cried out that Kroor Singh had left for Chunar.

The king’s anger at this confirmation of Kroor’s betrayal knew no bounds. He banished every member—man, woman and child—of Kroor’s household, to leave Vijaygarh within the hour on pain of death, and ordered that Kroor’s palace be looted and stripped of all wealth. Of that wealth, ordered the king, Ram Lal was to be allowed to take away as much as he could carry; the rest of Kroor’s wealth was to be added to the state treasury. And, added the king, if Ram Lal were agreeable, he was to be given a position at court.

Ram Lal hurried to Kroor Singh’s mansion, and turning to the munshi, who was making sure that the king’s orders were carried out properly, he said, ‘Quickly, give me my share of the money so that I can carry it away and bless the king for it! Hurry up with it, don’t torture a poor man anymore!’

‘What a strange man! He thinks only of himself even at a time like this! Wait a little, fellow, what’s your hurry?’ scolded the munshi.

Ram Lal began to wail and weep loudly. ‘The king be praised, the munshi is refusing to give me my money!’ he cried, turning as though returning to the king.

‘Wait, wait, where are you going?’ called the munshi after him. ‘Here, give him his money first,’ he said to his men.

‘Ho! If I had not made a noise, you would have swallowed all the money yourself!’ declared Ram Lal.

At this the munshi and his men burst out laughing. 'Here, take this, and be off with you,' said the munshi, setting two thousand rupees before him.

'Ha! Do you remember what the king commanded?' cried Tej Singh, indignant. 'He said I was to have all I could carry away! I can carry this amount in my pocket! Give me more!'

The munshi glared at Ram Lal, and dragging him to Kroor Singh's treasury, stood him in front of the large money chest. 'There! Take what you want! Let's see how much you can carry away!' he challenged.

Tej Singh picked up the money in handfuls and stashed it away on his person—in his turban, in his bag, in his belt...he even stuffed some coins into his mouth! And before the astonished munshi and his men could count to ten, he had put away ten thousand rupees. The men laughed in amazement. 'He isn't a man, he's a monster,' they cried, shaking their heads, as he walked away.

The king's orders were soon fulfilled—Kroor Singh's house was looted, and the men and women of his household, weeping and wailing and beating their breasts, left Vijaygarh and took the road to Chunar.

Tej Singh returned with the money to Birendra Singh. 'Look!' he said, showing him his earnings. 'I've made a handsome profit today! But this money comes from the devil—so please add some of yours to it, to purify it!'

'Where did you get this from?' asked Birendra Singh, surprised.

Tej Singh related the events leading up to the sack of Kroor's palace, and his acquisition of a portion of Kroor's wealth.

'All that is mine here, I give to you!' intoned Birendra Singh solemnly, delighted at Tej Singh's exploit.

'Make sure your contribution is not less than what I have taken from Kroor, for your station is far higher than his!' countered Tej Singh.

'But from where shall I get so much money at this hour?' asked Birendra Singh.

'Write me a note, promising me the amount,' replied Tej Singh promptly.

The prince laughed and pulling off a diamond ring from his finger, handed it to Tej Singh. The latter was delighted at the gift and accepted it joyously. 'May the Supreme Being fulfil your prayers!' he exclaimed in gratitude. 'But now we must pack up our tents and return home to Naugarh,' he added, serious again. 'I must go to Chunar at once to find out what mischief that devil's spawn, Kroor, is planning!'

Narrative Ten

THE NEWS OF Kroor Singh's ruin spread rapidly through the town. Chandrakanta's mother, Maharani Ratnagarbha, and Chandrakanta also heard what had happened. Of course, the princess and Chapala were overjoyed. That night, when the Maharaj returned to his palace, the queen laughingly asked after Kroor.

'He was a scoundrel and a liar, and was out to ruin our daughter's name for no reason at all,' declared the king, still angry.

'Tell me, why have you stopped Birendra from coming here freely?' asked the queen. 'Remember, this is the same Birendra who, even before Chandrakanta was born, used to visit us as a child, and stay with us for days. And when she was little, they used to play together as children. That is how they began to love each other. In those days, one could not tell that you and Raja Surendra Singh were two separate individuals, or that Naugarh and Vijaygarh were separate kingdoms for Surendra Singh would follow your lead in everything. And you yourself would say that Chandrakanta should be married to Birendra Singh. There was so much affection and such deep friendship between you and Surendra Singh. That evil, vicious Kroor has ruined it all, and filled your hearts with suspicion and doubt!'

'Yes, I, too, am surprised at myself,' agreed the king. 'It is as though I lost the ability to think and see the truth for myself. How did I come to lose all my affection for Birendra Singh? There is no reason that I can remember! Hai! This Kroor did great wrong! I see it now, now that I have got rid of him!'

'I wonder what mischief he will get up to in Chunar. I am sure he will stir up Maharaj Shivdatt against us, and create some new problem!' declared the queen.

'Well, we shall see, it's in God's hands,' answered the king. 'That rogue did not spare any effort to cause all the trouble he possibly could here!'

The king left the palace, his shoulders weighed down with worry. Now that Kroor had been shown to be the rascal that he was, he needed to find someone to appoint as his diwan—but who should that man be? The king considered this question for many days, and at last gave his deputy diwan, one Hardayal Singh, the title and privileges of 'Diwan' or 'Prime Minister'.

Hardayal Singh was a good and kind man, even-tempered and pleasant and honest to a fault; he had never hurt anyone in his life.

Narrative Eleven

KROOR SINGH WAS obsessed with a single thought—that somehow he must kill Birendra Singh and Tej Singh, and destroy the kingdom of Naugarh. He reached Chunar with Najim, and presented himself at the court of Maharaj Shivdatt. The king knew him well and acknowledged his salutations, and asked politely after him.

‘Maharaj, how I am and what has been happening with me—I will tell you all of that when we are alone,’ replied Kroor Singh.

That evening, after his darbar had ended and he was alone, the king summoned Kroor to him and once more asked how he was. In answer, Kroor launched into a long and bitter tirade against Maharaj Jai Singh, listing out every fault and grievance that he could, and slyly added, ‘His army is in poor shape these days, and the Mussalmans are all on our side. So if you so desire, you can conquer Vijaygarh easily. And what’s more, along with his kingdom, Maharaj Jai Singh’s daughter, Chandrakanta, who has no equal in beauty, will also become yours!’

Kroor Singh continued in this vein, trying his best to incite Maharaj Shivdatt to declare war against Jai Singh. At last, Maharaj Shivdatt said, ‘We do not need to go to war just now. Instead, we will first use our aiyaars to help us assess the situation, and then decide what action we need to take, if any. I have some half a dozen aiyaars here. I will send four of them to Vijaygarh, together with the jyotishi, Pandit Jagannath. Take them with you, let us see what they can find out, and later, if necessary, we too will follow with our army.’

Maharaj Shivdatt’s six aiyaars were Pandit Badrinath, Pannalal, Chunnilal, Ram Narayan, Bhagwandatt and Ghasita Singh. The king called Pandit Badrinath, Pannalal, Ram Narayan and Bhagwandatt to him, and after giving them appropriate instructions, assigned them to accompany Kroor Singh to Vijaygarh.

The king had barely finished this business of choosing the aiyaars when a chobdar came looking for him. ‘Maharaj, several men and women have arrived at our doorstep seeking refuge and shelter. They claim they are Kroor Singh’s relatives, and say that when Maharaj Jai Singh heard of Kroor Singh’s flight to Chunar, he was so furious that he took all their worldly wealth and banished them from Vijaygarh. What are your instructions for these people?’ said the chobdar.

Kroor Singh, thunderstruck, taken completely by surprise, could not utter a word at the chobdar’s news. Maharaj Shivdatt invited the refugees into his fort, and bade them tell him what had happened. They related all that had taken place at Vijaygarh. Then, turning to Kroor Singh and Najim, they remarked, ‘Ahmed must also be here. He had left Vijaygarh ahead of us to come to you.’

‘Ahmed? Where is he? He hasn’t come here,’ said Najim, taken aback.

‘Really? He had come to the house in Vijaygarh and hearing from us that you had set off for Chunar, he left at once, declaring that he would join you immediately!’ exclaimed the others.

‘That’s it, now I understand!’ said Najim grimly. ‘That would not have been Ahmed, but Tej Singh in disguise, there is no doubt in my mind! Tej Singh must also have been the one who told Maharaj Jai Singh about our coming to Chunar. This whole mess is his doing!’

Hearing this, Kroor Singh began to weep. Maharaj Shivdatt consoled him. ‘Whatever had to happen has happened, now don’t dwell on it,’ he said. ‘I will avenge this wrong that Jai Singh has done you. Stay here in Chunar as my guest. I give you the mansion opposite the public baths for your use—live there with your family and the members of your household. Your monetary needs will be taken care of by our royal treasury.’

A few days after these events, Kroor Singh presented himself at the darbar of Maharaj Shivdatt, requesting permission to leave for Vijaygarh. All arrangements had already been made, so the king readily agreed and without further delay bade farewell to Kroor Singh and Najim. The king’s four aiyaars and Pandit Jagannath Jyotishi were also ready to leave. They aiyaars had packed their tools of aiyaari, and many kinds of disguises. Jyotishi ji had packed his books and scrolls, and the various other implements required to practise his calling; he had also taken with him some tools of aiyaari, having some skill and knowledge of the art. And now this troop of troublemakers set

off for Vijaygarh. They had also planned to visit Naugarh. Let us see where they go and what they do.

Narrative Twelve

BIRENDRA SINGH AND Tej Singh have stepped out of the fort and are sitting by the river Chandraprabha, enjoying the beauty of their surroundings. With them are several other soldiers and male attendants. On one side flows the Chandraprabha, on the other the Karamnasa, and at their confluence stands the fort of Naugarh. Here, the Chandraprabha is very wide, and along its banks grows a dense teak forest; the cries of hundreds of peacocks and the antics of a thousand langurs add to the glory of the forest. Prince Birendra Singh sits sorrowfully upon the riverbank; in Chandrakanta's absence, the cries of the peacocks pierce him like arrows, the playful calls of the langurs fall upon him like thunderbolts, and the soft evening breeze burns him like the searing winds of summer. He sits there silently, gazing sadly out across the river and sighing to himself.

Suddenly, sitting a little way down the riverbank, Tej Singh spied a sadhu; the holy man was dressed in saffron robes, with a red tilak on his forehead that proclaimed him a devotee of Rama. The sadhu was singing to himself, while keeping time on a tambourine he held in his hand. His song went something like this:

*Accompanied by five
For the traitor, from Chunar arrives
Aur chitari, skilled in aiyaari
Masters of dissimulation
A clever Pandit, skilled in augury
Accomplished in divination*

*Beware, beware, of Kroor and his men
Black spells of darkness do they cast
Do sit here, carefree, uncaring*

Stop them, stop! Don't let them pass.

Tej Singh gave the sadhu a sharp look. It seemed as though the sadhu had been singing for Tej Singh's sole benefit, for catching his eye, he grinned at him, and left.

Birendra Singh, still lost in thoughts of Chandrakanta, is completely unaware of these happenings. He does not see the sadhu or hear his song, but stares unblinkingly at the river.

Tej Singh shook Birendra Singh by the arm; the prince looked up, startled. 'Come on, get up, let's go back to the palace. We need to talk in privacy. I will tell you what I need to say once we are alone in your room,' said Tej Singh. Birendra Singh pulled himself together and stood up, and the two men walked slowly towards the fort and into their palace.

Now they are alone, and there is no one but the two of them in the room.

'So tell me, what is it that you wanted to say?' asked Birendra Singh.

'You already know that Kroor Singh has gone to Chunar to enlist Maharaj Shivdatt's help, now listen to the outcome of his trip there,' said Tej Singh. 'The Maharaj has sent four aiyaars and a jyotishi back with Kroor. This jyotishi is very adept at geomancy and divination. And Najim is anyway with Kroor. This lot has now become very strong. Kroor and his men will create as much trouble as they can, and I need to leave you to deal with them. So I beseech you, hold yourself together. I am sure that one or the other of those aiyaars will come here and attempt to trap you. Stay alert and on your guard at all times. Do not go anywhere with anyone, unless it be with me. Do not eat anything given to you by anyone else, do not smell any flowers or perfumes that may be given to you as gifts. And remember, it is very likely that they will change their appearance to look like me.' Taking a step closer to the prince, he continued, 'Look...this is how you recognize me...here, within my eye, inside my lower eyelid, is a til that no one knows about. From now on, whenever I come to you, I will secretly show you this spot in my eye, and you will know that it is me. If I don't show you this sign, then you can safely assume that you are being deceived.'

Tej Singh explained many other matters to Birendra Singh; the prince listened with attention to all he had to say, then asked, 'How did you learn that Kroor has received so much help from Chunar?'

'Somehow, I did so,' replied Tej Singh. 'One day it will become evident to you how I did. For now, though, I must take my leave of you. If the

king or my father should ask about me, give them an excuse, whatever you think is appropriate.'

Dawn was only a watch away when Tej Singh, carrying his tools of aiyaari with him, set out from Naugarh.

Narrative Thirteen

CHAPALA, ON RECONNAISSANCE and in male disguise, stepped out of the city to survey the land. It was past midnight, and the moon shone clear and bright. Suddenly she felt the urge to see Tej Singh, and turned her steps towards Naugarh. Meanwhile, as we know, there was Tej Singh, with his aiyaari kit, and without any disguise, on his way to Vijaygarh. Quite by chance, the two met on the way. Chapala recognized him, and going up to him, spoke in her normal voice. 'So tell me, where are you going?' she asked.

Tej Singh recognizing her voice, knew it was Chapala who addressed him. 'Oh, well met!' he cried. 'How fortunate that we ran into each other here, otherwise I would have had to resort to all kinds of schemes and plans to meet you in Vijaygarh. There are many important things I need to tell you—so come, let's sit down.' And the two sat down on a convenient boulder by the side of the road.

'So, what do you have to tell me?' asked Chapala.

'Listen then,' began Tej Singh. 'You already know that Kroor went to Chunar for help; now also know that Maharaj Shivdatt has sent four aiyaars and Pandit Jagannath Jyotishi to help him, and that they have all arrived here. Their side has now become very strong, while here it is just you and me—which means that now the two of us will have to be even more vigilant and watchful than before. It will not surprise me if those aiyaars try to kidnap Maharaj Jai Singh himself. And as for Chandrakanta, it is specifically for her that they have come. I wanted to warn you and let you know about these developments.'

'So what should we do now?' asked Chapala.

'I have an idea: I will kidnap Hardayal Singh, the new diwan, and assuming his appearance and identity, I will take over his office. This way I will have the guards and the army under me, and I will be in a position to

control and do many things. I will need you, to keep your eyes and ears open at all times in and around the palace. Try and meet me at least once every day. Since I will, in any case, be posing as the diwan, it will not be difficult for you to see me. Just come to my house—that is, Hardayal Singh's house—every day. You won't need to disguise yourself. I, of course, will at all times, even when in the house, maintain my disguise.'

Tej Singh continued to explain many more matters to Chapala, who listened carefully; after a while, she said goodbye and returned to Vijaygarh. Tej Singh spent the rest of the night in the forest. As dawn broke, he disguised himself as a perfume-seller, and entered Vijaygarh. Carrying a couple of bottles of perfumes in his hand, with several more tied around his waist, he spent the day walking up and down the narrow lanes of the town. As evening fell, he made his way to the Diwan Sahib's house. Here he found Hardayal Singh relaxing on a couch; three or four of his friends were also there. The men were busy in conversation. There was no one else around.

Tej Singh, with his various bottles of perfumes, saluted the diwan and his friends and sat down. 'I am a perfume-seller, come here all the way from Lucknow,' he began, introducing himself. 'Hearing of your fame, I have brought the best perfumes in my collection for you,' he continued, and opening his bottles, he dabbed a little of the perfumed oils on twists of cotton wool, which he began to pass around for the diwan and his friends to smell. Hardayal Singh was a very kind-hearted man; he could not refuse the perfume-seller. So, accepting the twists of cotton wool from him, he smelled them as the man requested, and also passed them on to his friends. Within a few minutes of this exercise, Hardayal Singh and his friends fell unconscious on to the floor. Tej Singh, leaving the other men where they lay, made a bundle of Hardayal Singh and, slinging the bundle on to his back, set off towards Naugarh. As an extra precaution, Tej Singh drew a cloth over his face, so that even if someone were to see him, they would mistake him for a dhobi with his bundle of washing and let him pass.

He left the town and walking swiftly, soon reached the cave where he had imprisoned Ahmed. Opening the stone door, he entered the secret valley, and laid down his bundle. The Diwan Sahib was still unconscious; Tej Singh gently withdrew the diwan's ring—which bore his seal—from his finger, switched clothes with him, and quietly came away, taking care to shut the secret door securely behind him. He had not considered it necessary to fetter the diwan's feet, nor had he revived him. Leaving the cave, he returned at

once to Vijaygarh. Quickly changing his appearance to look like Hardayal Singh, he reached the diwan's house.

Meanwhile, it became time for the Diwan Sahib's evening meal. The servant girl came to summon him to eat—to find that her master was missing, and his friends lay on the ground, insensible! Hearing her terrified screams, the guards and servants came running, only to stop short in shocked surprise when they saw the scene. They searched high and low for the Diwan Sahib, but he was nowhere to be found.

Three watches of the night passed before the diwan's friends regained their senses. They looked around in confusion, bewildered at their condition. 'What happened? How did you fall unconscious? Where is the Diwan Sahib?' asked the crowd of guards and servants gathered there.

'There was a perfume-seller here, who gave us his perfumes to smell, which knocked us out! We had no control left over ourselves! Goodness knows where the Diwan Sahib has gone! That is why they say that friendship with the rich always puts one's life in danger! We swear we will never befriend a wealthy man again!' cried the diwan's friends.

The rest of the night passed in more such bewildered talk. Dawn was about to break, when suddenly they saw Diwan Sahib walking towards them; as we know, this was none other than Bahadur Tej Singh in disguise. The men crowded around him anxiously, asking him where he had been. 'Where did that rascally perfume-seller vanish and how did we lose our senses?' they asked.

'He was a rogue and a thief! I had recognized him, and was careful not to inhale his perfumes too deeply, or else I too would have passed out like the rest of you! When I tried to catch him, he ran off. I gave chase, but unfortunately, he managed to get away,' replied the diwan.

'Please come inside and eat,' said the serving girl who had first come to call him for his meal. 'No one in the house has eaten, everyone is hungry—the night has gone by in tears.'

'It is morning now, hardly the time for a meal,' replied the Diwan Sahib. 'Besides, I'm tired. I want to sleep for a while.' And he lay down on the bed. His friends, too, dispersed, each returning to his own house.

Later that morning, Tej Singh made his way to the darbar at the diwan's usual time. He was dressed appropriately for the darbar in the diwan's clothes, with his small bag of aiyaari tools cleverly hidden about his person. As he passed through the town, disguised as the Diwan Sahib, the people

lined the road on either side, their hands raised respectfully in salute. He acknowledged their greetings with slight nods of his head and reached the court. The Maharaj had not yet come. Tej Singh was familiar with Hardayal Singh's routine, and as had been the diwan's usual practice, he sat down and started work. In a little while, the king also arrived.

As the work of the darbar progressed, Hardayal Singh found an opportunity to speak to the king. 'O Maharajadhiraj, O King of Kings,' he said in a low voice, 'I have received intelligence that the king of Chunar, Raja Shivdatt Singh, has sent five aiyaars here with Kroor Singh with the specific objective of causing trouble. He has also said that he will follow later with an army. This is cause for anxiety for as you know, we have no aiyaars to assist us at this moment. There used to be Najim and Ahmed, but they are now with Kroor Singh, and all the Mussalmans in the kingdom have also gone over to his side. The aiyaars from Chunar must already be here, probably in disguise and mingling with the townspeople, looking for a chance to stir up trouble.'

'I see,' said the king thoughtfully. 'I too have noticed the unmannerly conduct of the Mussalmans lately. So what steps have you taken to deal with this?'

While they were talking thus in muted tones, the diwan noticed a chobdar in the court surreptitiously observing all that was going on. The diwan watched him carefully for a while. Realizing that he was being observed, the chobdar grew wary and started to move away. Abandoning his discussion with the king, the Diwan Sahib called out sharply, 'Hold that man!' The crowd surged towards the chobdar, but he had fled, so fleet footed that no one could catch him. Tej Singh alone could have caught that chobdar, who was actually an aiyaar in disguise, but he had to stay in character and move and behave as Hardayal Singh would have done—and so he remained seated where he was. Those who had run after the aiyaar returned without him.

'Maharaj,' said the Diwan Sahib, 'this incident proves what I had said. Exactly what I had feared has come to pass!'

The king, alarmed at the incident, adjourned his darbar quickly, and retired with his diwan to discuss the situation in private. 'Now what should we do?' he asked. 'That villain Kroor has turned a very powerful kingdom against us. Maharaj Shivdatt is a formidable enemy—we cannot fight him and hope to win!'

‘Maharaj,’ replied the Diwan Sahib, ‘I will say again that we have no aiyaar with us since the two we did have, Najim and Ahmed, have gone over to Kroor’s side—and it is not possible to counter aiyaars without aiyaars. They are very cunning, and trained to cause chaos. It is no great matter for an aiyaar to kill a thousand men single-handedly. That is why we must enlist on our side an aiyaar we can rely upon and trust. Unfortunately, there is no one we can enlist right away...’ And the diwan fell silent as though in thought. ‘But wait,’ he continued, ‘I have heard that Tej Singh, the son of Raja Surendra Singh’s diwan, Jeet Singh, has turned out to be a master aiyaar. I am sure that if the Maharaj so desires and asks for Tej Singh’s help, Raja Surendra Singh will not refuse his request. He loves the Maharaj with all his heart and soul. So even after the Maharaj declared that Prince Birendra Singh was no longer welcome in Vijaygarh—despite that Raja Surendra Singh holds the Maharaj in the same affection as before.’

The king reflected upon Hardayal Singh’s words for a while and said, ‘What you say is right—Surendra Singh and his son Birendra Singh are both very able men. There is no doubt that Birendra Singh is brave and courageous, a man who can face an army of ten thousand with only a thousand men, and win. He is also skilled in the art of statesmanship. Tej Singh’s skill is also undisputed—he is as accomplished in aiyaari as you say. But of late, I have not behaved very well towards them, of which I am very ashamed, and therefore feel hesitant to ask them for help. Besides, who knows, maybe they are also angry and annoyed with me. So why don’t *you* go and meet them instead? If they hold any anger or sadness towards me, remove it from their hearts, and bring Tej Singh with you. Then we will be able to move ahead.’

‘Very well, sire, I will go to Naugarh myself and do as you say,’ replied Hardayal Singh. ‘Give me a short letter with your seal for Raja Surendra Singh—that is all I need. I will give him the letter, and making peace on your behalf, persuade him to join us. I will not take anyone with me, but will go alone on this mission.’

The Maharaj approved of Hardayal Singh’s plan, and gave him the letter, written in his own hand and stamped with the royal seal.

Hardayal Singh (who, as we remember, was really Tej Singh) took the letter and returned to his palace. He took care not to go inside the house and zanana, the women’s quarters, but remained outside, even asking that his meal be served there. He wanted to meet Chapala before he left, to tell her

all that had happened. He ate and rested for a while, waiting for her. It was almost evening by the time she arrived. Making sure that they were alone and could not be overheard, Tej Singh told her of his discussion with the king, and showed her the letter that he had been given for Raja Surendra Singh.

Chapala was overjoyed. 'Hardayal Singh himself will also help you,' she said. 'He is an extremely able man. Now hurry, go to Naugarh and do all that you have planned.' She was full of praise for Tej Singh, and the hope that all would be resolved with Birendra Singh arose in her heart.

The imitation Hardayal Singh set off for Naugarh; on the way he changed his appearance to his true self.

Narrative Fourteen

THE KINGDOMS OF Naugarh and Vijaygarh lie in mountainous country. The rivers Chandraprabha and Karamnasa meander through the mountains, which are riddled with natural caves and caverns. In the dense forest that covers the mountain flanks there grow a variety of trees—sakhu, tend, vijaysar, sanai, koria, go, khaja, peyar, jigna, aasan, can all be found in the forest together with hundreds of parijat trees. These mountains are interesting—one moment you are in a village, and the next, only a mile or so away, you could be in dense forest, and have lost your way. In the rainy season, walk only a kos, and you will cross ten streams or more. Several species of wild animals can be seen in these forests, including sambhar, barasingha, cheetahs, bears, leopards and monkeys, and sometimes even tigers, though not during the rains when the rivulets and streams make it too wet for them, and they move up into the mountains to drier land. There are no deer on the mountains, but there are many in the valleys. Of the birds, there can be seen partridge and quail, though peacocks are the most numerous. These beautiful mountains and forests are still there today, just as they have been described here, and worth a visit.

The aiyaars who had come from Chunar with Kroor and Najim decided to avoid the city and, with Kroor, set up camp in this forest instead. Rather than go into the town all together, they decided that each aiyaar would go in on his own, to carry out whatever aiyaari was required of him. If he needed

the others, he could summon them in the forest by blowing upon a loud whistle that each of them would carry. Badrinath, who was the cleverest and most skilled of these aiyaars, suggested that they disguise themselves and visit the town once before embarking upon any aiyaari. They should, said Badrinath, familiarize themselves with all those who lived and worked in the palace—the serving men and women, even the queen herself should be observed carefully, and their names, faces and mannerisms remembered so that when required, the aiyaars could take on their form and guise. The others approved of this idea, and Najim gave them the names, and as far as possible, the descriptions of all those in the royal household. The aiyaars, disguising themselves as various different people, managed to gain entry into the palace several times. Though they came to know the palace and its residents very well, thanks to Chapala's vigilance they found no opportunity to practise their aiyaari; besides, they didn't really want to do anything till they had come to know and understand the lay of the land thoroughly.

Once they had acquired all the information they needed, they began their work. Bhagwandatt changed his appearance to look like Chapala, and went off to Naugarh to trap Birendra Singh. Presenting himself at Birendra Singh's palace, he requested the sentry to announce him. 'Please tell Prince Birendra Singh that Chapala has come from Vijaygarh to see him.'

It was late, and Prince Birendra Singh was deep in thoughts of Chandrakanta, dreaming up a hundred schemes to meet her, sighing deeply from time to time, when the guard entered his chamber and announced, 'O Lord of the Earth, Chapala has come from Vijaygarh and is waiting upon your threshold. What are your instructions for her?'

The prince started upon hearing Chapala's name, and joyfully ordered the guard to let her in. As Chapala entered the room, the prince jumped to his feet to welcome her. Taking her by the hand, he made her sit next to himself on the couch and plied her with questions about Chandrakanta.

'She is well,' answered Chapala. 'Except that she misses you, she knows no other hardship. She complains that you are very inconsiderate, that you never even bother to find out whether she is alive or dead. Today, overcome with anxiety, she has sent me to you with these two pears, which she has cut and peeled with her own hands. She has asked you to promise by her life that you will eat them.'

Birendra Singh was very pleased to hear Chapala's words. How could he ignore Chandrakanta's wishes? He took at once the pieces of fruit that

Chapala held out and was about to bite into one, when who should enter but Tej Singh. Tej Singh took in the situation at a glance—there sat Birendra Singh, and Chapala with him, and in the prince's hand a piece of fruit! This could only have one meaning! 'Watch out! Do not put that into your mouth!' he shouted, stepping into the room.

Birendra Singh paused, the piece of fruit halfway to his mouth. 'Why, what's wrong?' he asked, surprised.

'I warned you a thousand times before I left, broke my head explaining the situation to you, but you did not pay any heed to my words!' cried Tej Singh angrily. 'Has Chapala ever come here before that she should come now? Have you even tried to find out if this is indeed Chapala who is before you or some aiyaar? You see a woman in front you, she says a few sweet words—and that's enough to make a complete fool of you!'

Birendra Singh acknowledged the merit of Tej Singh's scolding; embarrassed at his own gullibility, he turned to look more closely at the false Chapala. Chapala could not stay calm any more: realizing that she had been recognized for what she was and had no hope of continuing her charade, she drew her dagger and rushed at Tej Singh. Birendra Singh, moving faster than even Tej Singh, grabbed her knife-hand by the wrist, and twisting the other hand behind her waist, lifted her up above his head as though he would fling her down upon the ground to break every bone in her body.

'Stop, stop! Don't do that, he will die!' cried out Tej Singh. 'He is an aiyaar, this is his job! Don't kill him, give him to me, let me deal with him!'

The prince lowered the aiyaar slowly to the ground, and tying his arms tightly behind him, handed him over to Tej Singh. Tej Singh forced his prisoner to inhale a substance that rendered him unconscious at once; bundling up the insensible aiyaar into a sheet as he had bundled up Ahmed before, and placing the parcel carefully in a corner of the room, he continued his conversation with the prince. 'Now whatever happened is over and done with, so don't fret about it anymore. Be more careful now and make sure you do not get deceived again.'

The prince, still embarrassed at his mistake, didn't answer; changing the subject, he asked about the state of affairs in Vijaygarh. Tej Singh gave him a full and detailed account of all that had happened there, and showed him the letter that Maharaj Jai Singh had written to Raja Surendra Singh. The prince was overjoyed. He clasped Tej Singh to his bosom in joy and said, 'Now let there be no more delay, do what needs to be done!'

‘Yes, yes, I will, do not be so anxious! Everything falls into place in its own time!’ reassured Tej Singh.

And so the night passed, the two men deep in conversation with each other.

It was almost dawn when Tej Singh picked up the bundle in which he had tied up the aiyaar, and made his way to the same hidden valley where he had imprisoned Ahmed. Entering the valley through the secret stone door as before, he found Ahmed, lying fast asleep beside the stream, and close by, Hardayal Singh sitting with bowed head upon a boulder in the shade of a tree.

‘Tej Singh! What crime have I committed that you have imprisoned me here?’ exclaimed Hardayal Singh, catching sight of him.

Tej Singh laughed and replied, ‘Had you committed a crime, sir, you would have woken up with chains on your feet, like Ahmed. You have done nothing wrong, but by keeping you here for a day, I have been able to achieve much of what I set out to do. That is why I took this liberty with you. Please forgive me. I am at your service, and you have the freedom now to go where you will. In all of Vijaygarh, you are the only man who cares about justice, or who is virtuous and honest—and that is the reason why I am also hopeful of your help.’

‘Tej Singh, as you know, I have always been a friend to you and to Prince Birendra Singh. I have absolutely no objection to helping either of you and will be glad to be of service. I was bewildered and confused to find that you, whom I considered a friend, had imprisoned me here. At first I did not understand how I came here—whether I was dead or had been brought here alive. It was only when I saw Ahmed that I realized that this was your doing! Now tell me, what is this great endeavour of yours that required you to keep me captive here? You say you need my assistance—tell me, then, how may I be of help?’

‘But first you must know—though I changed my appearance to look like you, rest assured I did not enter the zanana or intrude upon the privacy of your womenfolk in your home.’

‘No matter even if you had entered my home and my zanana, Tej Singh, for I consider you closer to me than my own son! Anyway, tell me what’s going on.’

Tej Singh related to him the events of the last few days and the state of affairs that prevailed. He also returned the clothes he had taken from the

diwan and showed him the letter from Maharaj Jai Singh. 'Now take your clothes and the letter, and go to the court of Raja Surendra Singh, and ask him to let me accompany you to Vijaygarh. Do this without delay, or else those aiyaars from Chunar will destroy us, and Maharaj Shivdatt will take over the kingdom. I will come with you to Vijaygarh, and I will take those aiyaars prisoner. There are two things though, that I would request you to do—first, remove all Mussalmans from positions of authority or control, and employ only Hindus; second, keep an eye on Prince Birendra Singh and from time to time, whenever an opportunity presents itself, praise him to the king, so that the king will feel kindly towards him again and call upon him for help.'

'I have always been your well-wisher. I give you my word that I will do all that you want and more,' promised Hardayal Singh.

Tej Singh undid his bundle, and tipping out the aiyaar he had carried with him to the cave, revived him. He had taken care to first fetter and chain him, removing from his person his aiyaari kit as well as the dagger he wore at his waist. With his face washed and clean of make up, Bhagwandatt's own features were revealed. Tej Singh recognized him at once since all aiyaars know each other, and Tej Singh knew the aiyaars from Chunar well, as they knew him.

Leaving Bhagwandatt sitting disconsolately by the stream, Tej Singh took Hardayal Singh by the arm and led him out of the secret valley. As they neared the great stone door, Tej Singh turned to Hardayal Singh and said, 'Sir, please be good enough to give me permission to render you unconscious once more. Once we are out of the valley, I will revive you.'

'I have no objection,' agreed Hardayal Singh. 'I have no desire at all to see the entrance or exit to this valley prison—that is your work, not mine. I do not wish to know about it.'

Once safely through the secret door and out of the valley, Tej Singh revived Hardayal Singh and said, 'Please put on your own garments now, and come with me.' Hardayal Singh did as Tej Singh asked.

Upon reaching the town of Naugarh, Hardayal Singh and Tej Singh parted company, and the diwan went alone to present himself at the court of Raja Surendra Singh. The Raja received him with great courtesy, and after a long conversation, Hardayal Singh presented to him the letter from Maharaj Jai Singh. Graciously accepting the letter, the Raja handed it to his diwan, Jeet Singh, instructing him to read it aloud.

Raja Surendra Singh listened to the letter with growing joy. Turning to Hardayal Singh, he declared, 'My kingdom is at the disposal of the Maharaj, as are my subjects. He can call upon any of them for help. And yes, Tej Singh shall return with you to Vijaygarh as the Maharaj requests!' Then, entrusting Diwan Jeet Singh with the responsibility of looking after their guest, the Raja adjourned his court.

Diwan Hardayal Singh stayed as an honoured guest in Naugarh for three days, and was greatly pleased with the hospitality and care that was shown him. On the fourth day, the Diwan Sahib asked the Raja's permission to leave. Surendra Singh loaded him with gifts of gems and precious stones and other riches, and calling Tej Singh, bade him to accompany the Diwan Sahib to Vijaygarh.

The two men reached Vijaygarh laden with the Raja's expensive gifts and presents, and presented themselves at the evening darbar. Hardayal Singh handed Surendra Singh's reply to the Maharaj, and telling him all that had happened, praised the Raja profusely. The Maharaj was greatly pleased, and extending the hand of friendship to Tej Singh, welcomed him to Vijaygarh. Turning to Hardayal Singh, he ordered, 'Make arrangements for Tej Singh to stay here in comfort, give him a mansion for his use and extend to him every hospitality. He is to be our guest.'

Once the king had adjourned his darbar, the Diwan Sahib conducted Tej Singh to the luxurious rooms that had been chosen for his use. The diwan also arranged for servants to look after him, and guards and foot soldiers for his security, making sure that they were Hindus.

The following day, when Tej Singh presented himself at the Maharaj's darbar, his chair was set next to that of Diwan Hardayal Singh.

Narrative Fifteen

WE HAVE MENTIONED earlier that Tej Singh recognized all the aiyaars in Maharaj Shivdatt's service. He now became anxious to find out which were the four who had accompanied Kroor to Vijaygarh. So, the next evening, he changed his appearance to look like Bhagwandatt, the aiyaar he had caught and imprisoned in the secret valley, and set out to explore the surrounding

forest. Though he searched for a long time, he found no clues leading him to the aiyaars—the rains had set in, and the night was dark and overcast. At last, as a last ploy, Tej Singh climbed a small hill, and standing atop it, blew a piercing whistle into the night.

The whistle produced the desired results, for out from the forest appeared the other aiyaars and Pandit Jagannath Joshi. Surprised to find Bhagwandatt there, they asked, ‘What are you doing here? Hadn’t you gone to Naugarh? Why are you back, and that too empty-handed?’

Tej Singh identified all four of them, and replied, ‘None of my schemes worked thanks to Tej Singh. If one of you come with me, we will be more successful.’

‘All right, one of us will accompany you tomorrow,’ agreed Pannalal. ‘For tonight, let’s see what we can do in the palace here.’

‘Fine,’ accepted Tej Singh, ‘but first, do any of you have anything to eat? I’m very hungry. I will be able to concentrate better after I have eaten.’

‘Whatever food we have with us, we have doctored with drugs to induce unconsciousness,’ said Jagannath. ‘If you can buy some food from the market and bring it here, then the rest of us could eat as well and be done with it.’

‘Someone come with me,’ said Bhagwandatt, who was Tej Singh.

Pannalal joined him, and the two men went off together towards the town. On the way, Pannalal suggested, ‘We should change our appearance. Tej Singh arrived here yesterday, and he recognizes all of us. What if we run into him?’

Bhagwandatt, afraid that while changing his appearance, his true identity might be revealed, dismissed Pannalal’s fears. ‘Don’t worry, there’s no need for that, we are unlikely to run into him so late at night,’ he said.

Bhagwandatt’s refusal to disguise himself immediately aroused Pannalal’s suspicions. He looked at him closely, but the night was dark, and he couldn’t tell if the man with him was Bhagwandatt or not. Uneasy and full of doubt, he decided to summon the others and gave a loud whistle into the night; but by this time they were close to the town and quite far away from the forest, so that the others did not hear his call. The whistle served to alert Tej Singh, who, realizing that Pannalal was suspicious, decided to delay no longer. He grabbed Pannalal by the throat and held him in a stranglehold; in defence, Pannalal drew his dagger. The two men grappled and wrestled, till at last Tej Singh overpowered Pannalal. Tying his hands securely behind

him, he rendered him unconscious. Then, quickly making a bundle of the unfortunate Pannalal, Tej Singh hefted him up upon his back and continued towards the town.

Changing his appearance back to his own, Tej Singh reached his rooms. He locked Pannalal into a small, dark storeroom in the house, and gave the sentries strict instructions to stay vigilant. He guarded Pannalal himself, making up his bed outside the storeroom door for the night. When morning dawned, Tej Singh set off for the darbar, taking his prisoner with him.

Meanwhile, in the forest, Ram Narayan, Badrinath and Jyotishi ji had been waiting for their two companions to return with the food. When they did not come back, they began to worry—perhaps they had both been captured?—but it did not occur to them that Bhagwandatt could have been someone else altogether!

There wasn't much that they could do that night, but the next morning, changing their appearance, they set out in search of their missing friends. They decided to investigate the darbar of Maharaj Jai Singh. On their way to the court, they saw Tej Singh, also making his way to the darbar, and behind him, surrounded by a dozen soldiers, Pannalal, clearly a prisoner. The other aiyaars fell in behind Pannalal and his guards.

Tej Singh reached the darbar with Pannalal. Maharaj Jai Singh was already there, and the court's business was in full swing. Tej Singh presented his prisoner to the king and made his way to his own seat.

‘Who do you have there, Tej Singh?’ asked the Maharaj.

‘Sire, of the five aiyaars who had come from Chunar, one has been captured. It is he who stands here before you. Please deal with him as you think appropriate,’ replied Tej Singh.

The Maharaj nodded, pleased at the aiyaar's capture. ‘What is your name?’ he asked, turning to look at the prisoner.

‘Crafty Khan, also known as Aiyaar Khan!’ shot back Pannalal.

The king laughed aloud at his wit and effrontery. ‘There is no need to question him; take him straight to the jail and hold him there under strict guard,’ he ordered.

The soldiers at once handcuffed and chained Pannalal, and dragged him away towards the prison cells. The Maharaj, delighted with Tej Singh's work, rewarded him with a hundred gold coins. Tej Singh accepted the king's generosity, bowing deeply in gracious reverence, and carefully put away the coins in his money bag.

Now, Ram Narayan, Badrinath and Jyotishi ji, in disguise, were watching this little drama from their place in the crowd. When Pannalal was led away by the soldiers, they followed him out; consulting amongst themselves, they came up with a cunning plan. Moving to a secluded spot, Badrinath quickly altered his appearance to look like Tej Singh, while Ram Narayan and Jyotishi ji disguised themselves as guards. Thus changed, they hurried after Pannalal and his escort of soldiers. Badrinath, in the guise of Tej Singh, called out, 'Stop, stop! The Maharaj has given fresh orders for this good-for-nothing aiyaar!' Catching up with the little party, he explained, 'When I pointed out that his fellow aiyaars would definitely make a plan to help him escape from the prison, the Maharaj agreed with me and decided that the prisoner would be safer in my custody. After all, I did catch him single-handedly. So hand this fellow over to me.'

The soldiers knew that that it had indeed been Tej Singh who had captured the aiyaar. So, suspecting nothing, they did as Tej Singh asked. The imitation Tej Singh, taking custody of Pannalal, set off towards the forest.

Meanwhile, the soldiers returned to report that they had handed over the prisoner to Tej Singh, only to find that the darbar was still in session, and that Tej Singh was seated there in his usual place. The soldiers, realizing that something was wrong, and terrified that they had let the prisoner escape, stood staring in silence. Noticing their confusion, Tej Singh frowned. 'What's wrong, have you locked up that aiyaar?' he asked.

Trembling in fear, the soldiers replied, 'Sir, we handed him over to you. You took the prisoner from us.'

Tej Singh, startled at their statement, said, 'Who? I? No, I have been sitting here since you took him away!'

The soldiers, afraid and amazed at the same time, could not utter a word, but stood there as though petrified.

'What has happened?' asked the king, turning to Tej Singh.

'Maharaj,' replied Tej Singh, 'the aiyaars have tricked us. They disguised themselves to look like me and took Pannalal away.'

The king was greatly incensed to hear this, and very angry with the soldiers, but Tej Singh interceded on their behalf. 'Maharaj,' he explained, 'this is how aiyaars are, they can trick and deceive even the best and the greatest, so these poor fellows hadn't any hope of resisting them.' Though the king calmed down at Tej Singh's words and agreed that the soldiers were not to blame, he remained upset and angry for a long time at Pannalal's escape.

Meanwhile, Badrinath and the others reached the forest with Pannalal, and resting under a tree asked him to relate all that had happened. When Pannalal explained the events leading to his capture, they understood that Bhagwandatt too had probably been taken prisoner by Tej Singh. ‘Please use your skills in divination to locate Bhagwandatt?’ they requested Pandit Jagannath.

The Pandit drew some complicated diagrams and after prolonged calculations, declared, ‘Bhagwandatt was definitely taken by Tej Singh. He is being held in a mountain cave two kos north of here.’

The aiyaars immediately set off in the direction of the cave. To keep them on course, Jyotishi ji would make fresh calculations from time to time—and so they reached the mountain cave. Entering the cave and walking a little way into it, they saw the same glimmer of light and the massive stone door that we have already described—and which, try as they might, they could not open. The Jyotishi did some more calculations and after thinking for a while, declared, ‘This door is protected by some tilisma and my divination skills do not work with such enchantments. We will have to think of some other way to open this door.’

Defeated by the magic, they came out of the cave, and stood there racking their brains, wondering how they could use aiyaari to open the door.

Narrative Sixteen

A FEW DAYS later, Tej Singh, on his usual round of reconnaissance, stepped out of the fort of Vijaygarh. A few hours of the day were still left, when, having wandered quite far from the fort, he saw Prince Birendra Singh sitting under a tree. His horse was tethered to the tree, while in front of him lay a barasingha, freshly slain, and next to the carcass a small fire burned brightly. As he came closer, he saw pieces of meat, placed on leaves being used as platters, lying in front of the prince.

The prince hailed Tej Singh loudly in delight, ‘Well met, Tej Singh! You have disappeared into Vijaygarh so completely that we do not even get news of you! Have you forgotten us so completely?’

Tej Singh laughed and replied, 'Am I in Vijaygarh on your behalf, or on my father's business?'

'Your father's!' declared the prince with a laugh. Tej Singh did not answer, but laughing as well, sat down next to the prince.

'Tell me, could you meet Chandrakanta?' asked Birendra Singh.

'No, unfortunately not,' replied Tej Singh. 'Ever since I reached Vijaygarh, I have been completely preoccupied with the job on hand. The other day I caught one of the aiyaars from Chunar, the Maharaj sent him off to prison, but before he could reach the jail, he was freed by his friends and escaped. None of them have been caught so far.'

'These people are veritable devils!' declared the prince.

'What's more, they have Badrinath with them. He is very shrewd and extremely clever. He is the only one I fear. Anyway, we shall see what happens. But tell me...what are you doing here? And that too, alone? None of your men is with you,' said Tej Singh.

'I had set out hunting this morning with several of my men,' explained the prince. 'We found no game till the afternoon, when suddenly this barasingha ran across my path. I gave chase, spurring my horse on as fast as it could go. It led me a fine dance, and soon all my companions were left behind. It is only now, a short while ago, that my arrow found its mark, and it fell here, where you see it lie. I was very hungry by this time, and thought I would roast and eat some of its meat. I was just about to do so when you arrived! Now you may as well roast it for both of us. I have already cleaned some of the meat, and sprinkled it with the spices I was fortunately carrying with me. Now roast the meat so that we may eat—but do hurry, I haven't eaten anything all day!'

Tej Singh quickly roasted the meat, and the two sat down beside a spring of clear water and began to eat. Tej Singh noticed that Birendra Singh was wiping the spices off the meat before biting into it. 'Why are you doing that?' he asked.

'I prefer it bland,' replied the prince. After only two or three bites, Birendra Singh put down the meat; he walked over to the nearby spring and cupping his hands, drank several long draughts of the clear, cool water. 'I have eaten enough. I cannot eat more after having stayed hungry the whole day,' he said.

'Whether you want any more or not, I do. It's too delicious to leave,' declared Tej Singh, and helped himself to more. At last, satisfied, he washed

his hands and face in the spring and said, 'Come, I will now see you to Naugarh, and then return to Vijaygarh.'

'Yes, let's go,' agreed Birendra Singh, mounting his horse. The two started off towards Naugarh, Birendra Singh on his horse, and Tej Singh walking beside him.

They had not walked very far when Tej Singh began to feel unwell. 'I don't know why my head is spinning,' he said.

'You ate too much of the meat,' replied the prince. 'That is making you ill.'

They had gone only a little further when Tej Singh grew dizzy and fell, unconscious, to the ground. Birendra Singh jumped off his horse, and binding Tej Singh's hands and feet, bundled him up tightly; slinging the bundle that was Tej Singh upon his back, and taking the horse by the reins, he turned back towards Vijaygarh. After walking some little distance, he stopped and gave a loud whistle, the sound of which echoed through the forest. Very soon, Kroor Singh, Pannalal, Ram Narayan and Jyotishi ji appeared from amongst the trees. 'Excellent job, Badrinath! You've caught a big one! Now we shall win this,' exclaimed Pannalal, delighted. Kroor Singh could barely contain his delight, so pleased was he at Tej Singh's capture.

Badrinath, for it was him in the guise of Prince Birendra Singh, set his load down upon the ground and turning to Ram Narayan, said, 'Now take this horse back to Naugarh, and leave it near the stable from which you had stolen it. The stable hands will find it and thinking it had wandered off by accident, take it in themselves.'

Ram Narayan mounted the horse and set off towards Naugarh. Badrinath picked up his bundle again, and after a brief discussion with the others, set off with them towards Chunar.

Now, Tej Singh's routine was well known in Vijaygarh. Every morning he would attend Maharaj Jai Singh's darbar, and after paying his respects to the king, he would take his seat and attend the proceedings. When Tej Singh did not appear at the darbar the next day and the next, the Maharaj became worried. 'We don't see Tej Singh these days,' he said to Hardayal Singh. 'Have you met him recently?'

'No, I haven't seen him either,' replied the Diwan Sahib. 'Today, after the darbar is adjourned, I will find out where he is and let you know.' After the court was adjourned, Hardayal Singh went to Tej Singh's house, and not finding him there, questioned the servants. 'He has not come home for

several days,' answered the servants. 'We have searched everywhere and asked everybody, but we cannot find him.'

Diwan Hardayal Singh was very disturbed at this news, and returned home, deep in thought. They *had* to find Tej Singh. It would be a matter of great shame for Vijaygarh if they did not. He sent out men in all directions to investigate and see if they could find any trace of him. He also sent a letter to Diwan Jeet Singh of Naugarh, bidding the messenger to return with a reply before the darbar sat again.

The messenger reached Naugarh that same evening and presented himself at the house of Jeet Singh, who received him with all due courtesy. Jeet Singh read Hardayal Singh's letter carefully, and came to the conclusion there was only one explanation for his son's disappearance: Tej Singh had been taken captive during the course of his aiyaari. He sent back the Diwan Sahib's messenger, stating in his reply that Tej Singh was not in Naugarh; then, taking matters into his own hands, sent out several of his own spies to find out what they could. The next morning, when the court sat, he informed Raja Surendra Singh of the latest developments—that a messenger had arrived the previous evening with a letter from Hardayal Singh asking whether Tej Singh was in Naugarh, because he had not been seen in Vijaygarh for the last several days, and that he had replied saying that Tej Singh was not with them.

'So where is Tej Singh?' asked the Raja in surprise. 'If he isn't in Vijaygarh, and he hasn't come here, where has he gone? Is it possible that he may have fallen into the hands of Maharaj Shivdatt's aiyaars? After all, he was one against five of them!'

'As far as I can understand the situation, I believe he must have been captured by the aiyaars. Anyway, we'll know in a few days,' said Jeet Singh.

Prince Birendra Singh was also present. Seated upon the king's right, he had listened intently to Jeet Singh's report. Turning to the king, he asked, 'With your permission, may I be given leave to go in search of Tej Singh?'

Diwan Jeet Singh smiled at the prince and shook his head. 'There is no doubt about your bravery and valour, but consider that we are dealing with aiyaars here who have outsmarted Tej Singh, himself an aiyaar, and of no mean ability. So what purpose would be served by your confronting them, for it is a certainty that you will be confounded by them,' he said. 'This much we do know, that if an aiyaar is caught by another aiyaar, he is not killed but merely kept prisoner. If Tej Singh has indeed been taken prisoner by those

aiyaars, then he is being held somewhere, and will somehow manage to escape, for he is very adept at his art. Besides, this is all in a day's work for him—anyone who is an aiyaar knows that at some time or the other, during the course of his aiyaari, he is likely to be caught and held captive. There is no cause to worry about him. Be patient, let us wait a week or two. If he has still not returned in that time, then take action.'

'You are right,' said the prince, 'but we must search for him. We cannot abandon him on the excuse that he is clever and will escape. It cannot be that we will not search for him!'

'We shall see. You are more worried about him because of the friendship you bear him,' said Jeet Singh.

'If nothing else, perhaps we can send out men to investigate,' suggested Raja Surendra Singh.

'I have already sent out several spies for that purpose,' replied Diwan Jeet Singh.

The king and the prince fell silent at this, but they could not stop worrying about Tej Singh.

The next day, in Vijaygarh, Maharaj Jai Singh asked Hardayal Singh again, 'Any news of Tej Singh?'

'There is no sign of him here,' answered the Diwan Sahib, 'but perhaps there will be news of him from Naugarh. I am waiting for my messenger to return.'

The messenger returned just as the diwan stopped speaking. Hardayal Singh read Jeet Singh's answer and looked up. 'Tej Singh is not in Naugarh. The message comes from his father, Jeet Singh, in reply to my letter,' he said, vexation and concern in his voice.

'Has an attempt been made to find him?' asked the Maharaj.

'I have sent out some of my spies out to investigate,' replied Hardayal Singh.

The Maharaj was greatly disturbed over Tej Singh's disappearance. He adjourned the darbar and returned to his palace. 'This is what is called a twist of Fate,' he said to the Maharani. 'As it is, Kroor Singh had created enough trouble between me and Surendra Singh; despite that he sent Tej Singh to help us, and now he, Tej Singh, has vanished! This makes it very awkward for me with Surendra Singh! I, too, have grown very fond of Tej Singh. When I think of him—his behaviour, his demeanour, his cultured

manners—I feel happy. He is a very able young man. And as for his temperament—I have never seen despair or discontent on his face.’

The king and the queen discussed Tej Singh and his disappearance for a while. As luck would have it, Chapala was standing there and, hearing what they had to say, quietly left the room and went in search of Chandrakanta. She tried to tell Chandrakanta what she had learnt, but overwhelmed with concern for Tej Singh, her throat constricting with emotion, she could not.

‘What is wrong?’ cried Chandrakanta, full of concern at Chapala’s agitated state. ‘Tell me what is upsetting you? Say something?’

Chapala could not answer; instead her eyes filled with uncharacteristic tears. Chandrakanta grew even more worried. What could it be that was making Chapala weep, she wondered. ‘Why are you crying? Why don’t you speak?’ she asked.

Chapala pulled herself together, and getting the words out with great difficulty, said, ‘I heard the Maharaj tell the Maharani that Tej Singh has been taken prisoner by Maharaj Shivdatt’s aiyaars. This means that Birendra Singh will also not be able to visit you easily, because Tej Singh was the only help and support he had.’ She couldn’t contain herself any more, and her eyes filling with tears again, she began to sob heartbrokenly. Seeing her condition, Chandrakanta realized that Chapala was in love with Tej Singh—which, she felt was a good development; there could be no harm in it. At the same time, she was deeply upset by Chapala’s state and Tej Singh’s disappearance.

‘Is this how you plan to get him back? By weeping? Will that help to free him? If you can’t do anything, then maybe I should!’ she chided Chapala.

Champa, too, was sitting there and had heard Chapala’s grief stricken story. ‘If you give me permission, may I go in search of Tej Singh?’ she asked.

‘You are not yet able enough,’ replied Chapala, through her tears.

‘Why, what is lacking in me? Am I not good at aiyaari now?’ protested Champa.

‘Yes, you are good at aiyaari, but not good enough to deal with the men who have managed to outsmart and take captive someone as clever and cunning as Tej Singh!’ explained Chapala. ‘If the princess gives me permission, I will go in search of him,’ she added, turning to Chandrakanta.

‘Are you waiting to seek permission even in this matter?’ exclaimed Chandrakanta. ‘If you become the one to rescue him, he will be yours for the rest of your life. Go now, go at once, do not delay! Go!’

Chapala turned to Champa and said, 'Be very careful in my absence, with all these aiyaars around. Make sure that they do not succeed in creating some new problem. And remember, whatever may be happening elsewhere, your first concern must be the princess. If you make a mistake, and if the princess faces any kind of trouble in my absence, I will not forgive you for the rest of my life!'

'Rest assured, I will be careful and on my guard,' said Champa.

Chapala gathered together her tools and instruments of aiyaari, and taking with her a few clothes and some jewellery in the fashion of the south, set out in search of Tej Singh.

Narrative Seventeen

CHAPALA WAS NO ordinary woman: not only was she blessed with beauty and grace, she was also endowed with physical strength so that to fight three or four men, or to take them prisoner, was for her an easy task. She was well versed in the use of weapons, adept at aiyaari, and in several other arts as well. She was an accomplished singer and could play musical instruments of all kinds, she was a graceful and talented dancer, she knew the art of making fireworks...the list of her accomplishments was endless, for perhaps there was no art or skill that Chapala did not know. Fair of face, she had a form and figure that was perfect in every manner, and her delicate hands and slim feet made it seem that even to strike her with a flower would be akin to murder. Whenever she needed to step out for any reason, she would deliberately hide her beauty or put on a disguise.

It is that time when the shades of evening have given way to darkness. The night has set in and the full moon is shining in all its glory. Chapala is striding through the night without bothering to disguise herself. Her bag of aiyaari slung under her arm, a dagger and a coil of rope at her waist, she steps swiftly through the trees, taking care to remain within the forest. Her yearning for Tej Singh has made her careless of her own body so that she has lost all sense of where she is going and why. She is unseeing of what lies before her, whether a stone or a boulder, a river or a stream. All she knows is that she must keep walking, one foot after another. Tears stream from her

eyes drenching her clothes, and every now and then she stumbles so that her fingers are torn and bleeding, but she doesn't care.

She did not see the small, swift stream that flowed across her path, and fell with a thud into it and hit her head; the cut bled profusely, and the cold water drenched her to the skin. The shock of her fall brought her back to her senses: she had set out to find Tej Singh, but in her present state of mind she could not, would not succeed! She must pull herself together! 'O my love, I forgot you completely, I didn't think of rescuing you, but lost myself in my own selfish worry—it is for that that I have been punished,' she cried out in anguish and remorse.

Chapala picked herself up and took stock of her surroundings. She realized that she was in the middle of a dense forest and had completely lost her way. Pushing down the panic and terror that threatened to swamp her, she turned away from the stream into which she had fallen, and began to think. There was no doubt in her mind that Tej Singh had been kidnapped by Maharaj Shivdatt's aiyaars. 'So they must have taken him to Chunar,' she reasoned. 'I will go to Chunar first; if I do not find him there, I will think of what to do next,' she decided and began to look for a proper path through the forest. It was past midnight when she finally found the road; she walked through the night, crossing hill after hill to Chunar.

When dawn broke, she disguised herself as a soldier. Intent only on covering the distance to Chunar as fast as possible, she did not stop to rest or even to eat or drink. At last, hungry and thirsty, she reached Chunar as the sun was setting. Determined to find Tej Singh or lose her life doing so, she had vowed that no food would pass her lips till she had some news of him. Entering Chunar, she did not pause to rest, but began searching for him in the city. Suddenly she had an idea: disguising herself to look like Pannalal, she made her way to the home of the aiyaar Ghasita Singh.

We have already written that of the six aiyaars, four had gone to Vijaygarh, while Ghasita Singh and Chunnilal had stayed back in Chunar. Ghasita Singh stood up and greeted Pannalal, and asked, 'Well, Pannalal, whom have you brought this time?'

'No one, this time,' replied Pannalal. 'Instead, I have come with a question, to ask you whether Najim is here or not, we have had no news of him for two days.'

'Well, as far as I know, he hasn't come here...' said Ghasita Singh.

‘Then where is he? Who could have captured him? There are no aiyaars left in Vijaygarh to take him prisoner!’ exclaimed Pannalal.

‘As for that, I can’t say yes or no with any certainty, for I don’t know how many aiyaars there might or might not be in Vijaygarh,’ shrugged Ghasita Singh. ‘Yes, I do know of Tej Singh, for he is notorious—but he has now been captured, and must at this very moment be weeping in his cell in the fort.’

‘Never mind, there was no harm in finding out,’ said Pannalal, pretending indifference. ‘Anyway, I must go now, I cannot stop.’ And the false Pannalal took his leave of Ghasita Singh.

Chapala breathed again. Now that she knew where Tej Singh was—that he was right there in Chunar, that he had come to no harm—she found her confidence return. She was certain that she would find a way to free him. She walked out of the fort and on to the open fields outside where, sitting on the banks of the Ganga, she made a meal of some dried fruits that she was carrying with her, and slaked her thirst with water from the river.

Rested and refreshed, she now made herself up to look like a wandering singer. Chapala did not need to make herself up to look beautiful; her natural loveliness was such that she could put to shame a thousand beauties with it. Ironically, it was for this very reason—that her great beauty should not mark her out or let her be identified—that she had to change her appearance.

When she was ready, she made her way to the rear of the royal palace, a flute in her hand. She settled herself in an open space outside the palace and began to sing a sad, melancholy song of heartbreak and longing in a high, clear voice; from time to time she would stop singing, and play the same sad notes on the flute instead.

The night was more than half done. Maharaj Shivdatt and his queen sat on the palace terrace, enjoying the cool breeze and whispering softly into each other’s ears, when suddenly, Chapala’s song floated out into the night. The king and the queen, captivated by her voice, grew still and silent. As they listened, the song stopped, and the clear, fluid notes of the flute were heard instead. The king could hold back no longer. He summoned a serving girl and said, ‘Find out who sings so sweet, and have her brought to the palace at once.’

The palace guards ran to obey, and found a slender, delicate looking young woman seated behind the palace, lost in her own song. She was so

lovely that they were rendered speechless as they stood there watching her. After a while they found their voices and said, 'The Maharaj has asked you to come to the palace. He is very eager to hear you sing.' Chapala did not refuse, but accompanied the guards back to the palace and, standing outside, began to sing. Her song made the king restless with desire, and he ordered that she be taken into the audience chamber. 'Light the lamps, and make all arrangements for her to sing. I, too, shall follow,' he ordered.

'The singer sounds like a woman from her voice,' remarked the queen. 'What harm is there if you invite her here, into the palace?'

'First let me take a look at her and see what manner of woman she is,' replied the king. 'If she is suitable to be invited into the palace, then that shall be done, and you too may meet her.'

The audience chamber was quickly made ready and, as the king entered, Mistress Chapala bowed and saluted him most gracefully. The king saw a remarkably beautiful woman, fair of skin, dressed in a black sari which she wore with a light green embroidered choli; she had draped her sari in the southern style, leaving her head uncovered. Her hair, twisted into a knot behind her head, was held in place with a pin and adorned with a tiny, golden flower. She wore a round, vermilion bindi on her forehead, delicate gold rings set with jewels in her ears and in her nose a coral stud. A gold tika in her hair, a heavy gold collar around her neck, gold bracelets on her wrists and above them black bangles, around her waist a tasselled, golden girdle and silver anklets on her feet completed her ensemble. Her attire was elegant enough, but her perfect form and graceful carriage caused even greater turmoil in the king's heart. Upon looking carefully, the king saw a small, black til on her chin; the blemish only served to make her beauty more radiant.

The king, intoxicated by Chapala's beauty, lost all sense of who he was and where he was; he forgot his Maharani, of whom he had been so enamoured only a short while ago, and words of admiration slipped out of his mouth unbidden. Their eyes met and locked, and the king invited Chapala to sit beside him. Mistress Chapala, swinging her hips flirtatiously, a playful look in her eyes, went up to the king, and saluting him, sat down. The king, mesmerized by her beauty, could not speak a word, but stared at her in silent and unblinking admiration. After a while, recollecting himself, he asked, 'Where is your home? Who are you? What do you do for a living? It is strange to see a woman as beautiful as you wandering alone at night.'

‘I am from Gwalior, the daughter of Patlapa Katthak, the bard. My name is Rambha. My father used to be a great singer. I fell in love with a young man, but he became angry with me as lovers do, and went away. I now roam the world looking for him. In the hope that I may find him again some day, I often visit the courts of kings—he, too, is a wonderful singer, and I would not be surprised to find him a singer at some king’s darbar. Tonight, in my sorrow, I was singing to myself, when you heard me and summoned me—and so I came.’

‘Your voice is very pure. Sing for me now, so that I may listen to my heart’s content,’ said the king.

‘The Maharaj is very gracious to honour one as insignificant as me, he has asked me to sing for him and to sit beside him. I will gladly sing for you—but the song would be more enjoyable if you call the musicians in your court to accompany me.’

The king was delighted. ‘Summon the musicians!’ he commanded.

The guards ran to call the musicians, who were taken aback at the king’s request—three watches of the night had passed, and the king wanted music! They had no option but to obey, and so they came. But when they saw the beauty of the woman who sat there waiting to sing, their reluctance vanished. They had come there irritated and angry, but now were all smiles. They tuned their instruments and sat down, and Chapala began to sing. The magic of the hour could not be described in words—the music, the wonder of Chapala’s song, the beauty of the night at that late hour, so enchanted the king that he sat unable to speak or move from his seat. The musicians, too, were struck dumb with wonder. Despite the ungodly hour, a large number of men gathered to hear Chapala sing.

She had sung just a couple of ragas when it was day. She sang a morning raga in acknowledgement of the sunrise and stopped. ‘Maharaj,’ she said, ‘it is now dawn. I am tired for I have come from very far away and have been travelling these last few days. If you give me permission, I will take my leave of you.’

Maharaj Shivdatt started, and realized that it was indeed daybreak. He took off the necklace of pearls he was wearing and gave it to Chapala as reward. ‘I have not had my fill of your singing yet,’ he said. ‘Stay here a few more nights and sing for us.’

‘If the king honours me thus, can I refuse?’ she replied.

The king ordered that arrangements be made for Rambha to stay, and that night, another gathering be arranged for her to sing. Rambha was given an elegant mansion for her use, together with servants and attendants to look after her.

That night, all the worthy men of the town gathered to hear Rambha sing. She paid her respects to the king, and sat down. There was no man in the gathering who was not hypnotized by her beauty or sighing soulfully when he looked at her. They praised her to each other. ‘What innocence, what purity! Have you ever seen such beauty?’ they exclaimed in wonder.

Rambha began to sing, and the audience sat, as still and silent as statues, mesmerized by her voice. After a single song, she stopped. ‘Maharaj,’ she said, ‘I had once, long ago, sung at the court of Raja Surendra Singh of Naugarh. A young man called Tej Singh had accompanied my singing on the lute. I will never forget that evening. His playing had been magical—I have never sung as well as I had sung then. I visited Naugarh again a few days ago, but he was not there any more. They said that he had vanished. So I didn’t stay there either, and came away.’ Rambha sighed and fell silent.

The Maharaj was by now completely under her spell. ‘Tej Singh is here, but as my prisoner,’ he confessed. ‘The problem is that he will never consent to play the lute while he remains a prisoner, and I will not release him.’

‘When he hears my name, he will remember that evening in Naugarh, but yes, he is stubborn, and unless he is requested to play in one particular manner, he will not accompany me, not even if I beg him to,’ replied Rambha.

‘What manner is that in which he must be asked?’ inquired the king.

‘First,’ said Rambha, ‘it must be a Brahmin who goes to summon him here, and the Brahmin must be no more than twenty years of age; second, the Brahmin must go alone—if you are afraid that Tej Singh may run away, then keep him fettered, he won’t object to that; and third, the lute that you give him to play must be of the best quality.’

‘Those conditions are easily met,’ replied the king. He looked around and spotted a Brahmin boy called Chetram who was about the right age, and ordered him to go to Tej Singh’s cell and bring him back with him; he also directed his munshi to make sure that his instructions were carried out properly. ‘Let Tej Singh’s guards know that they are to let him out with the

boy; they should not stop him. But yes, make sure the chains on his feet remain so he cannot run away.'

Chetram, following the king's orders, went to fetch Tej Singh from his prison cell, while the munshi instructed the guards as the king had commanded. The guards, who could have no objections to the king's orders, let Tej Singh leave his cell, accompanied only by the Brahmin boy. Tej Singh, who had understood at once that he had a well-wisher outside, who had engineered this subtle and clever way of reaching him, happily followed Chetram.

When he reached the gathering, he saw a beautiful woman who seemed to be the centre of attention. 'Welcome, Tej Singh!' called the woman as she saw him enter. 'Rambha has been waiting for you forever! Will she ever forget the lute you played in Naugarh?' she cried, winking at him with her left eye. Tej Singh understood at once that this was Chapala, and replied. 'Rambha! Is that you? Even if Death were standing before me, I would play the lute for you before I died—for where will I ever find one who sings as sweet as you?'

Though Maharaj Shivdatt was puzzled by this exchange between Rambha and Tej Singh, he did not pay much heed to it. His only preoccupation at that moment was that Tej Singh should play the lute, so that Rambha would sing. A lute of the highest quality was placed before Tej Singh. He began to play, and Rambha to sing—the music they made defied description! The king listened as though hypnotized. And as for the others, what can be said about their condition!

Tej Singh set down the lute after a single measure. 'Why have you stopped? Play some more!' cried the king.

'No, no more,' said Tej Singh. 'I play only a single tune in an evening. If you want to hear more, I can play again tomorrow.'

'Maharaj, this is true! This is the problem with him! Raja Surendra Singh, under whom he used to serve, would beg him till he was exhausted, but he would not listen, and would set down his lute after a single tune! But what does it matter? Listen to him again tomorrow!' said Rambha.

'What a peculiar fellow,' thought the king to himself. 'What does he get out of playing only a single song? But it's a pity, all the same, that he is not part of my court.'

Rambha also begged off singing, and the Maharaj regretfully dismissed the gathering. Tej Singh was sent back to his prison cell with Chetram

Brahmin, and the rest went home, dissatisfied, longing to hear more of Rambha's enchanted singing.

The king was now consumed with the need to hear Rambha sing to Tej Singh's lute. The second night, too, a similar gathering was called, and Chetram was sent as before to bring Tej Singh from his prison cell. That night Tej Singh again played but a single song and set down the lute. The Maharaj was still not satisfied, and decreed that a full gathering be held again the following night. The next evening, the men gathered as before, some came early and sat waiting expectantly. But Chapala, disguised as Chetram, reached Tej Singh's prison an hour before he was due to be fetched. The guards had their orders from the king, and were expecting Chetram; and so, as they had been doing for the last few days, they opened the door of Tej Singh's cell and handed him over to Chetram.

Chetram, who was actually Chapala, led Tej Singh away. After walking a little distance, Chetram undid Tej Singh's chains, and the two ran as fast as they could, out of the town and into the forest.

In the forest, Chapala stopped and changed back to her own appearance. Tej Singh could not praise her enough. 'Do not embarrass me with your words of praise,' said Chapala. 'I am not as clever as you say I am. Besides, I had no need to free you—it is only because Chandrakanta in her goodness wanted you freed that I came to help you.'

'Of course, why would you have need of me,' retorted Tej Singh. 'I was the one who was in need—which is why I became a musician to accompany you! A lowly job that no one in my family has ever done before, I had to do for you!'

Chapala laughed and replied, 'Enough, now forgive me, don't talk in this way.'

'Forgive you? Never! I won't let you go without my wages!' declared Tej Singh.

'What do I have that I can give you as wages?' asked Chapala.

'Whatever you have is enough for me,' said Tej Singh.

'Let such talk be,' replied Chapala. 'Tell me instead—do you return empty-handed from here, or do we show Maharaj Shivdatt some of our skill?'

'I would love to show him some of our talent,' said Tej Singh, 'but the decision is up to you.'

'We must do something,' declared Chapala.

After a great deal of thought, the two came up with a plan, to carry out which they moved to another part of the forest by the fort.

Narrative Eighteen

NOW HEAR WHAT happened at the gathering called by Maharaj Shivdatt Singh.

The king entered the audience hall, and graced the gathering with his presence. When Rambha did not appear, he sent a chobdar to fetch her, and Chetram Brahmin to bring Tej Singh from his prison. A little later, the chobdar returned and reported, ‘Maharaj, Rambha is not in her house, she has gone away it seems.’ The king, who was by now infatuated with Rambha, was deeply upset to hear this. Filled with longing for Rambha, he ordered that men be sent in all directions to find her. Meanwhile, Chetram returned from the jail and reported that Tej Singh was no longer in his cell.

The king was in shock, the gathering stupefied—what a fool that slip of a singing girl had made of them! The aiyaars, Ghasita Singh and Chunnilal, professed the view that Rambha was no singer, but an aiyaar dressed as a woman, who had come to free Tej Singh and had succeeded.

‘Perhaps,’ said the king, ‘but aiyaar or not, whoever he was, his skill is worthy of reward! The two of you had heard him, you were present in the gathering when he sang. Had your brains gone to sleep then that you could not recognize him for what he was? Shame on you, that you call yourself aiyaars!’

The king, filled with grief and anger in equal measure, retired to his palace. The others too, went home, and the news of Rambha’s disappearance spread through the town like wildfire—this was all that anyone was talking about that day.

The next day, as the king sat full of anger in his darbar, a chobdar came up to him. ‘Sire,’ said the chobdar, ‘the singer was in truth a woman. She disguised herself as Chetram Mishra to help Tej Singh escape. I have just seen them with my own eyes—they are in the chir forest!’

The king was even more astonished when he heard this, and ordered several of his men to go in search of them and bring them back at once. But the chobdar cautioned him. ‘Maharaj,’ he said, ‘they won’t be caught this

way; they will run away. Yes, if Ghasita Singh and Chunnilal were to come with me, I could point them out from a distance, and then Ghasita Singh and Chunnilal could use their cunning to trap them.'

Maharaj Shivdatt liked this plan, and ordered the two aiyaars to accompany the chobdar into the forest. The chobdar led them to the spot where he had seen Tej Singh, but there was no one there. 'Now where should we look next?' asked Ghasita Singh.

'Did you think they would have remained sitting under the same tree all this while?' retorted the chobdar. 'Look around, they must be here somewhere!'

'Oh all right,' said Ghasita Singh, 'why don't you lead the way then?' and the men began to search the surrounding forest for Tej Singh and his companion.

Just then there appeared an Ahir woman carrying a pot of milk on her head. The chobdar hailed her and asked, 'Have you seen a woman and a man together near here?'

'Yes, yes,' she replied. 'I have my cattle pens in that forest, I keep several cows and buffaloes there. I have just sold them two paisa worth of milk, and I am on my way to the town to sell the rest of it.'

The chobdar, pleased with her reply, took out some coins to reward her, but she refused, saying, 'I don't take money for nothing! Of course, if you were to buy and drink the milk I have to sell for those coins, I would accept with gratitude. It would save me a trip to the city.'

'All right, sell us the milk then,' said the chobdar.

The Ahiran set down her pot and began to ladle out the milk.

'Come, why don't you have some too?' said the chobdar to the others.

'No, we don't feel like it,' answered the two aiyaars.

'As you please,' replied the chobdar, drinking up the milk the woman poured for him with great appreciation. 'What excellent milk!' he exclaimed. 'Try some! It's truly very good!' Upon his insistence, the two aiyaars also drank some of the milk, and paying the Ahiran her money, they continued on their way in search of Tej Singh.

They had not walked far when the chobdar said, 'I don't know why, but my head is spinning.'

'I'm feeling dizzy too!' said Ghasita Singh.

Chunnilal opened his mouth to speak, but before he could say anything, he fell to the ground in a faint as did Ghasita Singh and the chobdar.

The Ahiran was not far away. Seeing the three stumble and fall, she came running, and pulling out some lakhlakha, she held it under the chobdar's nose and revived him. The chobdar was no other than Tej Singh in disguise, and the milk-seller was Chapala. As soon as Tej Singh recovered, he changed his appearance to look like himself. They tied up the two aiyaars securely into bundles. Chapala slung one of the bundles upon her back, while Tej Singh took the other, and thus laden, they made their way to Naugarh.

Narrative Nineteen

WITH CHAPALA AWAY in Chunar, Champa was left on her own in Vijaygarh. 'There are many aiyaars here these days,' she thought to herself. 'I must ensure that nothing goes wrong in Chapala's absence. So I need to devise a scheme that will catch and stop any trickery by the aiyaars, and which will also allow me to sleep peacefully at night.' Thinking thus, she gathered together certain ingredients and ground them into a powder. That night, after the palace was asleep and Chandrakanta had gone to bed, Champa mixed the powder with some water, and smeared the resultant paste on a few square yards of the floor around the door of Chandrakanta's bedchamber. Satisfied with her handiwork, she slipped under the princess's bed and lay down.

The paste that Champa had spread on the floor around the door had a very useful property: upon drying, it became invisible, but should anyone tread upon a surface treated with it, it would cause a loud report like a firecracker. And so, having set her trap, Champa slept in peace all night. No one entered the princess's bedchamber and when morning came, Champa washed away the paste.

The next night she came up with another scheme. First, she fashioned a mask of clay and painted it to look like Chandrakanta. Then, laying it upon Chandrakanta's pillows, she arranged the bedclothes to make it seem as though the princess lay asleep in bed. She took care, though, to let the clay dummy's features show, and ensured that there was just enough light in the bedchamber so that should anyone enter, he should be able to discern clearly the princess lying fast asleep on her bed. She spread the same paste of the

previous night all around the bed. ‘Rest tonight in the other room, princess,’ she said.

Chandrakanta understood and retired to the other room for the night. Champa spread the special paste around the door of the other room where the real princess slept, and hid herself in a small room off Chandrakanta’s bedchamber where the dummy rested. Blowing out her lamp, she lay down to sleep.

It was past midnight when she heard a loud ‘bang’ as though a small firecracker had been set off; it came from the room where she had placed the clay dummy. Champa jumped up, and bolting the door from the outside, set about making a great commotion. The palace women came running to find out what the noise was all about and gathered outside the door. One of them ran to call the king. Maharaj Jai Singh came running, with half a dozen soldiers from the palace guard who broke open the door of Chandrakanta’s bedchamber. The two aiyaars, Ram Narayan and Pannalal, stood within. As the king’s soldiers crowded into the room to catch them, the aiyaars drew their daggers and fought back furiously; even though they succeeded in wounding some of the soldiers, they were finally overpowered. The Maharaj ordered that they be imprisoned, and then turned to Champa for a full report of what had happened.

Champa related the events of the night and explained the trap she had laid to protect the princess. The Maharaj, pleased with her vigilance, rewarded her handsomely. ‘Where is Chapala?’ he asked, looking around.

‘She is not well,’ answered Champa.

The Maharaj, accepting her answer, did not ask any more questions and retired to his room to sleep.

Next morning, Maharaj Jai Singh summoned the two aiyaars into his darbar and questioned them. ‘What are your names?’ he asked.

‘Sartod Singh, Breaker of Heads,’ shot back Pannalal.

The king was greatly angered by his cheek. ‘These men are vicious and evil, they aren’t afraid of anything! Take them away and lock them up, but watch them carefully!’ he declared. The two aiyaars were once again taken away and jailed.

‘Do you have any news of Tej Singh?’ asked the Maharaj, turning to Diwan Hardayal Singh.

‘Sire, I have heard nothing so far,’ replied Hardayal Singh. ‘Maybe if we flog these two aiyaars we have caught, they will tell us something.’

‘All right,’ agreed the king, ‘though Tej Singh will be upset with us when he returns. After all, it is against the rules to flog aiyaars. Wait for Tej Singh a few days more, and then do what you think fit. Meanwhile, keep the army primed and prepared for war, for it will not be surprising if Shivdatt Singh decides to lay siege to us now.’

‘I am ready for war, sire,’ said Hardayal Singh, ‘except for one matter on which I wish to consult the Maharaj, and which I will discuss with you when we are alone.’

When the darbar had been adjourned, the king summoned Hardayal Singh. ‘What was it that you wished to discuss with me?’ he asked.

‘Maharaj,’ said Hardayal Singh, ‘Tej Singh had warned me several times, as had also Prince Birendra Singh and his father, that the Mussalmans here all support Kroor, and so we must make sure that we remove them as far as possible from positions of responsibility. I have observed that what they say seems to be true. I will deal with this as you instruct me.’

‘I was going to mention this to you myself,’ said the king. ‘I will say it now—gradually remove from office all Mussalmans who hold sensitive posts, or are in positions of authority.’

‘Very well, sire, it shall be done,’ said Hardayal Singh, and took leave of the king.

Narrative Twenty

MAHARAJ SHIVDATT SINGH sent Ghasita Singh and Chunnilal in search of Tej Singh, and adjourning his darbar, retired to his palace. But he was troubled, for his heart was entangled in Rambha’s dark tresses. That evening, he was unable to smile even at the Maharani.

‘Why are you looking so downcast?’ asked the Maharani.

‘It’s nothing, I haven’t slept enough, I am just tired,’ replied the king.

‘You had promised that you would invite that girl, the singer, into the palace so that I too could hear her. What happened to that promise?’ reminded the queen.

‘She fooled us all and disappeared—so whose song will you hear?’ answered the king.

‘Why, what happened? Tell me properly,’ said Maharani Kalavati, surprised at the king’s statement.

‘I can’t explain just now, my heart is deeply troubled,’ answered the king. Leaving the queen’s chamber, he hurried to his own private room, where he threw himself on his bed, and lost himself in thoughts of Rambha. ‘Who is this Rambha?’ he wondered. ‘There is no doubt that she was a woman, not a man in disguise. Why did she help Tej Singh to escape? Was it him she had been talking about, when she said she had lost her heart to someone? Oh Rambha, your arrow has wounded me. Is that why you came here? To pierce my heart with your arrow? What should I do? How do I find you again? I know nothing about you—how and where do I search for you?’ The Maharaj tossed and turned in his bed all night, unable to sleep, so distraught was he by the thoughts of Rambha.

Next morning, as soon as he entered the darbar, he asked, ‘Have Ghasita Singh and Chunnilal returned with news of Tej Singh?’ Learning that they hadn’t come back yet, the Maharaj grew even more disturbed. Though he carried on the business of the darbar as usual that morning, listening to the pleas and petitions of his people, his mind was preoccupied with Rambha. Just then he saw Badrinath, Najim, Jyotishi ji and Kroor Singh enter the court. They saluted him and sat down. The Maharaj noticed that they looked dispirited and unhappy, which made him even more anxious; he did not question them in the open court, but waited till the darbar was adjourned, and then spoke to them in private.

‘So what did you accomplish in Vijaygarh?’ asked the Maharaj.

‘Sire, only this—Bhagwandatt was taken captive by Tej Singh while Pannalal and Ram Narayan were caught by a woman named Champa who trapped them with great cunning and cleverness. Now I am the only aiyaar left of the four of us you had sent. Of their men, we could capture only Tej Singh, whom I had delivered to you. Apart from this, we have accomplished nothing,’ replied Pandit Badrinath.

‘Tej Singh has been rescued—and by a woman at that. The trick she played on us deserves punishment! Though I can say with certainty that it *was* a woman who helped Tej Singh escape his prison, regretfully, I cannot say who she was. She freed Tej Singh, and as she went, I suspect, she also caught Ghasita Singh and Chunnilal, for they went in search of her and have still not returned. Helping Kroor has been to my disadvantage. Anyway, now that all of you are here, find out who that woman was, who first stole my heart with

her voice, and then made a fool of all of us and helped Tej Singh to escape. Even now all I can see before me is her bewitching beauty.'

'Sire, I know her!' exclaimed Najim. 'I am sure the woman was Chandrakanta's great friend Chapala—there is no other woman who could have done this.'

'Is Chapala even more beautiful than Chandrakanta?' asked the king.

'Sire, Chapala cannot compete with Chandrakanta, but after her, if there is beauty in this world, then it is Chapala's—and what's more, she is in love with Tej Singh.'

The Maharaj fell silent, lost in wonder at Najim's words; after a while he looked up and said, 'Whatever happens, till I can get Chandrakanta and Chapala, I will know no peace. It is better that I write to Jai Singh, asking for them.'

'Maharaj, Jai Singh will pay no heed to your letter,' said Kroor.

'There is no harm in writing to him first,' replied the king. 'We can always attack Vijaygarh, and if he disregards my letter, well, then that is what we will do!' He called for his chief munshi and ordered, 'Write a letter to Raja Jai Singh that he should give me Chandrakanta's hand in marriage and include Chapala in her dowry.'

The chief munshi wrote the letter as directed and the king, affixing his seal, handed it to Badrinath, ordering him to deliver the letter to Raja Jai Singh. Badrinath could find no objection, and he did as his king commanded.

Narrative Twenty-One

THE NEXT DAY, as Maharaj Jai Singh sat in his darbar, asking Hardayal Singh for news of Tej Singh, who should walk in but Tej Singh himself—carrying a huge and heavy bundle on his back! He set down his bundle in the centre of the audience chamber and bowing low, saluted the king.

The Maharaj, delighted to see him, gestured for him to sit and asked, 'So tell us, sir! Where have you been all these days? We were very anxious about you. Your father, Diwan Jeet Singh, must be worried too, because we had sent a messenger to him as well in our search for you!'

‘Sire, this devoted servant of yours fell into the hands of the enemy, but due to your good wishes, he has escaped, and for good measure, has brought back two aiyaars from Chunar with him.’

The Maharaj, pleased, removed a costly bracelet from his wrist and gave it to Tej Singh as reward, and said, ‘Here, too, we have two aiyaars whom Champa took prisoner in the palace! Send these other two to the same prison!’

Hardayal Singh ordered the guards to undo the bundle that Tej Singh had brought; the soldiers did so—to reveal the unconscious forms of Ghasita Singh and Chunnilal. Tej Singh revived them, and they were led off to the same prison where Ram Narayan and Pannalal were being held.

‘Sire,’ requested Tej Singh, ‘everyone in Naugarh must also be worried about me. If I have your permission, may I go and see them?’

‘Yes, you must go,’ agreed the king, ‘but come back quickly.’ Turning to Hardayal Singh he added, ‘Take some gifts on my behalf, and accompany Tej Singh to Naugarh.’ Hardayal Singh bowed and gathering costly gifts for Raja Surendra Singh and ordering some men to accompany them, left for Naugarh with Tej Singh.

Meanwhile, Chapala reached Vijaygarh, much to Chandrakanta’s relief. ‘Tell me everything,’ ordered Chandrakanta, embracing her in welcome. Chapala related all her adventures in detail and the two friends sat talking for a long time.

‘Your protégée here also distinguished herself,’ said Chandrakanta, smiling at Champa, who also sat listening to the conversation. ‘She trapped and caught two aiyaars in the palace!’

Chapala, delighted to hear the story, hugged Champa, and praised her warmly.

Meanwhile, Tej Singh and Hardayal Singh were on their way to Naugarh. ‘It will be better if we enter Naugarh in the morning,’ said Hardayal Singh. ‘The darbar will be in session, and everyone will be present.’ Tej Singh agreed, and so the two sought shelter along the way for the night. The next morning they reached Naugarh and went at once to the court. Birendra Singh, who sat in his customary place next to the king, was so happy to see Tej Singh again that it seemed as though the wealth of all the worlds had been given to him.

Hardayal Singh saluted the king and the prince, and greeted his counterpart, Jeet Singh. Tej Singh, too, touched his head to the Raja’s feet in

respect; Raja Surendra Singh raised him up with affection. Tej Singh then greeted his father, touching his feet in respect. And having paid his respects to his elders, he turned to his friend, the prince, and sat down beside him. Hardayal Singh presented the Maharaj's gifts to the king, and a set of costly raiment to the prince; the Raja and Birendra Singh were both delighted and pleased with his courtesy. The greetings done, Tej Singh related his adventures. He was careful to hide Chapala's role in his escape, and at the end added only that he had captured two more aiyaars and brought them back with him, and that the aiyaars were now being held securely in Vijaygarh.

The Raja was greatly pleased and rewarded Tej Singh handsomely. 'Now, go at once to the palace and meet everyone who has been worrying about you, especially your mother—only she knows what she went through in your absence.'

Tej Singh left as directed, and the king, giving Jeet Singh the responsibility of looking after Hardayal Singh, adjourned the court and retired.

Finally, when he had met everyone and set their hearts and minds at ease, Tej Singh made his way to Birendra Singh's room. 'You told us in detail about how you were caught, but you were not as truthful about how you escaped,' said the prince who knew his friend well. 'Now tell me the real story of who rescued you from Chunar.'

Tej Singh related the true story of his escape from Chunar, praising Chapala profusely all the while.

'Congratulations!' teased the prince when Tej Singh had finished.

'First I will congratulate you and the princess, only then will it be time for me to receive congratulations!' retorted Tej Singh.

The prince laughed and fell silent.

Tej Singh stayed contentedly in Naugarh for a few days more. Every day, the prince would express his desire to meet Chandrakanta, and Tej Singh would do all he could to cheer him up.

When several days had passed, Hardayal Singh requested the king's permission to leave. 'It has been many days, sire, that I have spent here,' he said. 'I must return to Vijaygarh, for much work needs to be done. The Maharaj had asked me to bring Tej Singh back with me—with your permission, of course. So command me as you wish.'

'Very well, and of course Tej Singh must go with you,' agreed the king at once, and bade them both farewell. Tej Singh took his leave of the prince,

who tearfully begged him to keep in mind his yearning for Chandrakanta. ‘I don’t need to tell you more, but you know my condition,’ he said. Tej Singh reassured him, and left for Vijaygarh with Hardayal Singh.

The next day both men presented themselves at Maharaj Jai Singh’s darbar, and after paying their respects to the king, took their customary places in the court. Maharaj Jai Singh inquired after the well-being of Raja Surendra Singh, and even as Tej Singh was answering him, Badrinath arrived bearing Raja Shivdatt’s letter.

Badrinath presented the letter to Maharaj Jai Singh, who handed it to Diwan Hardayal Singh. Diwan Sahib opened and read the letter. His face turned red with anger, and both the king and Tej Singh understood at once that the letter contained some unpleasant news. Hardayal Singh read the letter through to the end in silence, and advised that the letter should not be read out aloud in the open darbar, but to the king alone, privately. The Maharaj agreed, and requested that he make arrangements for Badrinath’s stay and then follow him to his private chamber with Tej Singh.

The Diwan Sahib did as the king commanded. Once they were alone, the king asked him to read out Maharaj Shivdatt’s letter. In reply, the diwan held out the letter to the king, and suggested that it would be better if he read it himself. Surprised, the king did as his diwan suggested—and looked up trembling with rage, his eyes bloodshot with fury. ‘Tell Badrinath that he must leave Vijaygarh immediately—that is my reply to this letter,’ he declared, ripping the letter to shreds. The Maharaj relapsed into angry silence. ‘I knew that Kroor would stir up trouble at Chunar, and that is exactly what he has done. But as long as I am alive, I will ensure that he does not get what he desires!’ he said after a while. ‘Meanwhile, we should be ready for any contingency!’ he added.

‘Sire,’ said Tej Singh, ‘there is no doubt now that Shivdatt will launch an attack against us. We should be prepared for war. His intentions were clear enough when he sent the aiyaars here, but now there can be no doubt that he intends war.’

‘I know that Shivdatt has an army of thirty thousand, while our force numbers only ten thousand men. But I will not be intimidated by that,’ declared Maharaj Jai Singh.

‘Ten thousand strong here and five thousand men belonging to my lord, Raja Surendra Singh—that makes fifteen thousand, enough to defeat that coward. If you can send a letter and the Diwan Sahib with me to Naugarh, I

will return with the whole army. In fact, if the Maharaj wishes, I can even bring back Prince Birendra Singh. Hand him command and then watch us vanquish Shivdatt.'

'Sire, I agree with Tej Singh, I like his plan,' said Diwan Hardayal Singh.

'What you say is all very well, but I do not feel easy giving Birendra Singh charge of the army,' said the king. 'He is Raja Surendra Singh's son, yes, but he might as well be mine. How can I or Raja Surendra Singh send him into battle?'

'Sire, give no thought to this matter,' said Tej Singh. 'It cannot be that the Maharaj goes to war, and Birendra Singh stays back safely at home—he will never allow that. Raja Surendra Singh is no coward either. He will command Birendra Singh to fight by your side, and I would not be surprised if he himself were to join you on the battlefield.'

The king, reassured by Tej Singh's reply, asked Diwan Hardayal Singh to write to Raja Surendra Singh. 'Tell him of Shivdatt's impertinent request and my answer to his letter, and ask him what he thinks of the situation. Deliver the letter to the Raja yourself, and bring me back his answer at once, for we cannot afford any delay. Once we have the Raja's reply, we will decide how to proceed further.'

Diwan Hardayal Singh did as the king directed, and carrying the letter to Raja Surendra Singh with Maharaj Jai Singh's stamp and seal upon it, left at once for Naugarh. It was almost dusk when he reached, and he went straight to Diwan Jeet Singh's home. Jeet Singh was livid with anger when he heard of Shivdatt's letter. 'Shivdatt has lost his mind these days, he thinks we account for nothing,' said Jeet Singh. 'We shall meet the king this evening and see what needs to be done,' he added grimly.

That evening, Jeet Singh took Hardayal Singh to meet the king; Prince Birendra Singh was also present there. When Raja Surendra Singh read the letter sent by Maharaj Jai Singh, he was speechless at Shivdatt's effrontery. He passed the letter in silence to the prince, who was so overcome with rage that he, too, could not utter a word. Birendra Singh remained silent for a while, then folding his hands, he turned to the king and said, 'I am not afraid of war. We are warriors and war, when needed, is our duty. So, in such a situation, when war is clearly called for, I will not hesitate. If you allow me, I will take our army to Chunar and make him my prisoner before he can move against Vijaygarh.'

‘There is no need to rush to Chunar; instead, go to Vijaygarh just now,’ cautioned Raja Surendra Singh. ‘Kshatriyas hold war in more honour than any love they may bear for their sons or fathers. Therefore, setting my love for you aside, I command you to lead our army to Maharaj Jai Singh’s aid, and earn a name for yourself.’

So commanding the prince, the king retired to his palace; the two diwans returned to Jeet Singh’s house, and Prince Birendra Singh prepared himself for war. The night passed swiftly for the prince, caught up as he was in the double excitement of war and of meeting Chandrakanta.

Narrative Twenty-Two

AS SOON AS it was dawn, Prince Birendra Singh donned his armour and, ready for war, went to the palace to take leave of the king and the queen, his mother. The queen clasped him in her arms, and wiping her tears, gave him her blessings. ‘Go, my son,’ she said, ‘make a name for yourself amongst the brave. Uphold the honour of the kshatriyas and blow the trumpet of war! It is the way of warriors—in times of war, fathers and mothers do not think of safety and comfort. Go and fight, and by God’s grace, may the enemy never see your back!’

The prince bade farewell to his parents and found Diwan Hardayal Singh ready and waiting for him outside the palace. Mounting his horse, the prince set off for war; behind him followed his army, a vast, undulating sea of men. As they neared Vijaygarh, the prince dismounted and said to Hardayal Singh, ‘I think it may be advisable to halt here in this forest. Only after I have made all preparations, should the army enter the city.’

‘Yes, that is a good plan,’ agreed Hardayal Singh. ‘I shall go ahead and let the king know of your arrival, and then come back to fetch you.’

The Diwan Sahib entered Vijaygarh and reported to the king that Prince Birendra Singh was camped only a kos away with his army. The king was delighted. ‘The forest will make for an excellent camp for the army, but bring Birendra Singh to the city. Take all the army commanders with you, and bring him here with due honour.’

Hardayal Singh, taking several of the commanders with him, set off to fetch Birendra Singh. Meanwhile, Tej Singh too came to know that the prince had arrived, and hurried to meet him. He reached the forest encampment before the others and, catching sight of Birendra Singh in the distance, he called out, 'Congratulations!' The prince was overjoyed to see Tej Singh and eagerly questioned him as to the state of affairs. 'What is there is all good, what is not good will become good now,' replied Tej Singh. He said no more but turned towards the business of organizing the camp.

Meanwhile, Hardayal Singh arrived with the army commanders and invited Prince Birendra Singh to accompany them back to Vijaygarh. The prince acknowledged the king's courtesy, and dressed in battle gear, with his armour and his weapons upon him, he rode into Vijaygarh at the head of a hundred of his men. The news of the prince's coming spread around the town. Men and women crowded upon the balconies of their houses and gathered in the streets in anticipation. Everybody's eyes were turned towards the north, the direction from which the prince was expected.

The news that the prince was on his way also reached the palace. The king told the Maharani, who at once repaired to the highest balcony of her palace to watch for him; she took several of the women of the household with her, including Chandrakanta and Chapala. The king himself took up a position on the roof of his audience chamber to watch the cavalcade. After a short while, a cloud of dust was seen arising in the north; as the cloud came closer, in the dust could be seen a crowd of soldiers, and as they came even closer, the details could be clearly seen.

The men rode in slow and dignified formation towards the palace, their armour, of lustrous steel, glinting strangely golden in the last rays of the setting sun. Holding aloft their spears decorated with flags, their shields and swords shining by their side, and revelling in the glory of their youth, the soldiers impressed the onlookers with their look of valour and virtue. At their head, on a strong and handsome stallion, its caparison studded with precious jewels, rode Prince Birendra Singh. The prince kept a firm rein on his mettlesome steed. He was dressed in costly garments, and steel armour like his men; on his head was a helmet of steel decorated with a single eagle's feather. He was fair of face, his eyes sharp and bright, his skin ruddy with health and strength. A collar of gold around his throat and golden armbands reflected the light of the sun on to his face, increasing its radiance; around his waist was clasped a belt studded with priceless diamonds and

precious jewels. His boots, which reached up to his thighs, were embroidered with pearls, so close together that the leather could not be seen. A tall spear in his hand, his shield, sword, dagger, bows and arrows upon his person, a mace hanging by the side of the horse, his horse prancing spiritedly beneath him, he advanced into the town, glory personified. Strength, youth, valour and authority came together in his face, inspiring love in the hearts of his friends and fear amongst his enemies. The greatest wonder, though, was that the hundred men who followed the prince resembled him in beauty, strength and valour. The welcoming crowds grew as word of the glory of Prince Birendra Singh spread through the town. Whoever looked upon the prince was dazzled by his magnificence.

The queen, who had not seen Birendra Singh for a long time, and who now saw him in such pomp and splendour, was overcome with affection for him. Almost involuntarily, the words slipped out of her mouth. 'If there is any man worthy of Chandrakanta, then that is Birendra! Whatever happens, he shall be my daughter's husband!' Chapala and Chandrakanta were watching the cavalcade from another window. Chapala glanced askance at the princess—Chandrakanta blushed shyly, her hand on her heart, her eyes filled with the prince's image, her heart full of hope that now she would be able to see him from a closer distance. The Maharaj too, could not tear his eyes away from the glory of the young prince.

As Prince Birendra Singh reached the fort, the Maharaj could hold back no longer, and stepped out to welcome him. The prince dismounted and touched the king's feet in respect; the king clasped him to his heart, and holding his hand, led him into the palace himself. The queen, her eyes filled with tears of joy, her heart overflowing with affection for the prince, welcomed him in; the prince touched her feet in obeisance. Maharaj Jai Singh seated himself, making a place for the prince to be seated on his right; the queen seated herself to the left of her husband, the king. Serving women dressed in costly garments and precious jewels surrounded them. Though the prince sat with his eyes lowered respectfully in the presence of the king and the queen, his eyes searched restlessly for a particular face amongst the crowd. Chandrakanta, concealed behind the door, was gazing at him, trembling in her impatience to be alone with him, but helpless to go to him. And long before the princess could have her fill of gazing at the prince, the king ended the audience, and the prince, taking his leave of the king, retired to the chambers that had been set aside for him. Tej Singh arrived to pay his

respects to the prince, and the two spent some time in conversation. The prince had caught not even a glimpse of his beloved Chandrakanta—a lack that cast a pall over his spirits. He fell asleep that night as all other, thinking of his princess.

The next morning, dressed in gorgeous garments, an eagle's feather in his turban, and Tej Singh by his side, Prince Birendra Singh presented himself at the king's darbar. The king invited the prince to sit on a jewel-studded chair that had been placed for him next to Hardayal Singh. The diwan presented Raja Surendra Singh's reply to the king, reading which the king was greatly pleased. He ordered that all arrangements be made for the comfort of the prince's troops, including the setting up of water-closets and toilets for their use, and that a market on his, the king's, account be set up near their encampment to provide them with everything that they could possibly need.

‘Maharaj, my army has brought its own provisions,’ said the prince.

‘Why, did you think you were coming to a foreign land?’ retorted the king. ‘If your army has brought its own provisions, those too will come in handy later. I give you command of the army, make all arrangements here as you see fit.’

The prince turned to Tej Singh. ‘Go now to where the troops are and divide my army into three—station two thousand men each on either flank of Vijaygarh Fort, and dividing the remaining thousand men into groups of ten, spread them across the surrounding countryside at distances of five kos from each other,’ he ordered. ‘Make sure the men are provided with tents and all equipment. Send out our spies in all directions. We will review the Maharaj's troops tomorrow and then decide how they are to be deployed.’

Tej Singh left at once to carry out the prince's orders. The Maharaj was reassured once more at this evidence of the prince's support and efficiency. ‘Let our men know that tomorrow they will be given their orders. They should be ready to receive them,’ he said to Hardayal Singh.

Even as the king was speaking, some of his spies returned to report that Shivdatt Singh had left Chunar with a force of thirty thousand men, and that he would be at Vijaygarh in the space of two to three days.

‘We will take care of him,’ reassured the prince and ordered the spies to return to their posts.

The next day, the king and the prince, mounted upon an elephant, surveyed the king's men. Hardayal Singh had greatly decreased the number of

Mussalmans in the army, but even so, a thousand of them still remained. The prince was pleased with the army, but frowned at the sight of the Mussalmans.

The king understood the source of the prince's displeasure. 'Should we dismiss them?' he asked softly.

'No,' replied the prince. 'If we dismiss them, they will go over to the enemy at once. In my opinion, it would be better if we sent them first to face the enemy. Behind them we will send our own men and some cannons. If they show signs of joining the other side or betraying us, our cannon can wipe them out. With the fear of the cannons behind them, these Mussalmans will fight valiantly at least once—they will consider it better to die fighting than to die for no reason upon a cannonball!'

The Maharaj was greatly impressed by the prince's clever plan, and his heart filled with admiration for the young man.

Once they had finished inspecting the troops, the prince asked the king's permission to go hunting. The king agreed, provided he didn't go far and returned while it was still daylight. The prince promised and the king helped him dismount from the elephant. As the prince jumped on to his horse, the king ordered Hardayal Singh to send a hundred men with the prince.

The prince left for the hunt, and after a while reached a dense part of the forest. He had shot two sambhar with his arrows, and was searching for another quarry when Tej Singh appeared at his side. 'What are you doing here?' asked the prince. 'Have you made the arrangements I had asked you to make?'

'Can they be completed in a single day? They'll be done by tomorrow,' replied Tej Singh. 'Now I thought I might pay a visit to the secret valley where we have imprisoned Ahmed, and came to ask you if you would like to come with me.'

'Yes, I will come,' replied the prince and turned his horse towards the mountains. Ordering the rest of the soldiers to return to the fort along with the two sambhars he had killed, the prince left with Tej Singh for the secret valley. After a short ride, they reached the secret prison, and dismounting from their horses, entered the cave.

As they approached the great stone door, Tej Singh said to the prince, 'Can you open this door, or have you forgotten how to do so?'

'Of course I can, what is so difficult about that!' replied the prince, and putting his hand into the lion's mouth, he pulled on its tongue and the great

door swung open smoothly.

‘So you do remember!’ remarked Tej Singh.

‘Am I likely to forget?’ retorted the prince.

The two entered the secret valley, and reached the spring that flowed in the centre. They saw Ahmed and Bhagwandatt, sitting upon a boulder and talking with each other, their feet still fettered. Seeing the prince, they stood up and bowed low. ‘It is time now that we are pardoned,’ they said.

‘Yes, be patient for a few more days,’ replied the prince.

‘We must leave now,’ said Tej Singh, ‘or we will be late.’

The two came away and stepped outside the secret valley. Tej Singh, turning to the prince, said, ‘You were the one to open this door, so now you must shut it too.’

The prince agreed and shutting the door mounted his horse again. As they neared Vijaygarh again, Tej Singh took his leave of the prince with the excuse that he would now return to seeing to the army. The prince let him go, and continued to the fort. He dismounted, and entering the palace, retired to his room to rest. It was late night when Tej Singh came to visit him again.

‘So what is the status?’ asked the prince.

‘All arrangements have been made according to your instructions,’ said Tej Singh. ‘I could not get away even for an hour today to see you,’ he added.

The prince laughed and said, ‘You were with me till late in the afternoon, and then you say you did not see me?’

Tej Singh looked startled. ‘What do you mean?’ he asked the prince.

‘Do you mean to say you didn’t go with me to that secret valley where Ahmed and Bhagwandatt are imprisoned?’ asked the prince.

At this Tej Singh went pale with shock. ‘Please tell me—where did I meet you, where did I go with you and where did I part from you when we returned?’

The prince, somewhat surprised, gave him the details.

‘Well done, Prince, you have wiped us out! I do not regret that Ahmed and Bhagwandatt should escape as much as the fact that some outsider now knows the secret of opening the stone door.

‘What are you trying to say? I don’t understand,’ said the prince, bewildered.

‘If you had understood to start with, then you wouldn’t have been tricked in the first place,’ said Tej Singh. ‘Anyway, if you didn’t understand then, then understand now—Shivdatt’s aiyaars have deceived you and learnt

the way to the secret valley. This deed can only have been Badrinath's doing; no one else could have pulled this off. And the jyotishi would have used his power of divination to tell him where to go.'

The prince was stupefied at his own foolishness, and began to curse himself. 'Now, whatever had to happen has happened, so why weep over it,' said Tej Singh. 'Our prisoners must have escaped by now, but I will try and put another lock in place.'

'How will you do that?' asked the prince.

'That door can be locked in other ways too, much stronger than the one we were using, but the other locks are complicated and take a long time to unlock and lock again—that is why I had not used them in the first place. But I shall do so now.'

'Will you show me the new lock?' asked the prince.

'Not yet, not till we have defeated Chunar, or else you may be tricked again,' said Tej Singh.

'All right, do as you see fit,' said the prince.

Tej Singh left at once for the hidden prison, and having repaired the lock, was back before dawn. 'The prisoners had escaped,' he reported to the prince, 'but I have put another lock in place.'

A little later, the two presented themselves at the king's darbar, and paying their respects, sat down. The spies reported that Shivdatt's army was now only ten kos away.

'It is now time that we send the Mussalmans to stop the enemy,' said the prince.

The king agreed and gave his consent.

'Make sure that a few of our cannon follow close behind the Mussalman contingent,' said the prince to Tej Singh, and leaning over, added in a whisper, 'instruct our cannon that if they suspect the intentions of the Mussalmans, they should wipe them out, and leave not one man alive.'

Tej Singh and Hardayal Singh went off to make the necessary arrangements, while the king and the prince retired to the palace. Birendra Singh was restless—he had still not managed to catch sight of Chandrakanta. But Chandrakanta, hidden behind secret windows, had been watching him.

Narrative Twenty-Three

THAT EVENING, AS the prince and king sat together, they were joined by Tej Singh and Hardayal Singh, who reported that the army had been sent out to engage the enemy. The four began discussing plans and strategies for battle, and soon the night was half done. Suddenly several chobdars came running and addressing the king, said, 'Maharaj, some men were seen running out of your palace. The guards, thinking them to belong to the enemy side, shot at them with their bows and arrows, but despite being wounded, they ran away.'

The king, perplexed, pondered this news in silence; Tej Singh and the prince were equally puzzled. Suddenly they heard the sound of loud weeping—it was coming from the palace. The wailing, now interspersed with screams, increased in volume, so that it seemed the entire palace was in turmoil. Several women ran out of the palace and seeing the king came weeping and sobbing towards him. Barely able to speak for crying, they said, 'Someone has cut off Chandrakanta's and Chapala's heads, and taken them away!'

This news pierced the men like arrows. The king uttered a single 'Hai' and collapsed, while the prince looked as pale as if he were dead. Hardayal Singh's eyes filled with tears, and Tej Singh turned into a block of wood. The king pulled himself together, and seeing Birendra Singh's condition, first clasped him to his chest; seeing no change in the prince's death-like pallor, the king ran weeping to the palace, dragging the lifeless prince behind him by the hand. The palace was in uproar. The Maharani lay prostrate over Chandrakanta's headless corpse. She had beat her head so hard against the floor that she had hurt herself, and blood was flowing freely down her face. The king flung himself upon the corpse in grief. As for the prince, he did not have the strength to enter the palace, but collapsed upon the threshold, the muscles of his face set in a death mask.

The scene was grim: Chandrakanta and Chapala's bodies lay in the middle of the room, the severed heads could not be seen, and there was blood everywhere. The Maharani wailed ceaselessly, 'Hai, Chandrakanta, my daughter! What manner of heartless man was he who could take a knife to your throat? It was for you that we went to war, and now you yourself have ceased to be! What is this kingdom without you? Oh why am I still alive?'

The king kept repeating like one crazed, ‘Now Kroor must be happy! Now Shivdatt has what he wanted! Welcome them, tell them that Vijaygarh is all theirs to rule, for we shall accompany our daughter out of this life.’

Suddenly the Maharaj saw Birendra Singh lying by the door, his face bloody from a cut on his forehead. The king ran over to the prince who lay as though dead—there was no breath in his body, no pulse in his throat, and when he checked for signs of life, he found none. ‘What a fearful calamity! Along with our loss, the king of Naugarh too faces a deep loss. We had thought that we would hand over our kingdom to the prince, and then retire gracefully into the forest. But even this was not acceptable to God. Hai, someone run and fetch Tej Singh, ask him to look to the prince. I, too, shall give up my life in this very palace, and I am sure Raja Surendra Singh will as well. Here we were, planning one thing, and quite another has happened! Oh dear God, what did you do?’

Meanwhile, Tej Singh came running up, and seeing Birendra Singh lying there lifeless and the Maharaj wailing over him, Tej Singh lost whatever little strength still remained in him. He fell on his knees beside Birendra Singh and called out, ‘Prince, I do not wish to cry over you, because I do not wish to remain in this world any longer. I will accompany you happily wherever you have gone!’ And pulling out a dagger he was about to stab himself in the heart when a strange man leapt over the wall and stayed his hand.

Tej Singh stared at the man, whose skin was dyed red from head to foot. The man began to sing:

*Why do you give up your life?
Give me your ears instead!
This is deceit and trickery
Look at the corpses with care
Wake me! Get up! Look around you! Search!
Find out the truth!*

And finishing his peculiar rhyme the man danced and leapt away.

End of Part One

* An aiyaar is one who knows every kind of trick, every ruse and stratagem, is accomplished in every art and artifice, and whose main skills are disguise and escape.

Part Two



Narrative One

EVERYONE GATHERED AT the tragedy had seen the strange man and heard his peculiar rhyme. His sudden appearance became one more mystery in the sequence of bizarre events that night. Who was he and what had he meant, they wondered.

‘Please calm down, be quiet everyone,’ called Tej Singh in his loudest voice. ‘I have understood that what we see before us is aiyaari. The princess and Chapala are both alive—those corpses are not theirs!’

Tej Singh’s words shocked the weeping crowd of men and women into silence. They stopped their wailing and turned instead to stare uncomprehendingly at Tej Singh. The Maharani was the first to recover, and came running up to him. ‘Son, what do you mean, tell me what is going on?’ she pleaded. ‘How do you know that Chandrakanta is alive? Who broke into the palace so suddenly and so rudely?’

‘I do not know the identity of the intruder, but this much I do know—that Chandrakanta and Chapala have been kidnapped by Shivdatt Singh’s aiyaars, who have left these fake corpses behind in the hope that we will believe them to be dead and so not search for them.’

‘How do you know that these corpses are not real?’ asked the Maharaj.

‘It is easy to tell,’ replied Tej Singh. ‘Come with me and I will show you how I know.’

Tej Singh led the king and the queen to where the corpses lay, and pulling out his dagger, severed Chapala’s leg from her body. Holding up the severed leg he asked the king to take a closer look. ‘Can you see any bones?’ he asked.

The king examined the limb and surprised at what he saw, agreed that Chapala’s corpse was a dummy. He then examined Chandrakanta’s corpse in the same manner, and that too was clearly fake. ‘Very well, now we know that Chandrakanta is alive, but she has fallen into the hands of our enemies! Is that any less of a disaster?’ wept the king.

‘Whatever has happened has happened, we cannot change that,’ consoled Tej Singh. ‘But I will now go in search of Chandrakanta and Chapala and bring them back to you.’

Tej Singh’s words gave everyone hope and courage again—but Prince Birendra Singh still lay as though dead and knew nothing of all that had just taken place.

The Maharaj, worried about the prince and anxious to revive him, summoned doctors and physicians; but no one could revive the prince. Tej Singh, too, tried his own methods to bring the prince back to his senses, but to no avail.

‘What should we do?’ asked the Maharaj, greatly disturbed by the prince’s condition.

Tej Singh fell silent, pondering the sad condition of the prince. After a long silence, Tej Singh said, ‘Let us take the prince to his chamber, and lay him upon his bed. There, alone and in solitude, I will awaken him.’

The Maharaj stepped forward to help, but Tej Singh had already lifted up the unconscious prince in his arms. The Maharaj, anxious, made to follow him but Tej Singh stopped him. ‘Sire, it is better that you do not come with me. The prince will recover better alone.’ The king gave in and let Tej Singh carry the prince to his room.

Reaching the prince’s quarters, Tej Singh laid him gently on the bed, and locked the doors so that no one could enter. When the room was secure, he leaned forward and whispered into the prince’s ear, ‘Chandrakanta is not dead, she still lives! Look! Maharaj Shivdatt’s aiyaars are carrying her away! Wake up, run, rescue her before it is too late! Or they will take her away forever! Is this what your valour amounts to? Shame on you! The enemy has kidnapped Chandrakanta, and you stand silently by? Ram, Ram, Ram!’

The prince opened his eyes and starting up, cried, ‘Who is taking her away? Where is Chandrakanta?’ His eyes searched the room frantically and saw Tej Singh sitting there. ‘Who was it that spoke just now, saying that Chandrakanta was alive and had been kidnapped by our enemies?’ asked the prince.

‘I spoke, and I spoke the truth,’ replied Tej Singh. ‘The princess has been taken by Shivdatt’s men. They left behind a dummy corpse and splashed the room with red paint so that we would assume Chandrakanta was dead and not search for her.’

‘You are deceiving me! How do I know that her corpse is not real?’ said the prince.

‘I will prove it to you,’ replied Tej Singh. He opened the door of the room to find that the Maharaj stood outside, his eyes full of tears.

‘How is he?’ asked the king.

‘He is well, he has regained his senses, come inside and see for yourself,’ replied Tej Singh.

The prince stood up as the king entered, and the king clasped him in his arms. ‘How are you feeling?’ he asked.

‘I am well,’ replied the prince.

Some of the queen’s serving women, sent to inquire after the prince, arrived just then. Tej Singh sent one of them back to fetch the limbs he had severed from the two dummy corpses. The girl soon returned with the pieces, and Tej Singh, taking them from her, showed them to the prince. ‘Look, now do you agree that these are artificial? There are no bones within these,’ said Tej Singh.

‘Yes, indeed,’ agreed the prince. ‘But even so, it cannot be denied that the enemy has done an evil thing.’

‘It’s done,’ replied Tej Singh. ‘Now look ahead, and watch what I shall do.’

The king, the prince and Tej Singh spent the night in the prince’s room, discussing their next move. As dawn was breaking, Hardayal Singh knocked and entered, immediately ordering the attendants to leave them alone. Once the room was cleared of servants, the Diwan Sahib asked the others, ‘Is it true that the corpses we found were fake?’

‘Yes, sir, that is indeed true,’ replied Tej Singh.

‘Well, whoever planned this was very clever,’ mused the diwan. ‘The uproar in the palace and the city over the princess’s death made the soldiers guarding the imprisoned aiyaars less vigilant and some of them left their posts. While we wept and wailed over fake bodies, the few guards who remained watching the prisoners were attacked by the enemy and wounded and overpowered. Needless to say, the enemy aiyaars we had in our custody have escaped.’

Tej Singh and the others were shocked into silence at this news. At length the prince, gathering himself together, said, ‘We are in deep trouble. We do not hold any of their aiyaars, while they have the princess and Chapala! I cannot bear this anymore. We must act immediately!’

Even as he finished speaking, a chobdar entered and saluted respectfully. 'One of our spies has returned with news of battle, and is waiting outside,' he announced, and stood aside waiting for instructions.

'Bring him here,' ordered Hardayal Singh.

The spy entered and gave his report. 'The enemy forces had advanced a distance of four kos by the time the Mussalman contingent we had sent could reach them,' he said. 'The Mussalmans tried to make a run for it when they saw the enemy lines, but our cannon, following behind, fired on them so that a fourth of the Mussalmans were killed. The rest then stayed where they were and fought furiously, but the enemy made short work of them so that they were all killed. Unless we send reinforcements at once, even our cannon will be destroyed.'

At this, the prince ordered Hardayal Singh to send five thousand men as reinforcement immediately. 'Send my tent with them as well—I will join them in the afternoon,' he added. Hardayal Singh left at once to see to the arrangements.

'I shall accompany you,' said the Maharaj to the prince.

'What is the hurry, sire?' said Prince Birendra Singh, gently dissuading the king. 'Stay here for now and look after the kingdom. Let me go and see how brave that Shivdatt is!'

The Maharaj retired to his palace, and Tej Singh and Birendra Singh became busy with their preparations. Tej Singh took his leave of the prince, and summoned the town criers to the palace. 'Go out into the city and let it be known that, *Those who hold Dantarbir in reverence should come to Tej Singh at once!*' he instructed. The town criers left, to unquestioningly carry out Tej Singh's order, but wondering as to the meaning of this strange announcement.

Narrative Two

THAT DAY, THE Maharaj held his darbar at the usual time, and Tej Singh and the prince also presented themselves to the king as usual. The court was slow and subdued that morning, but the prince, eager for war, sought permission to depart for the front, and left at once. The Maharaj adjourned the darbar early,

and retired to the palace, where the Maharani as well as her serving women sat in sorrowful gloom. Chandrakanta and Chapala were alive, of that they were now sure, but where were they being held, what state were they in, whether they were in pain or discomfort, happy or sad—of these matters they had no idea, and wondering, worrying, their eyes would fill with tears. All they could think of was Chandrakanta, so much so that even food and drink had been forgotten.

‘Have you done anything about trying to find Chandrakanta?’ asked the Maharani as the Maharaj entered the palace.

‘Yes, Tej Singh is leaving in search of her. I don’t know anyone better than him to help us. Birendra Singh has also just taken his leave of me and left for the front. So now let us wait and see how matters unfold,’ replied the king.

Narrative Three

SOME OF THE day still remains. In a green, open field stand a couple of dozen chairs of which only three are occupied—by Prince Birendra Singh, Tej Singh and the commander of their army, Fateh Singh, who is a young man not more than twenty-five years of age. Towards the east are hundreds of tents arranged in a semicircle, within which the men of Birendra Singh’s regiment can be seen cleaning and repairing their equipment. Cannons, ready and gleaming for war, stand under huge awnings; to the south lie the cavalry stables, filled with strong and sturdy horses. To the west lies the encampment of the army support staff—the trumpeters, tunnellers, explosives experts and spies—as well as the mess and provisions store.

The prince turned to Sipahsalar Fateh Singh and said, ‘I assume that my camp and tent will be set up at Lohra by the morning so that we will be ready to face the enemy?’

‘Yes, sir, everything will be ready by the morning,’ replied Fateh Singh. ‘Our army, too, will set out for Lohra once night falls, and will reach there a few hours before dawn. You will see our courage the day after—it does not suit us to sit idle for so long!’

Just then, who should appear but Devi Singh, his step light, his attitude that of the aiyaar that he was. The prince and Tej Singh were overjoyed to see him and welcomed him warmly; Fateh Singh too, saluted him. When Devi Singh was comfortably seated, the prince asked, 'So tell us, Devi Singh, what have you been up to all these days?'

'Let *me* tell you of his deeds,' interrupted Tej Singh. 'I know exactly what he has been doing!'

'Tell us then,' said the prince, and sat back to listen.

'Do you remember,' said Tej Singh, 'when you sat in the garden with Chandrakanta, a frightening, fiendish fellow had suddenly appeared to warn us that the king was on his way? That fiend was him! In Naugarh, do you recall the holy man and his strange song as we sat by the river? That was him too—telling me of the arrival of Kroor Singh and the aiyaars from Chunar. And when the palace was plunged into grief, thinking that Chandrakanta was dead, and you lay unconscious, he was the one who told me that the princess and Chapala were alive. Had he not warned me, and had I not, upon his urging, examined the corpses more closely and discovered that they were dummies, we would all have been ruined. This is what he has been up to, these have been his exploits. And it was to summon him that I gave my strange instructions to the town criers—that announcement was the only way to find him, for he had no address where I could reach him.'

The prince thumped Devi Singh heartily on the back. 'Well done!' he said. 'How shall we praise you enough? You saved two families from ruin!'

'Do not praise me yet,' replied Devi Singh, 'for our work is not complete. Right now we need to worry about Chandrakanta and how to rescue her. Who knows what difficulties she may be facing. At the same time, we cannot abandon the king, for if we focus only on Chandrakanta, the outcome of this war will not be good for him.'

'Devi Singh,' said the prince soberly, 'at least tell me this much—where is Chandrakanta? Who has kidnapped her?'

'The princess and Chapala were kidnapped by Najim and Badrinath,' replied Devi Singh. 'Unfortunately, I don't know where they are being held, but I am sure that with some effort we will be able to discover that too.'

'Now all the enemy aiyaars are free. They are nine together, while we are only two. We are outnumbered. Whether we go in search of Chandrakanta and Chapala, or stay here and guard the prince, either course is difficult,' said Tej Singh

‘Neither course is difficult, wait and watch, it will all be taken care of,’ responded Devi Singh. ‘But first we must stop Shivdatt—only then will we be able to save the princess.’

‘We have taken our leave of the king,’ said Tej Singh. ‘In a few hours we break camp and leave to meet the enemy forces. The advance battalion has already left.’

The men discussed various plans till midnight, when the prince retired to his tent. Tej Singh and Devi Singh retired soon after—to Tej Singh’s tent, which was set up next to that of the prince. The soldiers on guard began their rounds, and the tramping of their feet could be heard as they patrolled the camp. The encampment settled down for the night. Only a little of the night remained when the report of a small cannon was heard; this was followed by the blare of trumpets, and the sounds of the men breaking camp. Very soon the army was on the move. Tej Singh and Devi Singh, laden with their instruments of *aiyaari*, were on foot, sometimes ahead, sometimes behind and sometimes walking with, the main body of the army. A couple of hours after dawn, Prince Birendra Singh’s men reached the battlefield, ready to face Shivdatt Singh’s army. Maharaj Jai Singh’s force was already in place, and as the prince’s army joined them, the men fell into formation and took up their positions for battle.

When all was ready, Prince Birendra Singh called a council of war in his tent, and said to the chief munshi, ‘Write a letter to Shivdatt Singh. Tell him that it seems to us that these days he has lost his sense of balance, given that he has been so easily incited to war against Maharaj Jai Singh by a good for nothing scoundrel like Kroor Singh. Let him also know that we know that his *aiyaars* have kidnapped Chandrakanta and Chapala, and it would be best for all concerned if he sends them back to Maharaj Jai Singh in honour and dignity. Tell him too, that having done that, he should withdraw his forces and return to Chunar. Otherwise, he will regret it—for once we begin battle and our brave men draw their swords against his soldiers, he will have nowhere to run and will be destroyed.’

The chief munshi wrote the letter as directed.

‘Now, who will take this missive to Shivdatt Singh?’ asked Birendra Singh.

At this, Devi Singh stepped forward with folded hands. ‘Sire, give me permission to deliver this letter, for I have a great desire to speak to Shivdatt Singh,’ he requested.

‘It is not safe for you to go alone, Shivdatt’s army is huge and he is surrounded by soldiers,’ demurred the prince.

‘There is no harm, let him go,’ said Tej Singh.

After some persuasion, the prince agreed to let Devi Singh go, but alongwith the letter handed him his own dagger for a weapon. Devi Singh accepted the letter and the dagger with reverence, and touching Tej Singh’s feet, left for the enemy lines.

No one amongst Shivdatt Singh’s army knew Devi Singh by sight. As he approached the enemy camp, he saw a huge tent, embroidered with gold and silver thread and dazzling in its opulence. He understood at once that this must be the king’s tent, and making his way directly to it, announced to the guards who stood outside, ‘Tell your master that one of Prince Birendra Singh’s aiyaars is here with a letter from the prince—hurry, don’t delay.’ One of the men hurried into the tent to let the king know, and came out a moment later with instructions to let Devi Singh enter.

Devi Singh stepped into the tent to see Maharaj Shivdatt Singh seated in royal splendour upon a golden throne studded with gems and precious jewels; on his right sat his diwan. The two men were flanked by armed guards seated on silver chairs—the guards, gigantic men dressed in jewelled garments, and armed with the deadliest of weapons, presented a sight that would have terrified the fainthearted and instilled the fear of death in anyone less courageous than Devi Singh. On low stools on either side of the guards sat the aiyaars. The rest of the tent was filled with rank upon rank of the noble and the rich, and sentries and soldiers who stood at attention at their service. It was a darbar that dazzled with its magnificence.

Devi Singh glanced around him, and without a greeting advanced to the centre of the tent. He stood there for a moment, surveying the scene carefully, then stepped up to the king and laid the prince’s letter upon his throne. The king turned red with fury at Devi Singh’s insolence. ‘A mosquito has garnered enough courage to take on an elephant! Birendra Singh must still be feeding at his mother’s breast!’ he thundered, and picking up the letter, ripped it into a hundred pieces without opening it.

Devi Singh’s eyes turned red with anger. ‘He who is doomed to die, loses all his good sense!’ he retorted.

Devi Singh’s taunt pierced the king like an arrow. ‘Grab that insolent fellow!’ he roared.

The guards had barely time to obey their king, before Devi Singh drew his dagger and swiftly dispatched half a dozen of them. He dug into his bag of aiyaari tricks and pulled out a small, spherical device, which he threw on the floor as hard as he could. The ball exploded with a force that shook the tent and terrified the court. The king, startled, jumped so that his turban, with its sarpech of priceless diamonds, flew off his head and landed on the floor. Devi Singh grabbed the turban and leapt and danced out of the tent. Maharaj Shivdatt and his court, taken completely by surprise, stared after him in stunned silence, helpless and quite unable to stop him.

Shivdatt let out all his anger and frustration on the aiyaars who were present at the darbar. ‘Shame on your aiyaari,’ he raged, ‘that an insignificant aiyaar from the enemy’s side should dishonour me in this manner and get away!’

‘Sire, we are aiyaars, we can, each of us, take on a thousand men singlehandedly, but we do not, ten of us together, attack a single man! It is not our way!’ replied Badrinath.

Shivdatt ignored Badrinath and declared, ‘Tomorrow, we show them their place so that they never forget it again!’

Narrative Four

DEVI SINGH, CARRYING Maharaj Shivdatt’s turban, returned to camp and presenting himself before the prince, narrated what had happened.

The prince laughed aloud at his account. ‘Well, it’s a good omen, if nothing else,’ he said.

‘Your story tells me that I have a true disciple at last!’ remarked Tej Singh to Devi Singh. He unfastened the diamond sarpech from the turban, and carefully put away the priceless ornament in his bag.

‘What will you do with the sarpech? What use is it to you?’ asked the prince, curious.

‘This is the sarpech of victory,’ declared Tej Singh. ‘The day you go to wed Chandrakanta, I will wear this on my forehead, and dressed like Shivdatt, I will lead your wedding procession!’

The prince laughed again, but despite himself, tears stood in his eyes. He wiped them away quickly with his handkerchief. Tej Singh understood that the tears were for Chandrakanta. He, too, was very concerned about Chapala. Turning to Devi Singh he said, 'Tomorrow battle will surely be joined, so it is very important for at least one aiyaar to remain here. At the same time it is imperative that we find Chandrakanta.'

'It is best that you stay with the prince while I go in search of Chandrakanta,' replied Devi Singh.

'No,' said Tej Singh. 'You are not familiar with the hills and mountains of Chunar, and it is certain that Chandrakanta must have been taken there. So it is better that you stay here, while I go in search of Chandrakanta.'

'As you command,' agreed Devi Singh.

Tej Singh took his leave of the prince. 'Devi Singh will stay with you,' he said. 'But remain alert at all times, and take whatever happens calmly, do not rush into action or take hurried decisions during the course of battle,' he advised.

The prince nodded. 'May God look after you,' he said, and sent him on his way.

Night had already fallen, and Tej Singh, his implements of aiyaari with him, left the camp and made his way towards a dense forest that lay some distance away.

Narrative Five

'WHERE HAVE THEY taken Chandrakanta? Have they put her up in a luxurious room or locked her up in a dark cell? What would they have given her to eat? My poor innocent princess—she must be weeping her heart out. Sorrow and fear must have worn her out. What if they are harassing her to marry Shivdatt? And she, unable to take the harassment, has killed herself?' These and similar unhappy thoughts plagued the prince all night and did not let him sleep. It was not yet dawn when there was heard the roll of drums from the enemy lines—Maharaj Shivdatt's army was ready for battle. The prince climbed out of bed and dressed quickly, and ordered his men to prepare to

meet the enemy. By the time the sun rose, sappers from both sides had prepared the field and both armies had taken their positions.

The prince, mounted on his Arab stallion, also took his place upon the battlefield. He turned to Devi Singh, who stood by his side, and said, 'We should tell Shivdatt that it is not good to shed the blood of so many men, and let the matter be settled by single combat between chosen men from both sides. He fancies himself to be an archer of Arjun's skill, so I myself will meet his challenge. Why should we take the lives of soldiers who have nothing to do with the matter between us?'

'Very well, I will propose this to the enemy at once,' declared Devi Singh, and so saying, ran out into the field of battle. He stood facing the enemy lines, and removing his stole, waved it high like a flag several times. Immediately, Shivdatt's aiyaar, Badrinath, stepped out of the enemy ranks, and came up to Devi Singh.

'Jai maya ki, praise to the powers of the universe!' greeted Badrinath.

'Jai maya ki,' responded Devi Singh.

'So what is so urgent that you step out into the battlefield and summon other aiyaars?'

'There is something I want to ask you,' said Devi Singh.

'Ask away,' invited Badrinath.

'Is your army made up of men or are there women in your ranks as well?'

'There isn't a single woman amongst us, not even the shadow of one.'

'Are there any amongst you who are brave and valiant, or are they content to let the soldiers fight on their behalf while they sit in safety and watch the show?'

'Our army is packed tight with brave and valiant men.'

'From your talk it does not seem so.'

'You will find out the truth when we fight.'

'In which case why don't those brave and valiant men show their courage in single combat? It will be faster and innocent men won't lose their lives for no reason. Our prince says that Maharaj Shivdatt is very confident of his prowess as a warrior, so why doesn't he fight him first? That way either he will win or our prince will become the ruler of Chunar—whatever be the outcome, the matter will be resolved right away,' said Devi Singh.

'Our king will never be defeated in single combat,' said Badrinath. 'He will crush your prince between his fingers.'

‘Then let him come to the battlefield and fight!’ challenged Devi Singh. Badrinath returned with the challenge to Maharaj Shivdatt.

‘That young slip of a boy dare challenge me!’ roared Shivdatt, his face livid with fury.

‘It’s fair, isn’t it? What is there to be so angry about? In my opinion, he is right in asking for single combat,’ said Badrinath.

At this, Maharaj Shivdatt galloped his horse out on to the battlefield and lifting his spear high, shook it at Birendra Singh’s army. In response, the prince kicked his horse and spurring it into a gallop reached the field. He came to a halt before the king. ‘You sing your own praises and call yourself valiant! Are brave men petty thieves? Could you not fight like a man for Chandrakanta that you had to steal her away? Shame on such valour!’ derided the prince.

The taunt pierced Maharaj Shivdatt like an arrow. He could find no words in reply; instead he attacked Birendra Singh furiously with his spear. The prince was ready and countered the king’s attack so strongly that Maharaj Shivdatt’s spear flew out of his hand and fell some distance away. At this the soldiers from both sides let out a great cry of appreciation for the prince. This angered the king even more, and drawing his sword, he charged the prince. The prince, too, drew his sword and parried and attacked, thrust for thrust. The two fought long and hard, till, several hours later, the king’s horse fell wounded to the ground. The king jumped clear of his horse and sought to attack the prince’s horse, but the prince understood his intention and leaping off his horse, struck the king such a blow on the wrist that his sword flew out of his hand and fell clattering to the ground some distance away. Devi Singh ran and picked up the king’s sword. The king realized that the prince was formidable with any weapon, and that if he continued to fight him longer, he would either be killed or captured—and so he signalled his army to attack the prince.

In a matter of minutes, the prince was surrounded. Seeing this, the prince’s army, too, attacked and soon the two forces were locked in a deadly battle. Fateh Singh and Devi Singh fought their way to the prince’s side, and with sword and dagger, kept the enemy at bay.

Shivdatt’s giant bodyguards attacked Birendra Singh with every intention of killing him, but the prince was too skillful a warrior for them to succeed. Many of the enemy soldiers died that day at the prince’s hands. As dusk fell, the retreat was sounded and the fighting stopped. The soldiers

returned to their respective camps. The prince returned to his tent, exhausted with the day's fighting. Commander Fateh Singh too had been wounded. That night, both sides rested.

Maharaj Shivdatt called a council of war with his diwan and his bodyguards. 'What should be our next step?' he asked. 'The prince's army is much smaller than ours, but his skill and valour is such that we have suffered heavy losses, and I too have been wounded at his hands. In my opinion, we should attack him at night, while he and his men lie asleep.' The others approved of this scheme, and so, when only a few hours of the night remained, Shivdatt, taking five hundred soldiers with him, launched an attack on the prince's camp.

As expected, the attack led to great confusion amongst the prince's men—it was difficult to tell friend from foe in the darkness, and the prince's soldiers began to fight each other. The prince, hearing the commotion, ran out of his tent. Devi Singh followed, and quickly distributed lamps amongst the soldiers. These lamps were no ordinary lamps—they had been made by Tej Singh for exactly such a contingency, and as soon as they were lit they cast a light so bright that the darkness of the night became the brightness of day. With light on their side, the prince's men rallied once more and made short work of Shivdatt's five hundred soldiers. But by the time the lamps were lit, the prince had already lost a thousand men. Birendra Singh grieved deeply for these men, so much so that he did not stop but continued fighting till dawn and into the day.

Once again, the two armies were locked in battle. The prince, in shining armour and with all his weapons upon his person, entered the fray. The battle was in full swing and the soldiers of both sides fighting furiously, heedless of exhaustion and their wounds, when all at once were seen, riding swiftly towards the battle, a great company of mounted men. They came from the east and from the north, and must have been at least five hundred in number. The rider in front was dressed in costly robes and shining armour, and mounted on a mettlesome Arab steed, and from his bearing it could be understood that he was the leader of the rest. His face was masked, as were the faces of all his followers.

This strange company of warriors attacked Shivdatt's army from the rear. Birendra Singh's men took heart with the arrival of these unexpected allies, and fought with renewed vigour. Maharaj Shivdatt's army could not fight this two-pronged assault, and the men, giving up the fight, ran for their

lives. The prince's army pursued their fleeing enemy for a distance of two kos, after which they returned triumphantly to camp, their drums beating forth their victory loudly.

The prince, though, was thoughtful—who were these masked warriors, he wondered, who had appeared at just the right moment to help us, and then disappeared as suddenly as they had come? When someone renders help in war, it is usually to ask an equal favour in return, but these warriors, they had not even spoken to the prince, much less asked for anything. This, said the prince to himself, was an act of great valour. He tried long and hard to puzzle out the identity of the masked warriors, and finally gave up. He could not think who they might be.

Maharaj Shivdatt's camp and treasury became the property of the prince. When all was secured and settled for the night, the prince turned to Devi Singh. 'Do you know who the masked warriors were who helped us?' he asked.

'I cannot begin to guess who they were,' confessed Devi Singh, equally puzzled. 'But whoever they were, they were brave!' he added, admiration in his voice.

Just then one of the prince's spies arrived with the information that the enemy had regrouped a little distance away, and were once again preparing to attack.

Narrative Six

MEANWHILE, TEJ SINGH had left in search of Chandrakanta and Chapala. There was no point in searching for them within the enemy encampment, he knew—Chandrakanta would never have been brought there. They were probably being held in Chunar, reasoned Tej Singh, and that was where he should start his search. He turned towards Chunar at once, and reached there the following morning.

Changing his appearance, he wandered up and down the narrow streets of the city all day, searching for some sign of the princess, his eyes and ears open for clues. But he neither saw nor heard anything that told him where Chandrakanta might be. That night, changing his appearance again, he stole

into the fort and, finding his chance, scaled the palace walls and climbed on to the palace roof. It must have been past midnight then. Tej Singh glanced down from the roof—the palace seemed deserted and very quiet, though it was still brightly lit.

He climbed down from the roof into a deserted courtyard, and stood silently listening. Ahead lay a chamber expensively furnished, its walls hung with priceless paintings. There was not much light in the room except from a few candles in ornate holders that threw their flickering shadows on the walls. Upon a high bedstead lay a woman, fast asleep. Around her, on the floor, equally fast asleep, lay several of her serving women and attendants. Tej Singh stepped into the room and silently put out the candles one by one, till at last only one remained. Now Tej Singh stood still and looked carefully at the occupant of the bed. Her body was covered by a silken coverlet; her face was turned away and thus partly hidden by the soft pillow upon which she rested. From the little that Tej Singh could see, he could tell that she was beautiful. Her skin was fair, her cheeks tinged with a soft blush and a strand of golden hair had escaped to lie charmingly across her face. Tej Singh understood that this must be Maharaj Shivdatt's queen.

After some thought, Tej Singh pulled out a piece of paper, a quill and some ink from his bag, and quickly scribbled a note: 'I do not know why, but I have been suddenly overcome with a great desire to meet Chandrakanta, so I am going to see her. I have found out where she is and how to get there.'

He stole up to the sleeping queen, and waving a soporific substance under her nose, made sure she passed from sleep into unconscious. After making sure that she was indeed unconscious, he wrapped her in a sheet and slung her over his shoulder. He placed the note that he had written upon her pillow, and carrying the sleeping queen, climbed to the roof. Using the same rope he had used to climb in, he climbed out of the palace, and through an opening in the walls facing the Ganga, he climbed out of the fort. He walked briskly for a while, and finding a sheltered spot some distance away, laid the queen's unconscious form on the ground, and returned to the fort. There, he hid himself behind the entrance, and waited.

Narrative Seven

THE SUN ROSE, and the women in the palace woke up to find that the queen had disappeared. They searched high and low for her, but she was nowhere to be found. Now the palace was thrown into confusion, and a thorough search was launched for the queen. When Maharaj Shivdatt Singh heard the news, he left the battle, and taking a dozen of his men with him, returned as swiftly as he could to Chunar. Hearing that the queen was still missing, he grew cold with fear, and ran as fast as he could into the palace, which still resounded with the shrill lamentations of the women.

At this point, Maharaj Shivdatt was in a strange state of mind. Though he had left his army some distance away and, leaving instructions with the aiyaars, had rushed to Chunar, he had reached too late, to find the city and the palace in tumult. Dispirited and sad, he made his way to the queen's chamber, and sitting down upon her bed, began to weep. Through his tears, he noticed a piece of paper sticking out from beneath the pillow—he pulled it out and unfolded it, and read the writing upon it. This was the same note that Tej Singh had written and slipped under the Maharani's pillow.

The Maharaj pondered the note in silence—he was not sure that the handwriting was indeed the queen's, for as far as he could remember, she did not form her letters quite so neatly. So if the note had not been written by her, then who could have written it? But if he was wrong, and the Maharani had indeed written the note, then how could she have found out where Chandrakanta had been hidden? The Maharaj was in a quandary—there was no aiyaar with him whom he could send to investigate, and if he sent another to the place where he had imprisoned Chandrakanta, then his secret would be out and everyone would come to know what he had done. At the same time, he could not ignore this note. It was imperative to visit Chandrakanta's prison at least once, to establish the truth of the note. The king decided to undertake this investigation himself. He would visit Chandrakanta in her prison, but not just now, not while the sun was still high in the sky, but in the evening. He emerged from the palace and entering his audience chamber, sat there sunk in sorrow, refusing both food and drink. Though he gave no instructions, several men had already set out in search of the queen.

As evening fell, the king called for his horse, and mounting it, rode out of the fort towards the west. He was alone. Night fell, but the bright moonlight made everything visible as clearly as though it was day. Tej Singh, who had remained hidden behind the entrance all day, now followed the king out of the fort. He walked swiftly and silently, always keeping the king in

view, and followed him for a distance of three kos. He was so skillful that the king believed he was alone and did not realize that someone had been following him like a shadow through the night. The king turned his horse on to the dry bed of a stream, and rode along it for quite a distance. On both sides grew a dense, deep forest of enormous sakhu and aasan trees from which came the sounds of wild and feral beasts. The further they followed the dry bed, the deeper it became and the higher the stony banks on either side; the trees became taller and taller, their branches meeting overhead in an arch.

They continued along the bed of the stream for about a kos or so. The trees overhead were now so dense that the moonlight no longer penetrated through the leaves, and the dry bed seemed no longer to be the course of a stream, but a tunnel. The Maharaj's horse slowed down, picking its way carefully in the darkness over the stony bed; Tej Singh, taking advantage of the dark, ventured closer to the king. Suddenly a small light appeared in the distance. Tej Singh assumed that the light signified the end of the tunnel, and he was right. As they came nearer to the light, Tej Singh saw that it came from the entrance to a small cave, which was guarded by some twenty of Shivdatt's soldiers—big, strong men with naked swords gleaming in the light. Within the cave could be seen two women seated upon a pile of stones. Though Tej Singh recognized them to be Chandrakanta and Chapala, he could not see their features distinctly in the dim light.

The guards acknowledged the king and one of them came forward to hold the reins of his horse as he dismounted. The sentries lit two torches, and by their light Tej Singh could now see the two women clearly. Chandrakanta's face had lost all colour, her hair hung loose, and she had hurt her head. Her clothes covered in mud, she rested, unconscious, against a boulder. Chapala sat next to her, her back resting against another boulder, her hand on Chandrakanta's head. Some items of food lay in front of them—it was clear that they were untouched and neither of the two women had eaten anything. The faces of both women reflected hopeless despair, seeing which Tej Singh's eyes filled with tears.

The king began to search here and there, but to no avail. He had come, full of hope, in search of his queen, but he could see no signs of her. Without a word to anyone, and with barely a glance at Chandrakanta, he climbed back on to his horse and went back the way he had come. The guards were surprised at the king's behaviour, but who dared question him? Tej Singh was

tempted to stay hidden in the tunnel, but it was too narrow and as the king came towards him he scrambled up the steep banks and lay hidden in the vegetation above. The king passed by unsuspectingly, intent now on returning to the city.

Now Tej Singh began to worry—how would he rescue Chandrakanta on his own? There was no way to fight the guards, nor could he disguise himself as the king, for Shivdatt had just visited. What if he tried some other trick and it failed? The enemy would then come to know that he knew where Chandrakanta was being held and if she were moved somewhere else, it might become difficult to find her again. It would be best, he decided, to return to the prince and come back with more men; he could not fight the guards alone in that narrow tunnel.

Tej Singh turned towards Vijaygarh, and travelling without a halt, finally reached the prince on the afternoon of the following day. The prince welcomed Tej Singh warmly and impatiently asked whether he had been able to discover anything. When Tej Singh replied yes, he had indeed discovered something, the prince, his heart full of hope and keen to hear what he had to say, dismissed all his attendants so that only Devi Singh and Fateh Singh remained with them in the room.

Tej Singh told them all that he had seen, and turning to the prince, he added, ‘If it had been anyone but Chandrakanta, I would have tried a trick or two, and it wouldn’t have mattered if I had failed for I would have just run away. But Chandrakanta is too fragile and too delicate for such crudeness. I cannot tie her into a bundle and carry her away, nor can I cause her discomfort of any kind. So I have returned, to take Devi Singh back with me. Now that you have been victorious over Shivdatt Singh, you will be all right without Devi Singh.’

‘Let both of us come with you,’ suggested the prince. ‘There is no likelihood of battle just now. Besides, Fateh Singh is here should the need arise.’

‘Very well,’ agreed Tej Singh, and the prince, giving Fateh Singh various instructions, prepared to leave at once. It was evening when Tej Singh, Devi Singh and the prince set out on their rescue mission. Birendra Singh rode, mounted on his horse, and Tej Singh and Devi Singh walked beside him. On the way the prince related the full story of his victory over Shivdatt Singh including the appearance of the mysterious masked warriors

so unexpectedly and so opportunely. Tej Singh expressed astonishment at the warriors, but he too did not know who they might have been.

The three men continued on their way, talking and conversing with each other. It was a moonlit night and the road lay clear before them. They must have travelled a distance of some four kos when they saw Pandit Badrinath on the road, alone. He saw the prince and coming up to him, saluted him. The prince acknowledged his greeting with a laugh.

‘Hello, Badrinathji,’ said Devi Singh. ‘Why are you siding with that cowardly, deceitful and treacherous jackal? Come join our court, and see for yourself the wisdom and courage of our lion-hearted leader!’

‘One day it shall be as you say,’ replied Badrinath. ‘But I cannot join you till this matter with Maharaj Shivdatt is resolved. Besides, if I were to join you now, you wouldn’t trust me! I am an aiyaar after all!’ And saluting the prince again, Badrinath turned and disappeared into the forest.

‘Meeting Badrinath on the way was not a good development,’ said Tej Singh. ‘He will now certainly try to find out where we are going.’

‘Yes, there is no doubt that this was a bad omen,’ agreed Devi Singh.

The prince’s heart thumped in anxiety. ‘So what shall we do now?’ he asked.

‘We cannot make a new plan right now,’ said Tej Singh. ‘We must continue, though instead of taking this road through the forest, we can take the path that lies across open fields, so that anyone following us will be clearly visible.’

‘Very well, lead the way,’ agreed the prince.

So the three left the forest and took the path that led through the fields. From time to time they would keep turning around to check if they were being followed, but they did not see anyone. They travelled all through the night without stopping, and halted for a short rest by a stream only when the sun finally rose. After walking a few more hours, they came to a dense forest—from here, the dry stream that led to the cave where Chandrakanta was being held was only some two kos away. ‘We should spend the day hidden in this forest, and venture near the cave only towards dusk, for that which we have to do is best done under cover of darkness,’ said Tej Singh.

The three men halted under a vast chir pine and made themselves comfortable for the day. They spread the saddlecloth upon the ground for the prince to rest upon, and unsaddling the horse, they tethered it to a tree with a long rope and left it to graze. The day went by in discussion and

conversation, and when the sun had set, they set off once more on their mission. Soon they reached the dry stream that led to the cave; hiding themselves in the undergrowth, they watched for a while, and seeing no one around, they climbed down on to the stony bed.

‘What a strange and terrifying path!’ exclaimed the prince in astonishment. They proceeded slowly and carefully along the dry streambed, and when they neared the point where Tej Singh had seen the light the previous night, they found it in complete darkness. Tej Singh was alert and on guard at once—what could be wrong, he wondered. They neared the cave where he had seen Chandrakanta and Chapala. The cave seemed empty, except for what seemed like several bodies lying upon its floor. Tej Singh quickly made a light—now that they could see clearly they realized that the bodies were those of Chandrakanta’s guards. The men, it seemed, had been wounded and now lay quite dead in the cave. There was blood everywhere, slowly congealing into a gory mess. There was no sign of the princess and Chapala, though pieces of their jewellery lay broken and scattered on the floor.

The prince could not contain himself, and with a heartbroken ‘Hai!’ fell on to his knees and began to weep.

‘Why do you lose heart?’ said Tej Singh. ‘He who has led us this far will once again lead us to the princess.’

‘I have lost all hope of seeing Chandrakanta again,’ wept the prince. ‘I am sure she has left this world for another.’

‘Not at all,’ declared Tej Singh. ‘If that had been the case, we would have found her lying here with these others.’

‘Maybe Badrinath has been up to something?’ suggested Devi Singh.

‘No, that does not sound quite right to me, for even if we assume for an instant that it has been Badrinath at work here, how do we explain the killing of these guards? It’s a strange setup, and I cannot understand it,’ said Tej Singh. ‘Well, time will explain even this,’ he added and urged that they leave the place quickly.

It is difficult to describe the prince’s condition at that point. The others coaxed him away from the cave and out of the channel with much difficulty.

Devi Singh turned to Tej Singh and suggested, ‘Let’s go to the place where you are holding Shivdatt’s queen.’

The three reached the place where Tej Singh had left the queen to find that Maharani Kalavati was also missing. Now they were even more puzzled

and disturbed.

It was past midnight and the three men sat pondering the strange events of the day, unable to make sense of them. Suddenly Devi Singh turned to Tej Singh and said, ‘Guruji, I have thought of a scheme by which we can find out what is happening. Wait here with the prince and rest. I will find out everything and return very soon—with proof if I can.’

Tej Singh nodded. ‘Yes, go. Do something that merits praise. We will stay in this forest.’

Devi Singh changed his appearance to that of a village pandit and left. Chunar was not very far from where they were and very soon he reached the city gates. A sentry was patrolling the entrance to the fort. Devi Singh pulled out a bottle and a gold coin and went up to the guard; putting on a rustic accent, he said, ‘If you can identify the perfume in this bottle, I will give you this gold coin. I come from a village close by—there a perfume-seller gave me this incense and said if I could identify it, he would give me five gold coins. I am a poor villager, what do I know of perfumes and incense. So I decided to come here to the city, even though it is the middle of the night. Luckily I have met you. You live in the royal court, you must be familiar with all kinds of perfumes. If you can identify what this is and tell me, I will return to my village at once. I have promised to let the perfume-seller know my answer by the morning.’

The sentry heard Devi Singh’s tale and examined the gold coin he offered in the light from a small shop close by. ‘What a stupid man he is,’ thought the sentry. ‘He is giving me a gold coin for nothing! I will smell his perfume and say whatever comes into my head. It’s not as though he will come back tomorrow and demand his money back!’ Thinking thus, the sentry put away the gold coin, and said, ‘It’s not a big favour that you ask, I will tell you what perfume this is!’ He took the bottle from Devi Singh, and uncorking it, held it up to his nose. No sooner had he done so than he fell to the ground unconscious. Devi Singh tied the soldier up into a bundle and carried him back to Tej Singh.

‘This fellow is one of those who guards the fort,’ he said. ‘Let’s question him. If he cannot tell us anything, we will think of something else.’

Devi Singh revived the soldier, who sat up and looked around him in bewilderment—where was he and how had he come here? Seeing Devi Singh in front of him, still in the garb of a village pandit, but now accompanied by two stalwart young men, he was even more puzzled. But

before he could say anything, Devi Singh asked, 'Where is your Maharani? Answer me quickly!'

The sentry, though tied hand and foot, shot back defiantly, 'Who are you to ask about our queen? Why do you want to know?'

Tej Singh stood up and kicked him hard. 'Answer the question!' he said.

The sentry, frightened, began to babble. 'The Maharani has been missing for several days, we have not been able to find any sign of her, the palace is in tumult, and I don't know anything more than this!' he answered in a rush.

Tej Singh turned to the prince and said, 'I think it will take us a few days to find out what has happened. You should return to your army while I deal with the investigation.'

'I will not return to the army now,' replied the prince.

'If you insist on staying here, there may be great trouble. If Shivdatt finds out you are not at your command, he will attack again. Maharaj Jai Singh will come under even more pressure, and your father will die of worry for you.'

'I don't care,' replied the prince. 'If Chandrakanta is no longer in this world, how does it matter what happens anywhere?'

'You cannot lose heart in this manner,' said Tej Singh, 'for if you break, how will the rest of us continue?'

At last the prince agreed. 'All right, let me stay with you till the end of tomorrow. If we do not learn anything by then, I will return to my army and attack Chunar. I will fight Shivdatt while you search for Chandrakanta.'

And with that Tej Singh had to be content.

Of course, all these discussions were held out of earshot of the sentry whom Devi Singh had captured. Tej Singh tied the sentry securely to the trunk of a tree and said to Devi Singh, 'Now while you stay here with the prince, I will find out what is happening.' He questioned Devi Singh on certain details, and then changing his appearance to look like that of the captive soldier, left for Chunar fort.

Narrative Eight

THE FOREST IN which the prince and Devi Singh waited with the captured guard was very dense, and could not be penetrated easily. The two men settled themselves comfortably on a rocky outcrop that was clear of vegetation and spent the night in talk and discussion. Just before dawn a small stone flew out of the trees and landed close to the prince. The two looked up in surprise, when another stone followed the first, landing harmlessly on the ground.

Devi Singh called loudly, 'Who are you, hiding there and throwing stones at us? Why don't you show yourself?'

'Jackals who speak in the voice of lions are best killed from a distance,' came a voice in reply.

The prince stood up in anger, his hand on the hilt of his sword. Devi Singh put a calming hand on his arm and said, 'Do not lose your composure. I will catch that good-for-nothing fellow and bring him to you this instant! Who does he think he is anyway?'

Devi Singh stood up and moved towards the source of the voice. At that another stone came out of the trees at him. Devi Singh ran towards the trees—there was someone there, but it was so dark that he could not catch more than a glimpse of him before the man ran away. He had not been able to see his face at all. Devi Singh chased him, but the man was as cunning as a fox, and circling in and out of the dense trees, soon gave him the slip. Devi Singh searched for him a long time...the sun rose, and soon it was broad daylight. But even so, he could find no trace of the man.

At last, giving up, Devi Singh returned to the rocky outcrop where he had left the prince—to find that the prince had disappeared. He searched everywhere for him, but there was no sign that he had ever been there. He made his way to the tree where they had left the sentry—he too had gone! Devi Singh, now completely at a loss, sat down upon the rocky outcrop, his head in his hands, his eyes full of tears. 'What shall I do now? Where do I search for the prince? Where do I go?' he wondered, disheartened. 'What if Tej Singh returns while I am away searching for the prince and finds no one here? What will he think? What will be his state of mind then?'

Devi Singh tried once more to see if he could find any clues about the prince's whereabouts, but finding nothing, he returned and decided to wait for Tej Singh.

Narrative Nine

MEANWHILE, TEJ SINGH, disguised as the kidnapped sentry, reached the gates of the fort. The other guards looked at him in surprise and asked, 'Why, Jairam Singh, where had you disappeared? Your vanishing caused a lot of trouble here! Badrinath ji came on an inspection of the guards and was furious when he found you missing from your post. He has gone to investigate your absence himself, and has still not returned! Thanks to you, we all came under fire!'

'I wasn't feeling well; nature called, so I went off to the fields. I had diarrhoea and so I was delayed. Even now my stomach is feeling funny. Whatever anyone says, brothers, whether someone is angry or happy, nature's call cannot be denied,' replied Tej Singh, in the guise of Jairam Singh. Then, pretending urgency, 'I need to go again! I will be back!' he cried, and so declaring, the false Jairam Singh walked quickly away.

Tej Singh had taken heed of what the other guards had said; he knew that if Badrinath returned and found him there, there was a very good chance that he would recognize him, and therefore it was best if he did not stay there any longer. Finding a secluded spot some distance away, he disguised himself as a beggar. Taking up a position by the side of the road, he waited for Badrinath to return. A little later, he saw Badrinath coming up the road; behind him came Najim, a heavy bundle on his back, and behind him, bringing up the rear, was the sentry Devi Singh had captured and in whose likeness Tej Singh had earlier disguised himself.

Tej Singh's head began to whirl when he saw Badrinath march by so confidently. It was not a good sign, he decided. The sentry had been tied securely to the tree trunk—and the prince and Devi Singh had been there too. They could not have rescued this soldier without causing some havoc. Something untoward has happened, thought Tej Singh, and it must be either the prince or Devi Singh in that bundle upon Najim's back. Tej Singh decided to stay where he was—he knew there was nothing he could do right then, for he was alone, with no one to help him. He continued sitting by the side of the road and watched as Badrinath and the others carried their bundle into the fort. Once they were inside, he stood up and went back the way they had come, towards the forest where he had left the prince and Devi Singh.

Devi Singh was still sitting sadly on the rocky outcrop, when suddenly Tej Singh appeared. Devi Singh ran and fell at his feet. 'Guruji, the prince

has fallen into the hands of the enemy,' he said, his voice full of distress.

Tej Singh seated himself on the boulder. 'Tell me exactly what happened,' he said.

Devi Singh gave him a detailed account of all that had taken place in his absence.

'Our fortunes seem to have turned for the worse since yesterday,' mused Tej Singh. 'We are beset by worries on all sides and unable to take action. Who knows what state Chandrakanta and Chapala are in and what troubles plague them at this moment? And now the prince has been taken! This is truly outrageous!'

Tej Singh and Devi Singh talked in this manner for a while longer, and then left the rocky outcrop where they sat, to follow a particular path through the forest.

Narrative Ten

MEANWHILE IN MAHARAJ Shivdatt's main palace within the fort in Chunar, in a small cell with heavy iron doors studded with spikes, chained and handcuffed, sat Prince Birendra Singh. He wore a sad and despondent look. Several women, daggers at their waists, guarded the prince and patrolled up and down outside his cell.

The prince muttered softly to himself. 'Hai, even if I find out where Chandrakanta is, it will be of no use now. Earlier we had known that it was Shivdatt who had kidnapped her, but now we do not know where she might be,' he sighed. 'Oh Chandrakanta, where are you? These chains and this prison cell present no hardship compared to the grief and anxiety I feel at your disappearance. If only I knew that you were safe and well and back with your parents, then dying of hunger and starvation in this dark cell would be a matter of joy for me. Until I know where you are, life is dark and grim. Oh Chandrakanta! What state must you be in right now? Where should I search for you? These chains are like salt on my wounds right now! I would that instead of sitting here, a helpless prisoner, I was roaming the forests in search of the princess. I would welcome the thorns that would have pierced my feet, I would have ignored the blood and the pain, and denying both thirst

and hunger, I would have persisted in my search for her. Dear God! You did nothing to help me. You could have at least acknowledged my courage in love. Instead, you have bound my hands and feet in chains. You gave me every comfort, every joy from the moment I was born...what pleasure do you get by breaking my heart now and inflicting this misery upon me?' Weeping thus and sighing, the prince sat in his cell.

It was past midnight. The cell in which the prince lay imprisoned looked out upon a large, lavishly decorated hall, in which there burnt half a dozen lamps of delicate glass. When the prince could bear his cell no longer, he lifted his head and gazed out of his prison window at the lights. All at once he saw several women enter the hall and proceed to light all the remaining lamps—there were round lamps, and lamps in the shape of cylinders, there were lamps fixed to the walls with brackets, and chandeliers that hung from the ceiling, as well as lanterns placed here and there. All of these lamps the women lit so that the hall was as bright as day. The women spread soft and costly cushions on the floor, and when all was done, stood gazing at the door, as though waiting for someone to enter. The prince observed the scene carefully. He had been greatly puzzled at the location of his prison cell—it was deep within the palace, in the private quarters of the king where lived the women of the king's household and where even the smell of another man was not permitted. Why had he been kept here, he wondered, and what advantage could that possibly give Maharaj Shivdatt?

In a short while, Maharaj Shivdatt entered the great room. The prince stared at the king in shock—for with him, one on each side, walked Chandrakanta and Chapala. The Maharaj held their hands in his, and slowly the three advanced to seat themselves on the cushions. Chandrakanta and Chapala seemed to have no objection; rather they sat snuggled up comfortably against the king.

Though Chandrakanta and the prince had been childhood playmates, and he knew her in every mood, he had never seen her look as beautiful as she did that night. In front of her lay receptacles for betel leaves, perfumes and other items for a night of pleasure.

The prince's eyes became bloodshot with rage. 'What is this that I see?' he said to himself. 'Chandrakanta cuddling up to Shivdatt so happily and flirting so outrageously with him? Has all her love for me vanished from her heart, and with it all the love she bore her parents? Look how she behaves, and in front of me! Does she not know that I am lying in chains, a prisoner, in

this little cell? Of course she knows! See how she looks askance in my direction, puckering her lips so wantonly! And with her is Chapala—what is the matter with her? She, who had given her heart to Tej Singh, and had risked her life to rescue him from this same Shivdatt's prison cell? She didn't love Shivdatt then, but now she is competing as an equal with her mistress, snuggling up to Shivdatt in that manner! Hai! One cannot trust women or rely upon them! Oh why was I doomed to love such a shameless woman? That a girl from a good family should behave in this manner! My life is now worthless, and I will kill myself. But will I leave Chandrakanta and Chapala alive for Shivdatt's pleasure? No, never! It is true that valiant men do not lift their hands against women—but now I do not have to worry about valour any more, or ever show my face in this world again. Now all I have to do is kill these two and then kill myself. Tej Singh, too, will support me in this, and the whole troublesome business will be resolved.'

As the prince watched, Chandrakanta coquettishly put her arms around the king's neck. Birendra Singh could bear it no longer, and with a great wrench, broke his chains, and kicked the door so hard that it flew off its hinges to land beside Shivdatt. He picked up a sword that lay there, and with a single stroke decapitated Chandrakanta. By the time the king had gathered himself, he had done the same to Chapala. But he did not attack Maharaj Shivdatt.

Maharaj Shivdatt scrambled to his feet. This sudden display of strength and speed had left him speechless. He stared at the prince as though in a trance, unable to utter a word and all his courage and bravery forgotten.

As Prince Birendra Singh stood there, the naked sword in his hand dripping with blood, Tej Singh and Devi Singh arrived upon the scene. 'Oh well done, you have taken good care of your heart!' called Tej Singh to the prince, and swiftly throwing a noose around Shivdatt's neck gave it a jerk such that Shivdatt, who was already quite shaken, fell to the ground. Devi Singh tied him into a bundle at once, and lifted the bundle on to his back. Tej Singh looked at the prince and said, 'I understand your state of mind at this moment. So just come with me, and don't say a word.'

Except for the women, there was no one there to stop them. The bloody violence of the last few minutes had caused some of them to faint; the others, who were still in their senses, were so frightened that they did not utter a squeak or make any attempt to stop them. Tej Singh, Devi Singh and the prince left, taking with them the bundle that was Maharaj Shivdatt.

Narrative Eleven

THE PRINCE NOW became a different person in nature and character. All the qualities that had made him who he was—his concern for his parents, his loyalty to Vijaygarh, his love of battle, Tej Singh's friendship—all these vanished with the killing of Chandrakanta and Chapala.

The three men emerged from the fort—first came Devi Singh, carrying the bundle that was Shivdatt, then the prince, and behind him, bringing up the rear, came Tej Singh. The prince was completely unaware of his surroundings or where they were going. Soon they reached a dense forest where Tej Singh asked Devi Singh to set down his bundle. The latter did so, and then cleared a boulder of leaves and dust for the prince to sit upon. But the prince remained standing, unseeing, saying not a word, just staring at the ground.

Tej Singh was very worried about the prince. His face seemed touched as if by Death; he was no longer aware of even his own body and stared unblinkingly, fixedly at the ground, never moving. What has happened to him? Did he die with Chandrakanta? Why doesn't he sit? Tej Singh took the prince's hand in an attempt to make him sit down upon the boulder; instead, the prince fell to the ground and hit his head against a rock. Blood poured down his face, but he did not blink, not once, and still stared, unseeing, before him. His breath came in long uneven gasps.

Now Tej Singh began to fear for the prince's life. He could not contain himself, and began to weep. Devi Singh, seeing Tej Singh's grief, joined him in his weeping. Tej Singh wept and as he wept, he called loudly, 'Hai, my prince, have you really left this world? Oh, in what evil hour did love for Chandrakanta awaken in your heart that its fruit has been so bitter? Was your life to be only this short?'

Suddenly a voice answered Tej Singh's lamentations. 'No,' said the voice, 'the prince's life will be long and glorious. His love for Chandrakanta was born not in an evil hour, but at a very auspicious moment, and the fruit it will bear will be sweet. He will marry the princess, and become king of Chunar. He will go on to conquer many other kingdoms. Chandrakanta will give birth to two brave and fiery-spirited sons, who will gather more fame and fortune than even their father. What has happened that you weep and wail in this manner?'

Taken aback, Tej Singh and Devi Singh stopped weeping at once, and looked around for the source of the voice. ‘What can this mean?’ wondered Tej Singh. ‘Whose is this voice that seeks to give life to the dead? What did it say? That the prince will not die? That he will have two brave sons? How will any of this be possible? He lies close to death right now! Let’s find the owner of this voice that says such impossible things!’ Tej Singh and Devi Singh looked all around, but they could not see anyone there in the forest.

‘This way! Look this way!’ cried the voice.

Tej Singh turned in the direction of the voice and whom did he see but Pandit Jagannath Jyotishi climbing down from a tree.

‘There is no cause for astonishment or puzzlement,’ said Jagannath Jyotishi. ‘I am the one who was speaking, and all that I have said will come true. Do not spend time worrying why I, who serve Maharaj Shivdatt, should make such prophecies in your favour, for that, too, will become clear in a while and you will begin to regard me as your true friend. But we shall talk later. First, let’s look to the prince.’

As the others watched, Jagannath Jyotishi searched around in the underbrush and plucked a herb that grew there. The herb was unlike any that Tej Singh or Devi Singh had seen before—its leaves were triangular, and upon the stalk, which was white and rough to the touch, grew a single sky-blue flower. Jagannath Jyotishi crushed the herb between his fingers and squeezed two drops of its juice upon each of the prince’s eyes and into each ear. Then, placing the remains of the plant into a small square of cloth and tying it into a bundle, he sat down to wait for the prince to recover.

Less than half an hour had passed when they noticed a change in the prince. His eyes lost their unblinking stare, his eyelids closed in sleep and his limbs lost their rigid stiffness. A while later, the prince sneezed and sat up, himself again. He looked around to see Jyotishi ji, Tej Singh and Devi Singh observing him anxiously. ‘Why, what is the matter, did something happen to me?’ he asked.

Tej Singh told him of all that had happened. The prince prostrated himself before the jyotishi in gratitude and said, ‘Maharaj, you have shown me great compassion, but my head is full of questions and conjectures—so satisfy my curiosity, tell me why did you so favour me?’

‘Prince,’ replied Jyotishi ji, ‘it is one of God’s wonders that my heart desires to be with you. Maharaj Shivdatt is not a man I would wish to give my life for—he does not know a good man when he sees one, nor does he

value those with merit or skill. To stay with him is to dishonour one's own skill. He never praises merit; he uses people and is an opportunist. And if, by chance, someone makes a mistake in his service, he withdraws his favour from him instantly, no matter how learned or skilful that person might be. Besides, he is unscrupulous and immoral. No good man can stay with him, and my heart twists within me at the thought. If I give my loyalty to anyone, then it will be to you and you alone. I know of no one who is more compassionate than you. I had been worrying about this for many days, but could find no opportunity to tell you the truth and convince you of my allegiance. After all, no matter what I may have said, I am an aiyaar, and aiyaars do not trust other aiyaars easily. Today I found a chance to show you where my loyalty lies—for today was a day of great distress and danger for you, which had been brought upon you by the cunning and deceit of Maharaj Shivdatt.'

Jyotishi ji's last statement took everyone by surprise. All three men stared intently at him. 'What do you mean, Jyotishi ji?' asked Tej Singh. 'How did Shivdatt trick us?'

'It is Maharaj Shivdatt's custom to consult me before embarking on any important venture. Though he asks my opinion, he does not always take my advice. I may agree or disagree with his plans, but it does not matter, for he will do as he wishes. He has come to grief several times by disregarding my advice, but he will still do as he wants. Pandit Badrinath too has been angered by this attitude of Shivdatt's—why does he bother to ask for advice when he doesn't wish to take it? I had advised him strongly against the deception he practised on you tonight, but he didn't listen, with the result that the aiyaars Ghasita Singh and Bhagwandatt lost their lives. I will tell you the whole truth of the matter, but only if you will henceforth consider me to be your fellow aiyaar and your friend.'

The prince glanced at Tej Singh, who said, 'Jyotishi ji, I will, with great pleasure, take you as my friend and colleague, but before I do so, you will have to take an oath to convince me that you have no trick or deception against us in your heart.'

Jagannath Jyotishi, holding the sacred thread he wore in his hand, took a solemn vow declaring his loyalty, and Tej Singh stood up and embraced him warmly, welcoming him into his band of aiyaars. The prince removed the collar of precious jewels he wore around his neck and gave it to Jyotishi ji as a mark of his favour.

‘Now listen to what really happened,’ said Jyotishi ji, ‘and understand why the prince was imprisoned in the palace instead of the dungeons, and what lies behind the bloody mayhem of tonight.’

‘If you recall, when you left in search of Princess Chandrakanta,’ continued Jyotishi ji, ‘Badrinath had met you on the way. Now, he reached the cave where she had been hidden, before you, with the intention of taking her to another hiding place—but he arrived to find the cave empty and the princess missing. He returned empty-handed, and then, taking Najim with him, he left in search of you. Finding all of you here, he used aiyaari to trick you and take the prince captive. Najim was the one who was throwing pebbles at you, and when Devi Singh ran after him, Badrinath ji came to the prince disguised as Tej Singh and, tricking him into unconsciousness, carried him away to the fort as his prisoner. And then, to make the prince fall out of love with Chandrakanta so that he would stop searching for her and stop waging war on him, Shivdatt forced Ghasita Singh and Bhagwandatt, who were the youngest amongst us, to change their appearance to look like Chandrakanta and Chapala. The prince was forced to witness the little drama they performed for his benefit...and you know what happened after that.’

The prince jumped for joy at the jyotishi’s words. ‘Chandrakanta is alive! My poor, innocent princess! What a cruel, deceitful trick that was that Shivdatt played on us. But no matter—Chandrakanta lives, and even though we do not know where she is right now, I am sure we will find her soon!’ he exclaimed.

The four sat down to think what they should do next, and came to the conclusion that first, Maharaj Shivdatt should be locked up in that same prison in the secret valley where Tej Singh had imprisoned the other aiyaars, though care should be taken to use the second lock, since Badrinath knew the mechanism of the lion’s tongue; second, the prince should return to Vijaygarh, for even though there would be no fighting as long as the Maharaj remained a prisoner, some military presence was required on the borders for the security of the kingdom; third, Devi Singh should stay with the prince; and finally, Tej Singh and Jyotishi ji should go in search of the princess.

Having decided their course of action, the four stood up and went on their way.

Narrative Twelve

IT IS AFTERNOON. Beside a stream, upon a boulder, sit two young women—both are dressed in torn, dirty saris, their faces streaked with dirt, their hair hanging loose and uncombed down their backs, and their delicate feet caked with mud. Both wear expressions of extreme dejection and despair. They are surrounded on all sides by dense, dark forest, from which can be heard the calls and cries of wild and savage beasts. When the wind blows through the trees, the rustling of the leaves makes the forest even more terrifying.

On the opposite side of the stream from where they sat, there appeared a leopard from amongst the trees. It came down to the stream to quench its thirst, and though the two young women could see it, the wild creature did not notice them, for they were hidden from its sight behind the trunk of a large jamun tree.

The more delicate of the two young women shivered in fright. ‘My dearest friend, what if the leopard comes this way?’ she whispered to her companion.

‘Don’t worry, my dear, it will not,’ reassured her companion. ‘And if it does, I will shoot it with this arrow I have mounted on my bow, and which I took from those guards I killed. We have two hundred arrows with us, and both you and I can shoot. Here, why don’t you mount an arrow upon your bow as well?’

The first woman did as her companion suggested, but they did not need their arrows, for the leopard, having drunk its fill of water, turned around and vanished into the forest again. The two now relaxed and fell to discussing various matters. The first woman addressed her companion and said, ‘So, Chapala, can you tell where we are? What forest is this, and where in this wilderness lies the road to Vijaygarh?’

‘I wouldn’t know, princess,’ replied Chapala. ‘In my eagerness to get as far away from our prison as possible, I did not notice which way we ran. I do not know which way lies Vijaygarh, where we left Chunar behind, or which way to turn for Naugarh! I have spent all my life with you in the palace, or at the most, patrolled the borders of Vijaygarh. I have never before ventured into these forests. Yes, it is true that I know the straight route to Chunar, but I did not take that path on purpose for the enemy encampment lies along the way. What if someone saw us? That is why I ran into the forest,

away from the soldiers. Anyway, we are in God's hands, and I am sure He will show us a path sooner or later. Here, I have some apples in my bag—have some, and drink some water from the stream, and we shall see what is to be done.'

'Save the apples for later,' suggested the princess. 'Who knows how long we may have to wander here. The forest is quite dense; let us find wild berries and fruits to eat. It will also help to pass the time.'

'As you wish,' agreed Chapala.

Chapala and Chandrakanta climbed higher along the stream and as they went, they searched for wild fruits that they could pick and eat. The afternoon was over and evening was drawing in when the two suddenly came upon the ruins of an old mansion. It must have been the grand residence of a king once, but now lay derelict and broken.

'Princess,' said Chapala, 'why don't you rest in the doorway of this ruined palace, while I search for more fruits? Once we have rested and eaten, we will go in and explore this place. Till we find the path to Vijaygarh, we can make this ruin our home. Perhaps a traveller or a cowherd will pass this way. We could ask them the way to Vijaygarh and make our way back.'

'All right,' agreed the princess. 'I will wait here for you, but don't wander too far!'

'I will stay within sight,' reassured Chapala, and went off in search of edible fruit for their meal.

Narrative Thirteen

CHANDRAKANTA, WAITING FOR Chapala upon the doorstep of the ruined house, began to fret and worry. To distract herself, she decided to explore the house for though it lay in ruins today, there must have been a time when it would have had no equal in grandeur.

Princess Chandrakanta stood up and entered the ruin. The doorway, of sturdy construction, was still intact. Though no doors remained, it was possible to imagine that once, stout wooden or iron doors must have hung from the hinges.

Inside, the princess found that the palace was huge, and laid out in a square. The central building was quite broken down, but the surrounding enclosure seemed in good repair.

As the princess ventured further into the ruin, she entered a large hall—its roof had fallen in but the supporting pillars were still standing. Here and there lay piles of rubble, and she picked her way slowly and carefully around them. As she crossed the great hall, she came to an open space, which, it was clear, must have been a garden once. Flowerbeds outlined in marble could still be seen; narrow marble channels, that must once have served to water the plants, still crisscrossed the open space. Several fountains, all in a state of disrepair, could also be seen. A layer of dirt lay over everything.

In the centre of the garden stood a huge stone heron. Curious, and eager to examine it more closely, the princess walked up to the statue. The bird was carved of white marble, and mounted on a waist-high pedestal of black stone. The legs of the bird could not be seen—it appeared to be sitting upon the stone pedestal, its legs tucked out of sight beneath its body. The circumference of its body was at least fifteen cubits around, and its long beak and its wings and feathers were carved with such skill and delicacy that no amount of praise for the sculptor seemed enough.

The princess, taken with the carving and fine detail of the statue, stepped closer, when all at once, the stone bird opened its beak. The princess stopped, flustered, and not a little apprehensive. She stepped away from the statue and to its side. And this time the bird spread its wings.

Chapala had often told the princess that there were no such beings as ghosts and spirits, that magic was only trickery and sleight of hand, and whatever strange phenomena there existed were aiyaari. Chandrakanta, too, was convinced of this, and was therefore not as afraid as she might, or should, have been. Another woman in her place may perhaps have died of fright, but Chandrakanta merely stepped behind the bird to examine it further. Her foot fell upon a small square stone embedded into the ground—and no sooner had she stepped upon it than the bird swivelled around, picked up Chandrakanta in its beak and swallowed her. It then swivelled back to its original position, closed its beak, folded its wings and was still again.

Narrative Fourteen

A SHORT WHILE later, Chapala returned with the fruits that she had gathered in the forest to find that Chandrakanta was no longer where she had left her. She looked around, but could not see her. 'Maybe she has gone into the ruins,' thought Chapala, and entered the derelict mansion.

The princess had walked fearlessly, unhesitatingly into the ruined house, but Chapala was more cautious—she walked slowly, pausing to note and observe each and every strange sight she saw. As she entered through the doorway, she saw two great halls on either side. Though there were piles of rubble everywhere, and in some places the roof had fallen in, she noticed that the paintings on the walls and the stone statues in the palace still looked fresh and new.

Chapala stared at the statues in astonishment. Not a single one of them was complete—some had heads missing, some had legs missing, some a hand and some even had half a torso missing! And the faces on these statues were also strangely terrifying. Crossing the piles of rubble—upon which grew wild trees—she reached the central garden, and saw in the distance the stone heron that we know had already swallowed the princess.

Chapala ran towards the stone heron, and as she came close, the bird opened its beak. Astonished, she stopped and stepped back—and the bird closed its beak. She wondered what to do next—it seemed as though some powerful aiyaari was at work in that palace. She must find its secret. First, though, she must find Chandrakanta, because the ruin seemed to be some ancient tilisma, and it should not be that she was trapped in its enchantment. Chapala moved away from the heron, and began searching for the princess.

There were corridors and courtyards on all four sides, with halls and smaller rooms leading off them, some in good condition, others in ruins. She reached a great hall whose roof had fallen in, in the centre. The length of the hall must have been some hundred yards. In the centre lay a great pile of earth and rubble from which had sprouted saplings of peepul and other wild trees; all around were scattered the bones of animals, and great big cobwebs and spider webs festooned the walls and hung down from what remained of the ceiling. On one side of this immense hall lay a small room, in which there was a well. Chapala entered and peered into the well but she could see only darkness.

Chapala began to wonder: what lay in the well? Why did the little room look cleaner and better maintained than its surrounding rooms? The well, too, seemed as though it was being looked after—there were no wild plants or saplings growing down its sides as often happens with abandoned wells. She could also hear faint sounds that seemed to be coming from the well—of these she could make neither head nor tail.

Chapala opened her bag of aiyaari equipment, and taking out some pieces of camphor, she set them alight and threw them into the well. The camphor burnt brightly on its way down, and lit up the interior of the well. (It is a natural property of camphor that if it is set alight and thrown into a deep well or hole, it will burn brightly and continue burning even when it reaches the bottom). Chapala could see that the well was indeed clean and well maintained, but there was no water in it. Instead, at the bottom of the well was spread a white sheet, upon which sat an old man. Chapala could see his long, flowing beard quite clearly, but because his head was bent downwards, she could not catch sight of his face; before him stood a small, four-legged stool upon which lay several brightly-coloured flowers. Chapala jumped with fright at this sight, then pulling herself together, sat down upon the edge of the well and tried to make sense of the scene. But she could find no explanation for it, and after a while, the pieces of camphor burnt themselves out and the well was plunged into darkness again.

The room led into another great hall, which was bigger and in a more ruined state than the other, and which contained a sight more frightening than the first. Huge mounds of earth and rubble lay all around, and piles of dirt and scattered bones; amidst the mess there also lay the intact and complete skeleton of a donkey or perhaps a mule. Chapala edged around the skeleton carefully, and reached the centre of the great hall.

There, in the centre, rose a marble platform, about as high as a man, and at its side, leading to the top, were nine marble steps. Upon the platform was placed a bed on which lay a man, reading a book that he held in his hands. Since the platform was so high, Chapala could not see the man's face. 'Should I climb on to that platform?' wondered Chapala. 'There can be no harm in that, can there? Should I climb those steps?' Chapala gingerly put one foot on to the first step. All at once there was a loud noise, and the stair, opening like the lid of a chest, threw off Chapala's foot with such force that she lost her balance and fell to the ground. She picked herself up and saw that the steps looked normal once again.

Chapala stood to one side and thought to herself, ‘This ruined mansion, despite its broken down condition, is a strange and curious place. It must have been built by a great and powerful aiyaar. It is not safe to walk through it, for one unwary move could kill me. But I am not afraid because my dear Chandrakanta, whom I love more than life itself, is trapped somewhere within this ruin. I must find her. Though I may die in the process, I will not leave this place without the princess.’

Chapala looked towards the platform again. ‘Let me see now,’ she said to herself, ‘what kinds of aiyaari may have been used in this platform and these stairs?’ She stood still, thinking, then placed a heavy stone weighing some ten ser upon the first step—the stair threw off the stone in the same manner and just as easily as it had thrown off her foot.

Chapala placed the stone on each of the nine steps by turn, and each of the steps threw off the stone in the same manner as the first one had done. ‘I must see what lies on this platform,’ thought Chapala, and began to think of other ways to reach the top. Finally, she gathered a great pile of rubble and stones near the platform, and climbed to the top from where she had a clear view of the platform: there, upon a marble bed, lay a man, holding a book in both hands. The man looked to be about thirty years of age. Gazing at him closely, Chapala realized that he, too, was made of stone, and picking up a small pebble, she threw it at his face. Though he was stone, his reaction was that of flesh and blood—raising one hand, he brushed off the pebble Chapala had thrown, and that done, returned the hand to its original position. Chapala placed a pebble carefully on his foot—he raised his foot and shook it till the pebble fell off. Though Chapala was both clever and fearless, the antics of this strange statue terrified her and she moved quickly away.

She now began to search in the opposite direction, and entering an adjoining hall, she saw what appeared to be the entrance to a dungeon. A flight of steps led downwards from the centre of the great room, and leading to the stairs, a pair of doors which, at that moment, stood wide open.

‘Should I go down those stairs or not?’ wondered Chapala. ‘What if the doors shut behind me and I am trapped inside? Maybe I should test this too before I go any further? What if I throw a boulder down the stairs? If these doors close behind a man, then they will definitely close with the weight of a boulder falling down the stairs. But if they do close, how will I open them again or ever find out what lies down there? So I must think of a plan so that

the doors do not close—perhaps it would be best if I broke those doors altogether!’

Chapala examined the doors and realized that she would not be able to break them—they were made of iron, and instead of hinges, they moved on a pivot embedded firmly into the ground. Chapala could not tell how deeply the pivot was fixed into the ground.

Chapala uncoiled the rope she wore around her waist, and folding it in four, tied one end of the rope to one of the iron doors and wound the other end around one of the pillars in the hall, and fastened it. Once she was sure that both ends of the rope were securely tied, she threw a big boulder through the open doors and down the stairs. All at once there came a whistling sound as of air escaping from a giant bellows, and the unsecured iron door shut with a clang. The other door strained and pulled at the rope, but the rope held and the door stayed open. Certain now that the door would stay open, Chapala decided to venture down the stairs.

Narrative Fifteen

MEANWHILE, CHAMPA, TOO, is not free of troubles. She, too, is wandering in search of the princess.

When several days passed with no news of the princess, she took permission from the Maharani and left in search of her. She wandered day after day through dense forests and over rocky mountains, but found no trace of Chandrakanta. One day, tired and exhausted, she took shelter under a tree and sat down to rest. ‘Where shall I search next?’ she asked herself. ‘I have promised the Maharani that I will find Chandrakanta without the help of either Prince Birendra Singh or Tej Singh, and while it is true that so far I have had no success, I will not return to Vijaygarh without the princess. I will carry on searching—sooner or later I am bound to find her.’

As she sat there under the tree, immersed in such thoughts, she saw four men walking towards her. They were dressed as soldiers; each carried a shield and a sword, and in his hand a scimitar. Seeing Champa, they stopped and had a brief discussion amongst themselves. They were still too far away for Champa to hear what they said, but as she watched them, it became clear

to her that they were waiting for someone. They would, now and then, glance at Champa; after a while, they separated and spread out amongst the trees so that they surrounded her, each at some distance from the others.

Champa was instantly alert. 'Who are these people? Why have they surrounded me? What do they want?' she wondered. 'I should not sit here any longer,' she decided and stood up, and began walking down one of the various paths that led away from the place. But the soldiers did not let her leave; instead, they ran towards her and blocked her way. 'Where are you going?' they asked. 'Wait, our master will be here soon, wait till he comes. We will take you to him and intercede on your behalf and have him employ you. You can then stay in comfort as one of his serving women, and won't have to roam the forests in this manner.'

'I don't need employment that I should wait for your master,' retorted Champa. 'Let me pass, I need to continue on my way.'

'No, no, don't be in such a hurry. Wait for our master—you will be delighted to see him. He is more handsome than any man you have ever seen. In fact, we will try and get you married to him,' replied one of the soldiers.

'Watch what you say!' flared Champa. 'Don't take me for a weak, lonely woman you can harass. I can deal with ten such as you!'

The men stared at Champa in astonishment, and then at each other, nonplussed at her reply. As Champa took a step away, one of the men reached out and grabbed her arm. Champa did not need more provocation—she pulled out her dagger with lightning speed, and wounding two of the soldiers ran off into the trees. The remaining two followed in pursuit, but they could not keep up and would have given up after a while had it not been for Champa's bad luck. She tripped over a stone and fell and hurt herself in such a manner that she could not get up again and the two men caught up with her.

Before they could utter a word, they saw approaching down the path, a large caravan of some two hundred merchants. Leading the caravan was an old man—he was dressed in costly robes, and was armed with sword, shield and spear. As he came closer it could be seen that he had a long, white beard, dark skin and brown eyes, and appeared to be some eighty years of age. His steed was a black horse of inestimable value. A beardless youth of not more than twenty years rode beside him on a sturdy Nepali pony; the young man's handsome bearing and expensive raiment proclaimed him a prince. They were followed by several men, some on horses and some on foot; behind them came camels laden with goods and provisions and tents for the caravan.

The caravan also included several closed palanquins, guarded by soldiers armed with guns.

The two men chasing Champa called out to the caravan, 'This woman has wounded two of our men...' Even before they could complete their sentence, Champa was surrounded by several of the caravan guards; wresting her dagger away from her, they handcuffed her and put her in chains. The old man, who seemed to be their chief, ordered the others to halt. 'Set up our camp here,' he ordered. 'It is a good spot—it seems that no one comes or passes here very often, for I can see no footprints upon the path nor any other recent signs of travellers.'

The camp was set up, including a large tent into which were herded the women from the palanquins; they were kept under guard and it was clear that they were prisoners. Poor Champa was also pushed into the tent with them. Soon, darkness fell. The women were given a single light in the tent. After a while, a couple of serving women entered to ask whether they wanted to cook for themselves, or whether they preferred to eat what was served to them. 'We will eat what you serve us,' answered all the women—except two, who declared they would not eat at all. 'Let's see how long you can starve,' said the serving women grimly, and walked out. Of the two women who had refused to eat, one was the unfortunate Champa, and the other a fragile and extremely beautiful young woman whose eyes were bright with tears and who would heave long, sad sighs from time to time. Champa was sitting next to her.

Some hours passed, and food was brought in for the women, except for the two, including Champa, who had refused to eat. Some more time passed, and the night was half done. The sounds of people moving about ceased as the camp settled down for the night. Soon Champa could hear the regular tread of feet, which told her that the camp was being patrolled by sentries. Slowly she struck up a conversation with the beautiful, fragile-looking woman next to her.

'Who are you?' asked Champa, 'and how did you fall into the clutches of these people?'

'My name is Kalavati,' answered the woman. 'I am Maharaj Shivdatt's queen. The Maharaj had gone to war, and I was asleep alone in my chamber. When I awoke I found myself a captive of these people. I have no recollection of how I got here. Who are you?'

‘What? You are the queen of Chunar! And in this condition! God is indeed inscrutable in His ways!’ exclaimed Champa. She added, ‘If you are Maharaj Shivdatt’s queen, then you would have heard about Princess Chandrakanta. I am her friend and companion, and was wandering the forests in search of her when these men captured me.’

As the two women talked softly to each other, there came a sudden shout from outside, ‘Who is it? Catch him! He is running away! He’s gone!’ The queen was frightened at the commotion, but Champa remained unperturbed. The rest of the night passed in more conversation for neither of the two women could sleep.

The sky lightened and it was almost dawn when the two women who had brought the food the night before, entered the tent. This time they were armed with swords, and announced that those who wished could go, one by one, into the forest to relieve themselves. While the other women gladly took the offer, Champa and the Maharani remained sitting where they were. The day must have been a few hours old when the old man who seemed to be the leader of the caravan entered their tent. He was accompanied by an old woman.

‘Is this all of them, or are there more?’ she asked.

‘At this moment, this is all of them,’ answered the old man. ‘With your help, we will have more.’

‘Yes, yes, I’ll trap many more, wait and see,’ she replied. ‘Now tell me, what kind of women do you want, and how much will you pay for each type?’

‘Look for yourself—they are all of the same kind,’ said the man, nodding at the women in the tent. ‘If you get me their kind, you will get ten rupees per woman.’ Then, indicating Champa, he said, ‘And if you get me women like her, I’ll give you fifty rupees, but (and here he gestured towards the Maharani) if you get me any as beautiful as this one, then I will pay you a full hundred rupees.’

‘I understand,’ nodded the old woman. ‘But tell me—where did you find them?’

‘That one, the one that is the most beautiful, we found her lying senseless in a cave. And the other one, we caught her yesterday. She’s a handful, she wounded two of my men!’

‘Hmm, one can tell that she is trouble just by the look in her eyes,’ remarked the old woman, looking Champa up and down. ‘Three or four like

her together can earn you enough riches to buy your entire caravan a passage to heaven!’

‘Without a doubt!’ agreed the old man. ‘As for the others, we caught them in various ways. That one, she was a neighbour. My son had pitched his tent next to hers, and he snared her by making her fall in love with him. These four—they were trapped because of their greed for money. As for the rest, I bought them from their mothers, grandmothers and guardians. Now let’s go, we’ll talk in our own tent. I am an old man, I can’t keep standing for so long.’

The old man and the old woman left the tent, and once they were safely out of earshot, the women broke into loud curses. ‘Just listen to that rascal! He wants to trap even more women? Where did he find this evil old crone? Listen to her boast! See how many women I will trap, she says! Oh dear God, You look after such people too! Who knows how many families this witch will ruin!’

Champa had observed the old woman very carefully, and remained in deep thought for a long time after the old man and old woman had left the tent. The Maharani, though, could only weep. ‘Hai, I wonder how the king fared in the war, he must be so sad without me,’ she said, as she wept softly to herself.

Champa tried to console her. ‘Maharani, don’t cry any more, be patient, I am sure we will be out of here very soon. If only I were free of these wretched chains I would show these people a thing or two! But I am helpless. The only way to rid myself of these chains is to saw through them, and that is impossible here!’

That day too passed in weeping and wailing. Soon it was evening, and the old chief once again paid the women a visit in their tent. With him came the same old crone, this time bringing a young and beautiful woman with her.

‘Look at her! Compare her to the others! Isn’t she in the first category?’ said the old woman.

‘No, not the first, though she may pass for the second category,’ replied the chief. ‘I will give you fifty rupees for her, and that’s a good start for you!’

‘All right, fifty, it is not as though I have a great number of buyers,’ agreed the old woman, resigned. ‘I will bring more tomorrow,’ she added, and left with the chief.

The old man and the old woman had been speaking in very low tones, so that no one knew what they had said—except Champa, who had read their lips.

The new prisoner seemed quite happy and carefree. She was served food at once, and she ate it all up with relish. She laughed to see the other women look sad and miserable, and cracked jokes at their expense. 'She is trouble,' thought Champa to herself. 'She is not at all angry or upset at being made a prisoner! There is definitely something wrong here!'

Narrative Sixteen

THAT NIGHT PASSED in the same manner as the previous one. In the morning, the same two women arrived, once again armed with swords, and the captives took turns to answer nature's call. Once again, Champa and the Maharani did not move from where they sat; nor did they eat anything.

'Have you eaten anything at all since you fell into these people's hands?' asked Champa.

'I eat once in two or three days, just to keep body and soul together, and in the hope of seeing the Maharaj again,' replied the queen.

A little later, two men entered the tent and spoke to Champa and the Maharani, 'You, the two of you! Get up and come outside. It is our chief's command that today all women have to sit outside in the sunshine and fresh air, so that they do not start looking sickly and pale.' They led them outside. Several of the women were already sitting there under the shade of a dense mahua tree where Champa and the Maharani joined them. Champa began to look around her with great interest.

The day was several hours old when the same old crone arrived, once more bringing a young, and even more beautiful woman with her. As soon as he saw her, the old chieftain welcomed her with great respect, seated her next to himself, and sent the young woman to sit with the other women under the tree. Champa observed the woman closely. At last she could not restrain herself, and looking up said, 'Mi sagamta!'^{*}

The woman who had just come with the old woman looked at her with interest. After a while, looking down at her foot and massaging her big toe, she said, 'Chapakla chhathme baaprofas.'[†] After this statement, both fell silent.

Evening fell, and the women returned to their tent. At night, they were brought food; everyone except Champa and the Maharani ate their fill. The two young women who had been brought by the old woman had especially large appetites and ate the food with great relish.

It grew late, and the encampment fell silent; there was no sound, except for the regular tramping of the sentries' feet outside the women's tent. A single lamp was still lit within the tent. All the women, except four, lay asleep: Champa, the Maharani and the two women who had been brought in by the old woman were wide awake. Champa looked at the two of them and said, 'Karak mi teti, no se paro festo.'[‡]

One of the women answered, 'Tomse ki?'[§]

Champa replied, 'Rani main sengi!'[¶]

The two strange women pulled out sharp files from their waistbands, and quietly sawed off Champa's handcuffs and chains. Now Champa relaxed, and smiles began to play upon her lips once again.

The night was several hours old when suddenly there was a loud commotion outside the women's tent. Shouts of 'Kill him! Hold him!' were heard, followed by the sound of firing. The women were convinced that the camp had been attacked by dacoits and that a full-fledged battle raged outside. The Maharani, frightened, called out for Champa, but Champa was nowhere to be found. One of the two young women brought in by the crone came up to the Maharani and said, 'It seems that Champa has managed to escape, but don't be afraid, it is your men who have raided this camp. I, too, am one of your men. I am not a woman, this is just a disguise. I will go now to fetch a palanquin for you.' And the two young 'women' left the tent.

Soon the fighting outside seemed to subside, except in the direction of the other tents in the campsite. Two men, their faces masked, entered the tent with a palanquin, and carried the Maharani away in it. The night ended and the sky began to lighten. Champa and the Maharani had escaped, but the other women remained sitting in the tent, their faces pale with fright, not one amongst them knowing what she should do next. Just then, Pannalal, Ram Narayan and Chunnilal arrived, bearing a covered palanquin with silken curtains embroidered with gold and silver flowers. They set the palanquin down outside and entered the tent. They looked at the women carefully, then asked, 'Two women amongst you are missing—where did they go?'

The women, already terrified, did not answer. Pannalal tried again. ‘Don’t be afraid,’ he said. ‘We are not dacoits. We created all this noise and confusion so that we could set you free. So tell me, where did those two women go?’

Now the women found some courage. ‘Not two, but four women are missing,’ answered one. ‘Of these, one was brought in yesterday, and one the day before. They told one of the other two that she should not be afraid for they were her servants, and would fetch a palanquin and take her away—and that is what they did. They came back with a palanquin, and the woman they had spoken to climbed into it and was carried away. As for the fourth woman, she had already run away.’

Pannalal, stunned into silence, stared questioningly at Ram Narayan and Chunnilal.

‘It is correct that we spoke to the Maharani telling her not to lose heart, and then left in search of you and the palanquin. As you know, we gave our signal whistle, met you, picked up the palanquin and here we are! But who is it who pre-empted us and carried the queen away before we could return? It is also correct that Champa had disappeared before we left. The Maharani had called out to her in the confusion, but Champa had not been there. Let us count how many palanquins remain in this camp of slave traders and traffickers in women. Let us also get these other women out of here.’

The women were ushered out of the tent. They looked around in dismay: there was blood everywhere, and here and there a corpse. The caravan’s old chieftain and his beautiful young son were seated under a tree, bound in chains, and guarded by ten men with naked swords. Dozens of other men, their arms and legs securely bound, lay under more trees. The tents had been destroyed and the campsite lay in ruins.

Pannalal, Ram Narayan and Chunnilal walked across to where the palanquins lay and counted them. ‘There are sixteen. When we had counted them earlier, there had been seventeen palanquins,’ said Ram Narayan. ‘This means that the palanquin in which the queen has been carried away was one of these. The question is—who has carried her away?’ Turning to Chunnilal, he continued, ‘Chunnilal, please ask the Diwan Sahib* to come here. He is with the rest of the soldiers.’

Chunnilal fetched the Diwan Sahib as directed. ‘Our four days of hard work has come to nought!’ said Pannalal to the diwan. ‘These people set up camp three steps from Vijaygarh. To keep them here and make sure they did

not move away before you could arrive with your soldiers, we tempted their old chief with the promise of more women. You too, put in every effort and came as swiftly as you could, there was all this fighting and bloodshed—and despite all this, we have found neither Champa nor the Maharani. Champa, of course, has probably run away. She had seen through our disguises at once, and had forced us to cut loose her chains by threatening to tell the old chieftain the truth about us, that we were men in disguise. We would have been caught and that would have sabotaged the rescue mission. So we had had no choice but to do as she asked, and in the commotion, seeing her chance, she escaped. But who has taken the Maharani?’

The Diwan Sahib was at a loss. ‘Question these scoundrels! Or better still, flog their old sardar and ask him! Maybe he is behind this trickery!’

But Pannalal shook his head. ‘You have been able to take the old man prisoner...which makes it hard for me to believe that the old man could be behind the Maharani’s disappearance... There must be another explanation. Take these slave traders and return to Chunar with your soldiers and take care of the kingdom. We will set out in search of the Maharani. We have taken that responsibility upon ourselves.’

The Diwan Sahib set off for Chunar, taking with him the slave traders as his captives, and all their wealth and possessions as well.

Pannalal, Ram Narayan and Chunnilal left in search of the Maharani, and as they went they talked amongst themselves. ‘Look at the state of Chunar these days—the king is a prisoner, the queen is missing, and to top it all, someone has made complete fools of us and taken her away again!’

‘Yes,’ agreed Ram Narayan. ‘What did we not do, what trouble did we not take to find the queen! We found these people with such great difficulty, held them in the forest making sure they wouldn’t leave, fetched the Diwan Sahib and the soldiers from Chunar, fought a battle in which we lost some of our men... And here we are, back to square one, with only shame and embarrassment as our reward!’

‘And I was celebrating because I thought we had also got Champa,’ said Chunnilal. ‘But she outsmarted us! Look at the way she recognized us and forced us to saw through her chains! She is very clever—do you think she could be behind this trick?’

‘No, sir! Champa alone cannot carry the Maharani away in a palanquin!’ declared Pannalal.

‘Pandit Badrinath has gone to free the king, taking Najim and Ahmed with him,’ said Ram Narayan. ‘Let’s see with what success he meets.’

‘We are in no state to return to Chunar to find out!’ protested Pannalal. ‘We cannot show our face in Chunar without the Maharani!’

‘Well, the man who stole the Maharani away is clearly smarter than us!’ said Ram Narayan. ‘We might as well settle down in this forest, bring our sons and daughters here and set up house! We have no hope of returning to Chunar for we will not find the Maharani so easily!’

‘So much for your courage,’ chided Pannalal.

After walking a little distance, the three separated, having fixed a place to meet again.

Narrative Seventeen

IN A DEEP gorge, surrounded by dense forest, sit Pandit Jagannath Jyotishi and Tej Singh. Beside them lies an ordinary-looking palanquin, in which sits a woman talking earnestly to Tej Singh. This woman is Maharani Kalavati, queen to the king of Chunar, Maharaj Shivdatt. Behind the palanquin, one hand resting upon it, stands Champa.

‘I don’t want to return to Chunar, I don’t want the throne. For me, it is heaven enough to be with the Maharaj. If he is a prisoner, then chain me and bind me too, but let me remain with him.’

‘No, you do not need to become a prisoner with the king, that is not why we have brought you here,’ said Tej Singh. ‘If you wish to return to Chunar, we will take you there in safety and security. Jyotishi ji has told us often of your devotion to the king, and mentioned how worried and sad you must be in his absence, and so we brought you here, in case you wished to be with him. Otherwise, we would have come away with Champa alone. There is no one except me who can take you to him, because no one but me knows where he is imprisoned. And who knows how long he will remain a prisoner. So now tell us what you wish—if you say so, we can take you back to Chunar, or we can take you to the king.’

‘You have done me a great favour,’ said the Maharani. ‘It’s true that no one can take me to the Maharaj quicker than you can. Don’t delay any more,

take me to him, I will be very grateful.'

'I cannot take you in the palanquin, I will have to render you unconscious and carry you there,' said Tej Singh.

'I am all right even with that, just take me to him, no matter how,' replied the Maharani.

'Then smell the fumes from this bottle,' said Tej Singh holding out a small phial.

The Maharani loved her husband so much that even if Tej Singh had asked for her head as the price for being with him, she would have agreed. She took the phial from his hand without hesitation, and sniffed it and fell unconscious.

'Now take her and leave her in that same prison with the king. I will wait here in this forest till you return,' said Jyotishi ji to Tej Singh. 'Champa, too, should return to Vijaygarh. We are, in any case, searching for Princess Chandrakanta, so why subject Champa to the trouble and hardship involved?'

'Champa, Jyotishi ji is right. Go back home, lest you get caught again in a dangerous situation,' said Tej Singh.

'I will not go back to Vijaygarh without the princess,' replied Champa firmly. 'Besides, even though I fell into the hands of those slave traders, I also managed to escape using my own wits! You didn't have to go to any extra trouble for me!'

'You are right when you say that you did not need us to rescue you, and nor did we,' conceded Tej Singh. 'We were searching for Princess Chandrakanta, and it was with her in mind that we found and tracked these slave traders. We didn't find her, but we found you and the Maharani instead. We were worrying how to rescue you when we saw that Pannalal, Ram Narayan and Chunnilal had also reached you and were making preparations to free the Maharani. We decided to step aside and watch, to let them do the hard work and to wait for the opportunity we were sure we would get. And it turned out exactly as we had hoped—while you escaped using your own wits, we managed to rescue the Maharani. Anyway, enough of these matters. Tell me though—if you are not returning home, what are you planning to do? Where do you plan to search for Chandrakanta? We must know, for it should not happen that we find the princess and return with her to Vijaygarh, while you, unknowing, continue to roam the forests and mountains looking for her!'

'I am not such a fool, don't worry about me,' retorted Champa.

Tej Singh had no option but to leave Champa to her own devices, and leaving both her and Jyotishi ji behind, he made a bundle of the Maharani, and slinging her on to his back, left for the secret valley where he had imprisoned Maharaj Shivdatt. Champa, too, left the forest by another path.

Narrative Eighteen

JYOTISHI JI, LEFT alone in the forest, decided to use his skills of divination to locate Chandrakanta and Chapala. He opened his box, pulled out his scrolls, and began his calculations. He worked steadily for an hour, when suddenly his face lit up and he smiled happily to himself. Packing away his scrolls as quickly as possible, he picked up his little box of tricks and ran towards the same secret prison to which Tej Singh was at that moment carrying the Maharani. He was an aiyaar, so moving quickly presented no challenge to him, and he ran as fast as possible in the direction of the secret valley.

Tej Singh was plodding along, one step at a time, with the Maharani on his back. He had travelled a distance of some five kos when all at once he heard a shout behind him. ‘Stop, stop!’ cried a voice. He stopped and turned to see Jyotishi Jagannath ji hurrying after him at great speed. What could be wrong, he wondered, as he waited anxiously for Jyotishi ji to catch up with him.

As Jyotishi ji came closer, Tej Singh saw the smile on his face and relaxed. ‘Why, what is the matter, that you have come running?’ he asked.

‘Nothing is the matter but I, too, will come with you to that secret prison,’ replied Jyotishi ji.

‘And why would you do that?’ asked Tej Singh.

‘You will find out when we get there, I can’t tell you here,’ replied Jyotishi ji.

‘Then you will have to consent to let me blindfold you at the entrance, for I now use another enchanted lock upon the door ever since Badrinath found out the secret of the first lock by tricking the prince,’ said Tej Singh. ‘The second lock was already in place, but I never used it because it takes a while to open and lock. I use it now and I have decided to tell no one its secret.’

‘I will not be blindfolded, and I will go into that secret prison, and though you will argue, you will take me with you,’ replied Jyotishi ji.

‘Hah! Is that how it is? At least tell me what it’s about!’ protested Tej Singh.

‘What do you think it’s about? It’s an ace! It’s the winning trick! I will show you Princess Chandrakanta there!’ exclaimed Jyotishi ji, triumphantly.

‘Huh? What are you saying? Tell me the truth!’

‘If it turns out that I am lying, then cut my throat and kill me in that same secret valley!’

‘Oh perfect!’ retorted Tej Singh. ‘If I kill you, what will you have to lose? I will be the one saddled with the sin of killing a Brahmin!’

‘I can tell you how to kill me without taking on the sin of killing a Brahmin,’ offered Jyotishi ji.

‘How?’ asked Tej Singh, curious despite himself.

‘It’s not difficult, first convert me to a Mussalman, then slaughter me, halal,’ said the jyotishi, solemnly.

Tej Singh burst out laughing. ‘Oh very well, come along! You leave me no option, I must do as you command!’

They reached the secret valley by the evening of the following day. Tej Singh opened the first lock by pulling on the lion’s tongue, as Jyotishi ji looked on. Once the first lock was open, he began to work on the second.

A smooth marble slab was inset into the wall on either side of the stone door. Tej Singh kicked the marble slab on the right with all his strength. There was a loud noise, and the marble slab receded into the wall and folded down as though on a hinge to become level with the floor. On a small platform about a cubit high was revealed the stone statue of a snake. Tej Singh grabbed the snake by its neck and twisted it round and round like a screw several times. After he had given the snake several such turns, the great stone door swung open. Picking up the Maharani, Tej Singh, followed by Jyotishi ji, entered the secret valley. He swung the great door shut behind him. To the left of the doorway was a small opening in the wall, into which Tej Singh inserted his hand and locked the door—by what mechanism, Jyotishi ji could not see.

‘What is in there?’ asked Jyotishi ji.

‘A little screw, which if I turn, I can close the marble slab I opened outside by kicking it, and in which was contained the statue of the snake,’ explained Tej Singh. ‘But this serves only to lock the door and slide the

marble slab back into place. To open the door from the inside we have to use a method similar to the one I used outside to let us in.'

They walked into the valley and reaching the open field, Tej Singh laid down the Maharani and revived her. 'Come, walk with us, we will take you to the king,' he said. The Maharani fell into step beside them.

'So where is Chandrakanta?' asked Tej Singh.

'I have never been inside this valley before, so I am not familiar with all the spots,' remarked Jyotishi ji. 'But keep walking, find Maharaj Shivdatt. Chandrakanta, too, will be found.'

Soon they came to the stream that flowed across the centre of the valley, and which has often been mentioned before. All at once, they saw Maharaj Shivdatt—he was standing on a boulder on the other side of the stream, and staring up at something with great interest.

The Maharani was wild with joy upon seeing the Maharaj. She didn't stop to ask whether the stream was safe or not, or how deep it was, but jumped in at once. Fortunately, the water was not deep, and she crossed it safely. Scrambling up on to the other side, she ran weeping to the king and fell at his feet. The Maharaj raised her up and held her in a close embrace; by then Tej Singh and Jyotishi ji had also crossed the stream and reached the king.

The king saw Jyotishi ji and asked in surprise, 'How have you come here? Did you also fall into Tej Singh's hands?'

'Oh no, why would I fall into Tej Singh's hands? He has graciously taken me into his band of aiyaars. I am now with Birendra Singh and no longer have anything to do with you,' answered the jyotishi.

The king glared at Jyotishi ji, his eyes red with rage. 'Your anger is useless,' said Jyotishi ji. 'What will it achieve now? I will stay where I wish, serve whom I wish. I prefer to stay with the person who respects me. Think of all the harsh and nasty words you said to me. At that time you did not even consider that I was a Brahmin. Now why are you staring at me with those red eyes of yours?'

Maharaj Shivdatt heard the jyotishi's words in silence and lowered his head in shame. Just then they heard a faint voice calling 'Tej Singh!'

Tej Singh looked up, startled, to see Princess Chandrakanta calling to him. She stood at the mouth of a small cave high up the mountainside. Tej Singh's eyes filled with tears to see her condition—her clothes were torn,

her body covered with dirt, her long hair hanging loose down her back, and her delicate, rose-like face drooping with sorrow and hardship.

Tej Singh ran to the foot of the mountain, with the intention of climbing up to the princess—but he could find no way up to the cave. After several unsuccessful attempts to reach her, he threw a rope up the side of the mountain, but it did not reach even a fourth of the way up to the cave. He tied his own rope to that of Jyotishi ji's, but even then, it did not reach more than halfway up. Finally, giving up in frustration, he called to Chandrakanta, 'Princess, how did you get up there?'

The princess could hear him clearly, but her voice, which was very soft, did not reach Tej Singh properly. She tried to answer him, but he could hear only a few faint words: 'Fate... came...escape...!'

'Oh no, we can't even talk to the princess,' thought Tej Singh in panic, though what was the use of panic! The princess called out again, and though Tej Singh could make out that she was saying something, he could not catch a single word. 'Don't worry,' he called out, 'stay calm, and I will find a way to bring you down here with us.' The princess did not reply, but plucked a large leaf from a wild tree that grew close by the cave's mouth, and picking up a sharp stone, wrote a few words on the leaf. Then, ripping a small piece of her sari, she tied the leaf in it along with a pebble to weight it down and threw it so that it landed in the water near the edge of the stream. Tej Singh rescued the bundle and untied it. The princess had written a single sentence upon the leaf: *Fetch the prince.*

Tej Singh showed the leaf with its message to Jyotishi ji. 'Please stay here with the princess while I go to bring the prince,' requested Tej Singh. 'Meanwhile, try and think of a way to bring her down from the cave.'

'Yes, all right, I will stay here and think of a solution while you are away,' agreed Jyotishi ji, and saw Tej Singh off on his way.

The Maharani had observed the entire scene, though she could not read what was written on the leaf and did not know where Tej Singh had gone. Seeing Chandrakanta's helpless condition, she began to weep, and could not tear her eyes away from the princess.

Meanwhile Tej Singh opened the stone door, and securing it behind him with the double lock, he left the valley and made his way to Vijaygarh.

Narrative Nineteen

SINCE PRINCESS CHANDRAKANTA had vanished and the war with Maharaj Shivdatt had begun, Vijaygarh had been plunged into deep gloom. Not only was the palace cast into despair—Maharaj Jai Singh and the royal women were weighed down with sorrow—but sadness lay like a pall upon the city and its inhabitants as well.

So when Prince Birendra Singh, having sent Tej Singh and the jyotishi in search of Chandrakanta, returned to Vijaygarh with Devi Singh, hope sprang afresh in the kingdom that perhaps the princess had been found; upon learning of the true state of affairs from the prince, a deeper despondency settled over the palace and the kingdom. Maharaj Jai Singh rejoiced to hear that Shivdatt was now a prisoner, but hearing that the princess had vanished for a second time, this time from her cave prison, he lost hope of their ever finding her again. Though Diwan Hardayal Singh and the others around him tried to cheer him up, saying that even if the princess had been taken to the underworld, Tej Singh would be sure to find her, the Maharaj remained unconvinced. As for the Maharani, her state was even more pitiable—she could neither eat nor drink, and spent all her days and nights weeping for Chandrakanta.

The prince stayed in Vijaygarh for several days, visiting Naugarh for a day or two to meet his parents who were as sad and melancholic as the rest; wherever the prince went, he was met with gloom and despondency.

One night, the prince lay in bed. It was past midnight, but troubled by thoughts of Chandrakanta, he had been unable to fall asleep. All at once he heard footsteps outside his closed door, and the sound of people talking. It seemed as though they were talking about the princess. The prince leapt out of bed, and putting his ear to the door, stood listening.

‘It’s the truth, I tell you, whether you believe it or not,’ said a voice. ‘I agree that in the beginning I, too, thought that Prince Birendra Singh loved the princess truly, but now I know that all he wants is the throne of Vijaygarh. He doesn’t love the princess. If he loved her, he would not be sitting here, but be out searching...’

The prince heard only this much, when suddenly there was a commotion outside: it seemed the palace guards had heard an intruder, and were shouting ‘Who’s there?’ as loudly as they could. The voice outside the prince’s door

stopped speaking, and soon all was silent. The prince sat by the door for a long time, but he could hear nothing more—just the indistinct sound of the guards talking amongst themselves.

The prince became even more disturbed: if even the sentries and soldiers had begun to think that he didn't love Chandrakanta, then the Maharaj and the Maharani must also think so! It was not right for him to stay on in Vijaygarh anymore. He couldn't return to Naugarh either—for if he did, it would be taken as further confirmation by everyone that he didn't care about the princess. He had to leave Vijaygarh, of that he was certain—though where he should go and what he should do, he did not know. The rest of his night passed in more such gloomy thoughts.

Early the next morning, the prince called for his horse, and rode out of Vijaygarh. Several men offered to ride with him, but he refused their company. Only Devi Singh was not deterred, and disobeying the prince's orders and disregarding his entreaties to leave him alone, he insisted on accompanying him. The prince spurred his horse into a gallop, hoping to leave Devi Singh behind. But Devi Singh, who was an aiyaar after all and used to running, kept up with the prince effortlessly. Besides, the rough terrain and hilly forest paths did not allow the prince's horse to run as fast as the prince would have liked.

After some distance, Devi Singh began to tire, and seeing that, Birendra Singh relented and slowed down. 'He bears great affection for me,' thought the prince. 'He won't leave my side as long as he has breath in him. I cannot, knowingly, cause him grief. Besides, he is not a stranger, but one of us, so there is no harm if he stays with me.' The prince brought his horse to a stop, and turned towards Devi Singh with a smile.

'At least tell me what your plan is? Or have you gone crazy?' cried Devi Singh, panting for breath.

The prince dismounted and handing Devi Singh the reins, said, 'Set this horse to graze, then come and listen to me so I can tell you what I am planning to do.'

Devi Singh spread the saddlecloth on the ground for the prince to sit upon, and leaving the horse to graze came and sat with the prince. 'Now tell me, with what thought in mind did you leave Vijaygarh?'

The prince related the events of the previous night. 'Unless the princess is found, I will not return to Vijaygarh or to Naugarh,' declared the prince.

‘You are making a big mistake to think in this manner,’ said Devi Singh. ‘You cannot discover anything that we aiyaars cannot. Tej Singh and Jyotishi ji are out looking for the princess, and if you command me, I too shall go! You will not be able to accomplish anything on your own. If you do not wish to return to Vijaygarh without the princess, then go home to Naugarh, and stay there till we bring her to you. You can return to Vijaygarh after that. We are anyway quite close to Naugarh right now.’

The prince thought for a moment and asked, ‘Is Naugarh closer from here than it is from Vijaygarh? I have ridden quite a distance.’

‘You came away from Vijaygarh in such a blind hurry that you have lost all sense of direction,’ said Devi Singh. ‘I know exactly where we are—Naugarh is only some two kos distant from here. Do you see that big peepul tree? That is at the entrance to the secret valley where Maharaj Shivdatt is imprisoned.’ All at once they saw Tej Singh walking towards them. ‘And look! There’s Tej Singh!’ exclaimed Devi Singh. ‘Where could he be coming from? I am sure he has some news!’

The prince could not wait for Tej Singh to reach them, and began to walk briskly towards him; and Tej Singh, seeing the prince, ran towards him. ‘Tell me, have you found out anything?’ asked the prince, impatiently.

‘Yes,’ answered Tej Singh, tersely.

‘Where?’ asked the prince, equally terse.

‘Come, I will show you,’ replied Tej Singh.

The prince hugged Tej Singh in joy and cried, ‘Let’s go. Atonce!’

‘Take your horse,’ said Tej Singh. ‘And don’t be so anxious. In fact, I was on my way to fetch you. But...why are you here?’

‘Ask Devi Singh—he will tell you. But that can wait. First take me to the princess,’ answered the prince.

Devi Singh saddled the horse, and the prince mounting it, the three set off towards the secret valley. Tej Singh and Devi Singh walked ahead and the prince followed behind, and very soon they reached the mouth of the secret cave.

‘I will unlock the door in front of you, but this time be careful that the other aiyaars do not get the secret out of you again,’ warned Tej Singh. He unlocked the great stone door, and they entered the secret valley and made their way rapidly to the spring where Jyotishi ji sat waiting for them. ‘Look!’ said Tej Singh pointing. ‘There is Chandrakanta!’

The princess, still trapped upon the mountainside, saw the prince enter the valley and yearned to be with him. The prince, equally desperate to reach her, tried frantically to climb up the mountainside, but, needless to say, he could not. ‘There is no way to reach the princess. Had there been one, would I not have brought her to you rather than bringing you here?’ chided Tej Singh, gently.

The prince’s eyes met those of the princess, and the two gazed unblinkingly at each other as tears streamed down their cheeks. Oh, what an unhappy situation! The one for whom the prince had left his home and his palace, she for whose love he had staked his life, and on whose behalf had fallen so many heads, she who had been missing for months—at last she had appeared before his eyes! But leave alone hold her close, he could not even speak to her or she to him! Only the prince and the princess knew the extent of their anguish at that moment.

Tej Singh turned to Jyotishi ji. ‘Have you thought of any means to reach the princess?’ he asked.

‘No,’ replied Jyotishi ji, shaking his head. ‘It will not be easy to bring the princess down from that cave. I suspect that she must return the way she has come. No other plan or scheme will work. We must find out from the princess how she reached the mountainside and following the same path, we must make our way to her. Only then will we be able to help her. This is no game but tilisma at work, and to combat such powerful enchantment, we will need all our strength and skills.’

Tej Singh agreed with the Jyoyishi ji’s analysis, and called up to the princess, ‘Do not be frightened any more, princess. Just as you had written the earlier message on a leaf, write down now how you reached that cave, and throw it down to us here.’

Narrative Twenty

CHAPALA WENT DOWN the stairs into the dungeon. Below, she saw a long, narrow room, the entrance to which was framed by a doorway on which there hung no doors. Chapala peered into the room, and then cautiously stepped inside. As she stepped into the room, there was a loud clang and she

turned to find that an iron door had descended from the top of the doorframe and locked her securely in. 'Is this a room or a mousetrap? That door fell just the way a mousetrap shuts! Now what shall I do?' she thought, annoyed. It was pitch dark in the room, so dark that she could not see her hand in front of her face. Nor had she seen another way out. Chapala stepped forward cautiously, groping and feeling her way in the darkness.

Suddenly Chapala's foot hit a small depression in the floor—with a small sound, a door slid open and light flooded the room. This door was not the one by which she had entered, but a completely different one. She walked up to the opening and examined it closely. Once again there were no signs of hinges or doors. She stepped outside, to find herself in a garden. Shrubs and bushes, ablaze with brightly coloured flowers, grew everywhere. A small stream ran into the garden, providing water for the shrubs. But the flowerbeds had not been taken care of for a while, and the whole garden wore an air of neglect. Ahead, a little distance away, stood a barahdari. Slowly, picking her way around the unkempt flowerbeds, Chapala reached the small, covered pavilion.

The pavilion was made entirely of black stone—floor, walls, pillars, roof, all were of black stone. In the centre of the pavilion, on a dais of white marble, had been placed a small square slab of red stone. Upon it were engraved the following words:

This is tilisma; one caught within it can never escape, unless the enchantment be broken.

The one who breaks the enchantment will make free all those captive here, and into his hands will fall great treasure.

But be warned, the one who breaks the tilisma must be strong in body, or breaking the enchantment will be to no avail.

Reading this, Chapala was in a panic. She became convinced that she would never be able to return to the world and would die where she was. Even though she had taken the precaution of making sure that the door into the dungeon did not slam shut behind her, the doorway by which she had entered the long, low room at the bottom of the steps was firmly shut. She turned back to see if she could retrace her steps, at least as far as the room, but search as she might, she could find no trace of the door by which she had entered the

garden. She returned to the little pavilion and went up to the marble dais upon which lay the engraved slab of stone. 'What if I pick up that slab of stone?' she thought. 'Maybe that will open a way? I will carry this piece of stone back with me to show the world!' But she had barely touched the stone when she felt a tingling sensation in her body, so strong that she fainted with its intensity and fell unconscious to the ground.

It was evening by the time Chapala came to again. She walked to the stream that ran through the garden, washed her face and felt better. The garden was full of vines upon which hung bunches of ripe grapes. Chapala was too sad and miserable to eat any, and returned to the barahdari where she sat down in dejected silence. As night fell and darkness grew, the little pavilion began to glow with a strange, bright light—the floor, walls, pillars and roof, all gave off a luminescent glow so that no part of the barahdari was in darkness or shadow. The glow from the pavilion was so bright that it lit up part of the little garden that lay around it.

Chapala stared in amazement at the glowing pavilion. What could be the source of the light, she wondered, running her hands over the walls and floor. The night passed in wakefulness as curiosity, wonder, fear and despair combined to keep her from sleep.

When morning came, Chapala began exploring the garden again in search of a way out. At last she came to the place where the little stream bubbled into the garden from beneath the garden wall. 'The wall is not very thick here, and the stream is wide enough...perhaps I can swim under the wall to the other side?' thought Chapala. She stepped fully clothed into the water, and taking a deep breath, dived into the stream under the wall and came out on the other side. The stream outside the garden was much wider than it had been within. Chapala climbed out of the water and looked around her—there were high mountains all around, as far as the eye could see. The stream beside which she stood came down from the mountains to flow under the wall and into the little garden in which had stood the strange pavilion.

Chapala dried her clothes in the sun (fortunately her bag of aiyaari was quite dry since it was made of a waterproof material), and when she was ready, she began walking. The mountains towered above her, and between them flowed the stream, bordered on both sides by parijat trees. Seeing no path or any way to climb the mountains, Chapala continued walking beside the stream. A few hours of the day had passed and Chapala had walked a distance of some three kos when she came to a stop. The path along the

stream had ended at the foot of a tall mountain, from which crashed a high waterfall into a pool beneath, to flow out as the stream along which Chapala had been walking. Beneath the mountain was a chamber some ten yards long and a yard deep. It was clear that it had been hollowed out of the mountain. In the centre of the chamber lay a large stone serpent, its mouth wide open, big enough for a man's body to be swallowed whole. In front of the serpent, a smooth slab of white marble had been set into the ground.

Chapala moved forward to take a closer look at the stone snake, and stepped on to the slab of white marble. Scarcely had her foot touched the marble when the snake began to breathe—long slow breaths that quickly increased in strength and intensity and sucked Chapala into the snake's open maw. Chapala fell into the serpent's stomach, losing consciousness as she did so.

When she came to, Chapala saw that she was lying in a small room, almost a cell, which was big enough to hold perhaps ten people but not more. In one corner were some steps leading upwards. Chapala sat still for a while, her head spinning, wondering at the strangeness of her situation; then, pulling herself together, she climbed the stairs to emerge on to a rooftop. The door to the room below shut with a clang—she had no means of going back down again. She stood on the rooftop and gazed at the tall mountains that surrounded the valley. Her gaze fell upon a small cave ahead of her—the mouth of the cave was not completely dark, so Chapala surmised that there was an opening on the other side, which was letting the daylight through.

In desperation, and with nowhere else to go, Chapala climbed up and into the cave. She walked through the dimly lit passage that lay beyond, to emerge on to a platform to see Princess Chandrakanta seated there. The princess was surrounded by piles of large leaves; she was using the leaves as paper and writing busily. Chapala glanced down to see a steep drop and, at the foot of the mountain, Prince Birendra Singh and Jyotishi ji, staring up at her.

The princess, hearing Chapala's tread, turned around and seeing who it was stood up in welcome. 'You came at the right moment, my dear friend,' cried the princess. 'Look, there they stand, all of them, below the mountain, but there is no way for us to go down to them. I can hear what they shout up to me, but they cannot hear me. Tej Singh has asked me to write down on these leaves how I reached here, and that is what I am doing.'

Chapala looked around carefully, but she too, could see no way to climb down the mountain. 'There is no need for you to write it out,' she said to the princess. 'My voice is loud enough for them to hear me. Only tell me this—were you swallowed by the heron or did you reach here by some other way?'

'Yes, I was swallowed by that heron in the ruined mansion that you too must have seen,' replied the princess. 'Did it swallow you too?'

'No, I came here by quite a different route,' replied Chapala, 'but before I tell you my adventures, let me tell the others about the ruin and its location so that they can take the necessary steps to get us out of here. As far as I can make out, we are likely to be stuck here for several days.'

Narrative Twenty-One

PRINCE BIRENDRA SINGH and the others saw Chapala come up behind the princess. Chapala looked down at them and called out, 'We were caught and imprisoned by that scoundrel Shivdatt. The cave where he had imprisoned us, I don't know how far from Chunar or in which direction it lies. But about seven kos south of that cave lies a ruin, in which there is a marvellous stone statue of a giant heron. The princess was swallowed by this statue, and that is how she reached this cave. The ruin is enchanted. Only if the tilisma is somehow broken can we escape from here with our lives. There is no other way to get us out. I entered that tilisma with great caution, but even so I was trapped. Be very careful when you enter the ruin, remain on your guard always.'

The prince and the others heard Chapala's words clearly. The prince grew livid with rage at Maharaj Shivdatt's deed. He didn't have to go far to find the king—he stood right there before him. So it was but the work of a moment for the prince to pull out his sword and lunge at the king as though to kill him. Maharaj Shivdatt's queen, who sat beside him and had seen and heard everything, saw the prince draw his sword, ran and fell at his feet in supplication. 'Kill me first,' she cried, 'because I cannot live as a widow, a state worse than death!' Tej Singh grabbed the prince's hand, and with much effort, calmed him down.

The prince, when quiet again, turned to Tej Singh and said, ‘If you think it feasible and if there is no harm in it, can you bring the princess’s parents here so that they, too, can see her and find some courage?’

‘That is out of the question, do not consider this valley an ordinary prison,’ replied Tej Singh, firmly. ‘They will be given a full account of the situation when possible, but for now, we must concentrate on saving the princess’s life. Come, let us all go to Maharaj Jai Singh, and apprising him of the situation, continue to that ruin that Chapala has told us about.’

Tej Singh called out to Chapala. ‘We are making our way towards the ruined mansion, but I have no idea how many days it will take to break the tilisma. Stay with the princess and give her courage, make sure she comes to no harm. I feel so helpless, I cannot even think of a way to reach food or clothing to you.’

‘Don’t worry about us,’ called back Chapala. ‘There are plenty of fruit trees and freshwater springs here, so we shall not want for food or drink. Be very careful when you come to that enchanted ruin. The tilisma will not be broken without the prince—this much I have come to understand. But look after him, do not leave him, guard him well!’

Leaving Maharaj Shivdatt and his Maharani captive in the secret prison, the prince, Tej Singh, Devi Singh and Jyotishi ji left the secret valley, locking it securely behind them. The prince sent Devi Singh to Naugarh to his parents, with instructions to let them know all that had happened, and having done so, to follow them to Vijaygarh. ‘We will wait for you at Vijaygarh, and leave for the enchanted ruin when you join us again,’ said the prince. Devi Singh nodded and turned down the path towards Naugarh.

Prince Birendra Singh had been missing from Vijaygarh since that morning. Since the prince had left suddenly and without a word to anyone, Maharaj Jai Singh, sad and worried, had sent out several spies to search for him. And so, when the prince, returning to Vijaygarh with the others that same evening, came to pay his respects to the king, the Maharaj reprimanded him gently, ‘Prince, you left without a word of explanation! Your leaving in this manner has upset us greatly, please don’t do so again!’

The prince did not reply, but Tej Singh said, ‘Maharaj, the situation was such that the prince had to leave very early in the morning. You were still asleep at that time, and he did not wish to disturb you.’ And Tej Singh told the king all about the many adventures that had befallen them—how he had left for Chunar, stolen away Maharaj Shivdatt’s queen, found the princess

held prisoner by Maharaj Shivdatt in the cave, the meeting with Jyotishi ji, the encounter with the slave traders, and finding the princess and Chapala held prisoner by an enchantment high up on the mountainside in a cave in the secret valley. And now, added Tej Singh, they were on their way to break the tilisma and release the princess from her prison.

The Maharaj was astonished at Tej Singh's account. 'You, all of you, have done work over and beyond the call of duty,' he said, full of admiration and praise for them. 'You are now preparing to break the tilisma, but the tilisma lies in another kingdom. Even though the king of that kingdom is your prisoner, you must proceed with all precaution and preparation. It may be best that I, too, come with you.'

'Sire, there is no need for you to put yourself to the trouble of accompanying us,' said Tej Singh. 'It will be enough if a few soldiers came with us.'

'All right, even if there is no need for me to come with you, if I do, I will at least be able to see that tilisma for myself,' said the king.

'As you wish,' agreed Tej Singh, giving in.

At this, the Maharaj instructed Diwan Hardayal Singh to make ready for his departure. 'Make sure that the prince's army as well as half of mine is prepared to accompany us tomorrow to Chunar,' he said.

The diwan carried out the king's orders; Devi Singh also returned from Naugarh the following day, and when all preparations were done, the prince, the Maharaj and their companions left for Chunar in order to break the tilisma. Diwan Hardayal Singh was left behind in Vijaygarh, in charge of running the kingdom in the king's absence.

Narrative Twenty-Two

THEY WERE FOUR days on the road, and reached the border of Chunar on the fifth. When Maharaj Shivdatt's diwan heard this news, he became nervous and flustered—Maharaj Shivdatt was already a prisoner, now who had the spirit or strength left to fight? He hurried to meet Maharaj Jai Singh, carrying many costly gifts for him. When the king heard of his arrival, he sent a message saying, 'There is no need for you to welcome us in this way. We

have not come here to take over Chunar. Your king is already our prisoner, so his kingdom has already fallen to us. We are here on other business.'

The diwan, though helpless to stop the advance of Maharaj Jai Singh into Chunar, now knew the reason behind the king's visit to Chunar. No one in Chunar had ever heard of the enchanted mansion before or known of the tilisma in the forest before. But now it suddenly became a well-known fact all over the kingdom that in the forest lay a ruined mansion with a powerful tilisma and that Prince Birendra Singh had come from Vijaygarh with the specific purpose of breaking that enchantment. The diwan sent many of his spies all over the kingdom in order to locate the ruin. Tej Singh and Jyotishi ji also carried out their own search. Finally the enchanted mansion was found, and the very next day, everybody, including the army, converged on to the forest in which lay the tilismi ruin.

Narrative Twenty-Three

MAHARAJ JAI SINGH, Prince Birendra Singh, Tej Singh, Devi Singh and Jyotishi ji entered the ruin cautiously, and looking about at the marvels within, were convinced at once that it was indeed enchanted. They moved slowly through the palace, observing each and every thing around them with great attention, till at last they reached the stone heron in the garden. Chapala had already warned them that this was the statue that had swallowed the princess. So Tej Singh did not allow anyone to approach the great stone bird, but stepped up to it himself and examined it carefully in exactly the same way that Chapala had done.

Maharaj Jai Singh and the others were astonished to see the marvellous behaviour of the stone bird—the manner in which it opened its beak, spread its wings, and swivelled around to swallow anyone behind it made them exclaim and wonder aloud, and they began to praise the skill and workmanship of the statue's creator.

They explored further and soon reached the great hall with the steps leading underground that Chapala had descended. They noticed the doorway—one of the doors stood open, tied back securely with a rope to a stout pillar. Tej Singh understood at once that this was Chapala's handiwork; the

rope, too, he recognized as hers, for upon one end of it was written her name. It became clear to him that Chapala had gone down those steps, and despite the precautions she had taken, she had been unable to return.

They found too, the well with its strange occupant, and came at last to the raised marble platform with the stone man lying upon it, a book in his hand. Just as Chapala had done, Tej Singh too tried to climb the steps to the top of the marble platform, and just as Chapala had been, he too was thrown off the very first step so that he landed with a thud upon the ground. The prince began laughing at his plight, but Devi Singh grew angry. 'All this deviltry, it is all his doing, that fellow who lies asleep upon this platform. Wait till I teach him a lesson!' he declared, and with a mighty jump he reached up and thumped the sleeping man on his head. The blow had all but landed on his head when the stone man sat up, opened his mouth and let out a blast of air as strong as a whirlwind so that the whole palace shook and trembled as though in an earthquake. 'Run, let's get out of this house,' shouted Jyotishi ji. 'It is not safe to remain here!'

The five men ran for their lives. They scrambled over the piles of rubble that lay around, and stumbled as the floor heaved beneath their feet, but at last they were out of the mansion and into the safety of the forest. They stood at a safe distance amongst the trees and watched the ruined mansion quiver and shake—it was two hours before the ruin stopped shaking.

Tej Singh turned to the jyotishi. 'Why don't you use your powers of divination and your knowledge of the stars to find out what kind of tilisma this is, and who can break it?' he suggested.

'Be patient for the rest of the day,' said Jyotishi ji. 'Tonight I will use my skills and find out all that is to be known and tomorrow we can decide what must be done. But it will take several days here and it is not proper for the Maharaj to be here. It will be better if he returns to Vijaygarh.'

The others agreed with Jyotishi ji, and the prince said to the king, 'You had come to see this ruin and you have done that. It is neither necessary nor appropriate for you to remain here any longer, you should return to Vijaygarh.'

The Maharaj did not want to return, but when he realized that that was what everyone else wished, he agreed. Leaving behind the prince's army, and half of his own men, he returned to Vijaygarh.

Narrative Twenty-Four

JAGANNATH JYOTISHI SPENT the entire night immersed in calculations, while Prince Birendra Singh, Tej Singh and Devi Singh waited anxiously beside him. At last Jyotishi ji announced, 'I have learnt through divination that the secret of breaking this tilisma is engraved upon a stone which lies within the ruin itself. As soon as it is dawn and we have refreshed ourselves, we must enter the ruin and search for that stone.'

Later the same day, the four men entered the ruin and found themselves once more at the base of the marble platform upon which lay the stone man. He was sleeping peacefully again, as though Devi Singh had never struck him that blow on the head.

'Look, there is a pile of bricks and rubble in that corner,' said Jyotishi ji, pointing. He turned to Tej Singh and said, 'Perhaps Chapala made that pile from which to observe the sleeping man. Why don't you climb up on it too, and see if you can read what is written in that book that he holds in his hands?'

Tej Singh did as Jyotishi ji suggested, and staring hard at the book that the stone man held in his hands, was able to make out the following words and numbers:

*8 sides—5—number
6 cubits—3—fingers
Buried treasure—0—add, right measure, break it!*

Tej Singh read them out to Jyotishi ji, adding that he could make neither head nor tail of these.

'Don't worry, we will soon find out what they mean,' said Jyotishi ji, and asked him to copy them down on a piece of paper. Tej Singh pulled out some paper, a quill and some ink from his bag of aiyaari, and noted down the strange words and numbers exactly as they were written upon the pages of the stone book.

'Now we must search this house for an eight-sided platform or maybe an octagonal pillar,' said Jyotishi ji. They searched the ruin carefully, and soon they were back in the pillared hall that contained the steps leading

down to the dungeons that Chapala had taken. The door still stood ajar, held open with Chapala's rope still tied securely to a pillar—an octagonal pillar!

There was no roof above the pillar, and it stood free. 'We should measure its height in cubits,'* said Jyotishi ji. Tej Singh did so and according to the proportions of his forearm and fingers, the pillar measured 6 cubits and the length of 7 fingers. Next, Devi Singh measured the pillar, and according to *his* proportions, it was 6 cubits and the length of 5 fingers, and when Jyotishi ji measured it, the pillar was 6 cubits and 10 fingers. But when the prince measured it, the pillar was exactly 6 cubits and 3 finger-lengths high.

Jyotishi ji was delighted with their findings and declared, 'This is it, this is the pillar we are seeking and whose proportions were written in the book. Beneath it lies "buried treasure" which is the stone slab upon which is written the secret of the tilisma. It is also clear that the tilisma will be broken by the prince, because it is his measurements that exactly match the figures in the book. Now we must untie that rope which is tied to the pillar and holds the door ajar.'

As Tej Singh untied the rope, Jyotishi ji remarked, 'We have met all the conditions set down in the book—we have found a pillar with 8 sides which measures 6 cubits and 3 fingers, and look here, we can also see the number 5. Now all that remains is "right measure, break it"—that clearly refers to the prince because his measurement is the "right" one, the one that fits. And so he should now "break it"!'

The prince picked up a large, broken piece of stone, and struck the pillar with all his strength. The pillar shook with the force of his blow, and after two or three such blows, it began to rock upon its foundations. The prince grabbed the pillar with both hands, and pulled it free from the ground. Buried beneath the uprooted pillar was revealed an iron chest, with a large padlock upon it. The prince, with great difficulty, finally broke the lock and opened the chest; inside it was another chest, also locked. The prince broke this open as well, to find another iron chest, similarly locked, and which was found to contain within it another chest. The prince broke open chest after chest, till a total of seven chests stood revealed, one inside the other. In the seventh chest lay a stone, with some writing engraved upon it. The prince picked up the stone and read the writing. This is what it said:

Be careful, do not be in a hurry to break the tilisma; if your name is Birendra Singh, then all this wealth is yours. The stone

that is embedded into the ground near the beak of the stone heron is not a stone, but made of a special mixture; dig it up, grind it fine with vinegar, and rub the resulting paste all over the heron's body. The heron, too, is not of stone, but of a special mixture; within two hours it will dissolve and flow away. Destroy all the wires, wheels, pulleys and gears that will now be revealed. Below lies a small room that leads to the well in the western hall; in that well sits an old man also made of this special mix. He holds a book in his hand. Take the book from his hand, but do not do so suddenly or you will be trapped. First, grab his right arm—he will then open his mouth. Stuff his mouth with camphor, and in a little while, he too will dissolve and flow away—then take his book. The pages in the book are all made of bhojpatra. Follow the instructions that you will find written upon them.

—Vikram

The prince read it out, while the others listened. They could not stop praising and admiring the skill of the person who had built the tilisma. Finally, it was decided that as the day was almost done, they would leave the ruin and come back the following day to do what was necessary.

Now it had become well known that in the kingdom of Chunar lay a vast tilisma, in which Princess Chandrakanta and her handmaiden Chapala had become prisoners, and to break the enchantment and release them, Prince Birendra Singh had arrived with a small army and had set up his camp close to the tilisma.

What is tilisma? How does it trap people? How will Prince Birendra Singh break it? Drawn by curiosity and the need to find answers to these and other questions, men and women came from far and wide and gathered where the prince's army also stood waiting. Though the crowd was curious, it was also afraid, and its fear made it keep a healthy distance from the old ruin. Amongst the crowd, the prince's men also spotted some masked horsemen, about whom they informed the prince.

Meanwhile, Pandit Badrinath, taking Ahmed and Najim with him, had reached the secret valley in an attempt to rescue Maharaj Shividatt. But Tej

Singh had secured the prison with the second lock, the secret of which was unknown to Badrinath. Unable to open the entrance to the secret valley, they were on their way to Vijaygarh when they, too, heard the news; abandoning all plans for the moment, they made their way to the site of the ruined mansion. Pannalal, Ram Narayan and Chunnilal had also reached the site of the tilisma. The six aiyaars gathered together and discussed the state of affairs amongst themselves; they came to the conclusion that, no matter what the cost, they must stop the prince from breaking the enchantment. With this end in view, they changed their appearance, and mingled with the prince's soldiers.

Narrative Twenty-Five

THE NEXT MORNING, Prince Birendra Singh, Tej Singh, Devi Singh and Jyotishi ji entered the ruins again, carrying with them some vinegar. They went back to the piece of stone that they had found the previous day, and proceeded to do as the instructions engraved upon the stone directed. Guards had been posted at the entrance to the ruined mansion, as well as all around it.

The four men entered the garden where stood the giant heron; they dug up the white slab of stone that was embedded in the ground before it, and which, if stepped upon, resulted in the heron opening its beak; they ground the stone into a fine paste with the vinegar, and rubbed the paste on the heron, making sure to cover every part of the statue's surface. As they watched, the heron began to melt and dissolve into a liquid, giving off a strange fragrance as it did so. Before two hours had passed, the gigantic statue and the pedestal upon which it had stood melted away, revealing a small chamber beneath. A set of steps led down into the chamber, which was full of wires and levers, gears and pulleys. The four ripped out the wires and broke the levers and pulleys, and descending into the chamber, made their way through an underground tunnel to the bottom of the well where sat the old man with a book in his hand; in front of him stood a small stool fashioned out of stone, upon which lay stone flowers of various hues.

The prince did as the instructions on the stone slab had advised: he grabbed the old man by the right arm and pulled, so that the statue opened its mouth which the prince stuffed with the camphor that Tej Singh held out to him. Tej Singh had also had the foresight to bring with him a sturdy torch, which he lighted; and in the glow cast by its flame, the four waited by the statue of the old man. An hour passed before the statue had dissolved completely, and the book that had been held in the old man's hands, fell to the ground.

The book was made of bhojpatra, as the stone had said it would be; its cover was also of bhojpatra, and upon it were written a few lines, which the prince read out:

Pick up the flowers too, they will be of great use to your aiyaars; their properties, too, are explained in this book. Take this book to your tent with you and read it there in peace; do nothing more today.

Tej Singh gathered up the flowers with great joy—there were six flowers in all. The four then retraced their steps to the chamber beneath the heron's statue, and climbing the stairs back to the surface, made their way out of the ruin.

Only a little of the day remained when Prince Birendra Singh reached his tent, and the four debated whether the book should be read at night. Tej Singh, impatient to know the properties of the stone flowers, begged the prince to read it. 'Read only what it says about the flowers while the day still remains,' he pleaded. 'We can read the rest tomorrow.'

'We'll read about the flowers after the enchantment has been broken,' laughed the prince. But Tej Singh begged and pleaded, and the prince gave in at last and opened the book. At that time, there was no one else in the tent except those four, all the guards and attendants having been sent away. The prince began to read:

The Virtues of the Six Flowers

1. *The gulab or rose—if it is rubbed with a little water, and the water, if drunk, will make a person immune from all*

manners and means of inducing unconsciousness.

2. *The motiya or jasmine—if it is rubbed with a little water, and the water poured into a well, then the water of the well will, for a period of four watches of the day, induce unconsciousness in whoever drinks it; the effects will be felt half an hour after drinking the water.*

The prince had only read out this much, when the three aiyaars began to jump for joy. The prince closed the book and declared, 'Enough. I will not read more!'

Now Tej Singh can be seen with folded hands, imploring the prince to read further, asking him in the name of all the gods to continue, and when his prayers fail, pointing out that they, the aiyaars, were his servants after all, and the flowers would ultimately be used in his service.

The prince continued teasing the aiyaars for a while, and then, relenting, read further:

3. *The orhur flower—if it is rubbed with a little water, and if this water is drunk, it will vanquish hunger for four days.*
4. *The kaner or oleander—if it is rubbed with a little water, and if this water is used to wash a person's feet, it will remove all tiredness and the fatigue of walking long distances.*
5. *The guldavali or chrysanthemum—if it is rubbed with a little water, and the water applied to the eyes, then it becomes possible to see in the dark.*
6. *The kevra flower—if it is rubbed in oil, and the oil applied to the body, the cold of winter will have no effect; if it is rubbed in water, and applied, then the sun and the heat of summer will not harm; and if it is rubbed in a solution of water and kattha, and the resultant mixture is drunk, then for seven days there will remain no fever, or agitation in the body.*

Tej Singh tucked away the stone flowers in his bag; Devi Singh and Jyotishi ji begged him for a couple, but he did not even let them see them,

leave alone give them any!

Narrative Twenty-Six

TEJ SINGH WAS more delighted with these flowers than he had ever been with anything in all his life. He was anyway one of the best at aiyaari, and now with these flowers in his hand, he had an even greater edge over the other aiyaars. Now who could compete with him? Yes, there was one thing that he still lacked, and which he had not found in this tilisma—an ointment, perhaps for the eyes, or amulet, which if applied or worn would make him invisible. And perhaps it was just as well he found no such aid, for then his aiyaari would not have been as praised and admired as it was, for if a man can disappear, he has no need of aiyaari, for an invisible man can do what he likes, unhindered.

The night passed in wakefulness for the four men: marvelling at the tilisma, the wonderful things they had seen and the strange flowers they had found, reading the magic book and planning for the next day, the men did not realize how the night passed. When dawn broke, they readied themselves quickly, and set off once more for the enchanted ruin.

‘Take the book from the tilisma with you—it’s lying on my bed. We’ll go through it once more before we do anything more,’ said the prince to Tej Singh.

Tej Singh went back into the tent to fetch the book, but he could not see it on the prince’s bed. He looked under the bed, and searched everywhere, but he could not find it. At last he asked the prince, ‘Where is the book? It isn’t on your bed.’

The prince, taken aback and deeply worried, rushed back into his tent, and began to search for the book. But how could he find a book that wasn’t there? ‘Hai,’ he cried, and fell upon his bed, his spirit broken. If the book was lost, so were the means to break the enchantment and free the princess. He fell upon his bed in despair, his heart empty of both hope and courage. Tej Singh, Devi Singh and Jagannath Jyotishi were also dismayed and worried by the disappearance of the book. For a long time, no one spoke and then they raised the alarm. The cry went up that the enchanted book had been

lost from the prince's tent. The guards were questioned, and men sent out in search of the thief or thieves in all directions.

‘Don't be disheartened,’ said Tej Singh to the prince. ‘I vow to you that I will find the thief. But if you lose courage, then the rest of us will break, and nothing will be achieved.’

The prince pulled himself together and sat up; just then a chobdar arrived with some strange news. With folded hands he said to the prince, ‘One of the men guarding the enchanted ruin has come forward. He says that the guards can hear sounds of several people inside the ruin, but since they do not have permission to enter it, they cannot investigate further. If you allow them, they will go in and see what is happening. They await your instructions.’

Tej Singh jumped up, ready to enter the tilisma immediately. ‘Come with me,’ he said to Devi Singh, ‘and let's find out what's going on!’

‘I am coming too!’ announced Jyotishi ji.

The prince stood up as well, so that finally, all four of them set off for the ruin together. Commander Fateh Singh was standing guard outside, and the prince requested him to accompany them inside. As soon as they stepped through the door, they heard shouts of distress, and from the commotion it seemed as though there were several people inside. They followed the shouts, and soon reached the great hall where lay the sleeping man upon the marble platform, a book in his hand.

The sleeping man was no longer asleep—instead, he was sitting up, his two stone hands holding Pandit Badrinath Aiyaar helpless in a vice-like grip; it was Badrinath who was shouting. Pannalal, Ram Narayan and Chunnilal were trying desperately to free him, but with no success. Prince Birendra Singh and his companions were deeply disturbed by the loss of the magical book, but Pandit Badrinath's hapless plight caused them to burst out laughing. The aiyaars turned around—to see the prince, with his three aiyaars and Commander Fateh Singh standing there.

‘Excellent, well done!’ jeered Tej Singh. ‘We reap what we sow, of that there is no doubt! You harassed our prince for no reason at all, and this is the price you are paying! God is just after all! And Pannalal, why are the rest of you walking knowingly into danger? You are not in any statue's grip, so why do you risk your lives for Badrinath? Leave him where he is, and the three of you go, run away!’

‘How can we leave him here?’ protested Pannalal. ‘Do whatever you wish to now, we are at your mercy.’

Tej Singh walked up to Badrinath. ‘Greetings, Pandit ji, and how are you today?’ he mocked. ‘Had you come here to break the tilisma? You would have done well to rescue your king first. Or maybe you thought you would break the enchantment, take the treasure, and the throne of Chunar as well!’

Devi Singh added his taunts to those of Tej Singh. ‘Badrinath, brother, if you break the tilisma, give me some of the treasure too, don’t keep it all for yourself!’

‘Badrinath, your stars are not good!’ said Jyotishi ji. ‘It would be best if you returned the enchanted book you stole from us last night!’

Badrinath heard their taunts, but refused to be drawn; he averted his eyes and stared silently at the floor. Pannalal, Ram Narayan and Chunnilal gathered around the prince, and begged, ‘For God’s sake, sire, save Badrinath’s life!’

‘What can I do?’ replied the prince. ‘I know nothing about this enchantment. And the magical book that I had found, by means of which I could have broken the spells—that you have taken. Now if I had that book, I could have looked it up and found some means of rescuing Badrinath. Of course, if you return that book to me, then I am sure we can find a way to release him.’

Pannalal glanced at Badrinath, who gestured in response. ‘We haven’t stolen the book,’ said Pannalal, turning towards the prince, ‘otherwise we would have returned it to you, given the desperate situation we are in. Either find a way to release Pandit Badrinath, or give us permission to fetch some food and drink for him. In fact, so long as you do not find the book and cannot break the tilisma and Badrinath remains imprisoned here, give us the freedom to come and go with food and nourishment for him.’

‘Pannalal,’ said Devi Singh, ‘it is easy to arrange food and drink for Badrinath, but if he remains captive like this for several days, he will need to relieve himself! What will you do then? How will you throw it away and where? Or will you let him stay there upon a pile of his own excrement?’

Pannalal did not answer. ‘Listen to me,’ intervened Tej Singh, ‘aiyaars know other aiyaars very well. If the prince does not give you permission, then I do—to look after Badrinath, however it is you choose to do so. You have done us great harm, you have stolen the magic book and now you deny it. At this moment, you are, all of you, in our power, and I can do with you

what I wish. If you do not agree to give me the book of your own accord, I can take it from you by force and torture, but I will not. Instead I will let you be, and only give you this warning—look after the book carefully, for I will not rest till I have found it, and I will get it without the need to hold you captive.’

Badrinath turned red with fury. ‘You see us helpless at this moment, and so you boast in this fashion,’ he exclaimed. ‘Show the same courage when we are free, and accepting an equal challenge, beat us at aiyaari! Are you the only aiyaar in the world? We declare that we have stolen your enchanted book, but you will not find it unless you make at least one of us your prisoner or torture us! You may brag that you will take the book from us even while you give us complete freedom to come and go as we wish, but your bragging will come to nothing! And if you do as you say you will, we will leave Maharaj Shivdatt, and as your slaves, we will serve the prince. But I give you fair warning—I will not return the book to you, and I will also free myself from the clutches of this stone man!’

‘I, too, take a vow that If I do not get the book without taking even one of you prisoner, I will never mention aiyaari again, but shaving my head, shall go away to another land!’ declared Tej Singh. ‘I, too, want to settle this between us once and for all!’

Badrinath and Tej Singh swore solemn oaths to do as they said, while poor Prince Birendra Singh stood by helplessly, not knowing what to say or how to stop them!

Tej Singh then took Devi Singh and Jyotishi ji aside, and whispered such instructions to them that they both immediately left the tilisma; going up to Badrinath he said, ‘We are leaving. You may send Pannalal, Ram Narayan and Chunnilal wherever and whenever you wish, and think up whatever means you may to free yourself. We will instruct the guards to let your companions come and go as they please, and no one will stop them.’

Tej Singh left the enchanted ruin, taking the prince with him, and returned to their tent, where he found Jyotishi ji waiting for him. ‘So Jyotishi ji, has Devi Singh left?’ he asked.

‘Yes, he has gone,’ nodded Jyotishi ji.

‘Have you seen anything yet?’

‘Yes, I have discovered something, but I see trouble.’

‘And what is that trouble?’

‘My powers of divination show me that they, too, have lost the book, and so far the book has not come to rest anywhere. Let’s see what Devi Singh accomplishes, though it would have been better if I had gone with him,’ said Jyotishi ji.

‘Then what are you waiting for?’ said Tej Singh. ‘Go at once and do what you need to do; I, too, will get busy with my tasks.’

Jyotishi ji left the tent at once. The prince, bewildered by these comings and goings, turned to Tej Singh. ‘Please do enlighten me too,’ he said. ‘What is going on here? What have you planned, what are you doing, and why did you let those aiyaars go free? I must say that to me it seems that you were carried away by your own bragging and ruined it all, for we had those aiyaars completely in our power!’

‘You have still not understood my objective,’ said Tej Singh. ‘I will take the book from them, that is certain, but at the same time, I intend to make sure they come over to our side and become my followers—for how long will this daily antagonism with them continue? Aiyaars never accept servitude, and even if they lose their lives, they never leave their master, unless it be to serve a vow or promise such as the one we made today.’

‘This makes me even more anxious!’ declared the prince. ‘God forbid that you lose, and Badrinath manages to escape! Will you then leave my side?’

‘Yes, absolutely, I will never show my face here again,’ replied Tej Singh.

‘So you have destroyed yourself, and me with you! So much for your friendship!’ said the prince in despair. ‘At least tell me this much—where have Devi Singh and the jyotishi disappeared?’

‘I can’t tell you just now,’ answered Tej Singh. ‘But don’t be afraid, God willing, it will all go well and you and I will stay together. Rest here for a while, I need to be away for two hours.’

‘All right,’ said the prince, resignedly.

Tej Singh left, and the prince dismissed Fateh Singh as well.

Now let us see what they do, and who wins.

Narrative Twenty-Seven

THE PRINCE, DEJECTED and downcast, sat silently in his tent for a long time after Tej Singh, Devi Singh and Jyotishi ji had left. All kinds of thoughts assailed him. He would look up at the slightest sound, in the hope that Tej Singh or Devi Singh had returned, and then, seeing no one, he would lose himself in his thoughts again. A single watch of the day remained, but none of the three aiyaars had returned. The prince grew anxious and restless, and unable to sit still any longer, stepped out of his tent.

Seeing the prince, several of his servants and attendants came up, and stood ready to serve him. The tent next to that of the prince belonged to the commander, Fateh Singh; hearing the sounds and realizing that the prince was outside, he immediately pulled on his clothes, strapped on his weapons, and joined the prince.

‘Let’s go for a walk,’ said the prince to Fateh Singh, ‘but make sure we are alone and no one else comes with us.’

Fateh Singh ordered the attendants to stay back, who complied, though reluctantly. The two men strolled slowly out of the camp, and when they were well away, the prince clasped Fateh Singh by the hand and said, ‘Fateh Singh, you are my friend; we have grown up together, studied together, there is nothing about me that you do not know, and Tej Singh, too, respects you greatly. But today I am very sad and do not know if I will survive the day. I do not know what came over Tej Singh, but he has entered into a foolish bet with Badrinath and let a thief go free! Who knows what will happen next? We may or may not find the book, the tilisma may break or it may not, Chandrakanta may become mine or she may remain forever trapped in that enchantment.’

‘Don’t worry so much,’ reassured Fateh Singh. ‘Tej Singh is not a fool, the bet he has made, he has made well. In a single move, all the aiyaars will be on your side. I am aware of the arrangements he has made today, and he has made them with reason. He had assigned me a task as well, I have completed that and it went well. Be patient, and see how it unfolds.’

The two, engrossed in conversation, had gone a considerable distance away from the camp. Suddenly they noticed a group of women a little way away. They fell silent, and hiding themselves behind some trees, began observing the women.

There must have been some twenty women, each leading a horse by the reins and walking slowly in the direction where the two men lay hidden. One of the women was leading two horses. While all the women were very

beautiful, the one leading them was the most beautiful and delicate of them all. She must have been some fifteen years old, and judging by her dress and ornaments, she seemed to be a king's daughter. She was covered in jewels from head to toe, her limbs were comely and well formed, and the beauty of her face, which was as delicate as a rose, was evident even from afar. The other women too, were dressed in costly and tasteful garments.

The women came closer, and now the prince could see them clearly, though neither he nor Fateh Singh, concealed in the shadow of the trees, were visible to the women. The girl who led them, and whom we may call a princess, halted suddenly and opening a book began to read it, weeping as she did so.

The prince recognized the book—it was the same enchanted book that had been lost, for upon its cover, in large gold letters was inscribed the word 'Tilisma'. 'This book had been stolen by the aiyaars,' thought the prince to himself, 'and Tej Singh is even now searching for it. How and why did this book fall into her hands? Who is she, and why does she weep as she reads it?'

End of Part Two

* 'I have recognized you.'

† 'If you remain quiet, then your life too will be saved.'

‡ 'Break my chains, or I will create a commotion and have you arrested.'

§ 'And what do you think will be your condition then?'

¶ 'I will stand by the queen and help her!'

* This is Maharaj Shivdatt's diwan, who has come with the army from Chunar to rescue the queen.

* A cubit is equal to the length of the forearm, from the tip of the middlefinger to the elbow. Though it has been standardized to approximately eighteen inches, clearly, the men in the story were not using the standardized cubit, but using their own forearms to measure the pillar. Therefore the prince's measure is the only one that fits.

Part Three



Narrative One

TILL IT IS known who she is, and from where she hails, we shall refer to the delicate-looking girl—who, with the book in hand, leads the other women—as the ‘Forest Maiden’.

When the Forest Maiden, by slow and graceful steps, reached the trees behind which Prince Birendra Singh and Fateh Singh were hidden, she stopped and turned to look behind her. One of the women following close behind stepped forward. This woman was also slender and young, as young as the Forest Maiden with a quick, vivacious manner; she carried a painting in her hands. The Forest Maiden handed her the book, and took the painting from her.

The Maiden gazed sadly at the painting and sighed deeply, her eyes filling with tears, a few drops even falling upon the canvas. The prince’s gaze too, fell upon the painting, and he stared at it in surprise. The Forest Maiden resumed her journey, and soon vanished into the trees.

‘Why Fateh Singh,’ said the prince, stepping out of his hiding place behind the trees, ‘do you know who she is?’

‘I have no idea at all, except that I would say that she is a king’s daughter,’ replied Fateh Singh, as puzzled as the prince.

‘That book in her hands,’ continued the prince, ‘that was definitely the one we found in the enchanted ruin, and which Shivdatt’s aiyaars stole from us, because of which Tej Singh challenged Badrinath and for which our aiyaars are even now searching!’

‘But if that is so, how did the book fall into her hands?’ asked Fateh Singh.

‘Yes, and while that is surprising enough, of bigger wonder is another matter which perhaps you did not note.’

‘No, I did not. What is it?’

‘The painting carried by her companion and upon which the young woman gazed so sorrowfully was a portrait—of me!’

‘That is indeed extraordinary!’ exclaimed Fateh Singh.

‘I am in a strange state of astonishment and bewilderment, and cannot make any sense of this whole affair!’ confessed the prince. ‘But come, let’s follow those women and see where they go!’

Fateh Singh nodded in agreement and both men turned down the path taken by the Forest Maiden and her companions. They had walked only a short distance when they heard someone calling them from behind. They turned to see that it was Tej Singh. As he came closer, they saw that he looked worried and flustered. ‘Why, what is the matter that you are so distraught?’ asked the prince.

‘Oh what can be the matter, except that I must now part ways with you for the rest of my life,’ replied Tej Singh, his voice breaking. Unable to continue, his eyes filled with tears. The prince became as upset as Tej Singh, but couldn’t understand why Tej Singh had spoken as he had, or why he had lost heart so completely.

Fateh Singh could not bear to see Tej Singh’s condition. Pulling out his handkerchief, he wiped the tears of both friends, and asked Tej Singh, ‘Why do you say such words, why are you so disturbed? Why must you leave the prince forever?’

Tej Singh pulled himself together and replied, ‘We could not find the magic book, nor do we have any hope left of finding it. Therefore, I must honour my oath, and shaving my head, leave the prince and these lands forever.’

Before either Fateh Singh or the prince could reply, Devi Singh and Jagannath Jyotishi also appeared on the scene. While still some distance away, Jyotishi ji called out, ‘Tej Singh, don’t lose heart! If you haven’t found the book, they haven’t either. It is as I had said earlier—the book has been taken by a third person.’

Tej Singh looked up in relief, recovering some of his old confidence.

‘Well done,’ chided the prince. ‘You shed so many tears, and made me cry as well, and all for nothing! I have just seen the book, in the hands of this third person who holds it now, and I would have told you had you given me a chance to do so! But there you were—in tears before I could say a word!’ The prince glanced down the path the women had taken, but he could no longer see them.

‘In whose hands did you see the book? Where is he?’ asked Tej Singh, still agitated.

‘I don’t know where they have disappeared, but come, let’s continue in the direction they went, perhaps we’ll catch up with them again,’ said the prince. ‘Hai! Scarcely do we solve one problem when another crops up!’

The prince led and Fateh Singh and the others followed him down the path. Tej Singh, Devi Singh and Jyotishi ji were puzzled and confused. Whom was the prince following, in whose hands had he seen the book, and if he had seen it with someone, why had he not taken it from him? Tej Singh was tempted to ask these questions of the prince, but seeing him so anxious and preoccupied in his search, he stayed silent. The prince searched for that troupe of strange women for several hours, but he found no sign of them. At last, he gave up and stopped under a tree, his eyes filling with tears again.

‘Please, tell us what is going on?’ cried Tej Singh, unable to contain himself any more.

‘No, not here. I won’t say anything here. Let’s return to our camp, and I will explain everything,’ replied the prince.

Upon returning to the camp, the prince suggested that they first visit the enchanted ruin, to see how the others were getting on. They had reached but the entrance to the ruin, when they saw Badrinath, Pannalal and the others coming towards them.

‘Oh look, they themselves are coming this way,’ said the prince. ‘But wait, how did Badrinath get free?’

‘That’s really surprising!’ exclaimed Tej Singh.

‘Can it be that the book has fallen into their hands after all?’ asked Devi Singh. ‘If that is so, then we are in trouble.’

‘No, the book is not with them, of this I am certain.’ said Fateh Singh. ‘We have just seen it, only a short while ago, in the hands of another. Of course, I cannot say whether they will get hold of it later, but at this moment, they do not have it.’

Badrinath and the others came up to them. ‘So, Tej Singh,’ jeered Pannalal, ‘you have lost, accept it!’

‘Of course not, how can you say that we have lost?’ retorted Tej Singh.

‘Of course you have lost! I am free, and we haven’t given you the book!’ answered Badrinath.

‘Oh, but we have found the book,’ said Tej Singh. ‘How does it matter how you escaped, whether we helped you or you managed it yourself? Finding the book is our victory, so now you might as well give up the service of Maharaj Shivdatt and join the prince instead!’

‘Show us the book, and we shall acknowledge the prince our master at once!’ declared Badrinath.

‘Why don’t *you* show us the book?’ said Tej Singh. ‘Since you cannot, it is proof that you don’t have it and we have found it!’

‘That’s enough,’ said Badrinath. ‘I can see, from what you say, that you don’t have the book either, and that it has been taken by some third person! I was worried that you had it, but now I am reassured that you don’t!’

‘So then, who has lost?’ asked Devi Singh.

‘No one,’ replied Badrinath. ‘No one has lost the bet, nor won it!’

‘All right then,’ interrupted the prince, ‘tell us how you escaped from the clutches of that stone statue!’

‘It was God’s will that I got away,’ replied Badrinath. ‘We didn’t do anything clever by intention. Pannalal hit the stone man on the head with a piece of wood, and he let go of me and grabbed the piece of wood instead—which he is still clutching in his hands!’

‘Good then, that neither you nor Tej Singh was proved wrong.’

‘Prince, my heart desires that I be with you, but what can I do, I cannot be disloyal. I must have a very good reason to leave Maharaj Shivdatt. Now if you give me permission, I shall take my leave of you,’ said Badrinath.

‘Very well, you are free to go,’ nodded the prince.

‘If you can’t or won’t join us, so be it, but at least stop your aiyaari,’ suggested Jyotishi ji.

‘Ho, Jyotishi ji! You reveal yourself as a timid scholar of the Vedas after all! Why be afraid of their aiyaari? Let them use all their skills against us!’ exclaimed Tej Singh.

‘We shall see,’ replied Pannalal. ‘For the moment, though, we take our leave. Jai maya ki! Long live Illusion!’

‘Jai maya ki!’ responded Tej Singh.

Badrinath and his companions left, and the prince too decided to stay away from the enchanted ruin that afternoon. That night, everybody gathered in the prince’s tent. The guards were given instructions to let nobody in, and once everyone had settled down, Tej Singh turned to the prince and said, ‘Now tell us—in whose hands did you see the magic book, and why did you not try to take it away from that person?’

‘I don’t know who she is, but if she is not more beautiful than Princess Chandrakanta, then she is at least her equal. It was her great beauty that prevented me from taking the book from her,’ answered the prince.

‘Where does Princess Chandrakanta come into the picture?’ asked Tej Singh, now even more confused. ‘Tell us clearly what you mean!’

‘What shall I say? What *can* I say? My heart is in turmoil,’ sighed the prince, and fell silent.

‘You are in a peculiar mood, I cannot understand anything,’ said Tej Singh. Turning to Fateh Singh, he continued, ‘You were with him, so please tell us clearly what happened. Clearly, the prince cannot do so! He will sigh a dozen times for every two words that he speaks! He keeps falling in love wherever he goes, he doesn’t solve one problem before he is ready to take on another!’

Fateh Singh recounted all that had taken place. Tej Singh listened in growing astonishment—who could this maiden be, where had she seen the prince before, when had she fallen in love with him, and how had she acquired his portrait?

Jyotishi ji used his skill at divination to find out what he could about the strange maiden but all that he could say with certainty was that she was the daughter of a king. They stayed up all night, all five of them, puzzling over the strange events of the day, but could find no explanation for them. At last they decided to launch a full-fledged search for the maiden and her companions.

The others returned to their various tents to catch what sleep they could, but the prince lay awake: the Forest Maiden filled his head and his heart, not allowing him to fall asleep. Sometimes it would be the memory of her fragile and innocent face that would torment him; sometimes he would recall the tears that she had shed. And so he passed the night in wakefulness, tossing and turning in his bed, and sighing deeply now and then. The sun rose, and was an hour in the sky, but still the prince did not rise from his bed.

Tej Singh entered the prince’s tent to find him in bed, his face covered with a sheet, and the sheet wet with tears. He understood that love for the Forest Maiden had taken full effect, and that at this point it was useless to either advise or reprimand him.

‘Do you wake or sleep?’ he called.

‘I am awake,’ replied the prince, uncovering his face.

‘So why haven’t you risen yet? You are the first one up every morning, what is the matter today?’

‘No, no, it’s nothing,’ said the prince, and getting out of bed, quickly bathed and dressed. The others were already waiting, and as soon as the

prince was ready, the three aiyaars prepared to leave for the forest in search of the strange women. 'I shall come too,' said the prince, and would not be dissuaded, not even when Tej Singh and the others protested that he would only hinder them in their search. 'No, I will not get in your way,' replied the prince. 'The three of you search where you will, as you will. I will take Fateh Singh with me, and the two of us will conduct our own search.' Tej Singh, still unhappy at this idea, warned that he would present an easy target for Shivdatt's aiyaars, but the prince was adamant. At last, helpless, Tej Singh agreed, and they left for the forest, accompanied by the prince and Fateh Singh.

After they had gone some distance into the forest, the three aiyaars left Prince Birendra Singh and Fateh Singh to their own devices, and dispersed in different directions to search for the Forest Maiden and her companions. The prince, alone with Fateh Singh, could speak of nothing but the Forest Maiden and her extraordinary beauty.

Narrative Two

AS THE PRINCE and Fateh Singh sat talking, a woman not lacking in either youth or beauty, and holding a basket filled with wild flowers in her hands, walked past the prince as though unaware of his presence. And as she walked, she talked to herself, 'I am late with the flowers, I am sure the princess will be angry with me, I wonder what punishment she will deal out to me today...'

The prince and Fateh Singh both heard her words quite clearly. 'It seems as though she is one of them,' said the prince. 'Call her here and question her, she may be able to help us.'

Fateh Singh called out to her, and the woman, startled, stopped and looked back in their direction. Fateh Singh gestured to her to come to them; she did so, frightened and trembling. 'Who are you, and for whom are you gathering these flowers?' asked Fateh Singh.

'I am just a poor flower girl,' she said. 'I cannot tell you where I live, or for whom I gather these flowers. I beg you, please let me go, don't kill me, I am an insignificant creature and my death will gain you nothing.'

The girl thus began to weep and beg. Her basket lay on the ground before them, and the heady fragrance of the flowers she had gathered filled the air. Just then, there arrived upon the scene a masked horseman who turned to the prince and said, 'Do not be fooled by her. She is an aiyaar, and the fragrance of those flowers, if you keep breathing it in much longer, will soon render you unconscious.'

The masked stranger had barely finished speaking when the flower girl stood up and ran, but Fateh Singh was as quick as her, and grabbed her hand. Seeing this, the masked horseman vanished as suddenly as he had appeared.

'Who was that masked stranger, and why did he do me this good deed?' wondered the prince.

'That is hard to say, given that he is determined to conceal himself,' replied Fateh Singh. 'Anyway, it is dangerous for us to stay here longer. If that horseman had not come, we would have been taken prisoner by now!'

'You are right, let's go,' agreed the prince. 'And let us take the flower girl with us—we can interrogate her once we reach our camp.'

Once they were back safely in his tent, the prince asked Fateh Singh to question the flower girl. 'Ask her what her name is,' he said.

'She will not reveal her name so easily,' said Fateh Singh. 'Wait, I will find out who she is another way!' He called for some warm water and had the woman's face thoroughly washed and scrubbed—and it was revealed that she was no other than Pandit Badrinath!

'Now what shall we do with you?' asked the prince.

'Whatever you think is appropriate,' answered Badrinath.

'Keep a close eye on him,' said the prince to Fateh Singh. 'Let Tej Singh, when he returns, decide what must be done with him.' Fateh Singh nodded and took Badrinath away with him into his tent.

When evening fell, Tej Singh, Devi Singh and Jyotishi ji returned and went straight to see the prince in his tent. 'Did you find out anything?' asked the prince at once.

'No,' replied Tej Singh, 'we searched all day long, but we could discover nothing.'

'So what shall we do next?' asked the prince, with a deep sigh.

'We don't need to worry about "next" yet. We'll find out more in a day or two, I'm sure,' replied Tej Singh.

'Well, we captured an aiyaar while you were gone!' said the prince.

'Who? Where is he?' exclaimed Tej Singh.

‘He is in Fateh Singh’s custody! Call them here and see for yourself who it is,’ said the prince.

Tej Singh sent Devi Singh to fetch Fateh Singh and his prisoner to the prince’s tent; when he saw that the captive aiyaar was Badrinath, he greeted him with a delighted laugh. ‘So, Badrinath, what’s your plan now?’ he taunted.

‘The same as it always was,’ retorted Badrinath.

‘So will you leave Shivdatt’s service now?’

‘And why would I do that?’

‘Because otherwise you will be imprisoned.’

‘As you please,’ shrugged Badrinath.

‘Don’t assume that your companions will be able to rescue you,’ warned Tej Singh. ‘It is not so easy to escape from our prison!’

‘I know all about your prison,’ replied Badrinath. ‘First send me there, and we shall see!’

‘Brave words, Mr Fearless!’ jeered Devi Singh.

Tej Singh turned to Fateh Singh and said, ‘Please keep a strict watch on him. It is dark now, but tomorrow he will be taken to the prison.’

Fateh Singh summoned his best soldiers and handed over Badrinath into their safekeeping. Meanwhile, a chobdar entered the tent and said, ‘There is a masked horseman outside; he gave me this letter, which he said was to be given to the prince.’

Tej Singh took the letter and examined the envelope closely; upon it were written the words: ‘Placed most respectfully at the lotus feet of Prince Birendra Singh.’ Tej Singh handed the letter to the prince, who opened it and read the verse inscribed within:

*The one for whom I gave up all comfort and all wealth
Heartless and uncaring, he asks not about me
I have given up the luxuries of the palace
And wander like an ascetic through the forest, my body covered
in ashes
I burn in the fire of his absence, my body singed with sorrow
And inhale in penance the bitter smoke of his absence*

—a viyogini, yearning for her beloved

The prince's eyes filled with tears, and in a voice choked with emotion, he ordered, 'Bring him in, he who has brought this letter!'

The chobdar ran to obey, but was back almost at once. 'The horseman has disappeared, he is not to be found anywhere,' he reported.

At this, the prince was overcome with grief. He handed the letter to Tej Singh, who read it and remarked, 'It seems that this letter has been sent by the woman for whom we have searched the forest all day. It is also clear that she is as deeply in love with you as you are with her, so you shouldn't be so sorrowful.'

'This letter has served the purpose of ghee upon the flames of my ardour! How can I stop thinking of her now? Anyway, go, all of you and rest, and we shall see what tomorrow brings!' said the prince.

Narrative Three

THAT NIGHT IT became impossible for the prince to fall asleep. He read the letter again and again. As dawn broke, he rose from his bed and immediately made ready to leave for the forest, calling to Tej Singh to accompany him. Tej Singh tried to dissuade him again from going into the forest, but the prince refused to listen to his words of caution. At last, Tej Singh took the enchanted rose from his pouch, and rubbing it in some water, gave the water to the prince and Fateh Singh, making sure they drank it all. 'Now go where you wish, for now no one will be able to render you unconscious,' said Tej Singh. 'Of course, if they capture you by force and take you away—that would be a different matter and one which I cannot prevent!'

'Ha! Who is there valiant enough to capture me by force?' laughed the prince.

The five men left for the forest again, and as before, the three aiyaars left the prince and Fateh Singh to their own devices and vanished into the trees, each in a different direction. The prince and Fateh Singh wandered through the forest, and soon they had left their camp site far behind. All at once, the prince saw two masked horsemen riding towards them. The horsemen approached the prince and stopped a little distance away. One of them dismounted from his horse, placed a package on the ground, and

climbed back on his horse at once. As the prince walked towards them, the horsemen turned away. 'Please accept this book and this letter,' they called and rode off into the forest.

The prince ran up to examine the package they had left behind—it was the magic book from the enchanted ruin. Upon it was placed a letter, and beside it some paper, and a pen and an inkwell. The prince, overjoyed, picked up the book at once and turning to Fateh Singh remarked, 'I wonder why the masked riders rode away after leaving us this book? I believe that the rider who spoke to us was actually a woman—it seemed so from her voice!' He turned the letter over in his hand. 'Let's see what the letter says,' he continued, and opening it began to read:

My heart is yours, and the one whom you desire—she, poor woman, is trapped in the enchanted ruin. If she suffers any trouble, you will be sad. In your happiness lies my happiness, and so I am returning this book to you. Break the enchantment and free Chandrakanta, but do not forget me—I ask you to swear upon her, whom you love more. Write your answer to my letter, and place it there where you found the book.

The prince wrote his reply at once:

My heart has been yearning to meet you from the moment I saw you in the forest, this enchanted book in your hands. I will consider myself blessed only when my eyes can rest on your two beloved ones, but that you hate my very face.

—Your Birendra

and set it down on the same spot.

The two riders had stopped amongst the trees, and now stood at a distance, watching the prince; though he waited for a long time, they would not come closer. At last, he moved away, and when the riders were satisfied that he was far enough away, one of them rode forward and picked up his

reply; within seconds the two riders vanished into the forest. The prince and Fateh Singh returned to their camp.

Late at night, Tej Singh and the others returned as well, and gathered in the prince's tent. 'We had no luck today either,' said Tej Singh. 'Yes, we did see some masked riders here and there in the forest, but they evaded us quite cleverly and we never were close enough to speak to them. But I am sure we'll find out something tomorrow.'

The prince smiled. 'Your efforts were in vain,' he said, 'but see with what aiyaari I have recovered that which was lost! Here—here's the enchanted book!' And the prince placed the book triumphantly in front of Tej Singh.

'I know the aiyaari you are capable of—but that is irrelevant right now,' declared Tej Singh. 'Tell us, how did you find the book? Now, that is the wonderful thing I want to know about!'

The prince recounted how they had come by the book; he showed them the letter, and also told them what he had written in reply.

'She seems to be the daughter of a noble family, for see how she did not wish to cause the prince any sorrow!' declared Jyotishi ji. 'We can also infer from her letter that she knows the full details of the prince's situation, but we still have no clue at all as to who she may be!'

'It is Tej Singh who should be ashamed of himself, that despite being such a great aiyaar, he hasn't been able to find a handful of women!' said the prince.

'I will find them, and find them in a manner that will make even you happy,' declared Tej Singh. 'But now that we have the book, should we not finish with the enchanted ruin first?'

'And do you think those women will wait around till you do so?' retorted the prince.

'Are you not concerned about Princess Chandrakanta any more?' asked Tej Singh.

'Of course I am,' protested the prince. 'Love for Chandrakanta flows in every vein of my body! But think of this girl too! If you are fair you will admit that her love for me is true, for she has put Chandrakanta before her own need of me!'

'I am not asking you to disregard her love, but should you not be thinking about breaking the enchantment as well?' said Tej Singh.

'Well, then make it so that both purposes are served.'

‘All right,’ agreed Tej Singh. ‘During the day, we will focus on breaking the enchantment which binds Chandrakanta and holds her prisoner, and at night, we shall search for these women.’

The night passed once more in wakefulness, and at dawn, the prince, Tej Singh and Jyotishi ji returned to the enchanted ruin. Following the instructions in the magic book, they began to work towards breaking the tilisma.

As it happened, the very first directive in the enchanted book instructed:

Those who are engaged in breaking the enchantment must leave the tilisma while three hours of daylight still remain, and thereafter they should not do anything related to breaking the enchantment.

This was in accordance with their plan.

Narrative Four

ENTERING THE ENCHANTED ruin, they made for the vast hall where lay the stone man upon his marble platform. Here the prince began his work to break the tilisma.

Moving towards the side where rested the sleeping man’s head and at a distance of some five cubits from the platform, the prince dug away the earth, using only his bare hands. After digging down for about a yard or so, he uncovered a large block of white stone upon which was fixed a stout iron ring. Taking hold of the iron ring, he pulled the stone out of the ground. Below it lay revealed an underground chamber, and steps leading down into it.

Tej Singh lit a torch, and by its light they descended into the underground chamber. It was a vast room, spotlessly clean, with not a trace of dust or dirt anywhere. In the centre of the room stood the marble likeness of a beautiful woman; in one hand the statue held a spike, and in the other, a hammer.

The prince took the spike and the hammer from the statue's hands, and inserting the nail into its left ear, hammered it in firmly. At once the statue's lips began to move, and strange music could be heard so that it seemed as though the statue was singing.

The statue continued its song for a while, then suddenly, without warning, it split into two, its right and left sides opening to reveal the hollow cavity of its abdomen. From within it appeared a tiny rose bush, about eight inches tall; upon it bloomed several flowers, and from one branch there hung a small key. Along with the shrub was revealed a small sheet of copper, upon which were inscribed a few lines of prose.

The prince picked up the sheet and read aloud:

This shrub has been created by our physician Ajayab Datt from special ingredients known only to him. The flowers smell like roses; their fragrance will never die and will be detectable from a great distance. Our physician made this rare and unique shrub as a special gift for you to keep in your court.

The prince was delighted to read this, and turning to Jyotishi ji, exclaimed, 'This is a wonderful find! I can smell the wonderful fragrance of these flowers, which is filling the room even as we speak!'

'There's no doubt, this is quite amazing,' agreed Tej Singh.

'And observe the workmanship! It is excellent!' admired Devi Singh.

Even as the prince and his companions exclaimed over the rose bush, a door opened on the far side of the chamber. They had seen no sign of this door earlier, but now, as it swung open, it flooded the room with light. They doused the torch and moved towards the door, and stepping out, found themselves in a small garden. This was the same garden that Chapala had discovered, and about which we have spoken earlier in another chapter.

Still following exactly the instructions in the enchanted book, the prince tied a string to the little key they had found with the rose bush, and dragged it around the garden, the others following. He dragged it through every flowerbed and along every narrow pathway, till at last, as he neared a fountain, the key stuck to the ground. They stopped and upon the prince's direction, began digging at that very spot. They had dug a few feet deep into the ground when Jyotishi ji warned them that it was time to stop. 'Only three

hours of the day remain,' he said, 'so it is time for us to move out of the tilisma.'

The prince picked up the key, and they retraced their steps through the garden, into the underground chamber, up the steps and back into the great room where slept the stone man. They picked up the stone slab they had dug up, and turning it over, used it to block the entrance to the underground chamber. Another iron ring was fixed to the underside of the stone slab, by means of which they could lift the slab again when necessary; there was also a keyhole, into which they inserted the key they had found in the underground chamber and found that it fitted; locking the stone slab into place, they made their way out of the ruin.

The four men returned to the camp and gathered in the prince's tent. After a short rest, Tej Singh, Devi Singh and Jyotishi ji left to continue their search for the Forest Maiden. At this time, perhaps some two hours of the day still remained.

The three aiyaars had ventured only a short distance into the forest when they saw one of the masked horsemen through the trees. Making use of the trees to hide themselves, they followed the rider cautiously through the forest. The rider was moving westwards, straight in the direction of Chunar. He would stop from time to time, look around and behind, and then continue on his way.

The sun set, and darkness took over; the dense forest seemed frightening in the deep dark of the night. The three aiyaars started at every sound, even that of dewdrops falling on dry leaves. After about an hour of such darkness, they reached the edge of the forest.

The masked rider now stopped and dismounted. Several more horses were tethered nearby, and the rider tied his horse amongst them; picking up some hay from a pile, he threw it to his horse. He then set off again, this time on foot.

The three aiyaars continued to follow the masked man, and after some three hours, they reached the banks of the Ganga. Upon the river shone two bright lights as though two large moons had descended upon its surface. The water gleamed with the strange white light. As they came closer they saw a large boat, magnificently decorated, upon which sat several beautiful women. Upon a raised dais in the centre sat a young and delicate-looking woman, whose radiant beauty held the onlookers spellbound. Her face glowed like the moon, and on either side of her there burned a bright lamp.

The masked rider reached the edge of the river and let out a shrill whistle. There came an answering whistle from the boat, and two of the women stood up and let down a dinghy. Climbing into it, they rowed to the river's edge and ferried the masked rider back to the boat with them.

The three aiyaars began to talk amongst themselves.

'These women are beautiful!' exclaimed Tej Singh.

'It seems to be an assembly of fairies, let's swim out to them!' cried Jyotishi ji, enthusiastically.

'Jyotishi ji,' teased Devi Singh, 'be careful that the fairies don't fly away with you, or we'll be less one man on our side!'

'In my opinion, this seems to be a gathering of the same people that the prince saw,' said Tej Singh.

'Yes, that seems to be quite certain,' agreed Devi Singh.

'So then why aren't you willing to swim across to them?' jeered Jyotishi ji. 'You are as afraid of the water as an old opium addict!'

'What use are you then?' retorted Devi Singh. 'We hear so much in praise of you—Jyotishi ji can do this and that, he's a big wheel, a giant wheel in the game, but no, you couldn't even locate an insignificant little gathering like this!'

'What am I to do? Those women are much smarter than me,' protested Jyotishi ji. 'They've changed their names, so when I try to find out who they are, my calculations throw up the oddest names—someone shows up as 'Forlorn', another as 'Enchantress', a third as 'Witch', a fourth as 'Imp'! Tell me, how can I accept that these are their true names?'

'So why have they changed their names?' asked Tej Singh.

'To make fools of us,' said Jyotishi ji.

'All right, let's forget about their names. Can you find out where they live?' suggested Devi Singh.

'My calculations throw up the same answer again and again—that their home is in the water. So do I conclude that they are water-beings or fish?' cried Jyotishi ji.

'But that is correct, is it not? They do reside upon the water, the river,' said Tej Singh.

'It's like this,' explained Jyotishi ji, 'the four elements, air, fire, water and earth, always impede the proper exercise of geomancy. If someone wants to confound a jyotishi's attempt at divination, they can do so through the manipulation of these four elements. The poor jyotishi will then be rendered

quite powerless, so that his scrolls and manuscripts will seem a burden to him!’

‘How so?’ questioned Tej Singh. ‘Please explain it properly to us, it may be useful in the future.’

‘I will tell you, but for now, let’s concentrate on the job in hand. Let’s swim across,’ urged Jyotishi ji.

‘All right,’ agreed Tej Singh.

The three aiyaars prepared to swim across to the boat. Leaving their clothes on the bank, and securing their little bags of aiyaari around their waist, they stepped into the water. But they had swum only a few feet when they heard a shrill whistle from the bank. At once, the lights on the boat were doused, as suddenly and as completely as though someone had thrown the lamps into the water. Pitch darkness engulfed them and they could no longer see the boat.

‘So much for “let’s swim across”!’ grumbled Devi Singh.

‘These people are very mischievous,’ cried Tej Singh.

‘I had warned you, they are trouble,’ said Jyotishi ji. ‘Now do you believe me that I spoke the truth when I said they have made a mockery of my skills of divination?’

‘Let’s get back to the bank,’ said Devi Singh. ‘It seems they have a guard stationed there; she must have been observing us and when we began to swim towards the boat, she gave that warning whistle and the others put out the lights. The signal seems to have been predetermined.’

‘Why did that useless guard wait for us to enter the water before sounding the alarm?’ complained Jyotishi ji. ‘Had she given that whistle earlier, we wouldn’t have had to get wet!’

The three aiyaars swam back to the riverbank, and began to search for their clothes in the dark, only to find that their clothes had disappeared.

‘Jyotishi ji! There you are! Thanks to your idea, our clothes have also vanished!’ swore Devi Singh. ‘Oh, if I could lay my hands on any of these people right now, I’d eat them alive!’

‘I would praise them, that was very smart aiyaari!’ said Tej Singh.

‘Yes, yes, do praise them! Praise them so that if any of them are listening, they will spare you further trouble in the future!’ grumbled Devi Singh.

‘What more can they do to us now? They have even taken our clothes away!’ said Jyotishi ji.

‘Let’s return to our camp,’ suggested Tej Singh. ‘There is nothing else we can do at this hour!’

It must have been past midnight when the three, shivering with cold and naked as they were born, in acute distress thanks to the aiyaari of the women, made their way through the forest and back towards their camp.

Narrative Five

PRINCE BIRENDRA SINGH had not slept a wink after Tej Singh, Devi Singh and Jyotishi ji had departed for the forest. He waited anxiously in his tent for their return and as the night passed, his anxiety grew. Dawn was breaking as the three aiyaars entered the camp. Tej Singh insisted that they go to the prince as they were, nude and shivering.

The prince was lying awake in his tent; a small lamp burned at his side. He sat up in shock, startled at the strange appearance of the three aiyaars. ‘What is wrong? Why are you in this state?’ he cried, astonished.

‘For now, be content to merely look at the state we are in!’ remarked Tej Singh, acidly. ‘We will tell you what the rest of the matter is after we have drawn breath!’

The three aiyaars sent for their clothes and dressed; meanwhile the sun rose and it was morning.

‘Now tell me, what trouble did you find yourselves in?’ asked the prince.

‘We were made complete fools of, in a manner that we will remember all our lives!’ declared Tej Singh.

‘What happened?’ asked the prince.

‘The one you are so besotted with, the one we have been killing ourselves to find—there is no doubt that she loves you deeply too. So why is she hell bent on hiding herself from us and what benefit does she see in doing so?’ asked Tej Singh, indignant.

‘Why, were you able to get some information?’ asked the prince, eagerly.

‘Information? Ha! We’ve seen the whole set up with our own eyes! That is why we were so severely punished! What more do you need to know? She

has very skilled aiyaars with her. Had I known that, I would have been more cautious!’ retorted Tej Singh.

‘Tell me clearly what took place,’ said the prince.

Tej Singh told the prince all that had happened, and the prince, amused, began to laugh. ‘They managed to foil your skills at divination too!’ he said to Jyotishi ji.

‘Don’t say a word, they’re trouble, all of them,’ said Jyotishi ji, grimly.

‘Even if you couldn’t find out anything about them, you could have tried to find out whether this was the doing of Shivdatt’s aiyaars,’ said the prince.

‘No, there is no connection between the women and Shivdatt’s aiyaars. I have given this much thought, and I would say that Shivdatt’s aiyaars are probably not even aware of their existence,’ declared Jyotishi ji.

‘At least there is that,’ said Tej Singh.

‘Shall we go there during the day today?’ asked Devi Singh.

‘What will happen to the task of breaking the enchantment then?’ asked Tej Singh.

‘How will a day’s delay matter?’ said the prince.

‘That is why I say that you no longer love Chandrakanta as you used to,’ said Tej Singh.

‘Never!’ protested the prince. ‘There is no one I love more than Chandrakanta, but I don’t know why, my heart is restless to know more about the Forest Maiden too!’

Tej Singh laughed and gave in. ‘Well, I must take Pandit Badrinath to the secret valley and imprison him there. He should not escape again!’ he said.

‘Why don’t you take him to the valley today?’ suggested the prince.

‘Yes, I’ll go now,’ agreed Tej Singh. ‘I’ll be back tonight; it is only a distance of fifteen kos after all. And while I am away, Devi Singh and Jyotishi ji can go in search of the Forest Maiden.’

The others agreed to this suggestion. Tej Singh bathed and dressed, and when Badrinath had been rendered unconscious by means of a drug mixed in his food, he made a bundle of him, and hoisting him up on to his back, set off for the secret valley. Meanwhile, the prince sent Devi Singh and Jyotishi ji to find out more about the Forest Maiden.

Tej Singh reached the secret valley as evening fell. He pulled on the lion’s tongue, thus opening the first lock, and then unlocked the second lock; to his surprise, the massive stone door guarding the entrance to the valley did

not open. Tej Singh stared at the unyielding door in shocked disbelief. He tried once more, but the door remained as firmly shut as before. Bewildered and not a little worried, he gave up; and once again hoisting the unconscious Badrinath upon his back, he returned to the prince's camp.

Narrative Six

DEVI SINGH AND Jyotishi ji had not ventured very far into the forest in their search for the Forest Maiden when they saw a masked rider coming their way. The rider stopped and called out, 'Devi Singh, where are you going? Your cunning won't succeed against us. You had a taste of our hospitality last night with a dip in the river and the disappearance of your clothes. Now why do you come here? Is it that you want to be taken prisoner? Be patient a while longer—let us first teach you aiyaari, only then will you be worthy opponents!'

Devi Singh, though surprised and shaken by the masked rider's words, hid his astonishment; he turned to Jyotishi ji and said scornfully, 'Listen to him! The horseman sahib will teach us aiyaari, he who is too ashamed to even show us his face!'

'What can Jyotishi ji say?' mocked the masked rider. 'He too must be as embarrassed as you! After all, we've confounded all his attempts at divination. He may try a thousand times, but he will learn nothing about us.'

'If you remain in this area, we will soon find out all there is to know about you,' declared Devi Singh.

'Of course we'll remain here, where else will we go? We will stay, and we will meet you daily, but you will find out nothing about us!'

During this exchange, Devi Singh had been slowly edging closer and closer to the masked rider; judging himself to be within reach, he pounced and pulled off the rider's mask. But the rider's face was painted red with roli, and Devi Singh could not make out his features. In response, the rider pulled off Devi Singh's turban, and flinging a letter upon the ground, turned and swiftly galloped away into the trees. Devi Singh, admitting defeat and quite mortified by this encounter, picked up the letter; upon the envelope was inscribed a single name, 'Prince Birendra Singh'.

‘I wonder where these people are from,’ mused Jyotishi ji, ‘but it seems to me that they are, all of them, aiyaars.’

Devi Singh put the letter away carefully in his pocket and said, ‘Of that there seems to be no doubt. We are the ones who lose at every encounter. I had thought that pulling off his mask would reveal the horseman’s identity, but see how cunning he was—he had his face covered with red colour beneath the mask!’

‘Well, we shall see,’ said Jyotishi ji. ‘Right now we must return to the camp, because we must deliver this letter to the prince. Let’s wait to find out what the letter says. Had it not been addressed to the prince, we could have read it.’

‘Yes, let’s go back,’ agreed Devi Singh. ‘First let’s find out what’s in the letter, and then decide what to do.’

The two men returned to the camp, and entering the prince’s tent, told him of their encounter with the masked horseman and handed him the letter. The prince opened the letter and read it. This is what it said:

No matter what, under no circumstances will I appear before you unless you accept in writing the two conditions I have set out below:

- 1. You must marry both Chandrakanta and me on the same day at the same time*
- 2. You must not consider me less than Chandrakanta in any manner, for I am equal to her in every way*

If you do not accept my conditions in writing, I will leave this forest tomorrow and return home. This too, I will add—that without my help, you cannot find Chandrakanta again, even if you seek her for a thousand years.

The prince loved the Forest Maiden with his whole heart; his desire for her was in no way less than his desire for Chandrakanta, but upon reading this letter, he was overcome with a hundred worries. How would it be possible to marry both the Forest Maiden and Chandrakanta on the same day at the same time? Chandrakanta would never agree, nor would Maharaj Jai

Singh. And then, the Forest Maiden's claim, that without her help, he could never be united with Chandrakanta—what did that mean? 'All the problems notwithstanding, I cannot live without the Forest Maiden,' sighed the prince. 'And so,' he reasoned with himself, 'for the present I will do as she demands and accept her conditions in writing at once. As for the future, I will deal with it later. Besides, I am sure I'll be able to persuade Chandrakanta, she won't refuse me!'

He showed the letter to Devi Singh and Jyotishi ji, who were as astonished at its contents as he was, and equally perplexed as to the right answer to send. The prince spent the rest of the day and the night wondering how he should reply to the letter. The following morning, Tej Singh, too, returned from the secret valley, still carrying the unconscious Badrinath on his back.

'Why have you brought him back?' asked the prince.

'What can I say? We are in trouble, it seems,' replied Tej Singh.

'Why do you say that?'

'I could not open the door that leads to the secret valley.'

'Could someone have locked it from within?' asked the prince

'No, there is no lock within, so that cannot be the case,' said Tej Singh.

'There are only two possibilities, and one of them must be true,' said Jyotishi ji. 'Either someone else has been there and has tampered with the lock, or Maharaj Shivdatt has somehow managed to secure it from within.'

'Why would Shivdatt lock himself in,' protested Tej Singh. 'That only puts him in a worse situation than he is in already. Such an action would only harm him, not help him!'

'Could the Forest Maiden have been up to some trickery?' suggested the prince.

'That is unjust of you!' protested Tej Singh. 'How could that poor Forest Maiden have had anything to do with that tilismi prison that is the secret valley?'

'You are not aware of what has been happening here,' explained the prince. 'I have received another letter from the Forest Maiden in your absence, which states that without her help, I will never be united with Chandrakanta. She has also written a couple of things more and demands an answer. I have been wondering how best to respond to her letter, and to understand how and why I would need her help. Now, with your return and the news that you cannot open the door to the valley, I am suspicious of her.'

‘I, too, believe that she may have something to do with the secret valley,’ agreed Devi Singh.

‘But if the Forest Maiden had wanted to create trouble for us, why would she have returned the enchanted book in the first place? Remember what she wrote in the letter that she sent with the book?’ argued Tej Singh.

‘That is also true,’ agreed Jyotishi ji.

Tej Singh turned to the prince. ‘Please show me that letter in which the Forest Maiden says that without her help you cannot be one with Chandrakanta,’ he requested.

The prince handed the letter to Tej Singh, who, upon reading it, fell into deep thought. The letter made no sense to him.

‘You know, all of you, how love for the Forest Maiden has taken root in my heart,’ said the prince. ‘I know no rest without her. So what harm can there be in my accepting her demands, in writing as she wants? If she is pleased, then she is sure to reveal some of her secrets.’

‘Do what you feel is right,’ said Tej Singh. ‘Poor Chandrakanta will not say a word, but getting Maharaj Jai Singh to agree that you marry both of them at the same time, in the same place, will be another matter! Who knows who she is, from which family, and from where she comes!’

‘But she has said that she is no less than Chandrakanta in any way,’ protested the prince.

Just then a chobdar entered and said, ‘There is a soldier outside, with a message that he wishes to deliver in person.’

‘Let him enter,’ said the prince.

The chobdar left the tent to return with the soldier. He was the oddest man that anyone had ever seen. Short and dark skinned, he was dressed in close-fitting canvas trousers which were decorated with ornamental braid, roughly tacked on. A basket-like helmet made of bamboo sat upon his head, and a sword and shield completed his strange ensemble. He greeted the prince with a deep bow.

The prince and his aiyaars were greatly amused at the soldier’s extraordinary appearance, but refrained from laughing aloud.

‘Who are you and from where do you come?’ asked Tej Singh.

The strange young man’s answer was, if anything, stranger than him. ‘I am a god, and I come from a gathering of demons!’ he replied. ‘I seek an answer from the prince to the letter that a horseman delivered to Devi Singh and Jagannath Jyotishi yesterday!’

‘How do you know their names?’ asked Tej Singh.

‘I have known Jyotishi ji from before he ever came into this world, and as for Devi Singh, he is my disciple!’ answered the strange man.

‘Oi, you devil! Since when was I your disciple? You insult me!’ exclaimed Devi Singh.

‘You are the one who is insulting me, you who speak so rudely to your master and show him no respect!’ retorted the strange man.

‘It seems that it is Death who brought you here!’ threatened Devi Singh.

‘I myself am Death,’ replied the strange man, unperturbed.

‘Should I teach you a lesson for your impertinence?’ cried Devi Singh.

‘I haven’t been sent here by a nobody,’ retorted the strange man. ‘I have come here from one whom you will bow to and salute seventeen and a half times every day.’

Tej Singh intervened before Devi Singh could say anything further. ‘Enough now, Devi Singh,’ he said. ‘He seems to be an aiyaar or jester of some sort. You, despite being an aiyaar yourself, have allowed his teasing to anger you.’

‘If you still do not understand who I am, I will have to call Champa to explain,’ replied the strange fellow.

At this, the others burst out laughing. But they were puzzled too—who was this peculiar man? It was a bizarre situation. The Forest Maiden and her people knew every detail of their lives, while they knew nothing about her or her followers.

Tej Singh gazed at the man’s face with great attention, searching for signs by which he may recognize him.

‘What are you staring at?’ said the man. ‘I am not an aiyaar, nor have I painted my face. Ask for some water, and wash my face and see for yourself. I am dark, and have been dark-skinned for the last four hundred years.’

Tej Singh began to laugh. ‘Whoever you are, you are good,’ he said. ‘I don’t need to examine you further. Had you been an enemy, I would have been justified, but you are not. Aiyaar or jester, there is no doubt that you have been sent by a friend.’

At this the strange man bowed in Tej Singh’s direction. Turning to the prince he said, ‘It would be well if I could have your answer, for I have far to go.’

The prince scribbled his reply behind the letter:

I accept all your conditions with my heart and soul.

and stamping and sealing it with his ring, handed it to the strange man, who left the tent and went on his way.

Narrative Seven

THE MORNING HAD been taken up with Tej Singh's return, which had been followed by the visit from the strange man—thus two watches of the day had already passed when Tej Singh revived Badrinath and handed him to the prince's soldiers, instructing them to keep a strict guard on him. Badrinath taken care of, Tej Singh turned to the prince and said, 'I must bathe and dress and refresh myself. Only after I have rested will I be able to think of what we must do next. What's more, it's been two days now that we have neglected working on the tilisma.'

The prince agreed and dismissed everybody; once they had rested and refreshed themselves, Tej Singh, the other aiyaars and Fateh Singh gathered once again in his tent. They had barely settled down when a chobdar entered and announced, 'An old woman waits without. She demands to see the prince. When we ask her what she wants, she refuses to tell us, and insists that what she has to say she will say only to the prince himself, for it concerns him and only him.'

'Show her in at once,' ordered the prince.

The chobdar ushered in the old woman. 'Have all the she demons and witches been let out?' burst out Tej Singh, startled by her hideous appearance. The words slipped out of his mouth before he could stop himself.

The old woman heard him, and glaring at him with bloodshot eyes, declared, 'Very well then, I shall go away and not say a word! How do I care? It is the prince who stands to lose, not I!' And turning, she walked out of the tent.

The prince sent the chobdar after her, who somehow persuaded her to return.

She was truly astonishingly hideous in appearance. She must have been some seventy years of age. Her hair, which must once have been black, was now streaked with white, and more than half her teeth had fallen out. Two large and crooked front teeth, almost as long as the width of two fingers, stuck out over her upper lip; the teeth were yellowed and decaying. She was wearing a sari made of some coarse fabric; this too was filthy and greasy with dirt, especially the part draped over her head. She wore a huge, brass ring in her nose and brass anklets on her feet.

‘So tell us then, what do you want?’ asked Tej Singh.

‘Let me take a breath!’ protested the old woman. ‘And then, why should I tell you! What I have to say is for the prince alone!’

‘All right, tell me then, what do you have to say?’ said the prince.

‘I will tell you, because what I have to say is to your gain,’ replied the old woman, and lapsed into a fit of violent coughing.

‘Now will you keep coughing for the next hour, or will you also say what you have come to say?’ chided Devi Singh.

‘Again, another interrupts!’ glared the old woman.

‘No, no, it’s all right, no one will speak a word any more,’ placated the prince.

‘What I have to say is important for you, and it will delight your heart,’ continued the old woman, ‘but I want something in return.’

‘Yes, yes, we will delight your heart as well,’ replied the prince.

‘First swear an oath that neither you nor any of your men will berate me, or harm me or hurt me in any way, or even think of taking me captive or imprisoning me,’ demanded the old woman.

‘If what you have to say is for my good, then why would anyone hurt you or harm you or wish to imprison you?’ asked the prince.

‘That is true,’ conceded the old woman. ‘I have done for you that which your aiyaars, even had they tried for a thousand years, would never have accomplished. Therefore I am worried that your aiyaars may seek to harm me out of jealousy and spite.’

The men listened to the old woman’s words in stunned astonishment. What could she have accomplished that she had so forgotten her place, they wondered. At last the prince swore a solemn oath that, ‘No matter what you say, neither I nor any of my men will harm or hurt you in any way.’

The old woman, satisfied, said, ‘I can tell you everything you want to know about that Forest Maiden, and I can also tell you how you may break

the tilisma in a matter of minutes, and be reunited with Chandrakanta.'

The prince and the others were overjoyed. 'If that is truly so, then tell me quickly—who is the Forest Maiden and how can I break that tilisma?'

'Let's discuss my reward first,' reminded the old woman.

'If what you say is true, then you will get whatever reward you ask for,' said the prince.

'Then swear it,' said the old woman.

'I'll swear, but first tell me what is it that you want,' replied the prince.

'All I want is that you should marry me, and marry me at once. You may marry the Forest Maiden and Chandrakanta whenever you wish, but don't delay your wedding with me. I have been enmeshed in my love for you for years, and have grown old in wondering how to become one with you. I found my chance today and have you here in my grasp—now do not delay, or I will be young no more and you will feel sorry that you let my youth slip away!'

The prince's face grew red with rage at the old woman's presumption. His aiyaars ground their teeth in fury, but they were helpless, for the prince had given his word to the old woman that she would not be harmed; had he not made that promise, they would have taught that old woman a lesson she would have never forgotten.

'Jyotishi ji, use your skills and tell us—is she an aiyaar, or is she really as we see her?' asked Tej Singh. 'If the prince had not guaranteed her safety, we would have found out one way or another.' Tej Singh looked at Jyotishi ji.

Jyotishi ji, putting his finger to his nose, and coughing thoughtfully, replied, 'She is not an aiyaar, she is as you see her.'

This made Tej Singh even angrier. 'Go away, leave this instant!' he ordered. 'So far we have honoured the prince's word and not harmed you, but now if you delay any more in getting out of here, I will have you torn to pieces by wild dogs! It is ridiculous that hags and witches such as you should desire the prince!'

'If you don't do as I say, you will be sorry,' declared the old woman. 'I will ruin all your efforts! See how cleverly I changed the lock in the door to your secret valley so that you could not open it and had to return with Badrinath! Now I shall go and free Maharaj Shivdatt—that will cause more confusion and trouble.' Her eyes bloodshot with rage, the old woman stomped out of the tent.

Devi Singh, upon a gesture from Tej Singh, followed her out.

‘What do you think is going on, Tej Singh?’ asked the prince. ‘This old witch seems to be trouble! She claims that she is the one who locked us out of the secret valley!’

‘I don’t know, I cannot understand it at all,’ confessed Tej Singh.

‘If what she says turns out to be true, then she is a huge problem for us,’ said Jyotishi ji.

‘We’ll know whether she was bluffing or not soon enough; if Shivdatt does in fact escape, she spoke the truth, and in that case, I will not leave her alive,’ said Tej Singh, grimly.

‘Yes, such a one must be killed,’ agreed Jyotishi ji.

‘After all, the prince hasn’t sworn that no one may harm her forever!’ said Tej Singh.

‘I had to see this day, when an old hag should lust after me!’ sighed the prince.

‘Don’t worry, we will take care of her,’ reassured Tej Singh. ‘Devi Singh has gone after her, he won’t return without some information.’

‘These days your aiyaari is jinxed,’ sighed the prince. ‘First it was your inability to find out anything about the Forest Maiden, and now it is the appearance of this old hag!’

The prince’s remark pierced Tej Singh and Jyotishi ji like an arrow through the heart. They did not utter a word, but stood up and left the tent.

The prince, left alone in his tent, was assailed by a hundred troubled thoughts. There was Chandrakanta, helpless and trapped in the tilisma, while here there was only delay in breaking the enchantment, and then there was the Forest Maiden who still evaded him and his aiyaars...and as though these were not troubles enough, there was the old hag with her threats and her wish to marry him. He grew sad and despondent. At last the day came to an end and evening drew in.

The prince called for Fateh Singh and asked, ‘Where is Tej Singh?’

‘I don’t know,’ replied Fateh Singh. ‘He has gone somewhere with Jyotishi ji.’

Narrative Eight

DEVI SINGH SET off behind the old woman. As long as daylight remained, the old woman kept walking, and Devi Singh followed. Towards dusk, the old witch reached a narrow mountain valley on either side of which rose tall, forbidding peaks. A little way into the valley lay a cave, into which the old woman disappeared. The mouth of the cave was just wide enough to let one person enter at a time.

‘This must be the old crone’s house,’ said Devi Singh to himself, and keeping the entrance of the cave in view, settled himself under a tree. He waited all night, but the old hag did not emerge. As soon as it was dawn, he decided to investigate what had become of her and entered the cave.

It was pitch dark inside and Devi Singh felt his way forward slowly and carefully. Reaching out with his hands, he felt rock on either side, and realized that the cave was actually a narrow tunnel, not a large or open chamber that may have been used as a living space. He must have followed the tunnel for some two miles, when he saw a light in the distance. The light grew bigger and brighter as he walked towards it, till at last he could see the exit from the tunnel.

Devi Singh stepped out, to find himself beside a narrow mountain stream. All around was dense forest. He had lost all sense of direction, the mountains and forests seemed unfamiliar and he could not tell where he had reached or which way lay the campsite. The day was now a few hours old, and Devi Singh began to scold and chide himself. The old woman had fooled him nicely; who knew which path she had taken and how far away she was now! It would be impossible to find her. It was best he returned through the tunnel, he thought, or he would be completely lost. It was a big mistake that he had not followed the old woman into the cave the previous night itself—but then, who could have imagined that the cave had an exit at the far side!

Devi Singh was furious with himself, but what use was anger now? The old witch had given him the slip. Disheartened and defeated, he turned back into the tunnel, and returning along the path by which he had come, he reached the camp as evening fell.

He entered the prince’s tent to see several men, including Fateh Singh, in conversation with the prince. The men, seeing Devi Singh, stood up and left, all except Fateh Singh, who remained where he was. ‘Could you find out anything about the old woman?’ asked the prince.

‘No, she fooled me,’ replied Devi Singh.

‘How?’ asked the prince, amused despite himself.

Devi Singh related the sorry tale of how the old woman had deceived him and disappeared. The prince grew even more despondent.

Devi Singh turned to Fateh Singh and asked, 'Where is my ustad and where is Jyotishi ji?'

Fateh Singh explained that Tej Singh, greatly upset by the prince's remark that these days his aiyaari was jinxed, had walked off taking Jyotishi ji with him and had not yet returned.

'When did he leave?' asked Devi Singh.

'Soon after you left,' said Fateh Singh.

'He wouldn't have stormed off just in vain,' said Devi Singh. 'He will return having accomplished something worthwhile.'

'We shall see,' remarked the prince. The words were barely out of his mouth when in walked Tej Singh and Jyotishi ji, both grinning broadly so that the others understood that they had been successful in whatever they had set out to do. 'Why, what news?' asked the prince.

'Good news!' said Tej Singh.

'Will you tell us, or just keep grinning?'

'Why do you want to know?'

'Should I not know?'

'Oh you should, but I won't tell you just now!' replied Tej Singh.

'Tell me a little?' begged the prince.

'No, not a word!' replied Tej Singh.

'Ustad, will you tell me or leave me in the dark as well?' piped up Devi Singh.

'Why, just because you call me "ustad", you think that I should tell you?'

'You will keep up this silly talk, and then you will tell me, I know!' declared Devi Singh.

Tej Singh laughed and replied, 'First tell me, what fame have you earned for yourself today?'

'Oh, I have let down your teaching completely,' confessed Devi Singh.

'That's all we need for success!' retorted Tej Singh.

A chobdar entered and announced, 'Maharaj Shivdatt's diwan is here.'

The prince glanced towards Tej Singh and said, 'Bring him in, though make sure his companions stay outside.'

Maharaj Shivdatt's diwan entered the tent, and greeting the prince, presented him with costly gems and jewels. The prince laid his hand upon the

gems, acknowledging the gift, and waited. The diwan continued with folded hands. 'These gifts are for you, from Maharaj Shivdatt. Thanks to the mercy of God and your compassionate grace, the king is now free. As soon as he reached home, he held a darbar and announced that from now on he acknowledges Prince Birendra Singh as his overlord, and that all his serving men and aiyaars are to henceforth consider the prince their master. He then gave me a handwritten letter for you and this gift of costly jewels and bade me bring them to you.'

The prince accepted the jewels and handed them to Tej Singh; he then invited the diwan to sit. The diwan, handing him the letter from Maharaj Shivdatt, did so. Though the night was several hours old, the prince called for a darbar, and when enough people had assembled, he asked Tej Singh to read the letter out loud.

After a long salutation, this is what the letter said:

The manner in which I escaped from the secret valley was such that I can only attribute my freedom to your goodness. You will ask yourself why I say that I became free thanks to your compassion, because you had, after all, made me your prisoner in the first place. But do not question what I say. I cannot, at this point, reveal to you fully the means and manner of my escape; nor can I present myself to you in person. But the day will come when you will know the full circumstances of my freedom and you will believe me then that I do not lie to you. For now I only hope that you will forgive my transgressions and accept the gift I am sending you. From this day forth, no aiyaar or serving man of mine will oppose you or go against you in any way, and I hope that you, too, will extend me the same courtesy.

*Yours,
Shivdatt*

The assembled darbar was overjoyed to hear this. The prince commanded that Pandit Badrinath ji, who was their prisoner, be brought to him at once. As soon as Badrinath was brought to the darbar, the prince ordered that his hands and feet be untied. The prince then honoured Badrinath

with a costly gift, and handed him over to Maharaj Shivdatt's diwan. 'Stay with us as our guest for two days before you leave for Chunar,' he graciously invited the diwan, and charging Fateh Singh with the diwan's comfort and safety, Birendra Singh dismissed the darbar.

Narrative Nine

THE NIGHT WAS more than half done when the prince dismissed the darbar. Fateh Singh retired to his own tent, taking the diwan with him. A little later, Tej Singh, Devi Singh and Jyotishi ji gathered in the prince's tent. At that time, there was no one else in the tent but the prince and the three aiyaars.

'So Tej Singh, the old woman was right then,' said the prince.

'Yes, but from Maharaj Shivdatt's letter, the events seem to have taken place quite differently from what she threatened,' said Tej Singh.

'Who can trust what he says,' said Devi Singh. 'He may be fooling us, for all we know.'

'This is the time to proceed with caution,' said Jyotishi ji. 'No matter how honest Shivdatt presents himself to be, one should never trust the enemy.'

'You are a jyotishi, an astrologer. Tell us whether Shivdatt has written this letter with a clean heart or there is any deceit or insincerity in it,' said Tej Singh.

'He has written this letter in all sincerity, but there is no guarantee that he will continue to be honest in the future,' replied Jyotishi ji, after giving the matter some thought.

'These days we are beset by such strange happenings all around that I can no longer tell what is true and what is not!' said Tej Singh. 'If he wrote this letter in honesty, then why didn't he tell us clearly the circumstances of his release from that secret prison?'

'There must be a good reason for it,' said Jyotishi ji.

'Can you not find out how he escaped through divination?' asked the prince.

'No,' answered Jyotishi ji. 'My skills don't work in the presence of tilisma, and the secret prison in which Maharaj Shivdatt had been imprisoned

was an enchanted one.'

'This is all very puzzling,' said Tej Singh.

'That old witch must be an aiyaar,' said Devi Singh.

'No, never! I have considered this matter carefully. That old woman knows nothing about aiyaari at all,' declared Jyotishi ji.

'Well, we shall see what happens,' said the prince. 'From tomorrow we should concentrate on breaking the tilisma to free Chandrakanta.'

'Yes, we should not delay that further,' agreed Tej Singh.

The prince dismissed the three aiyaars, who retired to their respective tents for the night. The next morning, the prince left for the enchanted ruin accompanied by the three aiyaars and taking with him both the enchanted book and the little key that they had found in the underground chamber. They made their way to the vast chamber where lay the sleeping man and, unlocking the entrance to the underground chamber, made their way through it to the garden and to the spot where they had started digging the other day.

They resumed the digging and after they had dug to a depth of several cubits, they uncovered the top of what appeared to be a large chest. The chest was tightly closed and locked, and in its lid was a keyhole covered by a thin copper plate, which protected it from being clogged by mud or soil. The prince ordered that the chest be lifted out, but as they dug around it to free it of earth, the chest was revealed as being even bigger than they had thought. Nor could they tell how deep into the ground it extended. At last, giving up, the prince opened the magic book. This is what the book said:

Tie the key to a string and drag it through the garden; at a particular spot the key will stick to the ground. Pick up the key, and removing some of the earth from that spot, dig there till you reach the lid of a chest. Once the top lid of the chest is revealed, stop digging, for the chest is not really a chest but a trapdoor. Now move to the fountain in the centre of the garden, and dig at the spot that is exactly at a distance of seven cubits to the fountain's east. An earthen pot will be uncovered. Within the pot lies another key, which is the key to the trapdoor. Take that and returning to the trapdoor, unlock it. You will see a set of stairs leading underground, which you must descend.

The underground chamber in which you will find yourselves will be very dark and full of smoke. Beware—do not light a torch

for flame or fire will ignite the smoke causing an explosion which will kill you. Cover your nose with some cloth before you descend into that chamber, and feeling your way, hurry through it as fast as you can. Be careful not to inhale the smoke. Soon you will reach a glittering chamber containing valuable heirlooms and other items. The whole chamber is crisscrossed with wires. Do not think too much—cut through the wires with your sword and make your way out of that chamber.

The prince stopped reading. Following the instructions in the enchanted book, the four men dug up the earthen pot that lay buried seven cubits to the east of the central fountain and finding the key, returned to open the trapdoor. ‘Now remember, everyone, we must wrap a cloth around our faces! This tilisma is a death trap! Don’t make a light, feel your way in the dark, become blind even with perfectly good eyesight and walk as fast as you can so you don’t breathe in the smoke!’ declared Devi Singh, theatrically.

The prince, amused despite the gravity of the situation, laughed aloud at Devi Singh’s dramatics. Protecting their noses against the smoke, the men descended into the underground chamber, made their way to the glittering room and cut their way through the wires to emerge out of the underground chamber into the open. Despite their precautions, they had inhaled some of the smoke, as a result of which they felt nauseous and stepping out of the underground chamber, they fainted. They lay there unconsciousness for almost two hours.

‘How much of the day is left?’ asked Tej Singh of Jyotishi ji once they had all recovered.

‘Four hours still remain,’ replied the jyotishi.

‘That leaves us with only an hour, hardly time to do anything more,’ said the prince. ‘How much can we achieve in an hour after all?’

Jyotishi ji was of the same opinion, and so the four men left the garden, and retracing their steps, returned once more to the vast chamber where lay the sleeping man. As before, they covered the opening into the underground chamber with the stone slab and locking it securely into place, made their way out of the enchanted ruin and back to their camp.

After resting for a while, the prince expressed a desire for some fresh air. Tej Singh agreed that it was a good idea, and so the prince, accompanied

by the three aiyaars, stepped out into the forest; the prince rode upon his horse, while the three aiyaars were on foot.

The prince set a leisurely pace through the forest. They must have walked about a kos when they came upon a large sal tree; upon its stout trunk was affixed a piece of paper on which some writing could be discerned.

‘Look, what is that paper, and what does it say?’ exclaimed Tej Singh.

Devi Singh walked up to the tree and read the writing on the piece of paper. This is what it said:

So now do you see how much trouble I can be? I had told you—marry me, and in an hour I will break the tilisma and tell you how to unite with Chandrakanta. But you didn’t agree, and I, in anger, freed Maharaj Shivdatt. Now what do you plan to do? Will you marry me or not? Whatever be your answer, write it on a piece of paper and stick it upon this tree. If you are willing to marry me, I will be with you at once. And if not, even so, give me your answer clearly. This time, I will cool my rage by killing Chandrakanta and Chapala. It takes me no time to enter the tilisma. I come and go through it thirteen times a day. Think of your well-being and consider that youth will be with me for only a while longer. Your aiyaars with all their skills cannot fight me. The other day, Devi Singh followed me, but what could he do? Listen to me! Agree to what I ask! Don’t be so stubborn, for it is upon my request that Shivdatt has become your friend. It is not too late to save yourself!

*Yours,
Surajmukhi*

Devi Singh read the letter to himself, and gestured to the others to come up and read it for themselves. The old woman’s valediction as ‘Surajmukhi’—the one whose face is as bright as the sun—caused them to burst out laughing.

‘This witch has given herself an appropriate name,’ sniggered the prince.

Tej Singh shook his head and appealed to Jyotishi ji to make sense of it.

‘Whatever may happen in the future, I can assure you that this witch cannot harm the prince. Pay no heed to this note,’ said Jyotishi ji.

‘You may be right in what you say, but the old witch actually carries out her threats!’ pointed out the prince. He urged his horse forward and rode away from the sal tree. But as they wandered through the forest, they found several similar notes affixed to the trunks of various trees. The prince refused to be comforted by Jyotishi ji’s reassurances, and growing more and more disheartened with every note they found, returned despondently to his tent.

The men chatted for a while, mainly discussing Surajmukhi and her impudence. One watch of the night had passed when Tej Singh suggested, ‘Let us go into the forest and scout around. We may discover something new or interesting.’ The three aiyaars took their leave of the prince and left to patrol the surrounding forest.

The prince lay down to rest, but troubled as he was by Chandrakanta’s helpless plight, his desire for the Forest Maiden and his anger at the old woman’s wicked threats, he could not sleep. It must have been past midnight when the prince heard the sound of someone coming towards his tent. He looked towards the entrance, to see Tej Singh standing there. ‘Why Tej Singh, have you brought some news?’ he asked.

‘Yes, we’ve found something interesting,’ replied Tej Singh.

‘What is it? Where? Show me,’ said the prince.

‘You’ll have to step out of the tent,’ said Tej Singh.

‘All right, let’s go,’ said the prince and followed Tej Singh outside and saw, a little distance away, a great crowd of people. Bright lights lit up the scene. ‘What’s that crowd?’ asked the prince.

‘Come with me and find out for yourself, it’s a matter for rejoicing,’ replied Tej Singh.

The crowd parted to let the prince through. Several torches were burning brightly, and by their light the prince saw Kroor Singh’s bloodied corpse upon the ground; sticking up from his chest could still be seen the dagger that had killed him.

‘So Tej Singh, you killed him after all?’ asked the prince.

‘Do we murder anyone in this manner?’ protested Tej Singh.

‘Then who has killed him?’

‘I have no idea.’

‘How did you find the body?’

‘We were patrolling the forest, and had reached the rear of the enchanted ruin when we saw some three or four men standing there in a huddle. They saw us approach and ran away, and we saw Kroor Singh upon the ground, stabbed through the heart. Devi Singh returned to fetch a litter and some men to carry him back, and we returned here with him,’ explained Tej Singh. ‘He is not dead, he is still warm, but he will not survive,’ he added.

‘This is very strange! Who could have killed him?’ wondered the prince. ‘At least pull out the dagger from his heart,’ he ordered Tej Singh.

Tej Singh did as the prince asked, and washing the dagger clean of blood, brought it to the prince who examined it closely. He could just make out some fine letters engraved upon it; examining them more closely in the torchlight, the prince saw that the letters spelt out ‘Chapala’.

‘Yes, this is Chapala’s dagger,’ agreed Tej Singh in astonishment. ‘Apart from the fact that it has her name engraved upon it, I recognize it as hers—she wears it all the time around her waist. But then, how did it get here? Can it be that Chapala herself has killed him?’

‘Chapala, the poor woman, is with Princess Chandrakanta, trapped in that dark cave where no lamp burns!’ protested Devi Singh.

‘In that case, who brought this dagger here?’ asked the prince.

‘And consider this too—what was Kroor Singh doing here? He was in the service of Maharaj Shivdatt, whose diwan himself is here with assurances of the king’s friendship!’ said Tej Singh.

‘Send someone to fetch the diwan here at once,’ ordered the prince.

Devi Singh ran to fetch the diwan, and waking him from a deep sleep, gave him the news. The diwan, troubled and anxious, came running, as did Fateh Singh. The diwan glanced down at Kroor Singh’s corpse. ‘This scoundrel has finally got what he deserved, but Ahmed and Najim still remain! Had they met the same fate, I would have been at peace!’ he declared.

‘Why, are they not with you anymore?’ asked the prince in surprise.

‘No,’ answered the diwan. ‘Kroor Singh left Chunar the same day the Maharaj, having escaped from his prison, returned to Chunar and declared the end of his enmity with you. He ran away, taking his entire household, as well as Najim and Ahmed with him. The Maharaj tried to search for him, but could not find him.’

Kroor Singh drew a few long, rattling breaths in his throat and died.

‘Now that he is dead, have his corpse dealt with, and we shall see what’s to be done next in the morning,’ said the prince. He gave Chapala’s dagger to Tej Singh for safekeeping, and retired to his tent.

Narrative Ten

THE NEXT MORNING, the prince, determined to break the tilisma, entered the enchanted ruin with the three aiyaars. As before, they passed through the various chambers and underground passages till they reached the little garden.

Seating himself in the pavilion of black stone, the prince opened the book and began to read:

After you pass through the chamber of poisonous smoke and cut through the wires in the other room, you will find that the smoke will disappear. You would have seen the barahdari of black stone, and within it, upon a pedestal of white marble, the square piece of red stone upon which is engraved some writing. Touching the stone gives rise to a tingling in the body, so that the person touching it soon falls unconscious. This will no longer happen once you have cut the wires in the underground chamber, which, in fact, lies below the barahdari. The pedestal upon which the stone rests is connected to the wires in the underground room, and so, the wires having been cut, the stone is now harmless. The following day, descend into the chamber of smoke again. You will find it clear of smoke. Light a torch and look around you—you will find the chamber filled with treasure. This wealth is all for you. Take it out of the chamber and store it where you think appropriate. Do nothing towards breaking the enchantment till you have emptied the underground chamber of this treasure. Take away also the slab of red stone that rests upon the pedestal in the black pavilion. In reality, that is a treasure chest filled with rare and costly things. You will find the key to unlock it in this tilisma.

The prince read this through again, and then prepared to descend into the chamber that had been filled with smoke. Tej Singh, Devi Singh and Jyotishi ji followed the prince, each carrying with him a flaming, brightly lit torch. Entering first the glittering room of wires, they saw that the room was much larger than they had realized. The wires they had cut lay scattered all around. Hundreds of massive chests of gold and silver lined the walls, and upon one of the walls, there hung a bunch of keys.

The prince took down the bunch of keys and examined it. The keys seemed to be to the treasure chests. He unlocked a chest and opening the lid, found it filled with precious ornaments studded with jewels and precious stones, and fashioned for a woman. He closed the lid, and opened another chest—this one was full of swords and daggers of rare workmanship, with hilts encrusted with jewels. The prince locked the chests again and said to Tej Singh, ‘It seems that this room contains a huge hoard of treasure! There is no need to open each and every chest. Have them removed as fast as you can, and after inspecting them in the camp, have them sent to Naugarh. We must clear this treasure out of here as quickly as we can.’

‘No matter how much we hurry, it is not possible to clear out all the chests in less than ten days,’ replied Tej Singh. ‘And if you open and examine each one before sending them to Naugarh, it will take even longer, and the work of breaking the tilisma will come to a halt. In my opinion, these chests should be sent, without inspection, as they are, to Naugarh. Once we are free of all the various tasks that lie ahead of us, you can have them opened and examined at leisure. That way, no one will know what is contained in them, and they won’t draw the attention of our enemies. Who knows how much treasure these chests contain that such an elaborate tilisma has been constructed to protect them!’

The prince as well as Devi Singh and Jyotishi ji liked Tej Singh’s suggestion, and having agreed to do as he said, they retraced their steps out of the ruin, and as before, locked the entrance to the underground passages securely behind them.

At that time, when they left the ruin, some six hours of the day still remained. The prince handed the bunch of keys to Tej Singh and said, ‘It is your task now to clear out the treasure chests and have them sent to Naugarh as quickly as you can.’

Narrative Eleven

IT TOOK TEJ Singh several days to move the chests out of the underground chamber and have them sent to Naugarh for he had to make elaborate arrangements to safeguard the treasure. He would enter the tilisma every day at dawn, and come out only when three hours of the day remained, as the magic book had instructed. Till all the treasure had been cleared and sent to Naugarh, all efforts to break the tilisma stayed suspended.

One night the prince lay in fitful sleep upon his bed. It was past midnight, and thoughts of Chandrakanta and the Forest Maiden troubled him, even in his sleep. At last, when he fell into a deep slumber, it was so deep that two watches of the day had passed when he awoke.

When the prince opened his eyes at last, he found himself not in his usual tent in the forest by the enchanted ruin, but in a large room hung with costly chandeliers and expensive lamps. Astonished, the prince looked around: on three sides were walls of marble, and on the fourth a set of ornate doors which were, at that moment, shut. Even though it was daylight, wax candles continued to burn in several brackets fixed to the walls, which were further adorned with portraits of beautiful women. On the longer wall, there hung a single life-size portrait in a golden frame.

The prince's gaze was drawn to that portrait. He stared at it, fascinated by the beauty of the woman depicted there and murmured softly to himself, almost as though he were addressing an invisible friend. 'Ah, there is nothing more wonderful than this portrait in this fabulous room! This is she, the one who holds me so firmly in her love that I am undone! How innocent and lovely is her face!'

The prince climbed out of bed and walking up to the portrait, stood gazing at it. Though the doors to the room were firmly closed, small skylights covered with glass let in the daylight so that it fell directly upon the life-sized portrait. The portrait was that of Princess Chandrakanta.

The prince continued talking to himself. 'What a clear and accurate likeness this is—her slender form, exactly the right height; her eyes large and lovely, lined with kajal! How well has the artist shown the blush upon her cheeks, the deep red of her fine lips and the gentle smile that plays upon them! In her ears she wears fine rings of gold, upon her forehead a fillet of pearls and in her nose a diamond stud. Around her delicate throat is fastened

a necklace, in painting which the artist has shown consummate skill! Observe the glittering rubies set in finest gold, how real they seem. Why only the necklace, the skill of the artist is evident in every aspect of the painting. And look! There is Chapala on one side and Champa on the other—see how they stand, finger on chin! Oh Chandrakanta! Where are you?’ And sighing to himself, he gazed unblinkingly at the portrait.

Suddenly he heard the sound of anklets. Startled, the prince looked around. The room was sealed shut—including the doors and the tiny skylights near the ceiling. Was there a woman hidden somewhere in the room? The prince, who had been in a semitrance since he had awoken, grew alert and all kinds of questions came rushing into his head. ‘How did I come here? Who brought me here? Whoever it was, has done me a great favour by showing me this portrait of my beloved Chandrakanta, but could it be that this is all a dream? It must be a dream! Maybe I should lie down upon the bed once again!’

Thus reasoning, the prince lay down upon the bed and closed his eyes; but of course, sleep did not come and he was startled once again by the tinkling of anklets. He once again climbed out of bed and this time walked towards the seven doors that lined the fourth wall. He pushed at the doors and they opened, every one of them. He stepped outside to find himself in a small garden, green and full of flowers. Some hours of the day had passed.

The garden was full of creepers and wild flowers, and in the centre was a pond. The prince walked towards the pond which was lined with stone. A set of elegant steps, flanked by a pair of tall jamun trees, led down into the pool. The trees were very dense and cast a deep shadow all around, even upon the water; beneath the trees were set small, bench-like platforms of marble. Upon the platform on the left was spread a soft rug. Beside this was placed a silver ewer with a spout, and next to it, upon some mulberry leaves, some twigs for cleaning the teeth. A small silver stool stood to one side, upon which were placed a towel and a set of expensive clothes.

Upon the marble platform on the right was placed a small, silver stool, and upon that everything necessary to perform a puja. There were several small vessels for water, a salver to hold them, and tiny bowls, all studded with precious jewels and polished so that they shone, and there was spread a small woollen rug to sit upon.

What is this place, wondered the prince. Who owns this room and this garden? Who has brought him here? All at once he noticed a piece of paper

fixed to the trunk of the tree beneath which lay the jewelled vessels for a puja. He moved closer and saw that the paper had some writing upon it. This is what he read:

Prince Birendra Singh, all these things are for you. Bathe in this pool and freely use all that we have laid out for you, for today you are our guest.

At this, the prince fell into deep thought. The arrangements for looking after him were so elaborate, but there was no one there in person that he could see. This place must belong to the fairies, thought the prince, and they must be here, wandering in this garden, but invisible to human eyes! Let me first explore this garden, he said to himself, for the day is already quite old, and I can always bathe later! He decided to escape if he could find a door or a gate leading out, but if not, it was imperative that he find out who owned this garden and who had brought him here, or how could he accept their hospitality? Thinking thus, the prince began to walk around the garden, looking for answers to his questions.

The room in which the prince had found himself upon waking lay at the western end of the garden. There were no buildings to the east, for the rising sun had been clearly visible to the prince. To the north lay another room, joined at right angles to the room on the west.

The prince would have liked to explore the second room, but finding its doors shut, he continued his walk around the garden. Making his way through the profusion of wild flowers and creepers and picking his way around the flowerbeds, he came to the southern edge of the garden. Here he saw a small hut, with writing upon the door—upon reading what it said, the prince realized that this was the privy. A wooden stool stood by the door; upon this was a small metal pot full of water for his use.

The day was several hours old by now, and the prince, his stomach uneasy, decided to use the facility of the privy. He then returned to the pool, where he washed his hands and face, and using the twigs set out, cleaned his teeth. He then bathed in the pool and dressed himself in the clothes laid out for him. Refreshed, he sat upon the woollen rug and performed his evening puja.

He then made his way back to the room in which he had found himself that morning, but found that the doors were securely shut and he could not enter. The sun shone fiercely down upon the garden, and the prince was beginning to feel dizzy and nauseous in the heat. He cast around desperately for shade, and finally made his way to the second room on the northern edge of the garden. This time the doors to this room stood open and the prince walked in.

The room was spotlessly clean, its marble floor looking as though it had been recently swept and washed. In the centre of the room was spread a Kashmiri carpet. At the far end, different kinds of choice foods were laid out in gold and silver platters, and on a rug that was spread out as a seat, there lay a note. The prince picked it up and read it. This is what it said:

Do not be anxious in any way. This house belongs to a friend, and you will be made welcome here in every way. Please dine and then retire to rest in the room next door, where a bed has been prepared for you.

The prince wondered what he should do next. He was very hungry, but he did not feel it was right to help himself to the food without his host being present. But he had been unable to discover anything about the owner of the house, who was bestowing such lavish hospitality upon him without revealing himself. He could not tell who had laid out the feast, where the food had been cooked, had it been prepared by his host himself or perhaps his servants, how did they come and go? And if they wished to hide themselves in this manner, why had they brought him here in the first place?

The prince seated himself on the rug and lost himself in these and other thoughts, till he realized with a start that he was now unbearably hungry. How long could he stay hungry after all? He reached for the food, but at the last moment hesitated and drew back his hand without touching the food.

As he withdrew his hand, there came the sound of loud laughter. The prince looked around in bewilderment. There was no one in the room that he could see.

There were a few skylights near the ceiling, and the prince stared at them, hoping for a clue, when a voice said, 'Don't hesitate to dine, there is no danger in eating here.'

At this, the prince gave in to his hunger and began to eat. Each dish was more delicious than the last and the prince ate his fill. A vessel filled with water stood on a nearby stool; the prince picked it up and washing his hands, made his way to the next room where, as the note had promised, an exceedingly comfortable bed had been laid out for him.

He lay down upon the bed and all kinds of thoughts crowded into his head. Who was the owner of this house and what advantage did he see in thus concealing himself? How long would he have to remain here, a prisoner? What state would his companions be in, back in the camp, to find him missing and unable to locate him? Thinking these and similar thoughts, the prince soon fell into a deep sleep.

The prince lay in slumber till nightfall. When the night was some two hours old, he was woken by the sound of a lute and a voice singing along with it. He opened his eyes and looked around—he was no longer in the room in which he had lain down to rest after his meal. Instead, he now found himself in a beautiful barahdari; the lute and the singing were coming from somewhere outside.

The prince rose up from his bed and looked out. The night was very dark but the garden was brightly lit. He realized that this garden was different—it was not the one in which he had found the pool, the one that he had explored that morning.

He could not tell how big this garden was, for he could not see its bounding wall. There were also several large trees in the garden. In the bright lights, the prince caught sight of several young and beautiful women in the distance. Some were strolling around the garden in groups while others were singing or playing the lute. The prince stood gazing at them—they would laugh and giggle playfully, and run first down one path and then another. The prince could not restrain himself and slowly moved towards them.

The girls noticed the prince and, startled, stopped their games. After a moment, they began to chatter excitedly amongst themselves. The prince could not understand a word they spoke, but from their expressions and their gestures he knew that they had not expected to see him, and were surprised and puzzled at his presence. At length, one of the women came up to him and asked, ‘Who are you, and why have you come into this garden without permission?’

The prince looked at the woman closely and found her both vivacious and pretty. 'I don't know to whom this garden belongs,' he replied. 'If you can, tell me who owns this place.'

'First answer our questions,' replied the woman, 'and then you may ask us what you wish and we will answer.'

'I have no idea at all how or why I have come here,' replied the prince.

'Of course you don't! What an innocent fellow you are!' retorted the woman. She turned to one of the other women and continued, 'Sister, come here a moment! Look what innocent crooks wander into this garden, thieves who do not know their own reasons for entering here!'

At this, all the other women came up and surrounded the prince, demanding that he answer their questions. 'Tell us the truth—who are you and why have you come here?' they clamoured.

'Search him!' suggested another woman. 'Let's make sure he hasn't stolen anything!'

'He must have stolen something,' said a third woman.

'Look how he has disguised himself, he looks like a king's son,' remarked a fourth.

'At least tell us where you stole these clothes from?' asked the first woman.

The prince was even more bemused and bewildered now. What a peculiar situation to be caught in, he said to himself. I am sure it is these women who have brought me here and now they accuse me of being a thief! Pondering such unhappy thoughts he remained silent for a while and at last, when he could bear it no longer, he burst out, 'It seems that it is you who have kidnapped me and hold me here!'

'Why would we do that?' retorted the first woman. 'What need had we to bring you here, and what do you have to give us in the hope of gaining which we brought you here? What is the point of accusing us in this manner? I am sure you came here with the intention to steal.'

'I do not even know the way to this place or how to leave,' protested the prince. 'If you show me the way out, I would gladly leave!'

'Oh listen to him, the poor innocent! He is here, but doesn't know how!' jeered the second woman.

'Sister, you don't understand! He is trying to be clever so he can escape!' replied the third.

'Let's make him a prisoner and take him away,' suggested the fourth.

‘Where will you take me?’ asked the prince, alarmed.

‘To our malik, our master!’ answered the first woman.

‘What is your malik’s name?’ asked the prince.

‘Who dares to address our malik by name?’ exclaimed the same woman.

‘Is it really that difficult for you to tell me your malik’s name?’ asked the prince.

‘Difficult! It’s more than that! The moment we take our malik’s name, our tongues will fall out of our mouths!’ declared the second woman.

‘So how do you speak to your malik?’

‘We speak to our malik’s portrait, we don’t see our malik face to face,’ explained the second woman.

‘And if someone asks you whom you serve, how will you answer?’

‘We wear our malik’s portrait around our necks, so that all who see us know we are the princess’s handmaidens.’

‘Why, are there several princesses here that you must avoid confusion between them by wearing your malik’s portrait around your neck?’ asked the prince.

‘No,’ explained the first woman, ‘there are only two princesses here and the same custom is followed in the household of each. No one can utter their malik’s name, and if it becomes necessary to know which woman serves whom, we just look at the portrait she wears around her neck.’

‘Will you show me the portrait?’ asked the prince.

‘Yes, yes, of course, take a look,’ said one of the women, and removed the miniature portrait that she wore around her throat and held it out for the prince to see.

The prince stared at the tiny likeness in shock. ‘This portrait is that of Chandrakanta!’ said the prince to himself. ‘What does that mean? Are all these women her handmaidens? That is impossible, for Chandrakanta’s kingdom lies in Vijaygarh! Maybe I should find out where we are?’ Thinking thus he turned to the women again and asked, ‘Tell me then, what is the name of this town or city where we are?’

‘This town is called Chitranagar, City of Portraits, because everyone here wears a portrait of her princess around their necks.’

‘And since when has this town been called so?’ asked the prince.

‘It has been thus called for thousands of years,’ replied the woman. ‘And similar portraits have been worn by the inhabitants for generations. My

great-grandmother had been given this by our malik, and now it has been passed down to me to wear around my neck.'

'So has this princess been ruling since then? Does she have no parents?'

'What do we know of such matters?' answered another woman. 'We don't meet the princess, so we do not know whether she is the same as the one in the portrait, whether she is still young or wizened and old.'

'So who holds the darbar?' asked the prince.

'There is a giant portrait of our malik, the princess. The darbar is held in front of that portrait, and whatever orders are to be given or decisions taken, are conveyed to us by a voice that comes from the portrait.'

'Your tales are making me question my sanity! Such things cannot be!' protested the prince. 'And if it is as you say, can you take me to that darbar?'

'You don't need to ask,' answered the woman. 'Once we have made you our prisoner, that is where we are going to take you. You will then be able see the truth for yourself.'

'If you don't have a malik, or if you do and it is only a portrait, then why do you want to tie me up and bind me in chains? What have I done to harm your malik?' asked the prince.

'Our princess, hidden from all eyes, walks around her kingdom. She lives in her palace and strolls around her garden, unseen by us. We tend the garden and clean the rooms in the palace every day. The floor, the beds and other things in the room look as though they have been used—the sheets are crumpled and in need of washing. And so we know that our princess is there and that, invisible from all eyes, she lives in her palace. She has done so for thousands of years and will always continue to do so.'

'Sister,' spoke up another woman, 'how long will you keep answering his questions? These questions are just tactics to save his life!'

'No, no,' replied the first woman. 'He seems to be the son of a nobleman, even that of a king, and it is right that we should answer his questions. And though we must make him our prisoner, we should do so with consideration and take him to the darbar with all due respect.'

'At least find out his name and his father's name, or will you just assume he is a king's son?' said a third woman. Turning to the prince, she asked, 'So, whose son are you and what is your name?'

'I am Birendra Singh, the son of Raja Surendra Singh, king of Naugarh.'

At this pronouncement, the women began to talk excitedly amongst themselves. 'It is him! By royal decree we have been ordered to find him and hold him captive! We must make him our prisoner at once, for we will be handsomely rewarded! He has done us great harm! He has broken the royal tilisma and stolen the treasure and taken it home! Quick, tie him up, and let's take him to the court at once. It isn't past midnight yet, the darbar must still be in session. If we delay any further, we will have to guard him all day tomorrow because the darbar is held only in the hours of darkness here!'

The prince listened in bewilderment to the women's chatter, his head whirling. Tossed between astonishment, anxiety and puzzlement, he didn't know what to think! At last, turning to the women, he said, 'Why are you so agitated? Look, I am ready to come with you of my own accord. Let's go and see what your princess's darbar is like.'

'Well, then, if you are willing to come with us voluntarily, why are we delaying? Come, let us go,' replied the first woman.

'Yes, let us,' agreed the prince.

The women were nine in number. One of them ran off, saying, 'Let me go ahead and let the darbar know that we have caught this thief and that the rest of you are bringing him in.' Of the remaining, four fell in behind the prince and four positioned themselves in front of him, and thus they led him away.

They walked the prince to a corner of the garden where a small door in the garden wall provided an exit. Above the door burned a single, round lamp of white glass. The women pushed the prince through the door and all eight followed him through.

A path on the other side led to another garden some distance away. This second garden was also very brightly lit and decorated as though for a celebration. Several serving men were walking around with gold and silver salvers in their hands; there were also a great many other men in the garden.

The women did not pause or stop to speak to anyone but, still surrounding the prince, made straight for the large diwankhana at the other end of the garden. The prince stared in wonder at the lavish ornamentation and rich elegance of the audience chamber.

First, his eyes fell on that same life-size portrait of Chandrakanta he had seen earlier; this time it was placed on a jewel-encrusted throne made of pure gold. It seemed as though Princess Chandrakanta herself sat on the throne, a crown upon her head, the royal canopy unfurled above her. Two

live tigers sat one on either side of the throne; they would burp and growl at intervals. In front of the throne, in two straight rows, sat several important-looking men dressed in expensive garments, their heads bowed. No one uttered a sound and a deep silence reigned in the audience chamber.

The presence of the princess's portrait and the ostentation of her court so overwhelmed the prince that he allowed himself to be led quietly to the throne, where he stood in awed silence. The women, who had led him here as though he was a thief, stood behind and beside him, also facing the throne.

'Who is this?' came a voice from behind the throne.

One of the women stepped forward. 'He was caught roaming in the royal gardens,' she explained. 'When we asked him who he was, he replied that his name was Birendra Singh. He is the one who has broken the Vikrami tilisma.'

'If that is true, much thought is required before a decision can be taken regarding his fate. For now, take him away and guard him; bring him back to the darbar when you are given the order to do so,' said the voice.

The women led the prince away and showed him into a comfortable, well-appointed room, but the prince was lost in his own thoughts and barely noticed his surroundings. The second garden and the portrait upon the throne in the diwankhana had thrown him into turmoil. He was thinking hard, his head bent. The first garden with all its wonders had been astonishing enough, and before he had been able to puzzle out its secret, he had been led to this second, even more mysterious garden with the audience chamber with Chandrakanta's portrait upon the throne, and the silent darbar in front of it! Deep in his thoughts, he paid no heed to where he was being taken, by whom or by which route; nor did he stop to consider the house and the room that he had been shown into.

On the floor were spread expensive carpets and soft cushions. The prince sat down upon the cushions, still preoccupied with his thoughts. He remained thus lost for almost two hours, unaware even of himself. At last, overcome by thirst, he looked up. A young woman stood in attendance. Folding her hands, she asked, 'How may I serve you, prince?' Understanding from his gestures that he wanted water, she filled a golden bowl with clear water and handed it to him. The prince drank the water, which soothed him instantly; within a few moments his eyelids grew heavy and stretching out on the cushions, he fell into a deep, deep sleep.

Narrative Twelve

MEANWHILE, PRINCE BIRENDRA Singh's disappearance had caused an uproar amongst his men. Tej Singh and Devi Singh, worried and anxious, searched everywhere for him, but with no success. When a whole day had passed without news of the prince, Jyotishi ji opened his books and scrolls. After many calculations and some thought, he announced to Tej Singh, 'By means of divination I can tell that the prince has been kidnapped by a group of women. They rendered him unconscious by means of a potion and carried him away. He is being held in their house in Naugarh somewhere. I cannot see or tell any more than that.'

'Naugarh is our own kingdom,' replied Tej Singh, 'and the people love King Surendra Singh and his family enough to give their lives for them. The prince's enemies have no power in Naugarh, nor any place of rest or residence. So who can it be who holds him there?'

Tej Singh pondered the problem for a long while, and then made ready to go in search of the prince. Devi Singh and Jyotishi ji joined him, and the three left for Naugarh. On the way they saw Maharaj Shivdatt's diwan safely home to Chunar. They had left the magic book—which had been found lying abandoned upon the prince's bed after his disappearance—in the care and safe custody of Commander Fateh Singh.

The three aiyaars left the camp for Naugarh in the dead of night. They walked without a halt for a distance of five kos, and as day broke, they hid themselves in a dense forest. Disguising themselves, so that nobody could recognize them, they set off again. They walked all day long and, hungry and tired, reached the border of Naugarh as the sun began to set. The three aiyaars conferred amongst themselves and decided that they would search for the prince in secret, revealing their presence to no one in Naugarh.

Separating from each other, they launched their search for the prince. They searched the gardens, entered homes and houses, and questioned the people of Naugarh, but they could find no trace of the prince. The next day, still in disguise, the three went together to the king's darbar, and finding an unobtrusive corner for themselves, stood listening to the talk of the people gathered in the court.

As they stood watching and listening, they noticed several of the royal spies entering the court, an expression of worry and concern on their faces.

Tej Singh's father, Jeet Singh, questioned the spies. 'What is the matter that you look so anxious?' he asked.

'I bring news of the prince from his camp,' replied one, stepping forward.

'How is he? Tell us quickly,' said Jeet Singh.

'He has been missing for the last two days.'

'Why? Has he gone somewhere?'

'No, sire. He was kidnapped by a group of strange women while he lay asleep in his tent at night. We have no idea where he has been taken.'

'How did you learn that he was kidnapped by a group of women?' asked Jeet Singh, very disturbed by this news.

'His aiyars searched everywhere for him, and at last Jagannath Jyotishi, through his skills at divination, discovered that he had been kidnapped by a group of women and is being held captive in Naugarh somewhere.'

'Here! In this kingdom of Naugarh?' exclaimed Jeet Singh in surprise. 'But we have no enemies here!'

'That is what Jyotishi ji said.'

'So where is Tej Singh?'

'He set off in search of the prince. Devi Singh and Jyotishi ji also went with him. But as soon as they left, our army and camp were attacked.'

'Attacked? By whom?'

'By Maharaj Shivdatt's forces, who moved in as soon as they saw their chance!'

Tej Singh and the other two aiyars pricked up their ears and listened closely.

'You had brought news that Maharaj Shivdatt had asked for peace and declaring his friendship, had sent his diwan to the prince with costly gifts. So what has changed so suddenly?' asked Jeet Singh.

'That is how it was at that point in time, but now it seems Shivdatt is bent on deceit and treachery.'

'So what was the result of his attack?'

'Commander Fateh Singh fought bravely and well for an entire day, but wounded by Maharaj Shivdatt, he was, at last, taken prisoner. The army, finding itself without a leader, has scattered far and wide.'

Raja Surendra Singh, who had been listening without a word to this exchange, grew red with anger at the news of Fateh Singh's capture and the

scattering of his army. Turning to Jeet Singh, he said, 'We do not have an army here with us. But I will take the few soldiers we do have, and go in search of Shivdatt. It is not a difficult task to kill such a coward.'

'Yes, that is what we should do,' agreed Jeet Singh. 'Hearing that the king has set forth against Shivdatt, our scattered army will also regroup.'

Just then, two other royal spies entered the darbar. 'Hearing the news of the prince's disappearance and the capture of Fateh Singh, Maharaj Jai Singh of Vijaygarh has besieged Chunar. On the way we heard that only a few hours after he took Fateh Singh prisoner, Maharaj Shivdatt himself disappeared. On his pillow was found a note that said, *This traitor will be given the punishment he deserves; he will remain a prisoner all his life*. Later we heard that Fateh Singh had managed to escape and return to the site of the tilisma and that the prince's scattered army is now slowly regrouping.'

Raja Surendra Singh glanced at Jeet Singh, who said, 'So Maharaj Jai Singh did besiege Chunar! It is right that we should help him and sort out the problem of Chunar once and for all. This regular irritation from Chunar is not good.'

'Yes,' agreed the king. 'You are right and this is precisely what we must do. I had hoped that my son would be the one to besiege Chunar so that his confidence in warfare would have grown, but I can bear this nonsense no longer.'

The three aiyaars quietly left the court, and finding a secluded spot, sat down to discuss what they had heard.

'What should we do?' asked Tej Singh.

'No matter what, we must find the prince before we do anything else,' said Devi Singh.

'I recommend that you return to the army, while Jyotishi ji and I continue our search for the prince,' replied Tej Singh.

'I would say that before we go anywhere or do anything, we should go to the secret valley where Maharaj Shivdatt had been imprisoned,' said Jyotishi ji.

'But we cannot open the door to it anymore,' pointed out Tej Singh.

'Let's go and take a look,' urged Jyotishi ji. 'Maybe by some chance, we can open it now?'

'All right, but even if we do manage to open the door, what use is it to visit that valley any more?' protested Tej Singh.

'You will see. For now, come with me,' said Jyotishi ji.

‘All right,’ gave in Tej Singh and the three aiyaars set off for the secret valley.

Narrative Thirteen

PRINCE BIRENDRA SINGH had slipped into a deep sleep akin to unconsciousness on the soft cushions in that luxurious room. When he awoke, he found himself lying upon the ground, upon a rocky outcrop in the wilderness. Bewildered and confused, he stood up and looked around—high, rocky mountains towered over him on all sides and a bubbling mountain stream, its banks sheltered by wild jamun trees, flowed down the middle of the valley. The prince realized he was in the same secret valley in which Tej Singh had held Maharaj Shivdatt and his queen captive, and where he had last seen Chandrakanta and Chapala in the mountain cave but had been unable to reach them.

The prince climbed down from the rocky outcrop and began to explore his surroundings. Whatever doubts he may have had about where he was, vanished when he saw Maharaj Shivdatt and his queen, just as he had left them, the Maharaj lying in the shade of a jamun tree, his queen seated beside him, massaging his feet. Though their faces were turned away from him, the prince had no doubt at all as to who they were.

The prince ran to the foot of the mountain and looked up at the cave where he had left Chandrakanta and Chapala. The princess still sat there, exactly as he had left her, her sari torn and filthy, her face streaked with dirt, her hair hanging loose and unkempt about her shoulders.

The moment he saw her again, the prince’s passion for the princess returned in full force. Seeing the princess as helpless as before, his eyes filled with tears and ashamed of himself, he hid himself from her sight behind a tree. ‘How can I face the princess? What do I say to her?’ he asked himself in anguish. ‘If she asks, do I say that I had left you here so that I could break the enchantment that binds you, but I haven’t been able to do so yet? No, I will never be able to say these words to her. What shall I do now? Caught in the charms of the Forest Maiden, I forgot all about the tilisma and as a result we lost so many days! And what if she asks how I came here, what then?

What will I tell her? And Shivdatt—he is here too! But we had heard that he had escaped, and his diwan had himself come to us with gifts! So what is going on here?’

The prince was thinking these and other unhappy thoughts when he saw Tej Singh, and behind him Devi Singh and Jagannath Jyotishi, walking towards him. Tej Singh, catching sight of the prince, ran to him and fell at his feet. In response, the prince raised Tej Singh up and clasped him to his heart. He embraced Devi Singh warmly and prostrated himself in front of Jyotishi ji in respect. The four men then settled themselves upon some boulders and fell into a discussion.

‘See there, Tej Singh,’ said the prince, ‘Princess Chandrakanta is still where we had left her, wearing that same torn sari and her friend Chapala next to her, comforting her.’

‘Have you spoken to her?’ asked Tej Singh.

‘No, I haven’t said a word,’ replied the prince. ‘I was trying to decide whether I should show myself to her or not when I saw you coming up the valley.’

‘For how many days have you been pondering this question?’ asked Tej Singh.

‘I have come into this valley not two seconds ago!’ protested the prince.

‘What! Have you just entered this valley?’ exclaimed Tej Singh. ‘In which case, where have you been all these days? You have been missing for several days. Seeing you here so unexpectedly just now, I thought you had stolen away from the camp and come here for love of the princess!’

‘No, I did not leave the camp voluntarily. I do not know who carried me away!’ said the prince.

‘Do you still not know who kidnapped you from the camp?’ asked Tej Singh in surprise.

‘No,’ the prince shook his head, and related the tale of his adventures to the three aiyaars, who listened in stunned surprise to the events that had befallen him. When the prince had finished his account, Tej Singh turned to Jyotishi ji. ‘What do you make of these happenings?’ he asked.

‘I have no idea what to make of them,’ replied Jyotishi ji, as puzzled as the others. ‘I cannot begin to imagine who kidnapped the prince and who led him such a fine dance!’

‘I have seen more wonders in these two days than we did while breaking the tilisma,’ said the prince.

‘If such happenings should befall a man less courageous, he might die of fright!’ declared Devi Singh.

‘Of that there is no doubt,’ agreed Jyotishi ji, wholeheartedly.

‘And there is one more thing of wonder,’ added the prince. ‘I can see Shivdatt here too!’

‘Where?’ exclaimed Tej Singh.

‘There, look, under that tree,’ said the prince, pointing.

‘That’s true, it’s him all right!’ agreed Tej Singh. ‘But what is going on? Let’s talk to him and see what he has to say!’

‘The princess is on the mountain there. We should speak to her first,’ said the prince. ‘My heart is in turmoil. I do not know what she may ask and what I may answer!’

‘That is the fate of all lovers,’ laughed Tej Singh. ‘Do not worry, I will do the talking for you.’

The four men stood up and walked towards Shivdatt, stopping first at the foot of the mountain upon the side of which sat Chandrakanta and Chapala. The princess was looking away and did not see them, but Chapala did and calling down to them asked after the prince and his well-being. The prince himself replied, calling up to Chapala to ask about Chandrakanta.

‘I am sure you can see for yourself what condition she is in, I don’t need to tell you,’ called back Chapala.

The princess, who had been sitting sadly with her head bent, looked up when Chapala began to speak, and seeing the prince leapt to her feet. She stood there looking down at him, her hands folded in supplication, her eyes overflowing with tears.

‘Princess,’ called up Birendra Singh, ‘be patient a few more days. The tilisma is almost broken, only a little remains. I had to come here for many reasons, but I will now return to that same tilisma.’

‘The princess says to tell you that her heart tells her that all these days that you have been away, your love for her has lessened, or someone else has taken her place in your heart. She says to let you know that she thought nothing of the hardship she has endured for so many days, but this new thought is causing her deep distress,’ replied Chapala.

‘So, should I let your secret out?’ Tej Singh teased the prince.

The prince could not answer; he looked beseechingly at Tej Singh, his hands folded, his eyes full of tears. Tej Singh laughed and clasping the prince's hands in his, called up to Chapala, 'Please explain to the princess that she must not doubt the prince at all. Her words have caused the prince great anguish.'

'Why have you come here today?' asked Chapala.

'We have come to check on Maharaj Shivdatt,' replied Tej Singh. 'We heard that he had escaped and reached Chunar.'

'It must be some aiyaar in disguise,' said Chapala, 'for I have seen these two here every day that you have been away.'

'Let me talk to them too,' said Tej Singh.

Maharaj Shivdatt had been listening with great attention to the exchange between Chapala and Tej Singh. He rose and came up to the prince, as though he wished to say something, but glancing up at Chandrakanta and Chapala, he fell silent again.

'Shivdatt, say what you want to say, why did you stop?' said Tej Singh.

'No, not any more,' said Shivdatt.

'Why not?'

'Because perhaps by remaining silent I will remain alive.'

'And if you do speak, who will kill you?'

'Now if I tell you that, what remains?' protested Shivdatt.

'If you don't speak I will never let you go,' said Tej Singh.

'Do whatever you wish, but I will not speak,' replied Shivdatt.

Tej Singh drew the dagger that hung at his waist, but stayed his hand as Chapala called out, 'Stop! Stop! Don't harm him!'

Tej Singh looked up at Chapala, the question clear in his glance.

'What reason do you have to draw your dagger upon Shivdatt?' she asked.

'He came up to us with the intention of telling us something, but seeing you there, he fell silent. Now he is refusing to tell us what it was he wished to say, and says nothing except that if he tells us he will die. I do not understand what is going on here. We are anyway puzzled at the events around him, and his strange statements have confused us even more.'

'He has lost his mind these days,' said Chapala. 'I see him often, shouting at nothing and running around like a madman. Don't attach any importance to his words.'

'Huh! She's the crazy one, calling me mad!' muttered Shivdatt.

‘What did you say? I dare you to say it again!’ exclaimed Tej Singh, glaring at Shivdatt.

‘I didn’t say a word. Why don’t you concentrate on your conversation with Chapala? Let me be, for as she says, I have become a madman these days,’ said Shivdatt.

‘That’s a good act, you play a good lunatic,’ said Devi Singh, sarcasm in his voice.

‘Chapala is correct, there is no doubt that I am insane,’ said Shivdatt.

‘Jyotishi ji,’ said the prince, ‘I ask you, take a look at this new style of madman.’

Jyotishi ji laughed. ‘When the voice from the heavens has declared him insane, what more can I say!’

‘I have so many fears and apprehensions in my heart,’ said the prince.

‘There is a great mystery here and who knows when it will be revealed,’ agreed Tej Singh. ‘The trouble is that we are helpless—we can do nothing about any of this.’

‘Our expert up there knows the answer, but she does not wish to reveal it yet,’ said Devi Singh.

‘That’s absolutely correct,’ agreed the prince.

Tej Singh laughed at Devi Singh’s words, but said nothing. Maharaj Shivdatt, too, returned to his place under the tree. Tej Singh turned to the prince. ‘It is time we returned to the army and our old camp. I have heard that while we have been away, Maharaj Shivdatt had attacked our army and inflicted severe losses upon us. I don’t know which Shivdatt that was, for then I heard that he had disappeared. And now I see our Shivdatt here.’

‘These matters are very puzzling,’ agreed the prince, ‘but tell me clearly all that you have heard and from whom.’

Tej Singh related to Birendra Singh all that had happened since his disappearance from his tent—how he and the others had set off to Naugarh to search for him, how, in disguise, they had stood in Raja Surendra Singh’s court and heard the reports of his spies, and how both Maharaj Jai Singh and Raja Surendra Singh had attacked and besieged Chunar. The prince, deeply troubled by this account, prepared to return to his army. He bid farewell to the princess, exhorting her to be patient and brave, and weeping copious tears as he left her behind in the secret valley once more.

It was already evening when these four emerged from the valley. ‘Devi Singh, we shall wait here while you go to Naugarh and bring back a good

horse for the prince from the royal stables so that he can ride to the tilismi ruin,' directed Tej Singh. 'But be careful, make sure no one sees you,' he added.

'Yes, of course I will be careful, for if I am seen, the purpose of sending me rather than another would be lost!' he declared.

'How long will you be?' asked Tej Singh.

'This isn't a complicated task,' replied Devi Singh. 'I should be back within a couple of hours.' (Naugarh was only about a kos and a half, or maybe two from that valley.)

Devi Singh set off for Naugarh, while the three who remained behind sat down in the shadow of some dense trees and began talking amongst themselves.

'So Jyotishi ji, won't you tell us, what is the mystery of Shivdatt?' asked the prince.

'There is no doubt in my mind that it was the real Shivdatt who sent his diwan to you, seeking to make peace. And there is also no doubt that it is the real Shivdatt we met just now and whom we have left behind in the valley. But I cannot say what happened in between these two events,' said Jyotishi ji.

'My father has besieged Chunar, let us await the outcome, said the prince. 'It would have been better had we been able to reach there sooner.'

'Never mind, nothing is lost yet,' said Jyotishi ji. 'Besides, they have no king. Shivdatt, as you know, has disappeared, and according to the note found on his bed, he has again been taken prisoner.'

'Yes, there is no doubt that Chunar will fall without a king to lead them. But had we been there, his aiyaars might have been a little more afraid,' said Tej Singh.

'It would have been better if Badrinath and the others had also been taken prisoner by us,' said the prince.

'This time I will definitely take them prisoner,' resolved Tej Singh.

More than a watch passed in such talk and Devi Singh finally returned with a horse for the prince. The four set off for the tilisma—the prince on his horse and the three aiyaars on foot.

Narrative Fourteen

WHEN MAHARAJ SHIVDATT had heard that the prince had disappeared from his tent and that Tej Singh, Devi Singh and Jyotishi ji had left to look for him, he had turned once more to treachery. Calling his diwan and his aiyaars to him, he said, ‘At this moment, the prince is missing, and his aiyaars have also left to search for him. This is a good opportunity to attack his army and destroy it, as well as to take for ourselves the treasure that he has recovered from the tilisma.’

His diwan, as also Badrinath, Pannalal, Ram Narayan and Chunnilal, counselled him against such a move, reminding him that he had made peace with the prince, and attacking his army would only lead to a reawakening of animosities, but Shivdatt did not listen to them. Najim and Ahmed, who were also present, agreed with Shivdatt and encouraged him in his plan.

And so Maharaj Shivdatt had attacked the prince’s army. Riding out on to the battlefield, he challenged the prince’s commander, Fateh Singh, to single combat. The commander, never one to deny a challenge, accepted; the two battled all day long till Fateh Singh was wounded and taken prisoner by Shivdatt.

The prince’s army, losing its commander, ran away and scattered across the countryside, and all that Shivdatt found to loot and plunder were their empty tents. The treasure from the tilisma, too, was beyond his reach, since Tej Singh had had it sent to Naugarh earlier. The only thing of value that Shivdatt *did* find was the magic book from the tilisma. Needless to say, he was overjoyed with his find. ‘Now I will break the tilisma myself, and freeing Chandrakanta from her mountain prison, I will marry her!’ he resolved.

Shivdatt sent Fateh Singh as a prisoner to the dungeons and held a great gathering to celebrate his victory. It is known that he left the dancing and celebration for his bedchamber where he lay down on his bed to rest. This was the very same night that he was kidnapped, no one knew by whom; the only clue left behind was the note, pinned to his pillow, that has been spoken of earlier. That night, at the same time that Shivdatt disappeared, Commander Fateh Singh had found himself a free man—waking from a deep sleep, he had found himself in a lonely forest. He did not know who had freed him from his

prison, or who had tended and expertly bandaged the wounds he had received at Shivdatt's hands.

Fateh Singh found his way back to the tilisma, where he found only a handful of his men remaining. As the news of his return spread, the soldiers returned and soon the prince's army was together once more. It was then that they heard the news of Shivdatt's disappearance. Fateh Singh, taking only a few trusted men with him, resolved to besiege Chunar. He had travelled only a distance of a kos or two, when he heard that Maharaj Jai Singh, too, was on his way to Chunar with the same intention. Abandoning his own plans, Fateh Singh joined forces with Maharaj Jai Singh and marched with him to Chunar.

As Jai Singh's army surrounded Chunar, Shivdatt's men barricaded themselves inside the fort with enough provisions to last them several days. They shut all the gates, and mounting cannons upon the ramparts, they fought the attacking force from the towers and battlements of the fort.

Narrative Fifteen

CLOSE TO CHUNAR, on the banks of a stream that flows in the valley between two high mountains, sit Pandit Badrinath, Ram Narayan, Pannalal, Najim and Ahmed. It is evening, and the men are deep in conversation.

'What can I say? Our malik has disappeared into the land of the blessed, leaving us with all the problems of this world,' grumbled Najim.

'We still don't know who killed him,' said Ahmed.

'His sins killed him and very soon the two of you will join him!' declared Badrinath. 'You may call yourselves aiyaars, but in actual fact, you are cheats and scoundrels, of that there is no doubt!'

'What! Are we dishonest men?' cried Najim.

'Of course you are! Does this need discussion?' retorted Badrinath. 'You could not even serve your master, Maharaj Jai Singh, with truth, so who can rely on your loyalty? What did you achieve except to bring ruin upon yourselves, take Kroor Singh's life and lead our king astray by giving him such wrong advice that he has been taken prisoner! You deserve to be beaten till you die!'

‘Mind what you say, or I will pull your ears and tear out your tongue!’ growled Ahmed.

Badrinath trembled with rage at Ahmed’s words. Picking up a rock, he struck Ahmed on the head with it, killing him instantly. Ahmed fell upon the ground, quite dead, his spirit well on its way to hell. Najim, terrified to see Badrinath’s fury, ran for his life. But Badrinath was thirsting for his blood and had no intentions of letting Najim escape. Fitting a large stone to a sling*, Badrinath let it fly—the stone knocked Najim to the ground, and Pannalal and the others kicked him till he too joined Ahmed, to serve Kroor Singh in death as they had in life.

The four aiyaars returned to their places beside the stream, and began talking amongst themselves.

‘That rids our court of nuisance,’ said Pannalal.

‘The Maharaj will not regret their deaths,’ agreed Badrinath.

‘We must think of a way to save the throne,’ said Pannalal. ‘Maharaj Jai Singh has the fort surrounded, and without the king, our army cannot break the siege. Our soldiers are forced to fight from within the fort. They cannot take the fighting to the battlefield.’

‘How long will they hold the fort?’ asked Chunnilal. ‘We have provisions only for two months inside the fort. What will the men do once the food runs out?’

‘We could not gather more provisions and store them, there was no time or opportunity to do so,’ said Ram Narayan.

‘There is one possibility of victory,’ said Badrinath slowly. ‘We must somehow separate Maharaj Jai Singh from his men. If we take him prisoner, so that his soldiers are without a leader, then it will not be difficult for our soldiers to break the siege and defeat his army.’

‘We must help in any way we can,’ said Pannalal. ‘It is our duty to serve our king—we have taken his bounty and we must give our lives for him if necessary.’

‘But our king, too, has resolved upon deceit and treachery,’ pointed out Ram Narayan. ‘What is Prince Birendra Singh’s fault in all that has happened?’

‘Whatever it is, it is important that we support our malik,’ said Chunnilal.

‘Najim and Ahmed brought the evil influence of Kroor to bear upon our king, but now they are all dead. This time I will ensure that there is peace

between the two kingdoms, only then will we have the good fortune to serve Birendra Singh. What a brave and gallant man is the prince!’ said Badrinath.

‘It is dark now, and the night is far gone,’ said Pannalal. ‘Let’s use our aiyaari and see if we can kidnap Maharaj Jai Singh and smuggle him into the fort as our prisoner.’

‘I have an aiyaar trick in mind that may work,’ said Badrinath.

‘And what is that?’ asked Pannalal.

Badrinath explained his plan. ‘We first take his cook captive, and putting him out of action, I change my appearance to look like him and take his place in the kitchen. The rest of you do the same with some of the kitchen helpers, and taking their place, work with me. I will cook the food and mix into it a potion to render the king unconscious. We will serve this to the king as well as to his guards. And as soon as the potion takes effect, our job is done.’

‘That is a good plan,’ agreed Pannalal. ‘It is right that you take on the role of the cook, for being a Brahmin, you may touch the king’s food without breaking any taboos. We must bear in mind that he cannot eat food cooked by someone belonging to a lower caste. Also make sure you do not mix too strong a potion into the food!’

‘Yes, yes, don’t worry, I am not such a fool,’ said Badrinath. ‘I am aware that kings always make another taste their food before they partake of it themselves. I will use a gentle and slow-acting drug that will take effect only a couple of hours after the food has been eaten; till then no one will suspect that anything could be wrong with the food.’

‘All right then, this plan is final. Now, let’s go,’ declared Ram Narayan.

Narrative Sixteen

MEANWHILE, RAJA SURENDRA Singh also left Naugarh for Chunar; marching as fast as he could, and pausing for neither sleep nor rest, he covered the distance in two days. As he neared Chunar, Maharaj Jai Singh learnt of his approach and sent Commander Fateh Singh to welcome him.

Fateh Singh gave Raja Surendra Singh a detailed account of their current situation. As morning broke, their army reached Chunar and joining

up with Maharaj Jai Singh's army, set up camp. Raja Surendra Singh sent Fateh Singh back to inform Maharaj Jai Singh of his arrival, and to ask for an audience.

Fateh Singh left Raja Surendra Singh's tent and had gone but a few yards, when he saw Maharaj Jai Singh's diwan, Hardayal Singh, with a group of officers. The men looked distressed and anxious. Fateh Singh stopped where he stood and, his heart beating faster in worry, watched them approach. 'What is the matter that you look so troubled?' he called as they came closer.

'We have some disastrous news,' answered one of the officers, shaking his head.

'Why, what has happened?' cried Fateh Singh, alarmed.

'Let's go to the Raja, we'll tell you everything there,' suggested another officer.

Fateh Singh led them to Raja Surendra Singh's tent; they saluted the Raja, and receiving his permission to do so, they sat down.

The Raja, too, was alarmed by their look of distress. Upon his asking them what the matter was, Hardayal Singh replied, 'This morning, very early, I heard the sound of cannon from within the fort. I went to inform Maharaj Jai Singh of this, but when I reached his tent, I found the guards outside lying unconscious on the ground. Though worried and not a little concerned, I entered all the same—to find the Maharaj's bed empty. I knew at once that there was something wrong and my heart filled with dread. When the physician saw the sentries lying there as if dead, he knew at once that they had been given a potion to induce unconsciousness. I immediately sent out several royal spies in all directions to search for the Maharaj, but so far we have no news of him at all.'

Hearing this account, Surendra Singh turned to his diwan, Jeet Singh, seated on his left, who said, 'Since we seem to be dealing not only with the Maharaj's disappearance, but also with the fact that his sentries were found lying insensible upon the ground, I suspect that a drug or potion was mixed in the king's food, and once it had taken effect upon him and his guards, he was kidnapped. Therefore, if we can speak to his cook, we may be able to find out what happened.'

At once, Raja Surendra Singh ordered that Maharaj Jai Singh's cook and kitchen staff be brought to him.

Several chobdars ran to fulfil his orders. They did not have to go very far since the encampments of the two armies lay next to each other. They returned very quickly—the kitchen was deserted, neither cook nor assistants were to be found. At the same time, there arrived several men with the news that the Maharaj's cook and kitchen staff had been found unconscious some way outside the encampment, and that litters had been sent to carry them back to camp.

‘Let all the litters be held outside; let only the cook upon his litter be brought here,’ ordered Jeet Singh.

The unconscious cook was carried in. Jeet Singh revived him by holding some lakhlakha under his nose, and when the man had recovered, asked him what had happened.

The cook related the events of the night. ‘About one watch of the night had passed when a sweetmeat seller turned up with his basket of confectionery. He was very glib of tongue and praised his sweets so much that he soon convinced us to try some. We had barely swallowed them when our heads began to swim, so much so that we did not even have the time to pay him. We must have lost consciousness then, for I do not know what happened next,’ he said.

‘All right, that's enough, we now know all that we need to know,’ said Jeet Singh, and dismissed the man, bidding him return to his own tent. He revived a couple of the unconscious guards with his lakhlakha as well, and giving some of it to them, asked them to use it to revive the others who still lay unconscious and dismissed them.

Now only Raja Surendra Singh, Jeet Singh and Diwan Hardayal Singh remained in the tent.

Raja Surendra Singh looked at Diwan Jeet Singh and said, ‘We must do something to rescue the Maharaj.’

‘What can we do?’ said Jeet Singh. ‘We have no aiyaars with us right now who might have done something. Tej Singh and Devi Singh have both gone in search of the prince, and there is no news of them at all.’

‘Well, then *you* must think of a plan,’ said the king.

‘What can I do!’ protested Jeet Singh. ‘It has been an age since this loyal servant of yours did any aiyaari. The day Tej Singh became a full aiyaar and entered your service was the day I gave up aiyaari. I do not even carry my bag of aiyaari tools any more, for I had not expected to need those skills ever again in my life!’

‘That is true, you gave up aiyaari many years ago,’ conceded Raja Surendra Singh. ‘But you must bring your skills into use again, for in a crisis such as this, it is not right that we do nothing. I am certain that even though you do not have your aiyaari kit with you, you would still have brought some of the tools with you.’

Jeet Singh gave a small laugh and admitted that the king was right. ‘When I am with my king and I have the knowledge of this art, then of course I will carry the tools as well—and definitely when we are upon a mission such as this!’ he agreed.

‘What are you waiting for then?’ said the Raja. ‘Call upon your old skills and rescue Maharaj Jai Singh!’

‘As you command!’ said Jeet Singh. Turning to Hardayal Singh he added, ‘Keep this conversation to yourself, and this evening, take Fateh Singh with you and start a skirmish. Make sure that whatever happens, the two armies—ours and that of Chunar—engage with each other and that the fighting continues all night and does not stop. This task I entrust to you.’

‘Very well, it shall be so,’ said Diwan Hardayal Singh, and taking leave of the king, returned to his tent to make the necessary arrangements.

Diwan Jeet Singh summoned Fateh Singh and explained what he wanted of him, and gave him several other instructions as well. Once Fateh Singh had been briefed and had left to perform the tasks he had been set, Jeet Singh also took leave of the Raja and retired to his own tent, where he began to gather together the tools and equipment of aiyaari that he would need.

Diwan Jeet Singh had an old servant, whom he held in great esteem. He had entrusted his aiyaari kit into the safekeeping of this old man. Though it had been an age since Jeet Singh had given up aiyaari, when he saw that his king was riding into battle and knowing that the other aiyaars had gone in search of the prince, he had considered it wise to take his tools of aiyaari with him. He now called the old man to him and bade him bring the chest that contained his aiyaari equipment; picking out the tools he needed, he packed them into a small pouch. He had also brought with him a potion he had prepared to induce unconsciousness—filling a small bottle with it, he stowed it away in the pouch. One watch of the day still remained when Jeet Singh, carrying his little bag of aiyaari tools and disguised as a farmer, stepped out of his tent.

He made his way out of the army encampment and towards a small hill to the south of the fort. He soon reached a deserted plateau where, away from

all eyes, he perched himself upon a boulder, and pulling out a quill and ink and some paper from his pouch, began to write. This is what he wrote:

*Your cunning was of no avail, as I am inside the fort after all.
Now wait and see the havoc I will create. You are aiyaars, all
four of you, and I do not know any aiyaari, but even so you
cannot catch me. Shame on your aiyaari!*

He wrote several such notes and prepared some glue; putting the notes and the glue carefully into his pouch, he set off towards the fort. Though it was dusk by the time he reached the fort, it was still too lit for his purpose. He walked around outside the fort waiting for the night. Once the darkness was complete, he found a low wall and throwing the rope ladder he was carrying over it, scaled it without difficulty. Making sure that there was no one in sight, he jumped to the ground and began exploring the fort.

Outside the fort, Hardayal Singh and Fateh Singh had created the diversion that Jeet Singh had requested—they had attacked the Chunar army, which had been forced to respond, and now the two armies were engaged in furious battle. The air was filled with the sound of cannons; the besieged army was fighting from the towers and ramparts of the fort, while the ordinary citizens stood around in worried groups wondering what the outcome of the battle would be. So distracted was everyone within the fort that Jeet Singh was able to wander around the fort unhindered and glue his little notes here and there on walls and doors. Whenever he heard someone coming, he would hide and continue when they had gone. In this manner, he had soon put up all the notes he had written.

There is furious fighting outside the massive doors that were the entrance into the fort. Officers, soldiers and aiyaars are all occupied with keeping the enemy at bay. No one suspects that at that very moment the king of all aiyaars, Jeet Singh, is inside the fort, thinking and planning his next move. They do not know that Jeet Singh is searching the fort for Maharaj Jai Singh and planning his rescue, or that he is plotting to take prisoner at once all the four aiyaars of Maharaj Shivdatt, so that no aiyaar remains at liberty to rescue the others.

Narrative Seventeen

COMMANDER FATEH SINGH'S bravery soon reduced the enemy to rags, and it was clear that the fort would fall to Fateh Singh before morning, and its massive gates broken open. Badrinath and the others looked on, waiting anxiously for the outcome. Suddenly a chobdar came running; the man was screaming and shouting, and was severely wounded. His face was so covered in blood from innumerable cuts and bruises that it was impossible to recognize him.

Badrinath, alarmed and agitated by the chobdar's condition, hurried up to him. 'What is this? Who has wounded you so grievously?' he asked.

'You are all so engrossed in the battle here, that you have forgotten everything else!' cried the chobdar. 'Some of Prince Birendra Singh's men have entered the fort from the rear and are roaming around inside, causing who knows what mischief! I confronted one of them, but he was too cunning and too agile for me, and wounded me so badly that I lay unconscious on the ground for two hours! I have somehow made my way here to let the rest of you know. I saw another of them on my way here—he was pasting bits of paper on the walls, but I was too afraid to challenge him.'

'This is bad news indeed!' exclaimed Pannalal.

'These people—could you see how many they are?' asked Badrinath.

'They seem to be many, though I have encountered only one,' replied the chobdar.

'Will you be able to recognize this one if you see him again?' asked Badrinath.

'Yes, I will, for I saw his face very clearly in the light,' replied the chobdar confidently.

'I am going in search of these men!' said Badrinath. 'Will you come with me?' he asked the chobdar.

'Of course I will! He has taken off half my face! I will not rest till he is taken prisoner!' declared the chobdar.

Badrinath, Pannalal, Ram Narayan and Chunnilal made their way towards the rear of the fort, the chobdar following. As they neared the palace where lived the royal women of the court, they spied a man sprawled upon the ground as though dead. A torch, still burning fitfully, lay some distance

away; close by lay a small leather vial such as those used to hold oil. The man was clearly a torchbearer.

‘Look, look, he has killed another man!’ cried the chobdar. Picking up the torch and pouring a little of the oil from the leather vial upon it so that it flared up again, he held it up so that the man’s face could be seen clearly. In the light of the now brightly burning torch, Badrinath recognized the man as one of their own torchbearers. He held up his hand to the man’s nose—he was still breathing. Badrinath understood that the man had been given a potion that had rendered him unconscious.

‘Let him be for now,’ said the chobdar. ‘First find the rogue who is responsible for this. I will come with you, bringing this torch with me. At no cost should those scoundrels be allowed to rescue Maharaj Jai Singh.’

‘We should first check on Maharaj Jai Singh in his prison,’ said Badrinath. The others agreed and the five men made their way to the little cell in which the aiyaars had imprisoned Maharaj Jai Singh. The Maharaj lay as they had left him, handcuffed, upon the floor. The chobdar examined the prison cell and its door with great care, and at last declared, ‘No, they haven’t been here. Let’s look for them on the other side.’

They searched high and low, but found no sign of the intruders. Instead they found Jeet Singh’s notes, glued to various walls and doors. The aiyaars were thrown into complete confusion upon reading what the notes said. As they stood there, pondering what to do next, the chobdar began to shout. ‘Look, look! A man has just entered that room,’ he cried, pointing to one of the cells. ‘I am sure he is the one who wounded me!’ He ran towards the cell, but stopped at the entrance. The aiyaars, hearing his cry, ran to him.

‘Come on, let’s go in,’ said Badrinath to the chobdar.

‘First get your weapons out, keep your swords and daggers ready,’ said the chobdar. ‘He is sure to attack.’

‘Don’t worry, we are prepared for him,’ replied Badrinath. ‘Lead the way since you have the torch.’

‘Oh no! I am not going in!’ declared the chobdar. ‘I escaped with my life once! I am not such a wretch that I would invite misfortune upon myself again and knowingly step into hell!’

‘That’s well done, you coward!’ exclaimed Badrinath. ‘Is it with this spirit that you work for kings? Hand me that torch!’

‘Here, take it! And call me a coward if you want!’ cried the chobdar. ‘After the wounds I have suffered, I would rather be a coward. Had you been

hurt as I am, you wouldn't have spoken thus! I have helped you so far—that is enough!' and thrusting the torch and the vial of oil into Badrinath's hand, the chobdar stepped aside.

The four aiyaars stepped into the room. They had taken but a few steps inside when the chobdar shut the door behind them and locked and barred it. Pulling out a flint from his belt, he sparked a light with it, and set fire to a small fuse that led under the door and into the closed room. The fuse caught fire and the flame ran hissing under the door.

The readers must have, by now, guessed the identity of this valiant chobdar. He was no other than that king of aiyaars, Jeet Singh. Disguised as a chobdar, he had frightened the aiyaars into coming with him, and had fooled them into revealing the location of Maharaj Jai Singh's prison. He had then led them to this little cell which he had, beforehand, prepared for them.

The fuse ran hissing under the door and ignited the small pile of powder that Jeet Singh had earlier placed in a corner of the cell. This powder was not an explosive or one that would cause fire—instead it gave off a thick, heavy smoke that, when inhaled, caused unconsciousness.

Leaving the fuse and the powder to do its work, Jeet Singh hastened to the little cell where Maharaj Jai Singh lay in chains. Seeing that there were no guards, Jeet Singh opened the door and quickly sawed through the Maharaj's chains. Identifying himself, he urged the king to be quick. 'Hurry, let's get out of here,' he said.

Jeet Singh led the Maharaj out of the fort by the same route that he had used to enter it, by scaling the low wall at the rear of the fort. 'Wait here for me,' he said, once they were safely over the wall. 'I have rendered the aiyaars unconscious. I will tie them to this rope and lower them, one by one, over the wall to you. When they are all on the other side of the wall with you, I will climb down and we will return to our encampment together.' Maharaj Jai Singh, delighted at this turn of events, agreed wholeheartedly with the plan.

Jeet Singh hurried back to the little room where he had trapped the aiyaars and where they now lay unconscious. Stuffing cotton wool soaked in lakhlakha up his nose, he entered the smoke-filled room. Dragging the aiyaars out by their feet, he carried them to the wall at the rear of the fort, and lowered them down to Maharaj Jai Singh, who was waiting there as planned.

Once the four aiyaars were safely over the wall, Jeet Singh joined Maharaj Jai Singh and escorted him safely back to his men. He then returned

with several litters and litter-bearers and had the four, still unconscious, aiyaars (whom he had hidden safely out of sight) carried back to camp, where they were handcuffed and chained and placed in a secure tent under heavy guard.

Raja Surendra Singh and Maharaj Jai Singh embraced each other with deep affection. The monarchs, delighted with Jeet Singh's deeds, rewarded him handsomely with grants of land.

Slowly the sky began to lighten in the east, and as dawn broke, Fateh Singh called off his men and the fighting came to a halt.

Narrative Eighteen

THE PRINCE, TOGETHER with Tej Singh and the other aiyaars, left the secret valley and set off in the direction of the tilisma. Spending one night on the road, as they set off again the following morning, they saw a masked rider in the distance, riding towards the prince. When the rider deemed himself to be close enough, he stopped and dismounting from his horse, placed a package on the ground; then, retreating some distance away, he stood waiting.

The prince moved forward and picked up the packet—once again, it was the magic book from the tilisma, with another letter. The prince, pleased to find the book again, looked at Tej Singh. 'What shall I do?' he asked. 'She is making me beholden to her again and again for the favours she is doing me. There is no doubt that this is her man who has placed this book of enchantments in my path and who now stands waiting there! Her love makes me helpless! Let's see what the letter says!' The prince opened the letter, and read it:

I am sending you this book of enchantments—it fell into my hands once again. Now use it and break the tilisma quickly and free Princess Chandrakanta. She must be in great distress. There is fighting in Chunar. You must hurry there. Show what you can do in battle so that the conquest of Chunar is forever in your name.

—*Your slave, who yearns for you*

The prince handed Tej Singh the letter and asked him to read it too.

‘I wonder if this Forest Maiden is human or fey?’ mused Tej Singh upon reading the letter. ‘So many strange things happen around her.’

The prince heaved a deep sigh. ‘Now if there was only a single problem I had to deal with!’

‘I recommend that you wait here while I go to Chunar and find out what is going on,’ said Devi Singh.

‘Very well,’ agreed the prince. ‘Chunar is barely five kos from here. We will wait here till you return with news. It will be better if we show ourselves with some brave deed to our credit!’

Devi Singh left for Chunar. The prince was thus delayed by another day on his journey, for it was only on the following day that Devi Singh returned with news from Chunar. Giving them an account of the battle and of Maharaj Jai Singh’s disappearance, and praising Jeet Singh’s *aiyaari*, he added, ‘The battle is still continuing. Our army attacked the fort several times, and though we are at the gates to the fort, we haven’t been able to breach them. The cannon fire from the fort has caused us great losses.’

‘If we could somehow enter the fort and open the gate to let our forces in...now that would be a brave deed indeed!’ said the prince to Tej Singh.

‘Yes, that would show great valour!’ agreed Tej Singh. ‘We will either succeed in opening the gates of the fort, or we will lose our lives in the attempt.’

‘What greater work awaits us than glory in war?’ exclaimed the prince. ‘We will either conquer Chunar, or we will find a place in Vishnu’s paradise of Vaikunth! In both cases we win!’

‘Well said!’ agreed Tej Singh. ‘There is no greater courage than this! So come, let’s disguise ourselves and enter the fort. But this cannot be done in daylight.’

‘Well then, we shall do it at night! We will infiltrate the fort at night, and remain hidden within it somewhere. When day breaks and the fighting begins, we will launch our attack on the gates from within and open them. Most of the soldiers will be up on the battlements and towers; there will only be a handful of men at the gates, and fighting through an odd fifty men or so is not a task of great difficulty,’ said the prince.

‘The prince is right,’ said Devi Singh, ‘but we should leave Jyotishi ji outside.’

‘Why so?’ protested Jyotishi ji.

‘You are a brahmin,’ said Devi Singh. ‘If you are killed, we will bear the sin of a brahmin’s death on our souls. We are kshatriyas, warriors; let us do this work, it is our duty.’

‘Yes, Jyotishi ji, don’t come into the fort with us,’ agreed the prince.

‘If I did not know aiyaari, what you say would have been right,’ said Jyotishi ji. ‘But I am an aiyaar, and Chivalry and Courage stand with folded hands before an aiyaar, always at his service!’

‘All right then, come with us,’ shrugged Devi Singh. ‘Why should we care, it is to our benefit if you come!’

‘What benefit?’ asked the prince.

‘It is certain that Jyotishi ji is our friend, he will never desert us. Even if he dies, we will not lose him, for he will come back as a brahmin demon, and that will be of great use to us!’ teased Devi Singh with a grin.

‘So will I be the only one to be killed?’ protested Jyotishi ji, indignantly. ‘But if I am, it will be you I will haunt, for it is you I love the most!’

The prince burst out laughing at their banter, and mounting his horse set off for Chunar, his aiyaars with him. They reached Chunar as evening fell; as soon as it was dark, they scaled the walls with their rope ladders and entered the fort.

Narrative Nineteen

PERHAPS A SINGLE watch of the day had passed when Fateh Singh’s army fought their way to the entrance of the fort again. Shivdatt’s men, up on the ramparts of the fort, were preparing to shower them with cannonballs and drive them away, when all of a sudden the great doors leading into the fort swung open. Four bright yellow flags, the colour of Prince Birendra Singh’s company, appeared at the open gates and were seen from a distance by Raja Surendra Singh, Maharaj Jai Singh and their men. Fateh Singh, overjoyed, stormed triumphantly into the fort with his men; the rest of the army followed

behind. They met no resistance from Shivdatt's people. Fateh Singh threw down Shivdatt's green standard from the tower and replacing it with their yellow one, he beat the victory drum that stood at the foot of the flagpole. 'Kroom, dhoom, triumph!' boomed the drum, its victorious beats breaking the spirit of the defeated army and causing its soldiers to give their allegiance to Prince Birendra Singh at once.

Though the prince had himself decapitated forty men in the battle for the gates of the fort, he and his aiyaars had been badly wounded. As Raja Surendra Singh entered the fort, Tej Singh and Devi Singh still carrying the prince's standard threw themselves at his feet, while Jyotishi ji gave him his blessings. They had no more strength left and as they acknowledged their king and master, the prince and his aiyaars collapsed with the pain of their wounds and fell unconscious, bleeding profusely.

Jeet Singh tended their wounds and bandaged them, and as he washed their faces, their disguises fell away and their real identities were revealed. Under Jeet Singh's care, they revived quickly. Raja Surendra Singh embraced his beloved son and sat with him for a long while; he also expressed his gratitude to the aiyaars for their loyal service and support. As for Maharaj Jai Singh, he could not sing the praises of the prince loud enough. The prince touched his feet in respect and greeted him with great joy.

And so, Chunar fell. That very day, Maharaj Jai Singh and Raja Surendra Singh together anointed Prince Birendra Singh king of Chunar. The city broke out in celebration and alms were distributed to the poor. The festivities continued for seven days. Maharaj Shivdatt's army acknowledged the prince as their master and gave him their complete and unquestioning loyalty. As for the royal women—no man approached them, and they were kept in honour, safe and secure in their palace.

The festivities over, Maharaj Jai Singh and Raja Surendra Singh prepared to return to their own kingdoms. They did so with light hearts, knowing that they left the prince to rule in Chunar. As they took their leave of Birendra Singh, they bade him break the tilisma and free Princess Chandrakanta as soon as possible. Seeing the two kings on their way to their own kingdoms, the prince left once again for the tilisma, taking his aiyaars and a few selected men-at-arms with him.

Narrative Twenty

ONCE AGAIN, THE prince set up camp at the entrance to the tilisma. The treasure had already been removed, and now only two parts of the enchantment remained to be resolved—the first was the platform upon which lay the sleeping man, and the second was the serpent doorway through which lay the path to the mountain cave where the princess and Chapala now waited. The prince had already recovered the magical book and he quickly read through the few pages that still remained unread. He made careful note of all that he needed to do to reach the princess, but the book gave no instructions regarding the sleeping man on the marble platform. All it said about the latter was that:

The platform is the entrance to another tilisma, far greater and more powerful than this one; the treasure it contains is beyond measure. Its wonders are such that they bewilder the brains of even the wisest and most capable men. The solution to that tilisma is completely different, and the key to the tilisma is with the man who lies asleep upon the platform.

‘So tell me, Jyotishi ji, am I not destined to break this tilisma of the platform?’ asked the prince.

‘We’ll see about that,’ said the jyotishi. ‘First, free Princess Chandrakanta.’

‘All right, let’s go. We should manage to accomplish that today itself,’ agreed the prince, and led the way into the enchanted ruin, the aiyaars following. Once inside, they set to work, meticulously following the instructions laid out in the tilismi book.

Unlocking the trapdoor (we have already explained before that the key to this was in Tej Singh’s safekeeping) that lay at the head of the stone man’s marble platform, they went through the underground chambers and passages to emerge in that same garden in which stood the barahdari of black stone, and in which had lain the square slab of red stone that had thrown Chapala into unconsciousness and which, the magic book had explained, was in reality a box containing within it a rare and precious object.

The four men dived into the stream in the same way that Chapala had done earlier to emerge on the other side of the garden wall, and following the stream a little way they, too, reached the small stone chamber in which lay the stone serpent that had swallowed Chapala.

On one side, set into the wall, was a slab of black stone of about the same height as a man. The prince kicked the stone slab as hard as he could, so that it slid into the rock wall, revealing an opening with a flight of steps leading underground.

Lighting a torch, the four men went down the stairs. An underground chamber lay below, and inside it could be seen the workings of the serpent. Along with several gears and pulleys, a large bellows made of bhojpatra was fixed just below the serpent. The prince understood that anyone stepping on the stone platform in front of the serpent would set the bellows working, which would in turn suck the person into the serpent's mouth.

A large window was set into one wall of the chamber. The window was closed and shuttered, and a little key lay before it. Unlocking the shutters with the key, the four men opened the window and climbing through it, emerged upon a little roof terrace from which they saw the entrance to what appeared to be a long, narrow cave. They knew from the instructions in the enchanted book that this narrow cave was the entrance to the larger chamber in which Chandrakanta and Chapala waited helplessly for rescue.

The prince's heart began to beat faster in anticipation of meeting Chandrakanta again, and Tej Singh trembled at the thought of being with Chapala once more. They moved ahead eagerly through the narrow passage.

'I will be able to meet Chandrakanta today in such complete privacy as never before,' thought the prince. 'I will run my fingers through her hair and untangle her locks, and use my shawl to wipe the dust from her body. Oh no, I should have remembered to bring her a fresh sari to wear! It was remiss of me to forget! How will I look her in the face now? She must be so unhappy in her torn clothes! She will be angry that I did not remember to bring her fresh clothes, and will think me uncaring and selfish. No, no, she won't be annoyed, she loves me deeply and will be overjoyed to see me. She won't worry about the clothes at all! Oh yes, I will tie my shawl round my waist, and drape her in my dhoti! For now, that will do.' These pleasant thoughts were interrupted by the sound of footsteps. 'What's that?' wondered the prince, startled. 'Can it be that Princess Chandrakanta and Chapala have

found out that I am on my way to them and are coming to meet me? No, that cannot be—how would they know that I am here?’

The prince continued to advance cautiously through the passage. Suddenly he heard a dreadful snarling and growling—and recognized it as the sound of wolves fighting amongst themselves. His feet grew heavy with dread. He glanced at Tej Singh but could not speak a word. Slowly they moved forward, till they came to the cave chamber where they had last seen Chandrakanta and Chapala from the valley floor below.

The princess and Chapala were nowhere to be seen. Instead, upon the floor of the cave lay two corpses, almost completely eaten by wolves so that barely any flesh remained upon the bones. The faces had been so gnawed that they were unrecognizable.

The prince grew wild with grief, and wept and wailed like a madman. ‘Hai, Chandrakanta, who has taken you away? No, they have killed you! It must have been these wolves we heard on our way here. The wolf that ate you was foolish for I was almost here—why did he not wait for me? I would have been a juicy morsel, full of the sweetness that love imparts to the flesh, while you, Chandrakanta, had grown as thin as a stick. But wait, have you really been eaten by wolves, or am I mistaken? Have I come to another cave? No, for there sits that scoundrel Shivdatt. Oh what is the point of my life now? How can I ever show my face to Maharaj Jai Singh again? Don’t be in such a hurry, princess, walk slowly, I am coming to you—should I leave you in death as well? Today, Naugarh, Vijaygarh and Chunar, all three kingdoms are ours. I am coming to join you, and with me will come many others who will serve you and attend you. This devastating tilisma, this rascal Shivdatt and now these wretched wolves—they have today reduced many brave hearts to ashes. Enough! The world has ended! Wait, Chandrakanta, why are you running away? Look, I am coming!’

The prince ran to the edge of the cave and looking down, made ready to jump to his death. His three aiyaars stood as though turned to stone. Suddenly there was a loud noise and the wall of the cave ripped open. An old man stepped out and grabbed the prince by the hand.

The prince looked at the old man. He must have been about eighty years of age. He had a long, white beard as soft as cotton wool, which hung down to his waist; his matted hair hung down to the floor. His body was covered in ashes and his eyes were glaring and red. In his right hand he held a trishul, and with the left he had grabbed the prince. A dark and terrible Shiva, his

body trembled with righteous anger. In a voice like thunder he announced, ‘I forbid you to make her a widow!’

The old man’s voice was so powerful that it shook the mountain, ripped open the hearts of the aiyaars and restored the prince’s wandering mind. The prince gazed at the old man for a long time and said, ‘It seems that you are Shiva incarnate, or perhaps some great yogi, and have appeared here for my good. And it is well that you appeared! You saved me from a great sin. I was about to take my life, which is against my code as a warrior. Now, maybe, I will fight you with one hand, and sacrifice my life on this strange trident you carry? That is why you have appeared, I am sure. But great soul that you are, tell me this—whom do I make a widow by giving up my life? Who is mine? Whom have I married? Had the princess heard you say what you did, she would have believed you, for who can doubt the words of a great soul such as you?’

‘Am I a liar?’ asked the old yogi sharply. ‘Are you a true warrior? Does a kshatriya forget his promises? Had you never promised anyone that you would marry her? Here, read this, see for yourself in whose hand this promise is written!’ And the old yogi pulled out a letter from his person and handed it to the prince.

‘This is my writing!’ exclaimed the prince, opening the letter. ‘What have I written here? That, *I accept all your conditions!* What does this mean?’ he wondered, and turning the letter over he realized that this was the Forest Maiden’s letter to him. ‘I understand now! This is the letter in which she asked me to marry her, and in reply I had agreed to all that she asked!’ He turned the letter over and over in his hand and mused to himself, ‘But how did it get into this old man’s hand? What does he have to do with the Forest Maiden?’

After pondering this mystery for a while, the prince turned towards the old man. ‘Do you know this Forest Maiden?’ he asked.

‘Are you still in doubt?’ exclaimed the old man angrily. ‘Should I bring her before you?’ He stamped his foot upon the ground so hard that the ground split open (whether this was possible or not, we will know in the fourth part of the tale). From the yawning chasm emerged the Forest Maiden, who, seeing the prince, fell at his feet.

End of Part Three

*Badrinath used a special sling called a 'chhaga', consisting of a small net of string to which are attached two cords; one cord is wound around the wrist, the other held between thumb and forefinger. The stone is placed in the net, and thrown at the target.

Part Four



Narrative One

THE PRINCE WAS both bewildered and amazed at the Forest Maiden's sudden appearance. He pondered the strange events of the last few minutes in stunned silence—what was going on, how and why had the Forest Maiden appeared in the cave so suddenly, and who was this old yogi who was helping her? At last, recovering his voice, he said to the yogi, 'I know this Forest Maiden. She has helped me greatly, and I have also made her many promises. But I cannot fulfil my promise to marry her unless Princess Chandrakanta is found. Look, read for yourself the conditions that she laid upon me. Here, in her letter, in her own hand she writes—*You must marry both Chandrakanta and me on the same day at the same time*, and I have accepted this condition. But if Princess Chandrakanta has left this world, I cannot marry either for I had agreed to marry both together.'

The yogi glared at the Forest Maiden. 'What is this, are you showing me up as a liar?'

'No, no, Maharaj,' said the Forest Maiden, her hands folded in supplication. 'How can I dare do that? Please ask him how he has concluded that Princess Chandrakanta is dead.'

The yogi turned his bloodshot eyes upon the prince. 'Did you hear what this maiden says? How did you decide that Princess Chandrakanta is dead?'

'Are you saying that the princess is alive?' asked the prince, startled.

'First answer my question,' glared the yogi.

'The first time I came to this valley, I had seen Chandrakanta and Chapala in this very cave, I had even spoken to them. And today, hoping to find them here, I see instead these two half eaten bodies and so concluded...' replied the prince, his voice breaking with grief.

The yogi turned to frown at Tej Singh. 'And you, has your common sense deserted you? Could you not tell that these corpses are those of men? Did you not stop to consider their form and stature?'

Tej Singh, startled, looked again at the bodies lying on the floor. ‘Yes, you are right, these corpses are those of men, not women!’ he agreed. ‘This was a grievous error on my part. I did not examine them properly as I should have done. Along with the prince I, too, became flustered,’ he added in embarrassed apology.

‘How shameful that aiyaars should make such mistakes! This little error of yours would have cost the prince his life!’ reprimanded the yogi. ‘Look there,’ he continued, pointing across the valley. ‘Do you see...between those two mountains?’ He looked again at Tej Singh. ‘I don’t need to tell you more, for you already know the secret of this valley—your ustad confided it to you long ago.’

Tej Singh turned to look in the direction in which the old yogi pointed and grew still, his gaze fixed on the mountains. The others, following his gaze, turned as one towards the same direction. ‘Oh, how did this happen!’ cried out Tej Singh. At this, the others stared even harder in the direction of the yogi’s finger.

At last, Tej Singh shook himself and turned towards the yogi—only to find that the yogi had disappeared! The Forest Maiden had vanished as well. And that was not all—Tej Singh and the others could not see or understand by which path the yogi and the Forest Maiden had come or where they had gone, or how. As long as the yogi and the Forest Maiden had been there, the ways of their entry had also remained—the door in the cave wall had stood open, as well as the chasm in the ground; but now there was no sign of either.

Narrative Two

AT LAST, UNABLE to solve the puzzle of these strange happenings, the prince turned to Tej Singh and said, ‘I still don’t know what the old yogi pointed at, and what you saw there that you stared at it, transfixed, for so long. Nor do I understand where those two have vanished.’

‘What can I tell you?’ replied Tej Singh, helplessly. ‘I did not learn much from them, nor could I understand exactly what is going on—all I know is that there is a great deal of hard work ahead of us.’

‘But what were you staring at?’ asked the prince.

‘It will take too long to explain,’ replied Tej Singh. ‘Let’s get out of here, the smell from those corpses is unbearable. I will tell you everything once we are out of here. But before we leave, look again at those two mountain peaks. Between them is a gateway, the doors of which used to be closed but now stand open,’ and Tej Singh pointed once again towards the mountain peaks. ‘For now, let’s leave this place, though we will have to return here tomorrow. This tilisma is so constructed that if we walk through it to this point, we need walk only a distance of five kos. Otherwise, if we were to take the path around it, we would have to walk a distance of fifteen kos.’

‘All right, let’s move out of here as you say, but unless I know clearly what is going on, I will remain anxious,’ replied the prince.

The four men left the tilisma by the same route they had taken into it. It was midnight by the time they emerged from the ruin. Meanwhile, the prince’s men had grown restless with worry—they knew that the prince and his aiyaars usually left the tilisma before sundown—and breathed a sigh of relief when the four entered the encampment.

‘I suggest that you rest tonight and we leave all explanations till tomorrow,’ said Tej Singh to the prince.

Narrative Three

EVEN THOUGH HE now knew for a certainty that Chandrakanta was alive, a dozen other questions plagued the prince and did not let him sleep. How had Chandrakanta escaped from the tilisma and where had she gone? Who was the Forest Maiden, where had the old yogi come from, what is it that he had shown Tej Singh? The prince did not sleep a wink all night and shortly before dawn, he rose and made his way to Tej Singh’s tent. Tej Singh was fast asleep, but the prince, unable to wait any longer, shook him awake.

Tej Singh woke up and greeted the prince. He knew that the prince was impatient to know what he had seen between the mountain peaks the previous day, and that is why he had woken him up so early, but even so, he asked, ‘What is the matter that you are awake so early?’

‘I couldn’t sleep all night, so now tell me quickly all that you have to say, for I am anxious to know,’ replied the prince.

Tej Singh asked the prince to be seated, and had Devi Singh and Jyotishi ji also awakened and brought to his tent. When they were all present, Tej Singh said, ‘I still do not know who has taken Princess Chandrakanta away from that tilisma, or who the old yogi is and why he is helping the Forest Maiden. But the sight he showed me was a matter of such surprise and threw me into such wonder that I could not tear my eyes away. The yogi, too, did not think to explain it to me and left before I could ask him anything more.’ Turning to the prince, he asked, ‘Do you remember, the very first time that I took you to the secret valley, I told you that my guru ji had revealed the secret of that valley to me, and I told you what that was?’

‘Yes, I remember it clearly,’ nodded the prince.

‘Then tell me what I had said,’ said Tej Singh.

‘Only this that within it lay a great treasure which was protected by a small tilisma, but which would not be difficult to break because your ustad had told you how to break it,’ said the prince.

‘Yes, that is correct,’ agreed Tej Singh. ‘Yesterday, as we stood in that cave, I drew your attention to the gateway between the two mountain peaks that the yogi had pointed out to me. Seeing the gates standing open, I realized that someone had broken that tilisma and taken the treasure away. I also realized that the yogi had pointed out the open gateway to me because it was likely that the person who had broken that tilisma was also the one who had taken Princess Chandrakanta away. Struck speechless by this realization, I stared at that open gateway for so long that the old yogi went away without answering my questions!’

At this, the prince grew deeply disturbed and fell into a deep and despondent silence. After a long while, he looked up again and pulled himself together. ‘So does this mean that Princess Chandrakanta is caught in some fresh trouble?’ he asked Tej Singh.

‘So it seems,’ said Tej Singh.

‘So how do we find her? What should we do next?’

‘I think we should return to the secret valley and examine the other tilisma between the mountain peaks. Maybe we will learn something of use or find some clues. And then let’s see where they lead us,’ suggested Tej Singh.

‘All right, let’s do as you say—though at this moment, a thought comes to mind,’ said the prince.

‘What is that?’ asked Tej Singh.

‘Do you recall when you had taken Badrinath to the secret valley to lock him up and had been unable to open the door to the valley? Maybe the same person who has broken the second tilisma was the one who had locked the door from the inside. He might have been in the valley at the time.’

‘You are absolutely right, there is no doubt, that is what must have happened,’ agreed Tej Singh. ‘In fact, this person must have been the one who released Shivdatt from the valley as well!’

‘Yes, quite possibly,’ said the prince. ‘But, when Shivdatt, after his release, resorted to treachery and attacked my army, did this same person imprison him in the valley again? And did he also write the note that was found on Shivdatt’s pillow when he was kidnapped?’

‘Yes, perhaps,’ said Tej Singh.

‘If so, then this person must be a friend, but if a friend, why has he taken the princess?’

‘It is difficult to answer your question,’ said Tej Singh. ‘Bear in mind that after Shivdatt had been released, you had found yourself in that secret valley, and the rest of us had also reached there in search of you. At that time, we had spoken to Chapala and she did not say that she had seen anyone enter the secret valley who had helped Shivdatt escape or anyone who had brought him back! She had not mentioned this at all. In fact, she had said the reverse, that she had seen Shivdatt in the valley every day. Nor had she mentioned anything that could be a matter of concern.’

‘The situation is no doubt very complicated, but you made some mistakes too.’

‘And what were those?’ asked Tej Singh.

‘Yesterday, the yogi stepped out of a wall and stopped me from jumping to my death. He then stamped his foot on the ground, which split open and out sprang the Forest Maiden. Now, the yogi was no god that a kick from him would rip open the earth. There must have been some hidden mechanism there in the ground. Perhaps you should have searched for that,’ said the prince.

‘Yes, you are right, I should have investigated that,’ agreed Tej Singh. ‘So what shall we do now?’

‘There is no urgent need to hurry to the secret valley, so let’s return to that cave today. We may discover something useful,’ suggested the prince.

The four men returned to the tilisma, and through it to the cave where they had met the yogi. The two decaying and half eaten corpses had disappeared, and the floor of the cave looked clean and freshly washed. They pondered this new wonder for a while, till remembering why they had returned, Tej Singh kicked the floor as hard as he could, in exactly the same manner as had the yogi.

At once, the floor of the cave opened beneath his feet, as it had before, and a narrow flight of steps, leading underground, came into view. The four men climbed down, only to find themselves in a pitch dark room. There must have been another door somewhere, but they could not find it, and after stumbling about in the dark for a while, they climbed out again, disappointed and disheartened.

This time, the opening in the floor did not close up again as it had with the yogi. ‘There must be a mechanism underground to close this,’ mused Tej Singh. ‘Anyway, there is no point in staying here any longer. We must get out of here and come back into the secret valley through the path that lies outside this tilisma. We will not be able to do anything more otherwise.’

The four men made their way out of the tilisma again. Tej Singh carefully replaced the stone slab near the marble platform with the sleeping man, and locked it securely into place. This ensured that no one else could enter the tilisma by that route.

Next day, Prince Birendra Singh, giving Commander Fateh Singh the title of ‘Governor’, sent him to Chunar. The prince himself set off for Naugarh, where he sought an audience with his father, Raja Surendra Singh. Upon the king’s instructions, Jeet Singh took the prince aside that night and making sure that they were alone, questioned him about the tilisma. The prince answered as best he could.

Jeet Singh heard the prince’s story, and summoned Tej Singh immediately and instructed him thus: ‘Leave at once for the secret valley, taking the other aiyaars and the prince with you. Help the prince break the second, smaller tilisma at once, the one your ustad had explained to you. Once that tilisma is broken, all that has happened will be explained. But before you break the enchantment, you must do two things: first, take some men with you, and send Shivdatt and his queen back with them; second, lock the door into the secret valley from within when you are inside. You do not

need to consult Raja Surendra Singh further on this, but leave at once, all of you. And remember to take a palanquin with you for the queen.'

The prince, accompanied by his three aiyaars and some soldiers, left at once for the secret valley. Leaving the soldiers to wait a little distance away, the prince and the aiyaars opened the secret door and entered the valley.

It was dawn now. The prince led Maharaj Shivdatt and his queen outside the secret valley to the waiting soldiers. He ordered his men to take them both to Naugarh with all speed and safety. After seeing them off—the king on foot, the queen in the palanquin—the prince returned to the secret valley.

Narrative Four

THE SOLDIERS ESCORTED Shivdatt and his queen to Naugarh, where, upon Jeet Singh's advice, they were housed in an elegant and comfortable mansion. Their handcuffs and chains were removed, though, in the interest of security, they were kept under heavy guard with soldiers and sentries stationed around the mansion at all times.

The following day, Raja Surendra Singh and Jeet Singh, having come to some decision, paid a visit to Maharaj Shivdatt and his Maharani, taking with them the four captive aiyaars, Badrinath, Pannalal, Ram Narayan and Chunnilal.

Maharaj Shivdatt met the Raja at the door and led him inside. The two men sat facing each other, while the four aiyaars, still handcuffed and in chains, were seated to one side. 'To what do I owe the honour of your visit?' asked Maharaj Shivdatt.

'So far you have done whatever it has pleased you to do,' replied Raja Surendra Singh. 'You chose to believe Kroor Singh's lies and did all you could to create trouble for us. You betrayed us, even started a war. What do you plan to do now? Are you content to remain a captive here for the rest of your life or do you have any other thoughts?'

'Your valour and the courage of Prince Birendra Singh cannot be questioned. Whatever may be said in praise is too little. May God keep you happy and grant you the joy of a grandson, and may you forgive all that I have

done,’ replied Maharaj Shivdatt. ‘I no longer want my throne or my kingdom. I am aware of the events in Chunar and the valiant manner in which you won the fort. Now, there remains only one wish in my heart—bear in mind your gallantry and valour, and grant me my desire.’ And Shivdatt stood up, his hands folded in supplication before the king.

‘Tell me your desire, and I will try to fulfil your wish to the extent that I can,’ replied Raja Surendra Singh.

‘Very well, then hear me out,’ said Shivdatt. ‘I have no son or heir, and so have no need or desire for Chunar. But in the fort remain the widows of many of my relatives, who have so far been dependent upon me. Please ensure that they are taken care of, so that they may spend the rest of their lives in peace and dignity. There are also many men from my family who remain in Chunar, but you need not know who they are, and I ask no favours for them—they are men, well able to earn a living and fend for themselves. As for myself, I ask that you give me my freedom and allow me to retire from this world to the forest with my wife. We will spend the rest of our days meditating upon the Supreme Being, for I cannot show my face in this world again. That is all I ask, I have no other wish.’

‘The widowed women of your household will be looked after, you need say no more on that,’ said Raja Surendra Singh. ‘But letting you go is another matter altogether and calls for much thought.’

‘You need not worry, I swear upon all that is holy that I hold no enmity towards you, and that I will not even think of harming you in way,’ promised Shivdatt solemnly, holding the sacred thread he wore across his shoulder.

‘You are not yet so old that you should retire to the forest,’ objected Raja Surendra Singh.

‘If you are a man of honour, let me go,’ said Shivdatt.

‘I have no faith in your promises, but since you call upon my honour, I will let you go,’ said Raja Surendra Singh. ‘Go where you wish to go, and take whatever money you require to meet your expenses.’

‘I don’t need money,’ said Shivdatt. ‘In fact, I will leave behind even the jewels that my queen is wearing right now.’

He glanced at his queen, and the poor woman quickly took off all the jewellery she was wearing.

‘You made the queen remove her jewellery—that was not well done,’ reproved Raja Surendra Singh.

‘Now that we want to retire to the forest, what need have we of jewels? Should we carry them with us to make ourselves the target of thieves and murderers and deprive ourselves of sleep at night?’ asked Shivdatt.

‘Look here, Shivdatt Singh,’ said Raja Surendra Singh sadly, ‘you were the king of Chunar only till recently, and even though you were our enemy, I do not like you to leave in this fashion. I have given you your freedom—so go where you will, but it is your poor queen I feel sorry for. Think of her and don’t subject her to more hardship. Consider my offer, stay here with us and I will give you whichever office you desire in my service.’

‘No, I cannot stay here. Lift the guard from this palace so that I may leave whenever I want tonight,’ said Shivdatt.

‘Very well, as you wish,’ said Raja Surendra Singh, giving in.

Maharaj Shivdatt’s aiyaars had been listening in silence to this exchange. Now that the two kings seemed to have finished what they had to say to each other, Badrinath turned to Maharaj Shivdatt and asked, ‘You have decided to retire to the forest, but what instructions do you leave for us?’

‘You are free to go wherever you want. I release you from my service,’ said Shivdatt. ‘It will be good if you choose to stay with Prince Birendra Singh. You will not find a wiser or more honourable king.’

‘May God keep you safe; from today we take on the service of Prince Birendra Singh,’ said Badrinath. ‘We ask that you break our chains with your own hands.’

Maharaj Shivdatt undid their chains and unlocked their handcuffs. Raja Surendra Singh and Jeet Singh did not object and looked on in silence. The four aiyaars, free of their chains, came and stood behind Raja Surendra Singh.

‘First, come stand before me and swear your oath of loyalty,’ said Jeet Singh to the aiyaars. ‘Let’s be done with the necessary rituals, you may take your position behind the Raja after that.’

Badrinath, Pannalal, Ram Narayan and Chunnilal smiled and agreed, and came and stood before Jeet Singh. In one hand they held their implements of aiyaari, the other they laid upon the sacred threads they wore, and standing thus and smiling, they intoned in unison, ‘From this day on, I am the servant of Raja Surendra Singh and his family. I will fulfil my duty with honesty and hard work. I will look upon Tej Singh, Devi Singh and Jyotishi ji as my brothers! And that completes my promise.’

‘Yes, that is enough,’ declared Jeet Singh and embraced the four aiyaars, after which the latter took up their positions behind the Raja.

‘I shall take my leave of you now,’ said Raja Surendra Singh to Maharaj Shivdatt. ‘I will remove the guard from this palace immediately, and you may leave whenever you wish. But before I go, let me embrace you as a friend.’

‘I am not worthy of your embrace,’ refused Shivdatt with folded hands.

‘No, you must not refuse,’ declared Raja Surendra Singh and clasped him to his chest. Sadly, he bid his old enemy farewell and left, having given instructions to lift the guard from the palace.

Raja Surendra Singh retired to his palace with Jeet Singh, Badrinath, Pannalal, Ram Narayan and Chunnilal. They were soon immersed in a lengthy discussion on Shivdatt and his regrettable ways. ‘A happy outcome of all this is that we now have four more aiyaars in the court,’ pointed out Jeet Singh and finding the moment opportune, he added, ‘May I therefore request that the king grant this loyal servant leave of absence from the court for fifteen days? I need to attend to some family business.’

‘You have already taken leave earlier, a day here, a couple of days there,’ protested the king.

‘Yes, sire, but now I need fifteen days, for I have to travel quite far, and Pandit Badrinath will take over my duties while I am gone, so you will face no problems in my absence,’ assured Jeet Singh.

‘Very well, then,’ said Raja Surendra Singh, ‘Go if you must, but return as soon as you can.’

Narrative Five

PRINCE BIRENDRA SINGH and his three aiyaars began to explore the secret valley.

‘I am sure now that someone has broken the smaller tilisma and taken away the treasure it held,’ declared Tej Singh after carefully examining the surroundings. ‘The thief must also be holding Princess Chandrakanta. My ustad had told me that the tilisma has within it several pavilions and gardens that are not only worth visiting, but which would be very comfortable to live

in as well. So it should come as no surprise if we were to find the thief living inside the tilisma itself.'

'Then we must hurry,' said the prince.

'Yes, so let us go to the tilisma at once,' agreed Tej Singh.

He led the prince to the foot of the mountain from which bubbled the spring that ran as a stream down the centre of the valley. He began to dig at a point that lay some forty cubits north of the stream. 'The instructions to break the smaller tilisma and reach the treasure within it are engraved upon a metal plate which is buried somewhere here,' explained Tej Singh. Despite digging and searching for a while, they did not find the plate; instead, where the plate should have been, they found a letter. The prince picked it up and opening it, read it. This is what it said:

What are you digging for now? There is nothing here any more that would be of use to you! What was concealed has been taken. The tilisma has been broken. Now brush the earth off your hands and feel sorry for yourselves!

'There, this is definite proof that the tilisma has been broken,' declared Tej Singh.

'If the tilisma has already been broken, would that not mean that all the doors, gateways and entrances leading into it would be standing open?' asked the prince.

'Yes, they must be!' agreed Tej Singh, and without further ado, he led the way up the mountain. The path curved and twisted and climbed higher and higher till at last they reached a small cave, its mouth just wide enough for a single person to enter.

Upon Tej Singh's prompting, the four men, one by one, stepped into the cave. A little further in, the cave opened out, so much so that the men could stand erect; they continued forward but cautiously and feeling their way ahead, for the cave was pitch dark. As the prince walked ahead into the darkness, his hand brushed against what seemed to be a door; upon pushing it, the door opened, and bright light came flooding into the cave.

The four men stepped through the door to find themselves in a small garden, which was very neat and spotlessly clean. Not even a twig was out of place and the place seemed as though it had just been swept. There were

no buildings or pavilions here, only a fountain playing in the centre, though they could not see the spring or reservoir that fed it.

They wandered around the garden and realized that they had reached the top of the mountain. As they neared the fountain, they saw, as though dropped there, a pair of bracelets upon the ground. The prince recognized them immediately as the ones that Princess Chandrakanta used to wear. ‘What do you make of this?’ he asked Tej Singh, picking up the bangles, his eyes awash with tears.

Tej Singh was about to reply, when his eye fell upon a folded piece of paper that lay upon the ground. He picked it up and unfolding it, read:

Go carefully. The aiyaars will follow you. If they find out, it will cause great harm to you and the prince. If I can, I will come tomorrow.

—You know who, the very same

Tej Singh stood silently pondering this note, lost in thought. At last the prince, impatient, asked, ‘What does the note say? What are you thinking?’

Tej Singh handed him the note, and the prince reading the two lines contained therein was equally puzzled. ‘This seems to concern me and the Forest Maiden, though I cannot say who has written it.’

‘You are right,’ said Tej Singh, ‘but there is one more aspect which is even more puzzling.’

‘What is that?’

‘I should know this writing; the way the letters have been formed seems familiar, but I cannot identify exactly whose hand it might be, for whoever has written it has tried to disguise his writing and altered the shape of his letters,’ said Tej Singh.

‘Let’s not worry about this note just now, we’ll find out sooner or later what it means,’ said the prince. ‘Let’s carry on with our task for now.’

The four men continued to explore the garden. In one corner of the garden they found four small windows, set next to each other and perfectly aligned. They pushed open the one on the extreme left and climbed through. A little further on, they reached a door. It was impossible to go beyond, for the door opened on to a sheer precipice. They realized that this was the same

door that the yogi had pointed out to Tej Singh—for from where they stood, they could see, across the secret valley, the same chamber in which Chandrakanta and Chapala had waited helplessly to be rescued for so many days.

They returned as they had come and climbed through the second window, which led into deep darkness. After walking some distance, they saw some light in the distance. Continuing forward, they reached the end where they found themselves standing at a pair of large gates, which stood wide open.

The four men walked through the gates and looked around. There was nothing to be seen but a wide, open meadow. Tej Singh wished to explore further, but the sun was too fierce, and besides, the prince refused to give permission. ‘We can come back and explore it another time,’ he said. ‘Right now, let us go back and see where the third and fourth windows lead us.’

The third window led them to a small garden—where, to their surprise, they saw the Forest Maiden strolling with several of her handmaidens! As soon as she saw them enter, she ran to the far end of the garden and disappeared, along with her attendants. The four men chased her, but she had vanished before they could reach her. All they found was a door in the garden wall. It was shut tight, and despite all their efforts, they could not open it.

A small pavilion lay to one side of the garden. Helpless and frustrated, the prince and his aiyars flung themselves down in the shelter of the pavilion. How had the Forest Maiden come here? Is this where she lived? Why did she run away when she saw them? Does she not want to meet them now? They debated these and other questions fruitlessly all day. Soon, it was evening, but not one amongst them had been able to make sense of what they had seen.

The garden contained several trees laden with fruit, as well as a small spring of fresh water. The four men satisfied their hunger with the fruit and their thirst with water from the spring, and deciding to spend the night in the garden, they lay down in the pavilion to rest.

Devi Singh pulled out a small lamp from his bag and lit it. The four men, unable to sleep, sat up and talked through the night by its light.

‘My love for Chandrakanta reduced us to this pitiable condition and even now there seems no end in sight,’ said the prince.

‘The princess is safe and well, and you will find her,’ reassured Tej Singh. ‘The greater the difficulties one faces in being with one’s beloved, the

greater the joy one finds with them.'

'What troubles have you faced for Chapala?' asked the prince.

'Well, what difficulties has she borne for me?' retorted Tej Singh. 'All that she has done, she has done for Princess Chandrakanta.'

'So is Chapala of your caste and community, Tej Singh?' asked Jyotishi ji.

'I don't know her caste or community,' replied Tej Singh. 'Once love takes root between two people, such questions no longer matter.'

'But does she have no guardians? If she is not of your caste, her parents will not accept you!' said Jyotishi ji.

'If that happens, I will kill her and kill myself as well,' said Tej Singh.

'Give me a prize and I will tell you how Chapala stands,' said the prince.

'I'll give you Chapala herself as a prize!'

'Be careful, for Chapala will then become mine!' teased the prince.

'Yes, yes, yours, she will be yours!' snapped Tej Singh.

'Chapala is of our own caste. Her father was a wealthy landowner and a great aiyaar. Chapala was but seven days old when her mother died. She was brought up by her father, who also taught her aiyaari. Her father died a few years ago and left her, as well as all his wealth, in the care of Maharaj Jai Singh for he had no heir. The Maharaj was very fond of her father—he had accomplished many difficult tasks for him. He has taken Chapala into his family and looks upon her as his daughter. The Maharani, too, regards her similarly. Princess Chandrakanta and Chapala grew up together, and that is why there is such great love between them.'

'You have given me great happiness with this,' said Tej Singh. 'I had been worrying about it for a while but was reluctant to ask you. How did you learn all this about Chapala?'

'From Princess Chandrakanta herself,' said the prince.

'Then these facts must be right,' said Tej Singh.

The night passed in more such talk. Soon it was morning, and refreshing themselves in the spring and making a quick meal of the fruit from the trees, the four men left the garden and made their way out of the third window. They then entered the fourth window and reached another garden, seeing which the prince stopped short in astonishment.

Narrative Six

‘WHAT HAS STARTLED you about this particular garden?’ asked Tej Singh. ‘What have you seen here that is so strange?’

‘I recognize this garden,’ explained the prince.

‘When did you see this place?’ asked Tej Singh, surprised.

‘This is the same place that I was brought to when I was kidnapped from our camp,’ said the prince. ‘It was here that I found myself when I woke up that morning, and here that I saw that life-size portrait of Princess Chandrakanta. There is the pool where I bathed that morning—see how tall those jamun trees are, on either side of the pool.’

‘In which case, it would be best if the rest of us could also explore this garden,’ said Tej Singh.

‘All right, and while you do so, let me see if the door to that room is open where I saw the portrait of Princess Chandrakanta.’

The four men explored this garden, which has been described fully in the [third part](#) of this book. It will be a waste of the reader’s time to repeat that description here.

The doors to the rooms were open, and within, the rooms were as the prince remembered them. They were also spotlessly clean, with no hint of dust or dirt anywhere.

When the prince had come into this garden the first time, he had been anxious and disturbed, and had not been able to explore the garden as he might have wished. This time it was different. This time, he was here with his aiyaars, without fear or worry, full of hope, and on the verge of all his dreams coming true. He walked jauntily around the garden, his mind free to observe and explore. None of the doors to the rooms was locked, and the prince showed the others around, punctuating the tour with remarks such as ‘This is where I rested’, ‘This is where I ate’ and ‘This is where I fell asleep to wake up in the other garden’.

‘The room in the other garden in which you woke up after you fell asleep...there must be a way to that room from here,’ said Tej Singh. ‘We must look for it.’

‘That is what I was thinking, too,’ agreed the prince.

‘The first time you came here, you were shown great hospitality—you were given fresh clothes to wear after your bath, provided with everything

you could need to perform your puja, even served a meal,' said Devi Singh to the prince. 'Today there is no sign of such hospitality. Why is that?'

'Perhaps because all of you are with me,' said the prince.

They continued to investigate and explore till at last they found a door, which led them into another garden. 'Yes, this is certainly that other garden in which I found myself when I woke up after my afternoon nap,' said the prince. 'The women who were here took me prisoner...though surprisingly, there is no one here today! Oh this wonderful Chitranagar that changes its nature so quickly! Anyway, let's investigate this place a little more and find out what we can. Let's see if that darbar with the portrait is still there, with all its scintillating splendour! I remember the way, and can lead you there without hesitation!' And the prince set off for the garden in which the court had been held, his three aiyaars following.

Narrative Seven

MAHARAJ JAI SINGH, king of Vijaygarh, first heard the news that even though the tilisma had been broken, Princess Chandrakanta had not been found; this was followed by the news that the princess was alive and well, and that Prince Birendra Singh had returned to the secret valley in search of her. The king had grown sad and despondent at this state of affairs. As for the queen, she could barely eat or drink in her grief over Chandrakanta's disappearance and had become as thin as a stick; the other women in the palace, too, were sad and miserable.

One day, as the Maharaj sat in his darbar, his Diwan Hardayal Singh by his side reading out to him the requests and pleas of his subjects, one of the royal spies entered the darbar bearing a piece of paper with some writing upon it.

The chobdar ushered the spy forward. Diwan Hardayal Singh questioned him, 'What is that piece of paper you bring and what does it say?'

'Such notices and posters are being found all over the city,' replied the spy. 'They can be seen at crossroads, in the markets, and along the main roads of the city. I asked someone to read one of these out to me, and when I

heard what was written upon it, I was afraid, and tearing one of these off, I have brought it to the Maharaj.'

Diwan Hardayal Singh took the piece of paper from the spy and read it aloud to the king. This is what it said:

The kings of Naugarh and Vijaygarh are celebrating success these days! They are very pleased they have conquered Chunar and believe that now they have no enemy left to fear. In the same manner, Birendra Singh is celebrating too, and exploring the secret valley free of care. They do not know that I, their greatest enemy, am still alive! I will begin my work today. One by one, I will find and kill every nobleman, every wealthy merchant and every man of influence in the two kingdoms of Naugarh and Vijaygarh. I will grind both the kingdoms into dust. And I will not be caught. Don't assume that you will outwit me with your aiyaars, for I think nothing of them. I, too, am a great aiyaar, though I will not take anyone prisoner. I will merely kill them. Now if you want to stay alive, leave this place! Beware! Beware! Beware!

—*The Most Devilish of All Aiyaars, Jalim Khan the Tyrannical*

Maharaj Jai Singh was deeply disturbed by this message. Hardayal Singh, too, was deeply shaken, as was the rest of the court.

Though Maharaj Jai Singh had listened in growing alarm and consternation, he hid his worry so as to give the others courage. 'We are not frightened by the vile threats of such base creatures as this man! Let it be announced in the town that Jalim Khan is our responsibility. He will be found and caught before he can harm anyone. No one should leave their home and run because they are afraid of this scoundrel! Let the announcement be made, and a heavy guard set up in and around the city! Let the royal spies be sent out to find and lay low this devil!' he declared.

A short while after this announcement, the Maharaj dismissed the darbar, indicating to Hardayal Singh that he should stay back once the others had left.

The two men retired to the king's private audience chamber and sat in deep thought, pondering this new problem of Jalim Khan.

'We have no aiyaars here with us, and they are needed to combat such a menace,' said Hardayal Singh.

'Write to Raja Surendra Singh at once, telling him of these events. Send off the letter immediately, along with the poster that the royal spy had brought with him,' said the king.

Hardayal Singh did as the king ordered, and calling one of the royal spies, bade him carry the letter and the poster to Naugarh immediately, making sure he did so with the greatest secrecy and dispatch. The Maharaj dismissed his diwan after ordering the guard to be doubled around the palace that night.

The king retired to his palace, where he told the queen about this latest development. The queen, too, was disturbed and upset at the news, and when the other women came to know of it, there was quite a commotion in the palace. The night was thus spent in restless fear and worry.

The following day, as the Maharaj sat in his darbar, another royal spy appeared, with another, similar notice in his hand. 'Posters such as these have appeared all over the city today,' he said, handing the sheet of paper to the diwan. Hardayal Singh read the notice aloud to the king. This is what it said:

Well done! Excellent! You cannot be congratulated enough! You couldn't stop me yourself so you asked Naugarh for help! It seems you do not know of the havoc I have wreaked in Naugarh. Did you think your spy could sneak away without my finding out? I have killed him. Send someone to fetch his body—it is lying a kos away from the city.

—*The same, Jalim Khan*

The king's heart filled with dread upon hearing this, and all those in the darbar trembled with fear. Each man began to fret and worry about his own safety. The king ordered several men to find and bring back the corpse of the spy who had been killed. As they waited, the word spread and a huge and tumultuous crowd, several thousand strong, gathered outside the court. The

name of Jalim Khan was on every tongue, creating a ripple of terror through the crowd. The spy's body was recovered, though of his head they could find no trace; the letter he had been given to deliver to Naugarh was still tucked into his sash.

Though the king reassured the people and gave them courage, he, too, was afraid and worried about his own life. He turned to the diwan and said, 'Let it be known in the town that anyone who helps us capture and take prisoner the fiend who calls himself Jalim Khan will be given a reward of ten thousand rupees from the royal treasury. And let another letter stating the events that have taken place here be sent to Naugarh at once; this time make sure that the letter is carried by five armed and mounted men.'

The king dismissed the darbar and retired to his palace. The five men, entrusted with the task of reaching the letter to Naugarh, trembled with fear, and decided that as soon as they were clear of the city walls, they would throw their horses into a gallop and reach Naugarh without a halt. It was not to be.

The very next morning a sentry presented himself in the darbar, bearing another notice. Hardayal Singh took the notice from his hand and read it:

Did these five horsemen dare to think that they could escape me? Today it is these five that I have killed; from tomorrow, I will move these games to your palace. There, I have warned you! Now be very careful. You have announced that the one who takes Jalim Khan prisoner will be given ten thousand rupees as reward. I say that I will give the one who catches me twenty thousand rupees.

—*The same, Jalim Khan*

This announcement terrified the people. The king was at a complete loss, and gave up all hope of ever being able to reach a letter to Naugarh. It wasn't feasible to send an entire army just to deliver a letter, and there seemed no other way! What's more, the royal spies had brought news of the fear that had spread through the town. It would not be a surprise if, over the next couple of days, the townsfolk abandoned their homes and fled the city to safety.

These thoughts threw the king into deeper gloom. He sent several men to recover the bodies of the dead horsemen. The men trembled in fear, but it was their king's command and they could not disobey.

The bodies were brought back. This time the heads were still attached to the bodies, though around each neck was a mark, as though the men had been hanged.

The king sat sunk in silence. He had no more words left and his mind refused to work. All at once he saw Pandit Badrinath walking towards him.

Pandit Badrinath's glory had to be seen to be believed. Quick and alert, he was dressed in the full splendour of an aiyaar and more—armed with bow and arrows, dressed in well-fitting breeches down to his knees, his bag of aiyaari tools and dagger fastened at the waist, a coil of rope slung over his shoulder, and a pouch full of stones as ammunition for the sling that hung around his neck, he arrived, resplendent, in the darbar.

The Maharaj was aware that Shivdatt had left with his queen for the forest, and that Badrinath, Pannalal, Ram Narayan and Chunnilal were now in the service of Raja Surendra Singh. Badrinath's arrival, therefore, was to him as a life-giving elixir to a dead man. He greeted him joyfully and bade him be seated.

‘You have come here at an opportune moment,’ said the king.

‘Yes, do not worry any more. I will catch Jalim Khan within a day or two,’ said Badrinath.

‘How did you hear of Jalim Khan?’

‘I heard of him in Naugarh itself, though the manner in which I came to know of him I will explain later. When I reached here, I found the townspeople gloomy and afraid. I tried to give them courage, and told everyone I met that they should be afraid no more for I had come and would save them. I will tell you more when we are alone. The steps we have to take to deal with this menace, those too, I shall discuss with you and Diwan Hardayal in solitude. For now, I must bathe and rest—only then will I be able to do more.’

Badrinath's presence brought back the glimmer of a smile upon the king's face. Asking Diwan Hardayal Singh to look after Badrinath and make sure that his comfort was taken care of and that he lacked for nothing, he dismissed the darbar.

‘When may I see the king this evening?’ asked Badrinath. ‘It is in the evening that I will discuss my plans.’

‘You are welcome to come and see me at any time you wish,’ replied the king, and retired to his palace.

Badrinath and Hardayal made their way to the latter’s house, where Badrinath spent the rest of the day planning and strategizing to capture Jalim Khan. As evening fell, he went in search of Maharaj Jai Singh, taking Hardayal Singh with him. Learning that the king was taking his evening stroll in the garden, they joined him there.

As soon as the king saw Badrinath and Hardayal Singh approach, he dismissed his attendants and servants so that the three of them could speak in privacy. After some talk about Shivdatt Singh, the Maharaj turned to Badrinath and said, ‘Now tell me, how did this news about Jalim Khan reach Naugarh?’

‘He put up similar notices in Naugarh, threatening to wreak havoc in Vijaygarh. That is why my king sent me here,’ explained Badrinath.

‘This evil Jalim Khan—he did not take any lives in Naugarh, did he?’ asked the king.

‘No, he doesn’t have Naugarh in his clutches so completely yet. The aiyars are fully engaged in effecting his capture as quickly as possible.’

‘He has killed many in Vijaygarh!’ said the king.

‘Yes, I heard of the killings as soon as I entered the city. We shall see...’ said Badrinath.

‘If you had brought Jyotishi ji with you, his skills at divination would have helped us catch him quickly,’ said the king.

‘Maharaj, consider his impudence,’ said Badrinath. ‘He announces his plans and then carries them out! Such audacity must be paid back in the same coin! He must be caught and punished with equal swagger! Why do we need Jyotishi ji for that?’

‘Well, let us see how we catch him,’ said the king, despondently. ‘He has the whole town cowering in terror.’

‘Don’t worry, I will catch one or the other by tomorrow morning.’

‘Why, is this the work of more than one man?’ asked the king, surprised.

‘Yes, there must be several men involved,’ said Badrinath. ‘One man alone cannot keep track of events in both Vijaygarh and Naugarh, and create chaos in both places at once.’

‘Very well, do what you must,’ said the king. ‘Your coming has given me great hope, for before that I was both anxious and helpless to deal with this menace.’

‘Give me permission to leave your presence, sire, I have much to do!’ said Badrinath.

‘Do you not need to return to your room?’ asked Hardayal Singh.

‘No,’ Badrinath shook his head. ‘I came to see the king fully prepared and with everything that I need upon my person. I will now do what is needed to find Jalim Khan.’

A few hours of the night had already passed when Badrinath thus took leave of Maharaj Jai Singh and began his hunt for Jalim Khan.

Narrative Eight

BADRINATH HAS SET off in search of Jalim Khan—no one knows what he plans to do, or how he will find him and take him prisoner. In his last message, Jalim Khan had threatened Maharaj Jai Singh that he would now move his activities to the royal palace itself.

Jalim Khan’s threat had had a profound effect on the Maharaj. He had quadrupled the guard on the palace, and had taken to staying up all night, his hand always upon the hilt of his sword. He had been somewhat reassured by Badrinath’s arrival, but the morning after the very night that Badrinath left in search of Jalim Khan, more posters appeared, at every crossroads and along every major road in the city. A copy of these was brought to the court by one of the royal spies, and Hardayal Singh read it out to the king. This is what the latest notice said:

Maharaj Jai Singh,

Beware! Do not depend on Pandit Badrinath’s aiyaari, for what can that callow youth do? Earlier, you had only to contend with Jalim Khan as your enemy. Now I have arrived as well. In the next fifteen days, I will destroy this city, and four days from today I will come to your palace at midnight, bearing Badrinath’s head. Beware! Beware! Take me prisoner then, when I come to your palace. Let me also see which gallant steps

forward to do so! Anyone who looks upon himself as an enemy of the Maharaj and wishes to meet me can do so upon the Pointed Peak at midnight.

—Afat Khan the Evil, Murderer.

This latest message destroyed whatever hope and courage remained with the king. Honour and the rules of valour would not allow him to leave Vijaygarh and run away, though every instinct in him screamed at him to do so. He dismissed the darbar and retired with Diwan Hardayal Singh to his private audience chamber, to discuss in detail this new menace of Afat Khan, Murderer.

‘Badrinath’s coming had given us hope that perhaps Jalim Khan would be caught, but now it seems that Badrinath himself is in danger,’ said Hardayal Singh.

‘If only it were possible to reach news of this latest development to Naugarh, for then another aiyaar could have come to assist Badrinath,’ said the Maharaj.

‘Any messenger we send to Naugarh will be killed, unless, of course, we send an entire company of two hundred men!’

‘We have scores of spies in our service, and though the bastards feed on my bounty, not one of them has been of any use! They haven’t brought me news of Jalim Khan, nor have they been able to reach a simple message to Naugarh!’ exclaimed the king, angrily.

‘Since the murder of the first royal spy, the rest have taken fright!’ agreed Hardayal Singh.

‘Bring these royal spies to me this evening. Either they will find a way to catch these scoundrels, or I will line them up in front of a cannon and blow them to pieces, and then I myself will go after these murderers,’ declared the king.

‘As you command,’ said Hardayal Singh, and took his leave.

The diwan returned home, greatly troubled. He hoped against hope that the royal spies would come up with a solution, but he knew that that was unlikely. And then, if the Maharaj himself decided to step out in search of the murderers, his own life, the diwan was sure, would be in danger.

Narrative Nine

PRINCE BIRENDRA SINGH set off for the third garden, where he had seen Princess Chandrakanta's portrait holding court and before which he had been presented like a common thief by the women. He remembered the way to the darbar clearly and as he led the way to it, they saw a young woman coming towards them. She was elegantly dressed in expensive garments, and quite beautiful to look at. She came up to the prince and handed him a letter. Surprised, and once again lost in wonder at the strangeness of this place, the prince took the letter and read it. This is what it said:

You have been in our land for several days, and the responsibility for looking after you, our guest, rests upon us. Today, we have everything in readiness for you. Follow this young woman and accepting our hospitality, grace our humble home with your presence. It will be a kindness that I will remember with gratitude all my life.

—Siddhanath Yogi

The prince handed the letter to Tej Singh, who read it and remarked, 'He is a sadhu, a yogi—and it is from this state of being that he derives the authority that is evident in his letter.'

Evening was drawing in, and while the prince pondered how best to respond to this letter, Tej Singh addressed the young woman. 'We accept Yogi ji's hospitality, but we cannot come with you right away. It is dusk, and we need an hour to perform our evening puja.'

'I will wait till you finish your puja,' said the woman. 'With your permission, may I bring the water you will need to perform the rituals, and stools or rugs to sit on?'

'No, there is no need,' said Devi Singh.

'Then how will you perform the evening puja? There is no stream or pond in this garden!' said the woman.

'There is a pond in that other garden,' said Tej Singh.

‘Why do you go to so much trouble?’ said the woman. ‘Give me a few moments and I will arrange it all for you, or come with me to the other garden and perform your puja there—there is still time for it.’

‘In that case, all right, bring the water, for we prefer to do the evening puja in this garden,’ said Tej Singh.

At this the woman hurried away, in the direction of the third garden.

‘If the sender of this letter is the same yogi who stopped me from leaping to my death, then this is good news indeed, because we shall surely meet the Forest Maiden again!’ said the prince. He paused and looked at Tej Singh. ‘Why did you not accept the woman’s offer? We could have gone into that third garden and done our evening puja there! I was about to agree, but I held myself in check, thinking that you must have a reason for refusing.’

‘Yes, I do have a reason,’ agreed Tej Singh.

‘Why, ustad, what is that reason?’ asked Devi Singh.

‘Wait and see, you will know soon enough,’ replied Tej Singh.

‘Why don’t you tell us now?’ asked the prince.

‘It’s like this,’ explained Tej Singh to the prince, ‘I have been thinking—what if the yogi is playing us false? In that case, he will mix a potion into our food to render us unconscious and once we fall asleep, he will have us moved out of the valley and seal all paths of entry. If that were to happen, all our efforts will come to naught. Remember, you were rendered unconscious in this very garden after drinking some water, and once you fell asleep, you were left in the secret valley. Had that not happened, we would have found out something about this place long before. And on the other hand, having accepted his hospitality, we cannot be late for our meal or refuse to eat, for that would be very rude and inconsiderate of us.’

‘So then, what’s the solution?’ asked Devi Singh.

Tej Singh laughed. ‘The solution is simple,’ he said. ‘Remember that tilismi rose? I will use that to make an antidote which I will give all of you and take some myself. Then we will be immune to all attempts to drug us for the next seven days.’

‘That is a good plan,’ agreed the prince. ‘Imagine how clever must have been the physician who created such a rare flower out of drugs and potions!’

Just then, they saw the young woman returning; she was followed by three more women carrying the vessels and other paraphernalia needed for the evening puja. They set these down in the shade of one of the trees in the

garden. 'Now leave us for a while,' said Tej Singh to the women. 'We do not perform our evening puja in front of women.'

'I have spent my whole life serving men such as you,' protested the young woman. 'Why do you need to give me excuses? Why not say clearly that you want me to leave? If that's what you want, I shall leave you!' and the young woman flounced off, taking the other three with her.

The men burst out laughing. 'She must spend a lot of time with aiyaars,' they said, amused.

After completing their evening puja, Tej Singh rubbed the rose in some water of which he made everyone drink a little, taking a few sips himself. Thus protected against any drugs or potions to induce unconsciousness, they waited for the young woman to return.

The young woman led them to the third garden which the prince knew very well, though none of the aiyaars had ever visited it before. This was the same garden, which, beautifully decorated and lit with hundreds of lights, had been the site of the strange darbar with Princess Chandrakanta's picture occupying the place of the sovereign. Today, though, none of the earlier activity was visible—there were no bright lights and no crowds of people walking around. Yes, some parts of the garden were lit, but only as a matter of necessity, and a few women strolled slowly here and there.

Dusk had fallen, and darkness gathered. The young woman led them towards the same building where the prince had seen the darbar presided over by Chandrakanta's portrait. As they walked briskly towards the building, he vowed to himself that he would not leave the yogi's domain till he had the answers to all his questions—who was the Forest Maiden and how had she come by the magical book? Why had she helped him so much, and where had Princess Chandrakanta disappeared?

They entered the audience chamber. Today there was no grand darbar in session, nor any portrait of the princess presiding over it. Instead, a large carpet had been spread upon the floor and upon it, on a deerskin, sat the same yogi who had stopped the prince from jumping to his death. The Forest Maiden sat a little way behind him, and in front stood several girls, their hands folded in deference.

The yogi, seeing the prince, stood up in welcome. Walking up to him, he took his hand and leading him towards the carpet, seated him upon his right, sharing the deerskin with him. The Forest Maiden rose and moved away, and stood gazing at the prince with adoring eyes.

The prince, too, had eyes for nothing and no one except the Forest Maiden. Their eyes, full of love for each other, met and locked; neither could look away from the other, though each blushed with the confusion that new lovers feel in each other's presence at first. It was only the presence of the old yogi that stopped them from rushing into each other's arms, for neither wanted him to see their lovelorn glances.

'Prince, I hope that you and your companions are well?' inquired the yogi politely after a while.

'Yes, by your grace we are well, except...' answered the prince.

'Except...what?'

'Except that I am not at ease, for there are many secrets here that remain unrevealed to me...though I am sure that you can, if you so desire, provide me with all the answers that I seek,' said the prince.

'By the grace of God, your mind will soon be set at ease, and all your doubts will vanish,' reassured the yogi. 'For now, accept the simple meal I offer you. We may then continue talking into the night. If He so wills, your troubles will end tonight and your days of happiness begin with the dawn.'

The yogi's words fell like life-giving rain upon the parched hearts of the prince and his aiyaars. They began to hope again, that now at long last, all would once again be well. Soon, they were served a lavish meal, each dish fit only for kings and outdoing the previous one in taste and flavour.

After they had eaten their fill, a beautiful rug was spread upon the stone platform that graced the centre of the garden. The yogi spread his deerskin upon the rug and sat down, inviting the prince to join him. The Forest Maiden and her two companions settled themselves, at a little distance, upon the rug. All the other women were dismissed.

One watch of the night had passed. The moon had risen and shone in its full glory. A cool breeze brought with it the sweet fragrance of flowers. The yogi smiled and said to the prince, 'Now ask me all that you wish to know, I will answer your questions, and complete all that still remains to be done.'

Prince Birendra Singh's heart was full of unanswered questions, each begging to be asked and answered first. He sat down next to the yogi and after some thought, began to ask his questions.

Narrative Ten

MEANWHILE, DIWAN HARDAYAL Singh gathered the royal spies together and spent the rest of the day in discussion with them. As evening fell, he entered the royal garden to present himself and the spies to Maharaj Jai Singh as he had been ordered.

The king addressed the spies and asked, ‘You, all of you, why have you not been able to find this Jalim Khan?’

‘Sire,’ replied the spies, ‘we are doing all that we possibly can, and hope that we will find him soon.’

‘Afat Khan is the newest menace—he has even told us where he can be found and when,’ continued the king. ‘Why, then, can you not take him prisoner?’

‘Maharaj,’ said the spies, ‘where do we begin our search? Afat Khan has given his location only as Pointed Peak. We do not know which peak he means, where it lies, what place he has named thus and what he means by it all.’

The king grew thoughtful. The spies were right. He, too, could not fathom where or what Pointed Peak might be. Warning the spies to remain alert, he dismissed them.

The king now lost all hope and resolved to spend his nights in watchfulness, his hand upon the hilt of his sword. Only his own courage, he now believed, could keep him alive.

The next day, more posters appeared in the city; a guard brought the king a copy and Hardayal Singh read it out. This is what it said:

Be very careful, remain vigilant at all times! I have Badrinath, and I will fulfil my earlier promise. At midnight tomorrow, I and my companions will come to your palace, bringing Badrinath's head with us! I dare you to take us prisoner.

—Afat Khan

Narrative Eleven

IN A DEEP and dark forest near Vijaygarh, upon a large boulder by the side of a rushing stream, sit two men, conversing in low tones with each other. The moon is very bright, and their faces and attire are clearly visible. Of the two men, one appears to be some forty years of age. He is tall and well-built and dark of complexion, and is dressed in breeches and a tight-fitting singlet. He has laid his weapons—a bow and arrows and a shield—before him, and kneels on the ground upon a single knee. In the moonlight, his dark beard and huge, ferocious moustache can be clearly seen, as can his dark and bloodshot eyes; he is clearly a scoundrel and a rogue. His name is Jalim Khan.

The other, who sits facing him, is called Afat Khan. He is sturdily built, and wears close-fitting breeches and a tunic; in front of him lies an axe, and beside him a small bundle. He is listening intently to Jalim Khan.

‘Finding you has been a great support,’ said Jalim Khan.

‘And for me, finding you!’ replied Afat Khan. Picking up the axe, he added, ‘Look at this axe, this will kill thousands. I don’t use any other weapon but this. Its blade has been dipped in poison so that the tiniest wound from it is fatal.’

‘I found you with great difficulty!’ exclaimed Jalim Khan.

‘I was determined to meet you, which is why I put up those notices. I was sure that you would know aiyaari, and therefore gave my location in the language of aiyaari that no one but an aiyaar would understand,’ explained Afat Khan.

‘I have learnt some aiyaari, but you seem to be a master in this skill, for you have managed to catch Badrinath!’ said Jalim Khan.

‘No, I’m not really a master, but yes, I know enough to deal with a young lad like Badrinath!’ said Afat Khan.

‘Whatever you may say, I acknowledge you as my master, my ustad!’ declared Jalim Khan. ‘Let us have a glimpse of Badrinath!’

‘Yes, of course,’ said Afat Khan. ‘I have buried his body, but his head is in that bundle there. But be careful, don’t touch it, I have treated it with a powder so that it does not begin to rot by tomorrow!’ Afat Khan picked up the small bundle that lay beside him, and untied it. The cloth was soaked with blood, and within it lay Badrinath’s severed head. The other men gathered there—followers of the two—began to hoot in delight at the sight.

‘This man was a troublemaker,’ said Jalim Khan.

‘Yes, but he could not escape me!’ declared Afat Khan.

‘Ustad, there is one thing you say though, that I do not like—that we will have to go to the palace at midnight tomorrow!’ said Jalim Khan

‘What is wrong with that? Watch the fun we’ll have!’

‘But ustad, you have announced to them that we will be there and so there will be a great crowd gathered there! What if they take us prisoner?’

‘Who on this earth can take us prisoner?’

‘What is the point of putting our lives in danger?’ persisted Jalim Khan.

‘Why don’t we go later, at another hour?’

‘You are a fool!’ declared Afat Khan. ‘Have you not understood at all why I have planned thus?’

‘You are the master,’ shrugged Jalim Khan.

‘Well then, listen!’ said Afat Khan. ‘I intend to kill all of them together and at once. Consider all those who will gather there tomorrow already dead. I will finish them off without moving a finger.’

‘How is that possible, ustad?’ asked Jalim Khan.

Afat Khan opened his bag and pulled out what looked like a small cannonball. ‘Look carefully at this ball,’ he said. ‘I have made several of these, and all of you will carry one each. As soon as we reach the palace, throw this into the crowd of people who would have gathered there to arrest us. The balls will explode with a great noise and release a dense and poisonous smoke that will blind them as soon as it touches their eyes, and kill them as soon as they breathe it in.’

The others were delighted at this scheme. ‘Master, please demonstrate how these work by exploding one here. It will give us more courage,’ suggested Jalim Khan.

‘All right, watch!’ said Afat Khan, and threw the ball he held upon the ground. It exploded with a loud bang, exactly as he had said it would, and threw off a dense, black smoke. Afat Khan, Jalim Khan and their men moved away quickly, but even so, their eyes became sore and their heads began to spin. Afat Khan pulled out a box of ointment from his bag and passed it around. The ointment gave some relief to their sore eyes, and when rubbed on their palms and inhaled, cured the dizziness. The men recovered and began to praise Afat Khan’s genius.

‘This is a wonderful invention, ustad!’ exclaimed Jalim Khan.

‘What do you say? Now do you have confidence enough to come with me to the palace?’ asked Afat Khan.

‘I thank Providence that I met you! You can accomplish in a day what it would have taken us a year to do! This is wonderful, master! We will follow you to the palace with joy and speed them on their way to hell! Come, give each of us one of these wonderful bombs of yours.’

‘Why now?’ asked Afat Khan. ‘I will hand these out just before we leave. We still have tomorrow to wait.’

‘As you say, ustad,’ agreed Jalim Khan. ‘But why did you give them so much time? Had you announced today as the day we would enter the palace, then we need not have waited another day and could have had our fun tonight itself.’

‘I had thought that Badrinath was cunning and shrewd and may not be taken so quickly and so I kept some time in hand. But he turned out to be rather simple-minded and a coward as well,’ explained Afat Khan.

‘So what should we do next?’

‘Right now, there is nothing more to be done except to prepare for tomorrow night’s excursion to the palace.’

‘You need not ask that again. Now we are fully with you and shall do as you say,’ said Jalim Khan.

‘In that case, we should move away from this spot and find another place to hide and rest for the day. Let us see what Fate brings tomorrow. I have taken a vow that I will not swallow a morsel till I have entered that palace and killed everyone,’ said Afat Khan.

‘Ustad, you should eat, or you will lose your strength.’

‘Enough, I do not suffer if I do not eat,’ said Afat Khan, and standing up, walked away from that spot, the others following.

Narrative Twelve

THE NEXT DAY dawned bright and clear—it was the day that Afat Khan was expected to appear in the palace with Badrinath’s head. The whole city of Vijaygarh was in a frenzy of preparation. Maharaj Jai Singh had been organizing his men all day. Sword in hand, he walked amongst his people,

giving them courage and advice. ‘Keep a close lookout for strangers and arrest anyone who is unfamiliar to you!’ he ordered. The brave and stalwart amongst the population of Vijaygarh were planning how they would fight and kill Afat Khan and his men. The Maharaj had lifted the guard outside the palace as enticement for Afat Khan to enter. He was certain that no purpose would be served by posting men outside the palace—that would only result in Afat Khan running away, possibly after killing some of the guards. No, it was much better that he be allowed to enter the palace without any hindrance, where he could be taken easily by the king and his soldiers. The palace was brightly lit in preparation for Afat Khan’s coming—there were no shadows where he might hide himself.

It was exactly midnight when six men entered the palace by way of the roof, and jumped into the centre of the crowd of armed men that stood waiting for them. Foremost amongst the intruders was Afat Khan, with Badrinath’s severed head held aloft in front of him.

Narrative Thirteen

MEANWHILE, PRINCE BIRENDRA Singh and the yogi were deep in conversation. The prince asked his questions and the yogi answered them, while the Forest Maiden and the aiyaars listened intently to all that was being said.

‘First tell me, is Chandrakanta alive or is she dead?’ asked the prince.

‘Dear God, dare anyone kill Chandrakanta? She is alive and well and very much in this world!’ declared the yogi.

‘Will I ever see her again?’

‘Yes, of course!’

‘When?’

The yogi nodded in the direction of the Forest Maiden. ‘When she so desires,’ he said.

The prince looked at the Forest Maiden. She seemed to be in a peculiar state of agitation, shivering and trembling now and then as though caught in some strange emotion. The yogi, seeing her thus disturbed, fixed her with a sharp stare, and the Forest Maiden pulled herself together into some semblance of calm. The prince, who had been observing the Forest Maiden

carefully, turned to the yogi and said, 'If you so desire, then I know that I will meet Chandrakanta again.'

'No, that is entirely in her hands,' said the yogi, gesturing once more at the Forest Maiden. 'But she is under my command, so do not worry. Ask me all that you need to, and then you will be told how you may be with Chandrakanta again.'

'Very well, then,' continued the prince, 'tell me, what is the Forest Maiden's true identity? Who is she?'

'She is the daughter of a king.'

'She helped me in many ways, what are her reasons for that?'

'Her reasons are only that there is great love between her and Princess Chandrakanta.'

'If that is so, then why does she wish to marry me?'

'She has no need to marry you, nor does she want to—but she is helpless in the face of Chandrakanta's insistence, who desires that she marry you,' said the yogi.

The prince was secretly delighted to hear this, and asked the yogi, 'If she and Chandrakanta are so fond of each other, then why does she not bring Chandrakanta to me?'

'It is not time yet.'

'Why not?'

'Bring Raja Surendra Singh and Maharaj Jai Singh here. She will give Chandrakanta into their safe custody.'

'I shall leave at once,' declared the prince, 'and return with both as soon as I can.'

'Before you go, answer one question of mine,' requested the yogi.

'What is that?'

The yogi gestured towards the Forest Maiden. 'This girl has helped you a great deal, and you and your aiyaars have seen her and know about her,' he said. 'Who else is there who knows of her, and besides your aiyaars, who else has seen her?'

'No one else, except Fateh Singh,' answered the prince.

The Forest Maiden stepped forward. 'He has met me once before,' she said, glancing at Tej Singh. 'But perhaps he has not told you of our meeting, because I had sworn him to secrecy.'

The prince looked questioningly at Tej Singh.

‘Yes, sire, she is right,’ replied Tej Singh. ‘This happened when you had once said that my aiyaari was jinxed and had become useless. If you recall, I had gone away. It was then that I met her and warned her that till she told me everything about herself, I would follow her and not let her rest. She had replied that the day would come when both she and Chandrakanta would be your brides, but meanwhile I should not pursue her, for that would only harm us. I had asked her to swear that Chandrakanta would be reunited with you, for only then would I leave her. She had, in turn, made me swear that I would not tell anyone of our meeting till she and you could meet. We had each made these promises to each other—and that is why I had said nothing even when you had asked. But today you and the Forest Maiden have met each other face to face, and therefore I am free to tell you of our meeting.’

The yogi turned back to the prince. ‘All right, even if no one besides you and your aiyaars have seen her, surely the men in your army must be aware that another woman has appeared who is helping their prince?’

‘No, no one knows that she has helped me,’ said the prince. ‘Though, of course, her masked riders have been seen by several of the men, and would have been noticed whenever they arrived with a letter or message from her,’ he added.

‘That doesn’t matter,’ said the yogi. ‘But tell me, did you speak of her to Raja Surendra Singh or Maharaj Jai Singh?’

‘I haven’t mentioned her to them, though I did give every detail to Diwan Jeet Singh, Tej Singh’s father. He may have told my father about her,’ said the prince.

‘No, Jeet Singh would not say anything of such matters to your father,’ said the yogi. ‘But from now on, remember—no one should come to know of all that the Forest Maiden has done with you and for you.’

‘I will not say a word,’ promised the prince. ‘But do explain, why not? How will such secrecy help? If I tell others of all that she has done, it will only reflect well on her.’

‘Perhaps it will reflect well on her amongst you and your people, but think how angry and upset her parents would be if they came to know what she has done? It is shameful that a young girl from a noble family should meet and write letters to a strange man, and even ask him to marry her!’

‘That is true,’ agreed the prince. ‘But tell me, who are her parents and where do they live?’

‘You will learn that when you bring Raja Surendra Singh and Maharaj Jai Singh here, and once Princess Chandrakanta has been delivered safely to them,’ said the yogi.

‘Then give me leave, that I may go at once to fetch them,’ said the prince.

‘This is hardly the time for you to leave,’ protested the yogi. ‘It is the middle of the night and unsafe in the forest. It is not as though you are in a city! Rest for a while and wait until morning, when you may leave.’

The prince gave in, and arrangements were made for him and his aiyaars to spend the night. It was a warm night and they chose to spend it in the open, in the garden. The yogi, after giving instructions that beds be made up for them upon the same marble platform upon which they sat, retired for the night to his own room; the Forest Maiden disappeared as well.

The rest of the night passed uneventfully. Just before dawn, the yogi returned and said to the prince, ‘There is one thing that I forgot to say to you last night: when you return here with Raja Surendra Singh and Maharaj Jai Singh, do not bring them into the secret valley right away. Leave them outside and enter only with your aiyaars. First see me, then return to fetch the two kings.’ The yogi paused. ‘And today, leave only after you have eaten and refreshed yourself,’ he added.

Though mystified by the yogi’s request that he enter the valley without the two kings, the prince did as the yogi suggested, and left the garden only after he and his aiyaars had bathed and eaten. They made their way out of the garden and the secret valley; while the prince and the others waited in the shade of a large tree outside the valley, Devi Singh set off to Naugarh to fetch a horse for the prince.

Only a few hours of the day remained when Devi Singh returned with the horse, and the prince, mounting it, set off for Naugarh with his aiyaars. Reaching the city, he entered the palace and paid his respects to his parents. He did not speak of his adventures nor did he tell anyone what had befallen him. Pannalal and the others gave him an account of all that happened in his absence, and of the terror that Jalim Khan had succeeded in spreading amongst the people of Vijaygarh. He heard of the coming of Afat Khan, and how Badrinath had set off in search of the two criminals, and of Afat Khan’s subsequent boast that he would appear in the royal palace at midnight with Badrinath’s head.

The prince was deeply agitated to learn of the state of affairs in Vijaygarh, and decided that he must leave at once to help Maharaj Jai Singh—for if he did not help Princess Chandrakanta's father under such conditions, she would never forgive him and he would not be able to face her again.

Meanwhile, Tej Singh heard that his father, Jeet Singh, had taken leave from the court for fifteen days and left the kingdom for some undisclosed destination. This troubled him greatly. Where could his father have gone? There was no task that needed doing for either the family or the community, so why had he made this excuse? Disturbed and anxious, he questioned his mother. 'Son,' she replied, 'are the wives of aiyaars ever told by their husbands where they go or what they do?' Tej Singh fell silent, acknowledging the truth of this.

The next morning, Tej Singh informed Raja Surendra Singh of the yogi's request. 'If you and Maharaj Jai Singh return with us, Princess Chandrakanta will be delivered safely into her father's custody,' explained Tej Singh.

The Raja was overjoyed to hear this. 'I am willing to leave at once,' he declared, 'but Maharaj Jai Singh is in trouble. Pandit Badrinath has gone to help, let us see what the outcome will be. Of course, you must have heard of all that has taken place in Vijaygarh recently.'

'Yes,' replied Tej Singh. 'In my opinion we should leave at once for Vijaygarh to help the Maharaj.'

'Yes, I was about to suggest the same,' said the Raja. 'But what of the prince? Does he plan to go to the Maharaj's aid or not?'

'You know that the prince is not afraid of Death himself,' replied Tej Singh. 'This Jalim Khan does not frighten him.'

'It is our duty as warriors to fight other valiant warriors, and your duty as aiyaars to deal with the criminal and the secret. But what if this fellow uses his underhand and evil methods to attack the prince himself?' asked the king.

'It may be the prince's duty to fight others as brave as himself, but dare any crook or criminal or any other touch even a hair on his head while we are alive?' protested Tej Singh.

'I believe that honour matters more than anything else, but it is also one's duty to save oneself from evil murderers. Besides, there is really no need for the prince to go to Vijaygarh right now,' said the king. 'Perhaps it is best that you go alone to help the Maharaj. Once Jalim Khan has been caught,

let the Maharaj know all that you have told me and bring him here with you. Then I, too, shall join you, and together we shall go to the secret valley.'

Realizing that Raja Surendra Singh did not wish the prince to go to Vijaygarh, Tej Singh did not insist. Instead, he left for Vijaygarh alone, carrying with him a letter from the Raja to Maharaj Jai Singh.

Tej Singh spent the afternoon sheltering from the fierce sun in the forest, and continued on his way to Vijaygarh in the cool of the evening. He reached Maharaj Jai Singh's palace at midnight, just as six men dropped suddenly from the palace roof to stand in the middle of the waiting crowd, the leader of the six men holding aloft Badrinath's severed head.

In the excitement and tension, no one had noticed Tej Singh's arrival. Now he called out in a loud voice, 'Catch that scoundrel! What are you waiting for?' and stepping forward, threw the rope he held as a lasso towards the men. Several other men rushed forward to grab the criminals. The latter pulled out the round bombs that Afat Khan had given them, and threw them amongst the crowd—but with no effect, for the bombs were dummies! In no time at all, all six men had been caught and taken prisoner.

The crowd now noticed Tej Singh. Afat Khan too, saw him, and called out, 'Tej, memche Badri!' At this, Tej Singh grabbed Afat Singh by the hand and pulling him aside, undid his bonds and embraced him like a brother.

'What are you doing? Why do you embrace him? He is a murderer! Can you not see that he has killed Badrinath?' cried the crowd.

'Quiet!' thundered Tej Singh. 'Can you not see who this is? Is it that easy to kill Badrinath?'

The crowd, mystified at his words, and in awe of him, let him take Afat Khan away. The other five men, though, were tied and bound in chains.

Tej Singh led Afat Khan through the crowd towards Maharaj Jai Singh, who stood watching the commotion a little distance away. The crowd, relieved at the capture of Jalim Khan and his men, was still excitable and agitated. Seeing Tej Singh walking towards him with Afat Khan beside him, the Maharaj pulled out his sword.

'Wait, sire, we are not your enemies!' called out Tej Singh. 'This man, whom you think of as Afat Khan, is actually none other than your friend, Pandit Badrinath!' and Tej Singh took hold of Afat Khan's beard and tugged, so that it came off, revealing Badrinath's face beneath.

The Maharaj steadied himself and drew a long breath. 'Why was Badrinath with that criminal?' he asked.

‘Maharaj, if I had not pretended to join them, how would I have lured them here to be captured?’ asked Badrinath.

‘Whose head do you hold in your hand, then?’ asked the Maharaj.

‘It is made of wax, it isn’t real,’ explained Badrinath.

At this, the cry went up that Badrinath aiyaar had captured Jalim Khan. Badrinath was mobbed by the adoring crowd, and could extricate himself only with great difficulty.

Jalim Khan and his men, realizing that they had been tricked, were livid with rage. But bound and tied, they were helpless and could do no more than curse and shout. Badrinath, unruffled by their curses, only laughed, as did the king and the others gathered there.

Once the palace had been cleared of people, Jalim Khan and his associates securely locked up, and Badrinath had had the chance to wash and refresh himself, the Maharaj invited him to sit down and tell them how he had tricked Jalim Khan.

‘Maharaj, the very first thing I did was to take on the identity of Afat Khan and write the notices announcing my presence, giving my location in a manner that only Jalim Khan or an aiyaar would understand. I already knew that there was no aiyaar here, so no one but Jalim Khan would have any idea of what I had written,’ said Badrinath.

‘You had given your location as the Pointed Peak—what is that?’ asked the Maharaj.

‘In the language of aiyaars, “Pointed Peak” means a deep and swift-flowing river,’ explained Badrinath. He continued with his story, giving the Maharaj and Tej Singh a full account of how he had met up with Jalim Khan and tricked him and his men with the dud bombs and convinced them to follow him into the palace.

The Maharaj, deeply impressed by Badrinath’s ingenuity and courage and grateful for his deliverance from Jalim Khan, gave him land and treasure as reward. But Badrinath refused, saying that he had done only what his master had asked him to do, and without Raja Surendra Singh’s permission he could accept no reward for his services. The Maharaj, even more impressed by Badrinath’s grace and dignity, determined to reward him handsomely in the future.

The night passed in more discussion, and as day broke, Tej Singh and Badrinath took their leave of the Maharaj and made their way to the house of Diwan Hardayal Singh.

Narrative Fourteen

THE NEXT MORNING the Maharaj held his darbar in which Tej Singh and Badrinath were both given seats of honour. Jalim Khan and his four associates were brought before the Maharaj. Upon the king's command, Tej Singh began to interrogate them.

'So, is Jalim Khan your real name, or are you also known by another name?' he questioned.

'I will answer that later. First tell me, is it the custom here to kill aiyaars or not?' replied Jalim Khan.

'No king in all of Hindustan will ever kill an aiyaar,' said Tej Singh, 'unless, of course, the aiyaar breaks the code of the aiyaars.'

'So, will we be executed?' asked Jalim Khan.

'That decision lies with the Maharaj. But are you aiyaars, that you ask these questions?'

'Yes, we are aiyaars!'

'God forbid!' exclaimed Tej Singh. 'Why do you then spoil the name of aiyaars? You are criminals through and through. What can men such as you have to do with aiyaari?'

'We are not new to aiyaari! We have been aiyaars for generations!'

'Perhaps your ancestors were aiyaars, but you are nothing but scoundrels!'

'Since you have already decided that we are scoundrels, what hope do we have of justice?' exclaimed Jalim Khan.

'That is as may be,' said Tej Singh. 'First tell us who you are!'

'If we are to be executed no matter what, why should we tell you who we are, or tell you anything at all? First swear that we will not be killed, and then we shall answer your questions.'

'We cannot make any such promise,' said Tej Singh, 'and whether you like it or not, you will have to tell us the truth.'

'We will not.'

'In which case you will be beaten around the head with shoes till you do.'

'Do what you please, we will not answer your questions.'

'Do I see arrogance here?' taunted Badrinath.

‘Ustad! You deceived me! I looked up to you!’ cried Jalim Khan, turning to Badrinath.

‘What does your regard matter? Sooner or later your head will lie separated from your body,’ said Badrinath.

‘Too bad you couldn’t do so!’ retorted Jalim Khan.

Tej Singh looked thoughtfully at Jalim Khan and his men and realized they would not break under simple interrogation. It was necessary to think of another way to get to the truth. He turned to the Maharaj and said, ‘Let these men, except one (and he pointed to show which one) be taken away and locked up again. We will wait and see what happens.’

The Maharaj gave the order and Jalim Khan and his men were led away, except for the one Tej Singh had indicated.

‘Agreed, O ustad, you are very cunning!’ called out Jalim Khan to Tej Singh. ‘You can recognize a man’s nature from his face! You have picked a coward and you will now be able to learn all that you want to know!’

‘First let me deal with him, then the rest of you will also be brought here,’ called back Tej Singh with a laugh.

It was true that the man whom Tej Singh had picked was a coward. Finding himself alone, without Jalim Khan and his companions for support, he began to fret. Tej Singh ignored him. ‘Bring me a brazier filled with coal, and some iron rods with wooden handles at the end,’ he ordered a chobdar. The darbar watched, mystified by Tej Singh’s demands. As for Jalim Khan’s man, the fellow grew so frightened that he almost lost his mind.

The chobdar ran to fulfil Tej Singh’s order, and returned with a brazier full of coals and several iron rods. ‘Light the fire, and heat these rods in it,’ said Tej Singh.

The prisoner could not stay silent any longer. Terrified, he asked, ‘Why, Tej Singh, what will you do with these iron rods?’

‘I will heat them to red-heat, and when they are sufficiently hot, I will pierce your eyes with two, your ears with another two, and thrust another down your throat into your stomach,’ replied Tej Singh.

‘You are known to be compassionate, so will killing someone with such cruelty not put a stain on your reputation for kindness?’ pleaded the prisoner.

Tej Singh laughed, ‘We can’t let you go...that would be foolish of us, for as long as you live, you will continue to kill. It is better that you die. And the more merciless and cruel your death, the more of a deterrent it will be to other demons like you.’

‘So is there no hope for me?’

‘There is one way, and one way alone, that you can stay alive,’ said Tej Singh.

‘What is that?’

‘If you tell us the truth about yourself and your companions, I will let you go.’

‘I will tell you the truth,’ promised the terrified prisoner.

‘How will we know that what you speak is truth?’

‘I will prove it to you.’

‘All right then, tell us,’ said Tej Singh.

‘Then listen,’ said the prisoner, and prepared to tell his story.

The darbar was full of people that morning, all eager to know the fate of Jalim Khan and his associates. As the prisoner prepared to speak, the crowd surged closer to hear. A young man stepped out of the crowd and moving towards the prisoner, drew his sword and cut off his head with a single stroke. Then, swirling that same sword, he cut his way out of the crowd, wounding several others as he did so.

No one thought to hold him in the confusion, except Badrinath, who followed the young man through the crowd and out of the darbar.

Recovering their wits, hundreds of people ran after Badrinath, all except Tej Singh who ran instead to the prison cells where Jalim Khan and the others had been imprisoned. He was afraid that in the chaos, someone may have used aiyaari and set them free. Much to his relief, he found Jalim Khan and his men still in the cells, just as they should have been.

Tej Singh returned to the darbar to find that only a fraction of the crowd remained, most having followed Badrinath in pursuit of the young stranger.

‘Where had you gone?’ asked the Maharaj.

‘I was worried that Jalim Khan and his associates might have escaped. I went down to the prison cells to make sure they were still there.’

‘Let’s see when Badrinath returns and what news he brings,’ said the Maharaj.

‘Badrinath will be back soon. He is very swift on his feet and would have caught up with the stranger very quickly,’ said Tej Singh.

The king did not dismiss the darbar at his usual time.

‘The Maharaj sits late today,’ remarked Tej Singh.

‘I will wait for Badrinath to return,’ replied the Maharaj. ‘I cannot retire till there is some news of him.’

Narrative Fifteen

SOME TWO HOURS must have passed when they heard a great commotion outside the darbar. A chobdar came running and informed the Maharaj that Badrinath had returned, having caught and captured the young killer.

The chobdar was followed almost immediately by Badrinath himself, who had the murderer with him, securely tied and trussed.

‘Badrinath, could you find out who he is?’ asked the Maharaj.

‘No, he refuses to say who he is, and he won’t say, no matter what we try,’ said Badrinath.

‘So what do we do?’

‘Well, to me it seems as though he has changed his true appearance,’ remarked Badrinath, and calling for some water, he had the captive’s face scrubbed and washed. As they watched, the young man’s appearance began to change, till his true face emerged.

The watching crowd began to chatter amongst themselves and pointed excitedly at the man. It seemed that they had recognized him. The Maharaj, too, looked startled and turning to Tej Singh, said, ‘That’s enough. We know who he is! He is Najim’s brother-in-law! I suspect that Jalim Khan and the others may also be related to Najim and Ahmed in some way! Fetch them back here to the darbar!’

Jalim Khan and his companions were brought into the court once more.

‘You have been recognized, for now we know that you are relatives of Najim and Ahmed,’ said Badrinath to Jalim Khan. ‘Your companion told us,’ he added.

Before Jalim Khan could reply, the young man called out, ‘Jalim Khan, do not believe Badrinath, he is a liar! Your companion told them nothing, for I did not let him. He was a coward and I killed him before he could say a word. No matter how much we are tortured and made to suffer or how we die, we must not tell these people anything!’

‘So be it!’ shouted Jalim Khan in response.

This exchange angered the Maharaj greatly. Livid with rage and trembling in fury, he turned to Badrinath and Tej Singh. ‘This is enough, I do not need to know who they are or what they want. They must be executed at once, their heads severed from their bodies right now, right here!’ he ordered.

The people, thirsty for the blood of the murderers, had only been waiting for the king's command. Jalim Khan and his associates, including the stranger, were executed straight away, and their bodies thrown away.

Tej Singh turned to the king, his hands folded. 'Sire, I have not yet been able to tell you why I came here, and right now is not the time.'

'If it is an important matter, come with me to my palace,' said the Maharaj.

'The matter is very important, but the Maharaj is still angry, and I, too, am not feeling well. For now, let me only say this much that what I have to tell you will bring you great joy,' answered Tej Singh.

At this, the Maharaj's anger disappeared and joy replaced the fury on his face. Taking Tej Singh by the hand, he led him towards the palace; Tej Singh nodded to Badrinath to follow.

Once away from the crowd and in the palace, Tej Singh told the Maharaj all that had happened and of the yogi's request. 'Now you and Raja Surendra Singh must come with us to the secret valley, and with the help of Siddhanath Yogi, bring the princess safely home again.'

The king's joy knew no bounds. He clasped Tej Singh to his chest and said, 'Now run, both of you, and ask Hardayal Singh to prepare for our journey at once. Eat and rest and refresh yourselves. Meanwhile, I will tell the princess's mother this good news!'

The two aiyaars took their leave of the king and left to give Hardayal Singh the news, while the Maharaj himself hurried to tell the queen. The palace, which had been a place of such fear and anger only an hour ago, was transformed into a place of joy. The news spread around the city that the Maharaj would leave shortly to fetch the princess back home, and also that he was to leave for Naugarh at once.

Narrative Sixteen

READERS, WE HAVE now reached that point in our story when we must join in the happiness of Prince Birendra Singh and Princess Chandrakanta. You would have understood by now that Maharaj Jai Singh will go to Naugarh, and from there, with Raja Surendra Singh and Prince Birendra Singh, he will

continue on to the secret valley. You would also remember Siddhanath Yogi's request to the prince that he leave the two kings outside, and first enter the valley alone, and you would know that that is exactly what the prince will do, following the yogi's instructions. So leave these people to their tasks, and come with me to the secret valley, where we shall hide ourselves in a corner and listen to the secret conversations of those who live there. Maybe your questions will be answered here, and the mysteries of the second and third parts of our story solved, and your hearts gladdened.

Prince Birendra Singh, Maharaj Jai Singh and the others have not reached there yet, but come with me, my readers, to that garden in the secret valley where the prince had seen Princess Chandrakanta's portrait in the darbar hall, and where he had later met Siddhanath Yogi and the Forest Maiden.

We are in that garden now. Look how the setting sun gilds the tops of the trees with gold. A cool breeze fills the garden with the delicate fragrance of flowers. And look, there, upon the marble platform in the middle of the garden, stand three beds, which those beautiful young women are preparing with embroidered coverlets. They are taking special care with the jewel-studded bed in the middle. Cast your eyes towards the lawn—the dub grass is so green and perfectly cut, a carpet of green silk. The green of the grass is bordered by colourful flowers, while the balsam trees stand behind them, tall and straight like sentries.

And there, on that side, look at that riot of chameli flowers, and on those trees, so dense that it is difficult to find a path through them; and between them that little pavilion, so pretty, and covered with climbing malati creepers dense with flowers. If you want, pluck a handful of the flowers—no one will see you or object. Look towards the west—beneath the flowering trees, the croton bushes with their variegated leaves, some striped, some white-spotted, some striped with red, some curled like corkscrews, impart a unique look to the garden. And there, look, those triangular beds, with pots of colourful coleus, arranged to look like tiny mountain peaks and surrounded by flowers of so many different hues.

And now our gaze leaves the trees and flowerbeds, and falls upon the three maidens and there our gaze stays fixed. They have made the beds and are now gathering henna leaves. One of the three has appeared several times in our story—she is the Forest Maiden. The other two are her friends, whom she loves dearly.

The Forest Maiden is dressed in white, but her friends wear more colourful clothes—one is in green, the other in red. The three maidens have finished gathering henna leaves, and are coming back towards the marble platform. Perhaps they intend to sit on the beds.

Yes, we are right. The Forest Maiden throws the henna leaves upon the ground, and flings herself as though exhausted upon the middle bed, while her two friends sit, one on either side, upon the other beds.

‘Oh, I am exhausted,’ said the Forest Maiden.

‘You have been wandering all day!’ pointed out her friend in green.

‘Are you tired too?’ asked the maiden in red, turning to the one in green.

‘No, why should I be tired? Remember when we used to walk ten kos a day? I didn’t get tired then, so why should I now?’ the maiden in green replied.

‘Oh, those days were frantic! We were always running here, there and everywhere!’ agreed the maiden in red.

‘So the prince’s aiyaars could not find out who we were,’ remarked the maiden in green.

‘Jyotishi ji himself could not discover us, for all his great skills in divination and geomancy! So what hope did anyone else have?’ said the maiden in red.

‘Jyotishi ji’s skills were rendered useless by these devices that Siddhanath Baba makes us wear around our necks, and which he is still not allowing us to take off,’ pointed out the Forest Maiden.

‘I wonder what they are made of, that they do not allow divination or magic,’ said the maiden in green.

‘I had asked the same question of Siddhanath Baba ji once,’ said the Forest Maiden. ‘He gave me a long explanation which I do not remember. But the gist of it was that these devices are made of several metals, including the metal used most in divination, and those associated with the stars and planets that are used in the calculations. Somehow, the combination of these metals ensures that divination cannot be used any more to locate us.’

‘These devices are very effective,’ agreed the maiden in green. ‘Even when I had gone to their camp as Surajmukhi, Jyotishi ji had been unable to tell that I was an aiyaara!’

‘The prince must have been completely fooled?’ asked the Forest Maiden.

‘Don’t ask!’ laughed the maiden in green. ‘He was so flustered! He could not understand who this evil woman was who had appeared out of nowhere and was setting him impossible conditions!’

‘And just before that I had gone disguised as a foot soldier and taken on Devi Singh! No one had been able to recognize me!’ added the maiden in red.

‘Yes, all this is true, but Fate also plays a role!’ declared the maiden in green. ‘Remember how, when Shivdatt’s aiyaars stole the tilismi book, we happened to come by and saw them burying something in the forest? We waited till they had left, and then dug up whatever it was they had buried—and it turned out to be the magic book?’

‘Oof, it had been so difficult to convince Siddhanath to give us permission to wander in the forest,’ recalled the Forest Maiden. ‘And even then he had made us promise that we would observe the prince only from a distance and never get too close!’

‘That was to protect you,’ pointed out her friend in green. ‘Poor old Siddhanath has never wanted anything for himself!’

‘That is true,’ admitted the Forest Maiden. ‘But what was I to do? I had to see him, I could not rest otherwise!’

‘Well, the two of us had been ordered to keep an eye on the prince, and help him in any way we could! Remember how we saved him from Badrinath when he had disguised himself as that woman gathering flowers in the forest?’ reminded the maiden in green.

‘The aiyaars tried very hard to discover what they could about us! But here we had Siddhanath, the aiyaar to beat all aiyaars, to help us. What chance did the others stand? Remember how we tricked Tej Singh, Devi Singh and Jyotishi ji that time when they tried to swim out to our boat in the Ganga? We even took their clothes off them!’ laughed the maiden in red.

‘Yes, we had led them there on purpose,’ said the maiden in green.

‘Yes, no matter how clever those aiyaars, they cannot win against our Siddhanath—though that Tej Singh, I must admit, is very sharp,’ said the Forest Maiden.

‘So what if Tej Singh is sharp! Our Siddhanath Baba is far sharper!’ declared the maiden in red.

‘That you know better!’ laughed the Forest Maiden.

‘Now you are teasing me!’ protested the maiden in red.

‘In truth, Siddhanath Baba has really deceived the prince. Neither he nor his aiyaars suspected even once that he was using us to break the tilisma of the secret valley!’ said the maiden in green.

‘Yes, when we were busy breaking the tilisma and had locked the entrance to the valley from the inside, Tej Singh had arrived with the unconscious Badrinath on his back to imprison him here. But he had returned unable to get in and quite unsuspecting of us!’ agreed the maiden in red.

‘He must have been really worried to find the door locked from within!’ said the Forest Maiden.

‘Yes, he must have been frantic with worry,’ agreed the maiden in red. ‘We tricked the prince and his aiyaars so many times. See how I pretended to be Surajmukhi on the one hand, threatening to let Shivdatt escape, while here we let him go after swearing friendship to the prince. They must have thought that Surajmukhi was a terrible old witch!’

‘Despite that, that rogue Shivdatt deceived us all and broke his promise of friendship to the prince! He could not be trusted!’ said the Forest Maiden.

‘And that is why we took him prisoner again, and returned the magic book to the prince,’ continued the maiden in red. ‘Yes, it’s true that Kroor Singh did recognize us once, and I was sure that if he escaped alive, our secret would be revealed! And so I fought him. I suppose he was destined to die at my hands, and so he did,’ she added.

‘That wretch was obsessed. He wanted to break the tilisma and take the treasure for himself!’ said the one in green, indignantly.

‘I am very pleased though, that it was I who broke this tilisma in the secret valley,’ said the Forest Maiden.

‘Well, it wasn’t too difficult! Besides, you had Siddhanath Baba to help you,’ pointed out the girl in green.

‘Oh well, at least it was done,’ sighed the Forest Maiden.

Narrative Seventeen

LEAVING HARDAYAL SINGH in his place as regent, Maharaj Jai Singh left for Naugarh with Tej Singh and Badrinath. He took only a small company of five

hundred men with him. They spent a day on the road; the following morning they approached Naugarh and set up camp a little distance away.

Raja Surendra Singh heard of Maharaj Jai Singh's approach, and accompanied by several of his officers and courtiers, he set out to welcome his overlord and lead him with respect into the city.

A palace had already been prepared and set aside for Maharaj Jai Singh's use. The Raja led the Maharaj to his quarters and invited him to a feast that had been prepared in his honour. But Maharaj Jai Singh refused. 'I cannot accept your invitation to a feast for several reasons, so please do not insist,' he said politely. 'It would also be best if you do not ask me what my reasons for refusing are!' he added.

But Raja Surendra Singh understood the Maharaj's reasons, and his heart filled with joy. After all, the father of a bride-to-be could not accept an invitation to a meal of any kind from the father of his future son-in-law!

That night, Prince Birendra Singh and his aiyaars visited Maharaj Jai Singh and paid their respects to him. The Maharaj greeted the prince with great affection and bade him sit beside him. He questioned the prince at length about the tilisma, and the prince answered his questions with grace and patience.

That night it was also decided that they would leave before dawn for the secret valley to meet Siddhanath Baba. They left for the valley by the light of the stars—Maharaj Jai Singh, Raja Surendra Singh, Prince Birendra Singh, Tej Singh, Devi Singh, Pandit Badrinath, Pannalal, Ram Narayan and Chunnilal, taking with them an escort of a thousand men. The valley was not far from Naugarh, and they arrived at its entrance just as the sun began to rise.

With folded hands, Prince Birendra Singh turned to Maharaj Jai Singh and Raja Surendra Singh. 'When Siddhanath Yogi sent me to fetch you, he made me promise that I would ask you to wait at the entrance while I entered the valley first and met him. I am to return again to fetch you. If you give me permission, I will do as the yogi had desired,' he explained.

Maharaj Jai Singh and Raja Surendra Singh gave their permission. 'You must do as the yogi asked,' they said. 'Meanwhile we will set up camp and wait for you.'

Prince Birendra Singh stepped into the secret valley, taking only Tej Singh with him. Taking the same route that they had before, the two men

reached that same garden where lived Siddhanath Yogi and where the prince had seen Princess Chandrakanta's portrait in the darbar hall.

They saw Siddhanath the moment they set foot in the garden. 'You have come?' he called, walking towards them.

The two saluted him from where they stood; going up to him the prince replied, 'In accordance with your wishes, I have left my father and Maharaj Jai Singh outside the valley, and have come alone to meet you.'

'It is well that you have brought them,' said Siddhanath Baba. 'Today you will meet Princess Chandrakanta,' he added.

'If you so desire, then it shall be so,' said Tej Singh.

'Tell me, is all else well? There was no trouble of any kind in Vijaygarh or Naugarh, was there?' asked the baba.

Tej Singh looked at him wonderingly. 'Yes, there was trouble—one Jalim Khan, bearing great enmity towards both kings, had created havoc,' he said.

'Ah yes, I am aware of that. Badrinath did very well, he is truly skilled in the arts of aiyaari. It is well that Jalim Khan and his companions are dead, now others of his gang will stay away and not dare attack the two kingdoms,' nodded Siddhanath Yogi. 'Come,' he added, 'let us stroll around the garden while we talk.'

'If you know this much, then you must also know who Jalim Khan really was?' asked Tej Singh.

'I do not know for sure, but I would guess that he would have been related to either Najim or Ahmed in some way,' said the yogi.

'That must be so,' agreed the prince.

'And Maharaj Shivdatt has left for the forest?' inquired Siddhanath.

'Yes,' confirmed the prince. 'He told my father that he would now spend his days in meditation and prayer.'

'Perhaps,' said Siddhanath Yogi, 'but one should never trust an enemy.'

'Why? Do you think he may resort to treachery again?' asked the prince.

'Who knows!' shrugged the yogi.

'Now if you give me leave, may I go back and fetch Maharaj Jai Singh and my father?' asked the prince.

'Yes, but first hear why I asked you to meet me alone,' reminded the yogi.

'Very well, tell me,' said the prince.

‘It is well known that when one desires something greatly, and if one has lost that something and almost given up hope of ever finding it again, and then finds it suddenly and unexpectedly, then one falls upon that object with as much eagerness as does a hungry hawk upon its prey. I know that there is great love between you and Princess Chandrakanta, and seeing her suddenly again after such a long absence may cause one or both of you to behave in a manner that would not be considered seemly before your fathers. She may show how much she missed you, or you may, in your enthusiasm, stand too close to her. That would not be appropriate. Therefore, it is better that you meet her first, alone,’ explained the yogi. ‘Now come with me,’ he added.

It is difficult to describe the prince’s happiness. He was to meet his beloved Chandrakanta again, after what had seemed to be an age—the love for whom he had left his kingdom at a stroke, and for whom he had searched high and low all this time through unimaginable hardship. And now, suddenly, he was to meet her again! And that too when there were no more obstacles in their way—no anger, no regrets and when no enemy threatened them any more. His heart leapt with joy. Delirious with happiness, he could find no words with which to answer Siddhanath Yogi and followed him in silence.

A young woman could be seen gathering flowers. The yogi called her to him and said, ‘Go to Princess Chandrakanta and tell her that Prince Birendra Singh is on his way to see her, and that she should return at once to her room with her companions.’ The young woman ran off at once to carry out his instructions. The yogi and the two men waited in the garden, the latter lost in their own thoughts. Tej Singh was eager and anxious to meet Chapala. Each man wondered how it would be to meet his beloved after so long. What would he ask her? What would she reply? If she complained, what would he say to her? They waited for a long time in the garden, strolling silently behind the yogi as he paced up and down the paths.

At last the yogi led them to the same room where the prince had seen Princess Chandrakanta’s portrait presiding over a silent darbar. ‘Go, go in there and meet Chandrakanta and her companions. I will meanwhile busy myself with other tasks,’ said the yogi and left them.

Prince Birendra Singh entered the room and saw Princess Chandrakanta at the far end. She stood there with Chapala and Champa, gazing unblinkingly at the prince. Birendra Singh ran towards the princess and she towards him;

but before they could reach each other, they swooned and fell upon the floor in a faint.

Tej Singh and Chapala were also lost in each other. Poor Champa, seeing both the prince and the princess lying upon the floor, ran into the other room and returned carrying a flask of extract of bed-mushk in one hand, and a lump of dried clay in the other. She sprinkled the fragrant bed-mushk on their faces, and dripping some upon the clay, she waved the lump of clay under their noses, like lakhlakha. Tej Singh and Chapala realized what had happened, and joined Champa in trying to revive the prince and the princess.

A short while later, they woke and sat staring at each other. Neither could speak, though each had a hundred questions to ask and a thousand things to tell the other. Their eyes filled with tears and overflowed, so that the tears poured down their cheeks in a cascade.

Hours passed, and the two had still not had their fill of looking at each other. Unaware of their surroundings, unaware of even their own bodies, the prince and the princess still gazed at each other.

Only Tej Singh and Chapala understood their condition, for they themselves were in a similar state. But Champa, seeing the love-struck pairs, was worried—were these four perhaps in danger of losing their minds along with their hearts? She cast about frantically in her mind for a way to make them start talking. At last, she took hold of the princess's hand and said, 'Princess, you used to say that the day you met the prince again you would ask him about the Forest Maiden. Who is that woman? What has he promised her? Now whom does he intend to marry? Have you forgotten all your questions? Will you not ask him these any more?'

It is easy to focus on one another completely only as long as no third person interferes or distracts—that is why the ascetic needs solitude during meditation. Birendra Singh and Chandrakanta's love for each other was not cheap or superficial, they had become one, each heart spoke to the other of the agony of separation, and the other understood. They did not need words, silence was enough and an outsider could not know what was going on in their hearts. But Champa's words startled them. They tore their eyes away from each other and dropped them in confusion, and their heads bent in embarrassment, they began to mumble incoherent words to each other. The princess could not speak of her travails, nor could the prince ask her about them.

Perhaps if they had been left alone long enough, they would have eventually found words. But here, Siddhanath Yogi separated them again. 'Prince, Siddhanath Baba wants you immediately, do not delay,' called a young woman from outside. The prince did not dare disobey the yogi, and his words remained unsaid, as did hers.

The prince wanted to say a few words in parting to the princess, but another young woman appeared and urged him to hurry, the yogi was waiting. The prince and Tej Singh left the chamber and went back into the garden. Siddhanath Baba was waiting for them, and calling the prince to him, gently admonished him. 'Prince,' he said, 'I did not say that you should spend the whole day with Princess Chandrakanta. It is almost afternoon. Those whom you have brought with you and left outside this valley must be waiting for you.'

The prince looked up at the sky. 'Yes, sir, the day has...'

'The day has what?' asked the yogi, sharply.

The prince grew flustered. 'Yes, it is late,' he admitted. 'But now, if I have your leave, may I quickly fetch my father and Maharaj Jai Singh?

'Yes, go and bring them here,' said the yogi, nodding. 'But tell them that they should bring with them into the valley only those men who may look upon Princess Chandrakanta, and with whom she may be without a veil in comfort.'

The prince agreed, and he and Tej Singh prostrated themselves before the yogi in both respect and gratitude. 'There is no need for all that just now, you will have enough opportunities to pay me your respects later,' said the yogi. 'Right now you must hurry—and remember, no one outside this valley must hear the details of your meeting with the princess. Also, if there is not enough of the day left, do not return today, come tomorrow.'

The two men promised and the baba sent them off to fetch the two kings.

It was late afternoon by the time the prince and Tej Singh stepped out of the valley and reached the campsite. Raja Surendra Singh and Maharaj Jai Singh were waiting for them and received them anxiously. The two men gave them the yogi's message, and mumbling some excuse as to the reason why the yogi had wished to see them first, retired to their tents, where they bathed and ate.

Meanwhile, Raja Surendra Singh and Maharaj Jai Singh sat in conference.

‘The yogi has said that we may bring with us only those men who may look upon the princess,’ said Raja Surendra Singh.

‘Well, you and I, the prince and Tej Singh—the four of us are definite. As for the others, you may choose whoever you wish to take,’ said Maharaj Jai Singh.

‘We do not need to take too many men with us,’ said Raja Surendra Singh. ‘We should, of course, take the aiyaars. It is not possible to observe purdah with aiyaars for they know everybody’s secrets. In fact, I would say one should not observe purdah with them.’

‘You are right,’ agreed Maharaj Jai Singh, ‘we need take only the aiyaars with us, no one else needs to come.’

Having made their decision, Raja Surendra Singh summoned Tej Singh and asked, ‘How long will it take us to reach Siddhanath Baba?’

‘If we do not stop on the way and do not get distracted, it will take us about five or six hours,’ replied Tej Singh. ‘In my opinion, we should not venture forth today. Very few hours of daylight remain, and the way is often difficult and treacherous. Once it grows dark, we will not be able to move forward a single step.’

Maharaj Jai Singh was impatient to see the princess again, but he gave in to Tej Singh’s advice, and it was decided that they would all leave for the secret valley early the next morning.

Narrative Eighteen

VERY EARLY THE following morning, Maharaj Jai Singh, Raja Surendra Singh and Prince Birendra Singh reached the entrance to the secret valley. They were accompanied by their aiyaars. The two kings watched in amazement as Tej Singh unlocked the entrance into the secret valley; as they stepped into the valley, their wonder grew and knew no bounds.

Tej Singh, pointing out the various wonders to the two kings, led them to the garden where Siddhanath awaited them. The baba had learnt of their coming and waited at the entrance itself to welcome them.

Tej Singh, pointing towards the yogi, said to the two kings, ‘Look, that is Siddhanath Baba, standing at the door.’

The kings hurried towards the yogi, eager to prostrate themselves before him in deference. But before they could do so, the yogi called out, 'Beware! Do not prostrate yourselves before me! You will regret it if you do, and we will not be able to meet each other's eye!'

The kings stopped, confused and surprised that the yogi had refused their respectful salutations. They came closer and wanted to clasp him by the hand, but this too, he refused to accept. 'Sire, I am not worthy,' he said. 'You are much higher in status than I am.'

'No one has a status higher than a sadhu,' said Raja Surendra Singh.

'What you say is correct, but you do not know what kind of an ascetic I am,' said the baba.

'It does not matter, whatever be the nature of the ascetic, he is worth worshipping,' said the Raja.

'Perhaps, but he must be a sadhu!' said Siddhanath Yogi.

'Then who are you, if not a sadhu?' asked the Raja.

'No one,' answered the yogi.

'I do not understand what you are trying to say,' said Maharaj Jai Singh, 'and with every utterance of yours I feel more anxious, puzzled and worried!'

The baba laughed and brushing off the Maharaj's worry, invited them into the garden.

Now, readers, I do not wish to praise this garden again and again, or describe once more every flower, leaf, plant and tree that grew there. I have written enough of these matters. All I wish to say now is that though the valley had no large and sprawling parks and gardens on describing which we need to waste reams of paper, the gardens that it did have were all, each and every one, beautifully laid out with flowers and fragrant mountain shrubs.

The baba led Maharaj Jai Singh, Raja Surendra Singh, Prince Birendra Singh and their aiyaars to the same audience chamber in which the darbar with the life-sized portrait of Princess Chandrakanta had been held—we should now say the same room in which the prince had met Chandrakanta the previous day!

The audience chamber was decorated in a manner the prince had not seen before. In the centre was a raised dais made comfortable with costly cushions, and to which the baba escorted the two kings and the prince, and seated them in state. The aiyaars were made to sit on either side of them, while the yogi himself took his place upon a deerskin that had already been spread upon the floor in front of the dais.

The yogi addressed the two kings and asked after their welfare.

‘We are well by your grace,’ replied the kings, ‘and today especially, we are overjoyed to meet you.’

‘I put you to the trouble of coming here, for that I apologize,’ said the yogi.

‘It was the thought of coming here that rid us of our troubles,’ said Maharaj Jai Singh, graciously. ‘Had you not come to our aid, I do not know how long we would have had to bear the sorrow of Princess Chandrakanta’s absence.’

‘Now you need not suffer any more in search of the princess,’ said the yogi with a smile.

‘We hope that with your grace, we will meet the princess today?’ asked the Maharaj.

‘If, for any reason, you cannot meet the princess today, you will definitely meet her tomorrow,’ said the yogi. ‘Meanwhile, bathe, rest, eat and refresh yourselves, and we shall speak again.’

The baba ordered one of the young women to prepare everything that was needed for their guests to bathe, and led them to the garden with the pool in which the prince had bathed on his first visit. The men bathed in the pool, and were then served a meal in the very room in which the prince had found himself upon waking and seen the life-sized portrait of Princess Chandrakanta on the wall. The room looked exactly as it had then, except that this time there was no portrait of the princess there.

When, bathed and refreshed, they sat down again, Raja Surendra Singh turned to the yogi. ‘This mountain valley, so full of beautiful gardens, lies within my domain. Yet I have never seen it before. Is there any path to enter and leave it that does not go through my kingdom?’ he asked.

‘The way into this valley is hidden, and therefore not easy to find,’ explained the yogi. ‘Those who know of the enchantment can see it perhaps, and even find their way here. One path, the more obvious one, is the one you have taken. There is another path, but that is even more secret.’

‘Since when have you been living here?’ asked Raja Surendra Singh.

‘I have come to this valley only a few days ago,’ said the baba, ‘and that too, not because I wished to, but for my master’s sake.’

‘Whom do you serve?’ asked the Raja in wonder.

‘That also you will learn soon,’ replied the yogi.

‘The Raja,’ began Maharaj Jai Singh, indicating Surendra Singh with a nod, ‘has a legitimate concern. This mountain and this valley lies within his kingdom, though he has never seen them before today. The gardens and pavilions do not look neglected or abandoned, or as though they do not have a master. You live here, and so we ask you, who owns this place?’

Before Siddhanath Baba could reply, the Forest Maiden was seen approaching. She was accompanied by her two friends, who walked one on either side of her; behind them came another twelve or fifteen maidens.

The baba nodded towards her. ‘She is the owner of this place,’ he said.

The two kings and the aiyaars looked towards the Forest Maiden in astonishment. The prince and Tej Singh, too, were taken aback at this, and memories of certain events came back to them. The prince lowered his head in thought. If the Forest Maiden was indeed the owner of this valley, then Princess Chandrakanta was her prisoner! No wonder the Forest Maiden had written so confidently to him that without her help he would not be able to free the princess. And that is why, the other day, Siddhanath Yogi had said that he would be able to meet the princess only when the Forest Maiden so desired! Yes, she was the one who had held the princess captive. He could never again look upon the Forest Maiden as his friend; rather, she was his enemy because she had, without reason, kidnapped the princess and held her prisoner, put her through immeasurable hardship, and caused him and the others so much trouble while trying to find her again!

Anger and rage bubbled up in the prince’s heart, and he raised his head to look at the Forest Maiden.

Now, though the prince loved Princess Chandrakanta deeply, his love for the Forest Maiden was no less. Yes, it was true that in those moments when he lost himself in thoughts of Chandrakanta, he would not remember the Forest Maiden, but the moment he would see her again, Love would have him in its stranglehold. This is what happened at this moment too. Yes, he was furious that she had made the princess a prisoner, but the fury did not last. His rage evaporated as soon as he looked at the Forest Maiden. His angry thoughts turned to love and pity. ‘No, no, this innocent one cannot be my enemy! How could I even think thus of her? I do not know anyone who is a greater friend to me. Had she not helped me, we could never have broken the tilisma, we would have lost the princess, and I myself would have fallen into the hands of my enemies!’

The others too, had come to the conclusion that if the Forest Maiden was the mistress of the valley, then she must be the one to have held the princess captive. Maharaj Jai Singh could restrain himself no longer, and turning to Siddhanath, he asked, 'So my poor Chandrakanta, caught in this valley, became her prisoner?'

'No,' replied the baba. 'At the time that the princess became trapped here, this valley had no master. It was later that this valley and these parks and gardens came to her.'

This threw the prince into even greater turmoil. Perhaps, if he had been alone, he would have shouted in frustration, but in the presence of the two kings, he dared not let his emotions show. He lowered his head again, his fists clenched in his effort to control his agitation.

Maharaj Jai Singh and Raja Surendra Singh could not bear it any longer either. 'Please, stop this convoluted and mysterious talk, and tell us clearly—who is this girl, who gave her this valley, and where is Princess Chandrakanta?' they asked.

The baba smiled and called the Forest Maiden to him. The Forest Maiden walked up to the baba, together with her two friends, one dressed in green and the other in red. The baba reached up and pulled off what seemed like a thin film stuck to her face, and pulling her by the hand, threw her at Maharaj Jai Singh's feet. 'Here she is, this is your Chandrakanta!' he cried.

The removal of the film showed that the Forest Maiden was indeed Princess Chandrakanta. The Maharaj clasped his daughter to his chest, overwhelmed with relief and joy.

Siddhanath removed the film from the faces of her friends as well—the one in red was none other than Chapala and the one in green was Champa.

It became impossible for anyone to contain their joy. Maharaj Jai Singh nodded at Chandrakanta, who fell at Raja Surendra Singh's feet in respect; the king raised her and gave her his blessing. As for the prince, it was impossible to describe his happiness. If the yogi had not allowed him to meet the princess earlier, he would not have been able to control himself and would have committed some impropriety or the other.

Siddhanath Baba looked at Maharaj Jai Singh and said, 'Now, please request the princess and her companions to leave us for a while, so that I may tell you the strange story of this mountain and how she came into it.'

'How can I send her away?' protested the Maharaj. 'I am looking at my daughter after so long. What if she goes away, and while she is out of my

sight, some new trouble arises and I never see her again?’

The baba laughed. ‘No, no,’ he reassured. ‘She will not be separated from you again.’

‘No, do not ask me to send her away, and tell me her story from the beginning,’ said the Maharaj.

‘Very well,’ agreed the baba, ‘as you desire!’

Narrative Nineteen

AND THE BABA began his tale of the curious mountain and Princess Chandrakanta.

‘I knew that this mountain contained a small tilisma and that there was a tilisma in Chunar as well. I also knew that the tilisma in this mountain contained the dowry of the woman who would marry the man who broke the tilisma in Chunar, and that she would be given ownership of this mountain and all it contained shortly before the wedding was to take place,’ began the baba.

‘First, please explain what is a tilisma and how it is created,’ asked Raja Surendra Singh.

‘A tilisma is created by someone who owns great wealth but who does not have a male heir to leave it to. Such a man then calls together the best astrologers and jyotishis and asks them to determine when the next boy and male heir will be born in his family or, if he has any brothers, in their families. The astrologers and jyotishis make their calculations, determine when the next male heir will be born, and even prepare his horoscope. A tilisma is then constructed to protect the treasure and wealth in the expected heir’s name,’ explained the baba.

‘These days,’ he continued, ‘a tilisma is constructed without much elaborate preparation—a little bit of wealth is put into the ground and a couple of human sacrifices performed over it. The spirits of the dead men then turn into snakes or ghosts and in that form, they protect the hoard, making sure that no one but the man for whom the treasure is meant may approach it. However, in the old days, the methods used were different. When the ancient kings needed to construct a tilisma, they would gather the greatest

astrologers, jyotishis, scholars, philosophers and craftsmen. These learned men would direct how the tilisma was to be made and the treasure protected—the ground would be dug in the manner that they would say, the treasure buried within it, and upon it would be constructed a tilismi building. The astrologers, jyotishis, scholars, philosophers and craftsmen would then use all their powers to bind the enchantments in place, keeping in mind the stars and constellations guiding the destiny of the young man for whom the tilismi treasure is intended. Prince Birendra Singh has broken a small tilisma. He will tell you all that he encountered and all that he had to do and you will get a better idea of what the jyotishis and others do, and how a tilisma is put together.’

‘Well, yes, we now have an idea,’ agreed Maharaj Jai Singh, ‘and we will understand even more after we hear the prince’s account. But for now, please tell us the secret behind this mountain and my daughter, and also explain how Maharaj Shivdatt first escaped from this secret valley and how he became a prisoner here again.’

‘I will tell you exactly what happened,’ said the baba. He continued, ‘When Princess Chandrakanta was trapped in the tilisma in Chunar, she had to suffer for a full two days. On the third day I heard what had happened, and I went as quickly as I could and rescued her from that cave, which I will show you.’

‘We hear that physical strength is also needed to break a tilisma?’ asked Raja Surendra Singh.

‘Yes, but in breaking this tilisma, the princess had no such demands put upon her. This tilisma in the secret valley was linked to the tilisma in Chunar that the prince broke, and because he had already opened it up, this one also opened easily. Had he not broken the other tilisma, this one could not have been broken,’ answered Siddhanath Yogi.

‘But you have not told us how and by which path you reached the princess,’ said the prince. ‘When we came to this valley and saw the princess trapped and helpless in that cave upon the mountain, we tried every way we could to reach her and could not. How did you manage?’

‘A tilisma cannot be understood only by thinking about it,’ said the yogi. ‘I knew that the princess was trapped here and that you were frantic to rescue her. I could have got her out of that cave immediately, but that was not enough. I also wanted that the treasure contained in this one should fall to the princess.’

‘You are a yogi, so I suppose you reached her using your yogic powers, but I am only an ordinary man, what could I do?’ sighed the prince.

‘Do not, even for an instant, consider that I have special powers,’ said Siddhanath Baba. ‘That which ordinary mortals and aiyaars cannot do, I cannot do either. Listen carefully now, and I will explain exactly how I reached the princess and what I did to rescue her.’

Narrative Twenty

‘I ENTERED THE secret valley and saw Chandrakanta trapped in that cave,’ said the yogi. ‘Now, my guru had told me that the valley contained certain secret ways under the stream that runs through its centre. I stepped into the stream and began to search for one of these secret ways, and soon discovered a little underwater entrance towards the eastern end of the stream.

‘I dived in and swam through the opening. It led into what seemed like a tunnel. At first, this was full of water, but very soon, after only a few feet, the water level began to fall, and soon I could stand up in it with the water only up to my waist. I realized then that the tunnel was sloping upwards and into the mountain. After climbing for about half an hour or so, I emerged into this garden in which we now sit, and wandering for a while within it, I saw a door set in the wall. I kicked it open and discovered this room in which we are now seated. It was pitch dark. Searching in the dark, I discovered another door, which I also kicked open and reached the cave where Princess Chandrakanta and Chapala lay, trapped and helpless, and in tears. Right there lay another path that I realized led to the tilisma in Chunar, a portion of which the prince had broken by then.

‘The princess and Chapala were frightened at my sudden appearance, but I reassured them, explaining that I had come to rescue them. I brought them back with me by the same path that I had taken to reach them. Now, though I had discovered this path, I did not know much more about the secret valley. I could have easily reached the princess and Chapala home at that point, but I wanted her to have the treasure that this tilisma protected.

‘I also knew, as did everyone else, that the prince wanted to break the Chunargarh tilisma only to free the princess, and that he had no desire to take

the treasure for himself. I also knew that the moment he realized that the princess was free, he would leave the tilisma and all its treasure intact. Now, I am amongst those who want your families to prosper. How could I allow all that wealth to go waste and lie buried there, and reach neither the prince nor the princess?

‘I confided my concerns to the princess and Chapala, and also told them quite flatly that unless they did as I asked, I would leave them behind in the secret valley and go away. The princess had no option but to agree to what I asked of her, and she promised she would not do anything against my wishes.

‘I did not know how to break this tilisma, though I was by then convinced that it was the princess to whom its wealth should fall. This garden that you see around us, it was in ruins, but there were a few of the trees that still bore fruit, so that we did not go hungry.

‘On the third night here, the moon was full. I was sitting by the pond, lost in my thoughts, when Chapala came running. “Hurry, come with us,” she said. “We have found something strange and wonderful here that you must see!”

‘I stood up at once, and hurried with Chapala to the eastern wall of this garden where Princess Chandrakanta stood gazing intently at something. The princess saw me approach and called out, “Babaji, look at these ants! They are white, and so big! It seems there is a hole or opening underneath this wall from where these ants are emerging!”

‘Now, I had heard from my ustad that wherever such ants are found, there is sure to be either buried treasure or the key to such treasure. I pulled out my dagger at once, and handing it to the princess, asked her to dig beneath the wall. She did so and very quickly unearthed a small glass pot. I asked the princess to break it and when she did so, we saw that it was full of some kind of oil, which quickly flowed away to reveal a bunch of keys.

‘The next morning, I handed Princess Chandrakanta the bunch of keys and said, “Walk around the garden and wherever you see a lock, try one of the keys from this bunch. I am sure we will be able to open some of these doors. I will go in with you to wherever they may lead.”

‘Now let me conclude my story quickly. That bunch held thirty keys, and over the next few days, we found and unlocked thirty locks. We found three doors that led us above and out of this tilisma, four doors led to gardens and the remaining twentythree to rooms full of treasure that contained jewels

and precious stones and anything else of wealth and value that one can imagine.

‘When we found the way to step out of this tilisma, I went back to my home and returned with several female attendants and items of necessary use for the princess. Meanwhile, the princess began to feel miserable and claustrophobic here, and begged me to let her wander freely outside the tilisma.

‘Finally, I agreed to let her step out. I used my skills to change her appearance and that of her companions, and brought them three horses upon which they would often ride through the surrounding forests. The only condition I put upon them was that they should stay hidden as far as possible, and make sure that no one recognized them. They followed my instructions perfectly to the end. Meanwhile, we repaired these gardens and brought them to the condition you see them in now.

‘And when Prince Birendra Singh broke the other tilisma and found the treasure it guarded, we too, could break the enchantment here and retrieve the hidden treasure of this tilisma.’

Here the yogi paused and turned to look at Maharaj Jai Singh. ‘All these days, Princess Chandrakanta was both my daughter and my sovereign. Today, I hand her back to you.’

Saying this, he continued with his story. ‘Meanwhile, the princess, taking pity on Maharaj Shivdatt’s queen, had allowed them to go free, after making Shivdatt swear friendship to the prince. But that scoundrel did not honour his promise and meeting up with his old companions, resorted to treachery and attacked the prince’s army. At last, finding no other way to stop him, I took him captive and brought him back to this secret valley where the prince had first imprisoned him.

‘Now, if there remain any other questions in your minds, please ask them, and I will try and remove all your doubts and suspicions,’ concluded the yogi.

‘Questions and doubts we had many, but at this moment I am so happy that I have forgotten everything I wanted to ask,’ said Raja Surendra Singh. ‘But just one more question—why did you choose to help the princess?’

‘Yes, that is the question I had in my heart as well,’ said Maharaj Jai Singh. ‘And then, we still do not know everything about you, and that makes us anxious. You have said several times that you are no yogi and have no special powers. If you are not who you appear to be, then who are you?’

‘You will know that too, soon enough,’ answered the baba.

Maharaj Jai Singh looked at the princess and asked, ‘Daughter, do you also not know the true identity of this yogi?’

‘I know everything, sire,’ replied Chandrakanta, her hands folded. ‘But I cannot say anything for he has made me promise that I will not!’

‘Why are you impatient?’ chided the yogi. ‘You will know everything you wish to about me very soon. First, why don’t you come and see the treasure that Princess Chandrakanta has retrieved from this tilisma?’

And the baba stood up and led everybody towards the other garden.

Narrative Twenty-One

BABA JI LED Maharaj Jai Singh and the others around the various gardens and buildings and showed them all the treasure and precious objects that the princess had found in the tilisma.

‘They were fortunate, those who gathered such wealth!’ exclaimed Maharaj Jai Singh. ‘Even if I were to sell my whole kingdom, I would not be able to gather such a dowry for my daughter!’

It took the yogi almost three days to show them everything. The greatest treasure was held in underground chambers beneath the audience hall where the prince had seen Princess Chandrakanta’s portrait presiding over a darbar.

At last, when the tour was completed and everybody sat down once again in the audience chamber, Maharaj Jai Singh turned to Siddhanath Baba and said, ‘We will be forever grateful to you for saving the princess’s life and looking after her. Now, please tell us about yourself—do not keep us in suspense any longer.’

‘Be patient just a little longer, I will tell you everything about myself very soon,’ replied Siddhanath Baba with a smile. Saying this, he gave a loud whistle at which three or four of the girls came running to stand beside him. ‘Prepare my bath and bring me some proper clothes to wear,’ he ordered. ‘Today I will throw away this deerskin and this beard!’

The girls ran to fulfil his orders, and prepared his bath in a small room off the main chamber. Siddhanath Yogi rose and left the others, closing the

door of the room behind him. Soon, bathed and dressed, he stepped out of the room in his true form—that of Tej Singh's father, Jeet Singh!

There was no need for questions and doubts now! Raja Surendra Singh jumped up and embraced his old friend. 'You are more than a brother to me,' he exclaimed. 'When the prince was caught in battle with Maharaj Shivdatt, you came to his aid with only five hundred horsemen. But today, you have earned for yourself a name more glorious than that of the prince himself, as well as the gratitude of both the houses of Naugarh and Vijaygarh for generations to come!'

Maharaj Jai Singh, too, gave Jeet Singh the status of an equal, and as for the younger aiyaars, they fell at his feet in adoration.

Now they knew that this Siddhanath Yogi, this saint—who had saved the life of Princess Chandrakanta and the honour of both Naugarh and Vijaygarh, who had helped both the kingdoms towards prosperity, outwitted the best aiyaars, fooled Prince Birendra Singh and led him a fine dance, but saved his life by holding him back as he prepared to jump off the mountain in grief, and who had engineered the defeat of Chunar—was none other than Jeet Singh himself!

The joy of that hour is hard to describe. You can picture for yourself Prince Birendra Singh's happiness at being reunited with Princess Chandrakanta. The joy was made greater by knowing that their benefactor, Siddhanath Yogi, was no stranger but their own Jeet Singh.

As for Maharaj Jai Singh and Raja Surendra Singh, their hearts were full of affection for each other. Maharaj Jai Singh had neither the patience nor did he feel the need to wait for a formal request for Chandrakanta's hand by Raja Surendra Singh. Instead, taking his daughter by the hand he placed her at the feet of the Raja. 'Please take this daughter of mine home and there, in front of the whole community and with the blessings of pandits and priests, make her Prince Birendra Singh's bride,' he said, his eyes bright with tears, his voice breaking with emotion, so full was his heart.

Raja Surendra Singh raised the princess to her feet and embraced her with affection. 'Now you must first take her home to Vijaygarh to see her mother, who must be pining away with worry,' he said to the Maharaj.

'What should we do now?' asked the Maharaj of Surendra Singh, after a pause.

'I think that all of must leave this place now,' said Jeet Singh. 'We do not need to take the treasure with us, for it can be locked away securely as it

was before. No one outside knows of its existence, so it will remain perfectly safe here. What's more, Princess Chandrakanta has grown fond of this valley and its air and water suit her, so I am sure she will return here often to spend some time. So I suggest that we leave here, taking only the princess and her companions with us.'

The others agreed with Jeet Singh, and left the valley variously for Naugarh and Vijaygarh as he suggested.

Jeet Singh ordered the women attending the princess to wash their faces and resume their own appearances, and to bring a palanquin for the princess. The women did as ordered and returned with a golden, jewel-studded palanquin. Prince Birendra Singh and Tej Singh now recognized the women.

'I did not recognize the women of our own household!' exclaimed Tej Singh. 'And even my mother did not reveal this secret to me!'

Narrative Twenty-Two

THE PATH THAT Prince Birendra Singh and the others had used to enter and leave the valley was not fit for elephants or horses or palanquins. Since the other path that Jeet Singh himself had taken was arduous and circuitous, he had arranged for a palanquin for the princess. The two horses that he had kept in the valley for the use of Chandrakanta, he now gave to the two kings. For the prince he called for a chair carried by bearers, but the prince refused its use and declared that he preferred to walk.

Jeet Singh now led them to the exit that he had used—a huge gate set into the mountain, upon either side of which stood two graceful metal statues. Jeet Singh walked up to the statue on the left, and put his finger into its right eye. At once, two flaps in its stomach flew open like small doors; within the opening could be seen a silver handle. Jeet Singh took hold of the handle and as he twisted it, the huge gate began to slide slowly into the ground. At last the barrier had disappeared into the ground, and before them lay revealed a vast, grassy meadow, lush and green. 'We shall make our way home through here,' announced Jeet Singh.

The day was still less than an hour old when Maharaj Jai Singh and Raja Surendra Singh mounted their horses and escorting Princess

Chandrakanta's palanquin, stepped out of the valley. Jeet Singh walked between the two kings, leading their two horses, and behind them came Prince Birendra Singh, surrounded by his aiyaars, a veritable Krishna!

A three-hour walk brought them back to the camp that the two kings had set up while waiting for the prince outside the valley. They rested here for the night, and set off once more the following morning. Bearers dressed in elegant and costly garments now lifted the princess into her palanquin and carried her in state back to Vijaygarh. The girls from Jeet Singh's household, who had served the princess for so many days and who had carried her palanquin all the way from the valley to the camp, also accompanied her, with Raja Surendra Singh's permission, to Vijaygarh.

Raja Surendra Singh returned with the prince to Naugarh, where the prince first paid his respects to his mother and then performed his puja to the goddess.

Now began days filled with happiness. Eight days later, gifts arrived from the palace of Maharaj Jai Singh, formally acknowledging the betrothal of Chandrakanta to Birendra Singh, and were received with great joy by Raja Surendra Singh.

Readers, the tale of Prince Birendra Singh and Princess Chandrakanta is almost done. Now all that remains is their wedding. Having written the preceding events so briefly, I do not wish to waste several sheets of paper in describing the prince's wedding procession. I do not wish to write that the road was swept from Naugarh to Vijaygarh, and sprinkled with the fragrant essence of kevra flowers, or that both cities were decorated with crystal lamps. You can imagine for yourselves the grandeur and glory of the wedding procession of a man as much in love with his betrothed as the prince, and when both the bride and groom are the only children of their parents. The breaking of the tilisma and the retrieval of the treasure had only served to increase their joy and its celebration.

I have disposed of the wedding procession quickly, much to my relief, but I must write this last episode in detail for it is worth telling.

The people of Vijaygarh were fully prepared to welcome the prince—the city was celebrating the forthcoming wedding, and singers, dancers and musicians were ready and prepared. But just as the prince and his wedding procession reached Vijaygarh, something very peculiar happened.

Ahead of the wedding procession came Maharaj Shivdatt, mounted on his horse, a jewelled ornament shining in his turban, a sword at his waist, in

his hands a flag. Behind him came the rest of the procession and Prince Birendra Singh, resplendent as the groom.

Maharaj Shivdatt dismounted and entered the palace gates; behind him came the prince. Just as the prince reached the gates, a cry arose from the watching people—they were shouting in surprise at the strange spectacle of Maharaj Shivdatt duelling with himself! There were two Shivdatts there—the one who had just dismounted, dressed in jewels and silks and another dressed in ordinary garments, but wielding his sword with equal skill and courage. The two Shivdatts called out that no one should come near them, but watch from a distance the outcome of their duel.

Finally, our Shivdatt (the one who had ridden in with the wedding procession) managed to tie up his enemy Shivdatt, and dragged him into the palace that had been set aside for the wedding procession to stay in. A crowd of curious people, eager to get to the bottom of this mystery, followed them.

Our Shivdatt tied the other to a pillar, and grabbing hold of a torch from a torchbearer who stood there, handed it to the other Shivdatt, and himself came and sat down beside Prince Birendra Singh. A large, jewel-studded bowl of rose-scented water stood in the room. Our Maharaj Shivdatt dipped his handkerchief in the water and washed his face with it—to reveal himself to be none other than Tej Singh!

The crowd burst out laughing.

Readers, you too would have understood this bit of tomfoolery, but in case you have any doubts, let me explain:

Tej Singh, keeping his promise to the prince, had dressed up as the defeated Shivdatt, wearing in his turban the sarpech that Devi Singh had taken from the king, and had led the wedding procession. The real Shivdatt, who had wriggled out of his imprisonment at Naugarh by pleading that he would retire to the forest, had come to Vijaygarh for a look at Prince Birendra Singh's wedding procession. Asceticism was just a facade; in truth he was still a scoundrel. Seeing his own self heading the wedding procession, he had understood at once that this was an aiyaar. His warrior blood had not been able to resist the challenge, and he had leapt in with drawn sword! The outcome, of course, was that he had lost and had had to play the role of torchbearer as Prince Birendra Singh married Princess Chandrakanta in joy and glory.

The End

Glossary

Non-English words used in the translation:

ahir	a caste or tribe of cowherds and milkmen
aiyaar	one who knows every kind of trick, every ruse and stratagem, is accomplished in every art and artifice, and whose main skills are disguise and escape
barahdari	a pavilion or summerhouse in a garden
beta	son
bhojpatra	the leaf and bark of the bhoj tree, used for writing on; the bhoj tree is a species of birch
chilam	the part of a huqqa which holds the tobacco and the fire
chitari	used in the sense of ‘aiyaar’
chobdar	a palace usher or guard, whose job it is to announce visitors to the king
choli	the short blouse worn with a sari
diwan	prime minister
diwankha	audience chamber or public room
na	
gandhi	a seller of perfumes
huqqa	the huqqa or pipe and its apparatus by which tobacco is smoked through water
huqqa-bardar	the servant whose job it is to attend to the king’s huqqa
zanana	the women’s quarters in a house or palace
kafir	a non-believer or non-Muslim
kattha	catechu
kos	approximately 2 miles

lakhlakha	a type of strong perfume
malik	master
munshi	a scribe or secretary
nazarbag	a garden in front of the palace, where the king often held audience
roli	a mixture of rice, turmeric and alum
sarpech	an ornament of gold, silver or precious stones worn in front of the turban, often as a sign of royalty
ser	a weight of about 2 lbs or a little less than a kilogram
tika	small, round mark made on the forehead and between the eyebrows, or a jewel worn on the forehead, fastened between the parting of the hair
til	a spot on the skin, often a mark of beauty
tilisma	enchantment
wazir	another word for prime minister

Acknowledgements

Chandrakanta has been translated into English before—in 2004, by Manju Gupta as *In the Mysterious Ruins*, and in 2008, for children, by Deepa Agarwal. The enduring charm of the novel, as well as its landmark place in Hindi literature, made me venture another translation, which proved to be a bigger challenge than I had expected. Devaki Nandan Khatri's language, the spoken Hindi of his times, fast-paced, simple and very effective, proved more difficult to translate into English than I had anticipated, and it took several drafts and many months before I could find a voice and register that did some justice to the original. I hope that I have, in some measure, succeeded in capturing the magic and mystery of the novel, its ready wit, and tongue-in-cheek humour.

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