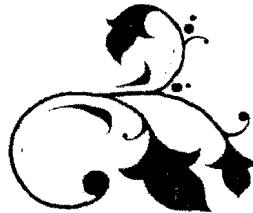


PALLI SAMAJ  
(The Village Life)  
*Translated by Malobika Chatterjee*



STEPPING INTO THE MUKHERJEE HOUSEHOLD, BENI GHOSAL SPOTTED AN elderly lady and called out to her, 'Mashi, do you have any idea where Rama is?'

The lady to whom the question was directed was engrossed in her prayers, but she had heard Beni and gestured towards the kitchen in response. Beni moved in that direction and standing at the threshold asked, 'Well, Rama, have you decided what to do?'

Taking the sizzling pan off the burning embers, Rama looked up and asked, 'What about, Barda?'

'The funeral rites of Tarini Khuro! Ramesh arrived yesterday. It looks as though he will make this ceremony quite a grand affair—do you plan to attend?'

In amazement Rama cried out, 'Me and go to Tarini Ghosal's house?!'

Somewhat embarrassed, Beni continued, 'I do realize that, Rama! No matter what, I know that you all will definitely not go across. But I believe that the young boy is planning to go from house to house issuing invitations; in scheming he surpasses even his father! How will you respond if he actually does turn up here to invite you?'

Angrily Rama answered, 'I will make no response—it is the guard outside who will say what he has to.'

As soon as the salacious conversation reached the ears of the elderly Mashi engrossed in her prayers, she quickly discarded what she had been doing and sprang up. Rama had barely finished speaking when like a piece of spluttering coal Mashi burst forth, 'Why the guard—can't I speak? I will give that wretched wastrel such a dressing down that he will never dare to darken the doors of the Mukherjees again with his presence. Tarini Ghosal's son will enter my house to extend an invitation?! I have forgotten nothing, Benimadhab! Tarini had wanted to get his son married to my Rama. My Jatin had not been born at the time—don't you understand, my dear, he had schemed to get hold of all of Jodu Mukherjee's property in this manner. When that did not materialize, he got Bhairav Acharya to conduct some black magic on this poor girl so that within six months of her marriage she was widowed. He came from a low caste but had the audacity to seek the hand of Jodu Mukherjee's daughter in marriage! That scoundrel has died in as horrific a manner as he deserved—even the last rites could not be undertaken by his son and heir! Damnation to these lower castes!' The widowed aunt began panting as though she was nearing the end of a bout of wrestling. Beni in the meanwhile had been growing increasingly downcast and woebegone at the repeated mention of the Ghosals' low caste because Tarini Ghosal was his uncle. Observing this, Rama chided her aunt, 'Mashi, why do you persist in referring to a man's caste? After all, no one has any control

over the caste they are born into. One has to make the best of what they are born with.'

With a somewhat embarrassed smile Beni acknowledged, 'No, Rama, Mashi is right. You belong to a high-caste Brahmin family, how can we even dream of bringing you in as a bride? Chhoto Khuro was wrong to have even thought of it. Further, if you are to talk of black magic, that is also true. Chhoto Khuro and that wretched Bhairav Acharya—nothing was beyond them! Apparently, that Bhairav is Ramesh's mentor these days.'

Mashi resumed her rant, 'That is only to be expected, Beni! That wretched boy has not been here for ten to twelve years—where has he been all this while?'

'How would I know, Mashi? We are only as well acquainted with Chhoto Khuro as you are. I have heard that Ramesh had been in Bombay or some place all this while. Some say that he is armed with a doctor's degree, others insist that he is a lawyer; there are others still who claim that it is all a fraud and he is nothing but a drunkard! His eyes were apparently absolutely bloodshot when he came home.'

'Really? Then he should not be permitted to even enter the house!'

Vigorously Beni nodded, 'Definitely not! Rama, do you remember Ramesh?'

Rama was just recovering from an extremely awkward feeling that had overtaken her while her marital misfortune was being recounted. She responded shyly, 'Of course I do! He is not much older than I am. Besides, we studied in school together. I also remember his mother's death. Khuri Ma used to love me a lot.'

Mashi was incited to anger once again, 'Such love be damned! It was only to achieve her own ends. Their motive had been to somehow trap you.'

Beni agreed very knowledgeably, 'There is no doubt about that, Mashi. It's true that Chhoto Khuri . . . ?'

Beni could not complete what he was saying, for Rama remarked in a displeased manner to her aunt, 'There is no need to dwell on the past, Mashi.'

No matter what the discord between Ramesh's father and Rama's father was, an unspoken pain always surfaced in Rama's heart at the mention of Ramesh's mother. Even after such a length of time had elapsed, that indistinct pain remained. Beni readily agreed, 'Yes, of course! Chhoto Khuri was the daughter of a good man. My mother weeps even today whenever Chhoto Khuri's name is mentioned.'

Observing that Rama's mind was softening, Beni adroitly steered the conversation in another direction. 'Then, the decision has been taken—Rama, you will not change your mind, I hope?'

Rama laughed, 'Barda, my father used to say: always make fully sure that the fire is out, the debt is paid, and the enemy vanquished. Tarini Ghosal caused us no end of misery while he was alive—he had even wanted to send my father to gaol! I have not forgotten any of that, Barda, and never can as long as I live. Ramesh after all is the son of that

enemy! Besides, there is absolutely no way that I can go. Though my father divided his property equally between his two children, it is my responsibility to see that no harm comes to his legacy. It is not just that I will not go, I also will not permit anyone who is in close contact with our family to attend.' Pausing to think, Rama continued, 'Barda, can't it be so arranged that not a single Brahmin goes over?'

Beni moved to one side and in a conspiratorial whisper said, 'That is exactly what I am trying to do! You leave it to me—there is nothing more to worry about. My name is not Beni Ghosal unless I manage to chase that Ramesh out of our Kuapur. And then, it will just be Bhairav Acharya and me! Tarini Ghosal is no more—let us see who can shield that rascal!'

Rama answered, 'Ramesh Ghosal will be his protector. Let me tell you, Barda, he will be no less an enemy.'

Beni moved even closer and glancing furtively this way and that, squatted down, lowered his voice to a bare whisper and said, 'Rama, if you want to destroy his strength, this is the best opportunity—if you let this chance slip by, it will just not be possible again, let me warn you. He has not yet learned how to protect and safeguard his property—this is the ideal time to uproot your enemy, which might become difficult in the future. We always have to keep in mind that he is Tarini Ghosal's son, after all!'

'I do understand that, Barda.'

'How could you not? The Almighty was on the verge of creating a boy when He changed His mind and fashioned you into a girl. We all talk about how your ready wit and intelligence puts even seasoned landlords to shame. Fine then, I will return tomorrow; it is getting late, let me take my leave today.' Extremely pleased with all the praise that was being showered on her, Rama stood up and was on the verge of uttering polite protestations, when her heart suddenly quailed. From one end of the courtyard, a deep, manly voice was heard calling out, 'Rani—where are you?'

Ramesh's mother used to address Rama in this manner in her childhood. After her death, Rama had almost forgotten this mode of address. Glancing at Beni, Rama saw that he had almost turned blue. The next moment Ramesh appeared at the door—wan, barefoot, dishevelled and dressed in the white attire of mourning. No sooner had he cast eyes on Beni than he spoke, 'Ah Barda, so you are here! That's good—who else but you could do the needful? I have been searching for you all through the village. Where is Rani?' Ramesh now stepped forward. There was no means of escape, so Rama waited with head downcast. Glancing once at her, in tones of deep amazement he burst forth, 'There you are! You have grown so much—how are you?'

Rama remained silent; all of a sudden she found it impossible to utter a word. Ramesh smiled a bit and said, 'Do you recognize me? I am your Ramesh da.'

Rama still found it impossible to look up. But she said mildly, 'How do you do?'

'I'm fine—but why do you address me so formally, Rama?' Looking at Beni and smiling somewhat sadly he said, 'I have never been able to forget those words of Rama's, Barda! When my mother passed away, this Rama was still a child. Even at that age she had wiped dry my tears and said, "Ramesh da, don't cry, we will share my mother." You probably don't even remember all that, do you, Rama? But tell me, do you remember my mother?'

These words seemed to cause Rama even greater embarrassment. She found it impossible to nod her head and acknowledge that yes, she did remember her Khuri Ma vividly. Ramesh continued to speak. 'There is no more time—there are only three more days left!' he said addressing Rama. 'Please do whatever has to be done—I have come to you bereft of everything. It is impossible to make any arrangement at all unless you take matters in hand. I have come to you on my mother's behalf.'

Rama's aunt had in the meanwhile come and silently stood behind Ramesh. When neither Beni nor Rama made any sort of response, she moved ahead and looking at Ramesh, scathingly asked, 'Aren't you Tarini Ghosal's son?'

Ramesh had never seen this Mashi before. She had joined the household after Ramesh had left the village, on the pretext of nursing Rama's ailing mother—but had not departed since. Ramesh looked at her with some degree of surprise. Disregarding the fact that she had not been introduced to Ramesh, Mashi continued, 'How else could one be so shameless? Like father like son! Don't you have any shame, just barging into a household in this manner and bothering everybody?'

Ramesh stood there astounded, as though struck by a thunderbolt.

'I should be going,' said Beni, and hurriedly left.

Rama had withdrawn inside the kitchen at her aunt's outburst. From there she said, 'Mashi, what are you talking about! Why don't you go about your own work?'

The old lady assumed that she was privy to the private thoughts of her niece. So, injecting a little more venom into her tones she said, 'Come on Rama, don't drivell! I don't shy away from speaking out what must be said—unlike both of you. Why did Beni have to run away in fright like that? He could have stayed to hear this as well. Ramesh, we are neither your clerical staff nor your subjects that we have to be present to help out! Tarini is dead—that is a boon to the entire village. If Beni was a man he could have said so to your face, instead of leaving the matter to us.'

Ramesh stood still, as though lifeless. Truly, all this was beyond his worst nightmare. The lock on the kitchen door clanked loudly from inside, but no one paid it any heed. Mashi cast a look at Ramesh's wan and wilted visage and said again, 'However, I do not want to insult a Brahmin through servants and guards; just be a bit more aware of the social norms. You are not a child that you can just stroll in and make friends! Let me warn you beforehand, my Rama will not enter your house even to wash her feet!'

All of a sudden Ramesh seemed to awake from a stupor and a heart-

wrenching sigh arose from him in such a manner that inside the kitchen, from behind the shelter of the door, Rama looked up. Looking towards the kitchen door Ramesh said with some hesitation, 'Since coming to my house is impossible for you, what more can I say! But I was unaware of all these facts—won't you forgive me for that, Rani?' And before anyone could say anything more, he turned and quickly left the room.

There was absolutely no response from inside the kitchen. Ramesh did not come to know that the person from whom he begged forgiveness was staring at his retreating back. Beni returned as soon as Ramesh was gone. He had merely hid himself outside and waited. Meeting Mashi's eyes, a smile spread right across his face and he said admiringly, 'What a lesson you taught him, Mashi! It was beyond my powers to have talked to him in that manner. Is this a task for servants and guards, Rama! I was waiting outside and saw him leaving, looking like the overcast sky. That's it—serves him right!'

Not fully appeased, Mashi responded, 'That may well be; but instead of dumping the responsibility on two women, would it not have been better to have told him so yourself, Beni! If that was impossible for you, why couldn't you at least wait and listen to all that I had to say? You should not have run away like that.'

Beni's smile vanished at the sting behind Mashi's words. He could not think of any appropriate answer. But he did not have to wait for a very long time. Rama suddenly spoke from inside; she had remained silent all this while. 'Mashi, the best solution was for you to have spoken,' she said. 'No matter what, there is none who can equal you in spewing forth poison in that manner.'

Both Beni and Mashi were astounded. Turning towards the kitchen Mashi asked, 'What is it that you just said?'

'Nothing! You've interrupted your prayers at least seven times—why don't you at least complete them? Is there no cooking to be done?' Rama emerged from the kitchen and without saying another word to anyone entered a room at the other end of the courtyard. Beni asked in dry tones, 'What is the matter, Mashi?'

'How will I know, my dear? Is it possible for mere menials like me to understand the reason behind frayed tempers of royalty like her!' Her face black with thwarted rage, Mashi took her seat before the image of the deity and began to mutter something which may well have been a holy chant. Beni made a hurried exit.

Bikrampur to settle down in Kuapur. Mukherjee was not only a Brahmin, but an extremely intelligent man as well. By dint of a suitable marriage, working for the royal family of Burdwan and innumerable other activities, he had accumulated a vast amount of property. Ghosal too had married in the same place; but could do little more than pay off the debts his father had left. He struggled to make a living and look after his family. It was apparently on the occasion of his marriage that there was a falling out between the two friends. Eventually matters came to such a pass that despite living in the same village, neither of them spoke to or even looked at each other any longer. Ghosal did not call on the Mukherjees even on the day Balaram Mukherjee passed away. But, after his death the amazing fact that was revealed was—all of Balaram Mukherjee's assets had been divided very precisely between his son and the sons of his erstwhile friend. Since then Kuapur had virtually been controlled by the Mukherjees and the Ghosals. They looked on themselves as the local landlords and the villagers did not raise any objection to this arrangement either.

In time, the Ghosal dynasty, too, had come to be divided. Tarini Ghosal, the younger brother of Balaram Ghosal, had not been allowed to wait for the outcome of all the cases that were pending in court, and had been summoned to his eternal rest by the Almighty. This caused quite a stir in the village of Kuapur. Beni Ghosal, Balaram's son, returned to Kuapur now, breathing a secret sigh of relief. In every way he tried to arrange matters such that the funeral rites of his uncle were totally disrupted. The nephew and uncle had not looked on each other for over ten years. Many years ago, Tarini's household had lost its mistress; he had sent his son Ramesh to stay with his maternal grandparents and Tarini himself had spent the better part of his time with servants and innumerable pending litigations. Ramesh, having been informed of his father's demise at Rourkee College where he was studying, had arrived in Kuapur the previous evening, only to perform the last rites.

It was a house that was in a chaotic frenzy of chores to be completed in time—the funeral obsequies had been scheduled for Thursday. Some of the elders from the neighbouring villages put in sporadic appearances. However, nobody turned up from his own village, Kuapur—and Ramesh was beginning to believe that ultimately no one might turn up at all. It was only Bhairav Acharya and members of his household who had wholeheartedly joined in all the activities. Though Ramesh did not expect the advent of any of the Brahmins of their village, he was nevertheless making truly grandiose arrangements.

He spent a lot of time in the house, seeing to all the arrangements. Emerging outside for a while, he found a few elderly people gathered in the living room, puffing away on their hookahs. He was on the verge of humbly proffering his hospitality, when a sudden noise made him turn around; a very elderly man accompanied by five or six children had just entered the house. The man's clothes were somewhat shabby, and on his nose were perched a pair of round spectacles—held back with a string. He had white hair and a white moustache that was stained brown thanks to the sprinkling of tobacco. He drew close and, looking at Ramesh

through his fearsome spectacles, burst into tears without warning. Ramesh failed to recognize this visitor, but anxiously moving closer, no sooner had he grasped his hands, than the elderly man cried out in a rasping voice, 'My dear Ramesh, it is beyond imagination that Tarini would make his escape in this manner, but that does not mean that we of the Chatterjee dynasty will take recourse to falsehood. While on my way to your house, I did not hesitate to tell that Beni Ghosal to his face, "The kind of arrangements our Ramesh is making for the funeral, nobody has ever seen before." He paused for breath before continuing, 'A lot of scoundrels will come and malign me—but Dharmadas only bows his head to the Almighty and nobody else.' Thus having grabbed the attention of the gathering, the old man wrested the hookah from Gobinda Ganguly, and after one vigorous pull began coughing violently.

Dharmadas had not exaggerated in any manner. No one in Kuapur had ever seen the likes of the kind of arrangements that were being made. Cooks had been summoned from Kolkata—they had set up a temporary kitchen at one corner of the premises, where a whole host of young children crowded around. Bhairav Acharya was organizing the clothes that were to be donated to the poor; a group of men also jostled for place there. They occupied themselves by trying to calculate the amount of money Ramesh was wasting in such extravagances. Meanwhile, the poor from the neighbouring regions had also begun flocking to Kuapur in great numbers. There were any number of people in the house, squabbling pointlessly or creating a furore just as senselessly. Dharmadas began coughing even more violently seeing the manner in which money was being spent without a care.

Ramesh was about to make some humble protest to Dharmadas's praise for his elaborate funeral arrangements; however, Dharmadas gestured for him to stop and tried to speak, but was overcome by another spate of coughing. As a result not a word could be deciphered.

Gobinda Ganguly had been the first to reach the Ghosal household—hence it should have been his prerogative to say all that Dharmadas had just voiced—after all, Dharmadas had only just arrived; the fact that he had missed his cue was causing him no end of discomfort. He did not lose the opportunity that presently befell him. Addressing Dharmadas he spoke aloud, 'Yesterday morning I could not reach here in spite of setting out—Beni insisted on calling out, "Gobinda Khuro, come and smoke a pipe." For a moment I wanted to refuse, but then thought to myself, "Why not try and assess what his feelings and intentions are?" Do you know what Beni said, Ramesh? He said, "You are acting as Ramesh's spokesperson, but will people go and partake of a meal at his house?" Why should I be the one to let him have the final word on the matter? Whether you are wealthy or not, is my Ramesh second to anybody? Nobody can even dream of a mouthful to eat in Beni's house! I responded, "Beni Babu, this is the path to his house—why not go and see how the poor are fed? Ramesh is a young boy, but look at the courage he has! I have been around for so long, but I have not seen such flawless arrangements ever." Even then, I will still say—what could we possibly

do? The man who is responsible for all this is pulling the strings from above. Tarini da was a saint who had strayed and was merely whiling away his time on earth.'

Dharmadas broke into another spate of coughing. Seeing Gobinda Ganguly spouting forth praise in such glowing terms, he became increasingly agitated in his desire to say something even more flowery.

Ganguly was now unstoppable; he continued, 'You are no outsider my dear, but someone very close to me. Your mother was cousin to my very own distant cousin. The Banerjee family of Radhanagar—Tarini da was well aware of all this. Hence he would always send for me, whether it was regarding a matter of litigation or to stand witness in some case.'

With great difficulty, Dharmadas somehow managed to suppress his bout of coughing long enough to utter, 'Why do you talk such rubbish, Gobinda? Do I seem to be a callow youth of today? Have I not seen what has happened in this village? The year Tarini wanted a witness, you said, "I have no shoes; is it possible to go in this manner?" Immediately he bought you a new pair—that was what you wore to go and stand witness.'

Gobinda with bloodshot eyes asked, 'Did I?'

'Didn't you?'

'Get out, liar!'

'It's your father who is a liar!'

Gobinda jumped up brandishing his broken umbrella, 'What, you scoundrel!'

Dharmadas in an equally volatile manner produced his bamboo baton, but was overcome by another violent fit of coughing. Ramesh who had stepped forward to intervene between the two was stunned into silence by their cheap behaviour. Laying down the stick and continuing to cough, Dharmadas gasped, 'That wastrel happens to be younger than me and so he is taking advantage—look at him—what sheer audacity!'

'Oh! That scoundrel happens to be older than me and so . . .' Gobinda Ganguly too rolled up his umbrella and sat down.

The cooks from the city stopped work and looked on at this scene of allegations and counter-allegations with some amusement. All those engaged in various chores gathered around for some fun at no expense. The children stopped playing and enjoyed the entertainment, and in the midst of it all, Ramesh stood in shamed and stunned silence. Not a single word escaped his lips. What was all this? Both these men—Gobinda and Dharmadas—were venerable, elderly people and Brahmins at that! How could they stoop to such ugly bandying of words for such a minor reason? Seated on the veranda, Bhairav had seen and heard everything. Now, getting up, he addressed Ramesh, 'There are enough clothes for four hundred people—do you want me to get some more?'

All of a sudden Ramesh found it impossible to say a word. Bhairav smiled, observing Ramesh's plight. Mildly he chided, 'Shame on you Ganguly Moshai, Babu is amazed! Do not take it amiss, Babu—all this happens only too frequently. In a household where work is being conducted

along such mammoth proportions, bloody battles sometimes do take place. Then, all is as before once again. Come along Chatterjee Moshai, help me check on the clothes.'

Before Dharmadas could make any response, Gobinda Ganguly stood up with great enthusiasm and vigorously nodding his head remarked, 'Absolutely right! That is exactly what happens! Why, even our scriptures say that no marriage can take place unless a million words are exchanged! That year—do you remember, Bhairav, during a ceremony that was organized by Jodu Mukherjee's daughter Rama some years ago—there was such a violent skirmish between Raghav Bhattacharjee and Haran Chatterjee! But, Bhairav, my friend, I really do believe that Babaji is not doing the right thing. It is an absolute waste of money to spend so much on clothes for the poor and downtrodden. Instead, I would say, distributing clothes amongst the Brahmins and their male offsprings would be the best policy to follow. What do you say, Dharmadas?'

Dharmadas nodded sagely in agreement. 'Gobinda is not wrong there, Babaji! No matter how much you give them, those ingrates will never sing your praises. Why else does one call them lowly? You do understand, Ramesh?'

Ramesh had been silent all the while. In the course of this discussion regarding clothes to be distributed, he had felt as if he had been mortally wounded. It was not the arguments for or against the issue that concerned him; but the manner in which these respectable men squabbled so shamelessly in front of the so-called lowly people without any compunction was what stunned him. Seeing Bhairav waiting for an answer, Ramesh answered tersely, 'Prepare another two hundred or so.'

'How is everything to be managed?' said Gobinda. 'Bhairav, come along—let me give you a hand; how much can you cope with alone?' Not waiting for anyone's consent or permission, he got up and took his place amongst the pile of clothes. Just as Ramesh was about to return to the house, Dharmadas called him aside and in lowered tones talked at length on some matter quite secretly with him. Ramesh nodded his consent and went inside. From where he was seated, Gobinda Ganguly cast covert glances in their direction and observed it all.

'Where is he? Where are you, Babaji?' A wizened, short Brahmin, with a tonsured head entered. He, too, was accompanied by a couple of children. The eldest, a girl, was the only one who was somewhat dressed—she was clad in an extremely worn-out old sari. The two boys had only a loincloth to save themselves from total nudity. Everybody present looked up. Gobinda greeted him, 'Welcome, Dinu da, take a seat. We are very fortunate to be blessed by your presence today. That boy is all on his own and quite lost, but if you all stand by him . . .'

Dharmadas glared at Gobinda for having spoken first again. The latter completely ignored Dharmadas and continued, 'But, none of you ever step in this direction, Dada.' He then proceeded to hand over the hookah to Dinu Bhattacharjee who seated himself and took one or two meaningless puffs on the burnt-out hookah. He then said, 'I have not been here all this while—went to fetch my wife from her parental home.

Where is Babaji? I believe that very elaborate arrangements are being made? I heard in the marketplace of the neighbouring village that not only would everybody be fed, but that packets of food would also be handed over to the guests while leaving.'

Gobinda lowered his voice, 'Perhaps some clothing will be given too!' Then in a louder voice he exclaimed, 'There you are, Ramesh! I was just telling Dinu da—thanks to your parents' blessings, the arrangements are being conducted well, but Beni is wholeheartedly making plans to spoil the show. He has already sent men to me twice! Well, there's no question which side I'm on—after all, I have a very special bond with Ramesh. But even Dinu da or Dharmadas da—can these people ever discard you? Dinu da came rushing here immediately on hearing the news. Sasthicharan, come and light the hookah for me! Ramesh, just come here, there is something that I need to tell you.' Gobinda then drew him aside and whispered, 'Is Dharmadas's wife inside? Be careful, be very, very careful, my dear! No matter what that wily Brahmin might say, never even think about handing her the keys of the larder—half your supplies will just vanish! Why do you have to worry? Let me return home, I will send your aunt over. If she takes charge, not a grain of rice will go astray.'

Ramesh consented and then started wondering: how had Gobinda gauged so accurately the fact that Dharmadas had secretly mentioned that his wife would take charge of the larder? There was no end to his amazement!

Two naked children ran up to Dinu Bhattacharjee and said piteously, 'Baba, we want some sweets.'

Glancing at Ramesh and Gobinda, Dinu asked, 'Where will we get all that?'

'They are being prepared there—' the children pointed out to where the sweetmeats were being made.

'We too, Dadamoshai . . .' Some children surrounded the elderly Dharmadas and they too started whining.

'Fine! Fine!' Ramesh said placatingly and hurried forward. 'Acharya Moshai, the children set out in the morning and none of them have eaten! You there, what is your name—bring the plates of sweets in this direction.'

The moment the plates of sweetmeats arrived, the children fell on them like hungry locusts. The impassive Dinanath's eyes grew sharp and moist at the sight of the children gorging on the food. 'You, Khedi, the manner in which you are eating—how do the sweets taste?'

'Fine, Baba!' Khedi continued to eat with gusto. Dinu smiled indulgently and nodding, said, 'Your tastes! As long as it is sweet—it suffices for you. But, you cooks out there, why do you stop? There is still some light.'

The reply came promptly, 'Definitely so! It is still a long time to go for the evening prayers.'

'Then, let Gobinda taste some of your fare—let us see what the cooks in Kolkata are like! Why include me? All right then—make sure you

give me only half—fetch some water, let me wash my hands—'

On Satish's instructions Sasthicharan immediately brought forth plates from inside the house.

The plates and glasses of water were handed out and in a flash, more than half of the enormous quantity of sweets was put away by the three frail, elderly and ailing Brahmins.

'Truly, they are experts! What do you say, Dharmadas?' asked Dinanath, heaving a deep sigh of contentment. Dharmadas had not yet completed his meal; and though he found it impossible to give voice to his thoughts through the layers of sweets crammed in his mouth, it was quite obvious that in this matter, there was no disagreement at all.

'Yes indeed, these cooks are masters of their trade!' declared Gobinda, finishing last of all. He was on the verge of washing up, when humbly the cook requested that some more sweets be tasted.

'Some more? Bring them on!'

Yet more sweets were savoured and devoured, while Ramesh continued to drink in the sight. Dinanath extended his hand towards his daughter and said, 'Here Khedi, hold on to these—'

'I cannot eat any more, Baba.'

'You can, you can! Just gulp them down with a glass of water. Look at you, how frail you are. If you really find it impossible to eat now, tie them to one end of your sari and partake of them tomorrow morning. Yes, this is truly a royal feast—very well prepared! You have had two types of sweets prepared?'

Ramesh got no opportunity to answer. The cook responded with utmost enthusiasm, 'Why no, there are many more varieties . . .'

'What! But we have not tasted them.'

Looking at Ramesh's bewildered face, Dinanath commented, 'Now, the Boses of Radhanagar had put up really delectable fare. The taste of their food seems to linger on the taste buds even today. You won't believe this, Babaji, but those are some of my favourite sweets.'

Ramesh smiled a bit and nodded. To believe in the above statement did not seem a particularly difficult task to him. Rakhal was going out on some work, Ramesh called out and said, 'Acharya Moshai is probably inside; just go and ask him to send out some more sweets.'

It was well past evening and yet the august and venerable Brahmins continued to wait eagerly for the sweetmeats. Rakhal returned with the message, 'The larder will not be unlocked now, Babu.'

Ramesh was irritated, 'Go and tell Bhairav Acharya that I have sent you . . .'

Gobinda Ganguly noting this displeasure immediately spoke up, 'Dinu da, did you note Bhairav's audacity? This is an outsider who is showing more concern than the actual owner! That is why I say . . .'

Without waiting for him to continue, Rakhal interrupted, 'What will Acharya Moshai do? Ginni Ma has come from the other household and locked the larder.'

Dharmadas and Gobinda were startled and chorused, 'Who, Boro Ginni?'

Ramesh asked in deep amazement, 'Jethaima is here?'

'Yes—and she has immediately locked up both larders.'

In stunned and pleasurable astonishment, Ramesh and went inside without saying anything more.

### 3

'JETHAIMA?'

Bishheshwari emerged from the larder. Beni's mother's age ought to have been nothing less than fifty considering that Beni himself was much older than Ramesh, but she did not appear to be beyond forty!

Ramesh stared at his aunt unblinkingly. Her fair complexion seemed to be as radiant as ever. At one time, Bishheshwari's beauty had been widely acclaimed throughout the region; even now, its exquisiteness had not abandoned her. Her hair was cropped short, one or two stray locks fell on her forehead. The features of her face seemed to have been fashioned by an artist's hand. The most amazing part about her whole arresting personality were her beauteous eyes—gazing at them even for a short while seemed to induce a kind of mesmeric stupor on the beholder.

At one point of time, Bishheshwari had greatly loved Ramesh and his late mother. As young brides, when the children had not yet been born and they were both persecuted by a harsh mother-in-law and sisters-in-law, Ramesh's mother and Bishheshwari had forged deep bonds of affection. Later, the storms of discord, legal battles and the innumerable travails of separation had shaken the very roots of the two families. In all the furore the bonds had slackened, but had not been torn asunder. After all these years, to enter the Ghosal larder and to see all the vessels and utensils that had been neatly and lovingly arranged by her late sister-in-law, made Bishheshwari weep. Her eyes still remained bloodshot and moist even after she had wiped away her tears on Ramesh's call. Ramesh gazed at her anguished face in amazement. Bishheshwari was aware of this. When she looked on the newly bereaved Ramesh, her heart cried out in pain—but she controlled herself so that her pain was not externally manifest. Rather, she merely smiled briefly and said, 'How are you, Ramesh?'

Ramesh's lips quivered as he attempted to answer. After his mother's death, till he had been sent to his grandparents, it was Bishheshwari who had taken the utmost care of Ramesh, not wanting to let go of him. But Ramesh also remembered that when he had gone to visit them the day he arrived, Bishheshwari had refused to meet him on the pretext of Beni not being present. Then, the confrontation at Rama's house in Beni's presence also came to mind and Ramesh felt that Rama's aunt's harsh reprimand had made it clear that there was no one in the village he could call his own. Looking at him for a while, Bishheshwari said, 'No, my dear, at

such times you have to be strong.'

Her tone did not appear to have even a vestige of tenderness. Ramesh controlled himself. It was obvious to him that where hurt feelings had no meaning, there was nothing more embarrassing and awkward than a display of emotion. He said, 'I am fine, Jethaima. Why did you bother to come? I would have done what I could.'

Bishheshwari smiled, 'You have not invited me, Ramesh, that I have to answer to you. Listen to me, before all the obsequies are over, I am not unlocking the larder and letting anything be taken out; when I leave, I will hand over the key to you and when I return tomorrow, I will collect it from you. But tell me, did you meet your Barda the other day?'

Ramesh was put into a quandary by the question. He remained uncertain as to whether the mother knew of the son's behaviour. Thinking for a while, he responded, 'Barda was not at home at the time.'

His Jethaima's face had darkened with anxiety immediately on asking the question; it was clearly visible to Ramesh that his response had been appropriate for it seemed to have driven away the shadows and she looked tranquil once again. Smiling, she chided him affectionately, 'That is just my fate! Is that what happened? But just because you did not get to meet him, does it mean you will not go again? I know that Beni is not very happy with you; but you must do what should be done. Go and approach him amiably once again, Ramesh! He is older than you and there is no shame in being humble before him. Besides, this is such a time of misfortune, my dear, that there is nothing to be ashamed about seeking to make amends in all humility. My dear child, please go to him once—I am sure that he is at home.'

Ramesh remained silent. The reason for this extreme enthusiasm was not clear to him and neither were his doubts stilled. Bishheshwari moved closer and said very mildly, 'I know those who are sitting outside far better than you do. Do not pay any attention to what they say. Now, accompany me to your Barda.'

Ramesh shook his head and asserted, 'No, Jethaima, that is not possible. No matter what you might think of those sitting outside might be, they are the only ones I have to call my own.'

He was on the verge of saying something further, but a sudden glance at his aunt's face stilled him. It seemed to him that all of a sudden Bishheshwari's face had become even more faded than the greying dusk all around. After a while she sighed deeply and said, 'All right, I will have to accept what you say; since going to him is impossible for you, there is no sense in talking further about it. Never mind, you do not have to worry about a thing, my dear! There will be no problems. I am going now, but I will return very early tomorrow morning.' Bishheshwari then sent for her maid and left. It was apparent to her that Beni and Ramesh must have met in the meanwhile and that was when the seeds of discord must have been sown. After gazing for a while at her retreating form, Ramesh returned dejectedly once more to the area of activity. Gobinda asked him fervently, 'Babaji, Boro Ginni Ma had come, hadn't she?'

Ramesh nodded, 'Yes.'

'I believe that she has locked the larder and taken the key with her?'

Ramesh nodded as before. She had indeed locked all the stores inside and taken the keys with her.

Gobinda responded, 'Did you note, Dharmadas, it is just as I had feared! Do you have any idea of the reason why, Babaji?'

A steady anger grew in Ramesh, but realizing that he could not afford to offend those who were standing by him, he remained silent. The poverty-stricken Dinu Bhattacharjee had not yet left. As he was not all that worldly-wise, he found it impossible to leave without lauding to the high heavens the person and his entire lineage thanks to whom he and all his children had gorged themselves to satiety on sweetmeats. He responded to Gobinda's question, 'What is so difficult to understand about that? She has locked the larder to prevent it from falling into the hands of the wrong people. She is well aware of the situation here.'

Gobinda was irritated; he could not contain himself at the words of the simple man and shouted, 'Why do you persist in talking when you understand nothing at all? What do you comprehend of all these matters that you come to search for a meaning?'

This harsh chiding seemed to have a detrimental effect on Dinu. He too grew agitated and responded heatedly, 'Where is the need for understanding here? Didn't you hear that Ginni Ma herself has locked the larder? Who can possibly question that?'

Gobinda was furious, 'Why don't you just return home, Bhattacharjee? You and all your family have gorged yourselves to the gills—the prime reason for which you came. Why wait any longer? You can taste the other sweetmeats the day after tomorrow. There will be nothing more today. Now you can leave, we have a lot of work.'

Dinu was greatly embarrassed and shrank into himself. Ramesh got all the more angry and embarrassed. Gobinda was about to say something more, when all of a sudden Ramesh in calm and steely tones questioned, 'What is the matter with you, Ganguly Moshai! Why do you persist in insulting others in this manner?'

Initially Gobinda was somewhat startled at being chided in this manner. At the next moment he smiled caustically and answered, 'Whom did I insult, Babaji? Fine, why not just ask him and find out whether what I am saying is true? If he is sharp, I am much more wily. Dharmadas, did you see the sheer audacity of that Dinu?'

Only Dharmadas knew what he had observed, but Ramesh was so taken aback by Gobinda Ganguly's shamelessness that he lost the purpose in arguing any further. Dinu himself looked towards Ramesh and said, 'No, Babaji, what Gobinda says is correct. Everybody knows of my poverty—I do not have any wealth or property like the others. It is by asking for alms in this manner that we survive. The Almighty has not blessed me with the means to feed my children with good food—it is on occasions like this that they can eat to their fill. When Tarini da was alive, he loved to see that we were fed. So, let me assure you, Babaji, that we have eaten our fill—he must have observed this from above and must be very pleased.'

After this exposure of his true plight, Dinu's grave and unemotional visage visibly softened and tears welled up in his eyes. Ramesh turned away to spare Dinu the embarrassment. Dinu wiped his eyes dry with one end of his soiled and tattered shawl. 'It is not merely I who feel thus, Babaji; no one who ever approached Tarini da had to return empty-handed. But who knows about all this, tell me? Tarini da maintained a strict silence about all his charity and generosity! Let me not bother you any longer. Come along children, how else can I bless you any more, Ramesh, than by saying, may you be like your father, may you live long!'

Ramesh drew close to Dinanath and emotionally said, 'Bhattacharjee Moshai, please bear with me over the next couple of days. It embarrasses me to say—it is a blessing to have you step into the house.'

Hurriedly Dinu Bhattacharjee clasped both of Ramesh's hands in his own, 'I am a poor man, Babaji! It embarrasses me when you speak in this manner.'

The old man and his brood of children left. Returning after seeing them off, Ramesh reflected for a moment on his harsh words to Gobinda Ganguly and attempted to say something mollifying to him. He was immediately stopped by the latter who said, 'This is my own personal task, Ramesh. Even if I had not been invited, I would have to come and shoulder the responsibility. That is why we are present—Dharmadas and I did not wait to be called, we came of our own accord.'

Dharmadas had just begun to puff away at the hookah. Leaning on his stick he stood up and, doubling over in vain attempts to control his bout of coughing, said, 'Listen to us, Ramesh, we are not like Beni Ghosal—there is no controversy about our birth.'

Ramesh was startled at this unnecessary reference to Beni's birth, but he did not get angry. In the short while he had spent in the village he had come to realize that thanks to a certain lack in their education and habits, these socially respectable people found no hesitation or embarrassment in venturing to talk about the most delicate and personal of issues.

Recollecting his aunt's affectionate request to him to meet Beni and her pained visage when he had refused, Ramesh felt a pinch of guilt. After everybody had left, he got ready to go and call on his Barda. When he reached Beni's house, it was around eight in the evening, and it sounded as though a battle was being waged inside. Gobinda Ganguly's voice rang out—the loudest of them all, 'I can wager that within a couple of days Ramesh will go to the dogs—or else, you can change my name, Beni Babu. Have you heard about all these lordly goings-on? Tarini Ghosal did not leave behind any worldly assets, then why all this pomp? If the wealth is there, go ahead and spend it—if not, who has even heard of anybody incurring debts to perform the last rites of his father? I am assuring you, Beni Babu, this fellow has definitely borrowed a substantial sum of money from the Nandis.'

Enthusiastically Beni said, 'Then, one will have to verify the facts, what do you say, Gobinda Khuro?'

Gobinda now lowered his voice and said, 'Why don't you wait, Babaji? Let him make a proper entrance and then the fun will begin—who waits outside? Is that Ramesh Babaji? Why have you bothered to come at this late hour? You could have sent for us.'

Ramesh did not answer Gobinda's question and moving forward said, 'Barda, I have come to meet you.'

Beni was startled and could not reply. Gobinda immediately said, 'Of course, that is very good of you, Babaji. This is your house. An elder brother is just like one's own father! That is just what we have come to tell Beni Babu—let all the hostilities that you brothers harbour for each other end with Tarini da's death. Why prolong the issue? You brothers unite and let us savour the sight, what do you say, Haldar Mama? Why do you remain standing! Someone put out a seat for him! No, Beni Babu, you are the elder brother. It won't do if you remain aloof. Besides, since Boro Ginni Thakrun has gone over . . .'

Stunned, Beni asked, 'Ma went over?'

Gobinda was quite pleased at this surprise he had managed to spring. But, suppressing his actual feelings, he hypocritically lauded all that had taken place. 'She did not just visit!' he said. 'She has taken charge of the stores and all the other work—it is she who is now organizing everything. Isn't it right that she should do that anyway?'

Everybody was silent. Gobinda heaved a deep sigh and said, 'Is there anybody comparable to Boro Ginni Thakrun in the village? No, Beni, it might seem like flattery if praises are showered directly, but if there is a true lady anywhere in the village, it is your mother. Does anyone know of another like her?' Once again he sighed and was appropriately grave. Beni remained silent for a long time and then indistinctly murmured, 'All right!'

Gobinda asserted, 'That won't do, Beni Babu; you will have to go and take over the supervision of all the arrangements for Tarini da's funeral—the entire responsibility is yours! Since everybody is present, why not discuss the text of the invitation and also decide on some sort of a menu? What do you say, Ramesh Babaji? Isn't that right, Haldar Mama? Dharmadas, why are you silent? You know everybody who ought to be invited or left out!'

Ramesh stood up and in all humility addressed Beni, 'If you can grace the occasion with your presence . . .'

Solemnly Beni responded, 'Since Ma has been there, what difference does my going make . . . what do you say, Gobinda Khuro?'

Before Gobinda could answer, Ramesh spoke up, 'I do not want to force you, Barda; but if you can find the time, please do come.'

Beni remained silent. Before Gobinda could open his mouth to say something again, Ramesh turned on his heels and left the room. Gobinda immediately craned his neck and, peering outside, said in a whisper, 'Did you note the manner in which he spoke, Beni Babu?'

But Beni was absent-mindedly reflecting on the various issues at hand and did not answer.

On his way back home, Gobinda's words came back to haunt Ramesh

and he shuddered in distaste. He retraced his steps and entered Beni Ghosal's house once again. The discussion in the courtyard had reached a crescendo by then; but he did not have the slightest desire even to listen. Entering, Ramesh called out, 'Jethaima!'

Bishheshwari was sitting on the veranda in front of her room in the dark, in solitary silence. She was quite taken aback at hearing Ramesh's voice at that hour of the night. 'Ramesh? What is the matter?' she asked.

Ramesh went up to her. Flustered at this unexpected visit, his aunt called out, 'Just wait a bit, let me ask someone to fetch a light.'

'There is no need, Jethaima, do not get up,' Ramesh took his seat in the darkness. Bishheshwari asked, 'What is the urgency at this hour of the night?'

Ramesh answered softly, 'The invitations have not yet been sent out and so I came to ask you, if you could help, Jethaima . . .'

'Now, that can be a problem! What do they say—Gobinda Ganguly and Chatterjee Moshai—?'

Ramesh interrupted abruptly, 'I do not know and do not want to know what these people suggest. Whatever you say will be done.'

Such heated words from Ramesh greatly surprised Bishheshwari. She remained silent for a while and then said, 'But, did you not say Ramesh, only a short while back, that these people were truly your own? Well, never mind, what good will a woman's opinion do, my dear? In this village, and why in this village—in every village—there are groups and individuals who do not talk or eat with each other. On occasions like this, there is no dearth to the acute anxiety that is caused all around. There is no greater problem in a village than who to include and who to leave out of the guest list on social and religious occasions.'

Ramesh was not particularly surprised by what his aunt was saying, for he had come to learn a lot in the past few days. Despite that, he asked, 'Why does it happen this way, Jethaima?'

'There are a lot of things involved—you will understand only if you stay here for a while. Some people are truly at fault, others are falsely accused; besides, there are ongoing court cases and groups of false witnesses. If I had gone to your place even two days earlier, Ramesh, I would never have permitted matters to be organized on such a large scale for the funeral feast. It worries me to think of just what will happen on that day.' Bishheshwari sighed deeply. Ramesh could not gauge what she actually meant. Neither could he understand what being 'truly at fault' meant or what the meaning behind being falsely accused was. Rather excitedly he said, 'But, I have no connection with all that! I am almost a stranger so to speak and have no enmity with anybody. So Jethaima, the best for me would be not to make any judgement about any groups in any way; I shall invite all the Brahmins and everybody else. But, nothing will be done without your permission—you give the order, Jethaima!'

After reflecting silently on the matter, Bishheshwari said, 'I cannot give such a command, Ramesh, it will cause a lot of problems. But neither am I saying that you are incorrect. However, this is not exactly

a matter of falsehood and truth, my dear. Those whom society has made outcasts and kept apart cannot be drawn close so easily. No matter what society's rules are, they have to be respected. Or else, there remains no power to do either good or ill—and that cannot be permitted under any circumstance, Ramesh.'

If he had thought over this matter rationally, Ramesh would not have rejected this logic; but he had witnessed the degrading and scheming behaviour of the so-called heads of society only a few minutes ago and the flames of disgust were still burning bright within him. He burst forth in utter distaste, 'By village society you mean the likes of Dharmadas and Gobinda, don't you? Isn't it better that such a society remains absolutely powerless, Jethaima?'

Bishheshwari took note of Ramesh's heated frame of mind, but remarked calmly, 'It is not just them, even your elder brother Beni is one of the heads of society.'

Ramesh remained silent. Bishheshwari resumed, 'So I say, carry out all the work after consulting them, Ramesh. It is not a good idea to go against them immediately after stepping into the village.'

In his excitement, Ramesh did not realize at that point how farsighted Bishheshwari was being in her advice. Instead, he said, 'Jethaima, you have just said that due to a variety of reasons there is a lot of factionalism here. Probably personal likes and dislikes are predominant. But I am not even aware of the misdeeds people are accused of, whether they are true or false! So, it is impossible for me to insult anybody by leaving them out.'

Amused, Bishheshwari responded, 'You impulsive child! I am older than you, like your mother. It is also wrong of you to disobey me.'

'What can I do, Jethaima? I have decided to invite everybody.'

His absolute determination displeased Bishheshwari; probably in her heart of hearts she was thoroughly irritated. She remarked, 'Then, coming to ask for my permission was just a farce!'

Ramesh took note of his aunt's displeasure, but was not swayed in the least. A little later he continued gently, 'I assumed Jethaima that you would happily bless me in any action that was not wrong. My . . .'

Before he had finished speaking, Bishheshwari interrupted, 'But shouldn't you also have realized, Ramesh, that I would not go against my own son?'

Her words wounded Ramesh. No matter what the surface interaction between them might have been, since the previous day his soul had been craving a mother's affection and a son's rights from Bishheshwari; but in a flash he realized that her own son held a much stronger position in her heart. Standing up, with smothered hurt in his tones he said, 'That is what I had taken for granted till yesterday, Jethaima! It is the very reason why I had asked you not to come—I would manage as best as I could. I did not have the audacity to even invite you.'

This stifled hurt did not escape Bishheshwari's attention. But, not making any response, she continued to sit in silence in the darkness. Just as Ramesh turned to leave, she said, 'Just a moment, dear, let me fetch

the keys of the larder.' She got a bunch of keys and flung them at his feet. Ramesh was dumbstruck for a few minutes and then, heaving a deep sigh, stooped to pick them up and left. Only a few hours ago he had thought to himself, 'What is there to be scared of? I have my Jethaima.' But, in the short span of a night he had to admit the bitter truth—'Jethaima too has deserted me.'

## 4

THE FUNERAL WAS OVER. RAMESH HAD JUST LEFT HIS PRAYER SEAT AND WAS trying to get better acquainted with his invitees. The feast which had been arranged in the house was just about to start when suddenly the noise of a clamour and raised voices from indoors hurriedly drew him there. A lot of others also accompanied him. Just inside the entrance of the inner kitchen, a young widow huddled awkwardly; an elderly lady was close at hand—her face flushed with rage. A veritable volley of abuses gushed forth from her. The object of the abuses was Paran Haldar. As soon as she spotted Ramesh, the elderly lady shrieked, 'Tell me, just because you belong to the gentry, must an old Brahmin like me always be held to ransom? Just because we have no guardian, can we be punished any number of times?'

Pointing out Gobinda she said, 'At the ceremony in the Mukherjee household, didn't he extract a fine from us? Haven't we been paying on a number of occasions? How many times will the old story be repeated?'

Ramesh could not understand anything of what was going on. Gobinda Ganguly had been sitting, but now stood up in order to pass judgement. Looking in turn at the elderly woman and at Ramesh, in a grave voice he said, 'Since you have dragged in my name, Khanto Mashi, let me reveal the truth. Everybody knows that Gobinda Ganguly is no toady! Your daughter has undertaken a penance and was appropriately fined. And we have ordered her not to touch the sacred fire. On her death we will carry her to the funeral pyre, but . . . '

Khanto Mashi screamed, 'You carry your own daughter to the funeral pyre when she expires. There is no need to worry about my child. Gobinda, don't you ever look at your own self when you talk? Your relative there, sitting so coyly in the store room, where and why did she disappear for almost one and a half years, returning so sickly and washed out? Aren't there any skeletons in the cupboards of the rich? Do not irritate me too much, I can reveal a lot of secrets. We too have borne children and can recognize the signs quite well. Don't try to hoodwink us!'

Gobinda flew into a blinding rage and shouted aloud in a frenzy, 'You worthless and good-for-nothing—'

But the worthless and good-for-nothing woman was not browbeaten in the least. Rather, she took a couple of steps forward and brandishing

her hands about wildly, asked sardonically, 'Are you going to strike me? If you come to battle with me, let me warn you—more than half the village will not remain unscathed! My daughter had not even attempted to enter the kitchen; but just as she reached the door, Haldar Thakurpo lost no time in insulting her senselessly. Let me ask—was there no scandal associated with the in-laws? Let me ask—should I make more revelations or will this suffice?'

Ramesh stood still, as though turned to stone. Bhairav Acharya grasped Khanto's hands and with utmost humility pleaded, 'That will suffice, Mashi, there is no need for any more. Sukumari my dear, get up and come and sit with me in the other room.'

Paran Haldar stood ramrod straight and flinging the shawl over his shoulder said firmly, 'I am warning you—unless this woman of a loose character is thrown out, I will not touch even a drop of water in this house! Gobinda! Kalicharan! If you respect your Mama, just come away. Beni Ghosal had warned me, "Mama, do not go there!" If I had known that such a characterless woman would be present, would I have risked my religion by coming to this house? Kali, come away!'

Despite the repeated injunctions of his uncle, Kalicharan remained seated with his head bowed. He traded in jute. About four years ago, an eminent client of his from Kolkata had run away with his younger widowed sister. The incident was an open secret. The sudden journey to the in-laws' house and from there on a pilgrimage—all this remained hidden for only a few days. For fear that all this would once again come to the fore, Kali found it impossible to look up. Gobinda, however, continued to feel the sting of Khanto Mashi's outburst.

Once again he stood up and asserted, 'No matter what anyone else says, Beni Ghosal, Paran Haldar and Jodu Mukherjee's daughter are regarded as the pillars of society. None of us can disregard them. Ramesh Babaji, unless you can explain why these two fallen women have been invited to the house, I am warning you, we will not have even a drop of water here.'

In minutes, a group of people stood up, ready to leave. They were naïve and rustic people, well versed in obeying the dictums of society, particularly where it was most advantageous.

All the invited Brahmins conversed among themselves and drew whatever conclusions they pleased. Tearfully, Bhairav Acharya and Dinu Bhattacharjee pleaded in turn with Khanto Mashi and her daughter, Gobinda Ganguly and Paran Haldar. The ceremony was on the point of being disrupted. But, Ramesh could not say a word. As it is he was weak with hunger and thirst and then to have to cope with this unimaginable situation! He stood aghast with a wan face.

'Ramesh!'

All of a sudden all attention was on Bishheshwari. She had emerged from the larder and was now standing at the door. Her head remained covered by one end of the sari, but her face was visible to all. It only then dawned on Ramesh that his Jethaima had not deserted him after all and that she had voluntarily appeared by his side. The whole world was

witness to the presence of Bishheshwari, the head of the Ghosal family.

The village did not observe the practice of the purdah system as rigidly as the city. But Bishheshwari was the eldest daughter-in-law in her family and despite the fact that she was not very young, she did not appear in public very much, especially without covering her face. Hence her sudden appearance—that too in the midst of such a delicate social situation—took everyone by surprise. Those who had never seen her before were amazed at her beautiful pair of eyes. It was probably sheer anger that had propelled her forward. As soon as everybody looked up, she quickly moved to one side. In a sudden flash, all of Ramesh's indecision vanished. He moved forward. From inside, Bishheshwari asserted firmly and clearly, 'Tell Ganguly Moshai not to scare us, Ramesh! Further, inform Haldar Moshai that I have personally invited everybody and he has absolutely no cause to insult Sukumari. In my household, when there is a ceremony going on, I forbid any sort of clamour or hurling of abuses. Anybody who has a problem with that can go elsewhere.'

Everyone present heard Boro Ginni's stern command. Ramesh did not have to repeat it again; it would have been impossible for him to do so. Neither could Ramesh stand there and witness the result of this course of action. Seeing his Jethaima voluntarily assuming all responsibility, he was overwhelmed with tears. Somehow he controlled himself and rushed into a room. There he started weeping unrestrainedly. He had been busy all day and it had been impossible for him to keep track of all those who had come and gone. But, no matter who else might have come, it was absolutely beyond any stretch of his imagination that his Jethaima would actually pay a visit. Now, after Bishheshwari's statement, all those who had stood up slowly resumed their seats. Only Gobinda Ganguly and Paran Haldar remained standing stiffly. Someone from amongst the crowd said indistinctly, 'Why don't you sit down, Khuro, who organizes such a feast these days?'

Paran Haldar left the place without a word, but amazingly, Gobinda Ganguly took his seat again. However, he continued to look gloomy and on the pretext of supervising the serving, did not sit to eat along with the others. Those who took note of this also observed that Gobinda was not one to give up so easily. But there were no more problems after that. It was impossible to believe the quantity of food the Brahmins could put away. Neither was the food they carried back for all the missing children any less!

Late in the evening, all the proceedings had almost come to an end—Ramesh stood absent-mindedly under a tree, feeling somewhat melancholic. He saw Dinu Bhattacharjee returning with his children. Khedi was heading the line and came to an abrupt halt on seeing him, stuttering, 'Baba, Baba . . .'

Everybody awkwardly came to a standstill. Ramesh immediately realized the situation from what the little girl had inadvertently let slip. If there had been any other way out, he himself would have escaped. However, since that option was not there, he smiled genially and asked, 'Khedi! Whom are you carrying all this back for?'

Realizing that Khedi would find it impossible to explain all their packets, large and small, Dinu himself smiled drily and said, 'All the low-caste children, these remnants can at least be given to them. Never mind that, now I understand why everyone addresses her as Ginni Ma.'

Not making any response, Ramesh accompanied them to the door and then, all of a sudden he asked, 'Bhattacharjee Moshai, you are aware of everything that goes on here. Can you tell me why there is so much unrest in our village?'

Dinu clicked his tongue and shook his head rapidly a couple of times, 'Babaji, our Kuapur is much better off! You will not believe what I have just been witness to in a neighbouring village. It is constituted of barely twenty houses, but there are four groups! One man even sent his nephew to jail for plucking two ripe mangoes off his tree. All villages are the same, besides being riddled by legal battles and all manners of litigation.'

Once again Ramesh inquired, 'Is there no solution to all this?'

'How is that possible? This is the peak of Kalyug—an era when sin abounds!' Bhattacharjee sighed deeply and continued, 'But, I can tell you one thing, Babaji, I go to seek alms in many places, a lot of people are very good to me. It is only too apparent that you, the youth, are kind and generous; it is the old humbugs who cause problems. They do not let go any opportunity to take advantage of the weakness of people, they would hang them if they could.' To illustrate his point, the old man put out his tongue in such a manner that Ramesh could not help laughing.

However, Dinu did not join in the laughter. 'It is not a matter of jest, Babaji,' he said gravely, 'but the veritable truth! I have also grown old, but you have progressed a long way in this darkness.'

'Never mind, Bhattacharjee Moshai, please continue.'

'What more is there to say, Babaji? Life in villages follows this pattern. Gobinda Ganguly—if one were to even mention all his sins, it would be necessary to do penance just from uttering the words. Khantomoni was not wrong—but everybody is scared of him. He is incomparable so far as counterfeiting, organizing false witnesses and framing people in legal battles is concerned. Beni Babu is his toady; hence, no one dares to utter a word against him either! Rather, he is responsible for turning so many people into outcasts.'

Ramesh walked along in silence for a long while, his entire body burning in anger. Dinu continued, 'Mark my words, Babaji, Khantomoni will not be let off very easily. Gobinda Ganguly, Paran Haldar—is it a joking matter to take on two formidable people like them? But it must be admitted that that woman has guts! Why not, anyway? She sells puffed rice from door to door and is well aware of everything that goes on. If she is rubbed the wrong way, there will be no end to the havoc that will result, I can tell you! Which household does not have skeletons in the cupboard, tell me? Even Beni Babu . . .'

Apprehensive that he might hear some unsavoury secrets from Beni's past, Ramesh stopped Dinu, 'Let that be, we will not talk about Barda . . .'

Dinu was embarrassed, 'Then let it be! I am a poor man and do not

want to interfere in anybody's affairs. If anyone informs Beni Babu, my house will be set on fire . . .'

Ramesh once again interrupted, 'Bhattacharjee Moshai, is your house much further away?'

'No, not very far, if some day . . .'

'Definitely I will come!' As Ramesh was about to leave, he turned around once, 'We will meet again tomorrow morning—but, even after that, do keep in touch.' Ramesh then left.

'God bless you and may you be like your father!' Showering benedictions wholeheartedly, Dinu Bhattacharjee left with his children.

## 5

IN THE LOCALITY, IT WAS ONLY MADHU PAL'S GROCERY STORE THAT LAY ON the way to the river, at one end of the marketplace. Ramesh on an impulse set out in the direction of this shop, realizing all of a sudden that despite ten days and more had gone by, the man had not turned up to collect his dues. Madhu Pal seated Chhoto Babu on the veranda respectfully and coming to know of the reason for his visit was greatly surprised. Normally, none of his debtors ever came forward voluntarily to clear his dues. In fact, Madhu Pal had never witnessed such a happening and nor had he ever heard about such a thing in his entire life. After a long conversation, Madhu told Ramesh of his problems. 'How will the shop function, Babu? There are innumerable bills of varying amounts that have added up to quite a substantial sum. After reassuring me that dues will be immediately paid, there is no sight or sound of those people. Oh! Is that you, Banerjee Moshai, when did you return? My respectful salutations.'

Banerjee Moshai, looking rather dishevelled, appeared with some fish that was well wrapped up. He sighed deeply and said, 'I returned yesterday, Madhu.' Putting down all his packages he continued, 'Can you believe the audacity of that wretched fisherwoman? She actually grasped my hand! Tell me, is this fish really worth all that much? Disgusting wretch! Can you cheat a Brahmin and get away with it? Won't you have to go to hell?'

Madhu was incredulous, 'She touched you?!

The furious Banerjee glanced wrathfully all around, 'A small amount is due to her, but just because of that do you have to grip my hand in front of everyone? Everybody present witnessed the sight! After washing up in the river in the morning, I had decided to get on with the marketing for the day; but that low-down woman covers her basket and assures me that everything has been sold out. But is it possible to deceive me? I just reached out and took off the lid and . . . And she immediately caught hold of my hand! Will I run away with all her dues—past and present?

Tell me Madhu, is that possible?"

Madhu Pal agreed, 'How is that possible!'

'Exactly! Is there any discipline in this village or not? It does not look like there is any such thing, or else should not that fisherwoman have been absolutely boycotted by all?'

Suddenly glancing at Ramesh he asked, 'Who is the Babu, Madhu?'

Taking great pride, Madhu Pal replied, 'Our Chhoto Babu's son! Some money was due and he came all the way to return it.'

Forgetting all his sorrows regarding the purchase of the fish, Banerjee Moshai was amazed, 'What, Ramesh Babaji! May you live a long time. I believe that you organized a truly magnificent feast? No one had ever partaken of such a repast! But it is to be greatly regretted that I could not personally attend—I had to go to Kolkata on work. Shame! Can anyone live in such a city?'

Ramesh gazed silently at him. But everyone else in the shop was waiting with curious anticipation to hear about Banerjee Moshai's sojourn in Kolkata. Madhu Pal hastily organized a hookah and handing it to him asked, 'Then? Did you get the job?'

'How could I not? But, living there is impossible—it is as filthy as it is polluted. If you return to your dwelling safely without being run over, you can count yourself extremely lucky!'

Madhu Pal had never been to Kolkata. He had only been to Midnapore—having gone there as a witness in some case. He was stunned to hear such criticism about the big city. 'What are you saying?!'

Banerjee smiled a bit, 'Why not ask your Ramesh Babu whether all this is true or not? No, Madhu, even if I have to go hungry, never ever mention going to foreign regions to me again. You won't believe this—over there, one has to even buy the vegetables for daily consumption! Is that possible? I have become as thin as a reed during these past few months. Each day there seemed to be something or the other wrong with me—I had no choice but to run back as quickly as I could. What a relief! Staying in the village with my children and even begging if required is preferable. A Brahmin has no need to be ashamed of seeking alms. May the goddess of prosperity always be worshipped and revered, but no one should ever have to think of travelling out of the village.'

While all present were bemused with fright, Banerjee got up and freely availed of the mustard oil Madhu Pal had in the shop and proceeded to give himself a brisk massage. He then said, 'It is getting late, might as well take a dip in the river and return home. Let me have some salt, Madhu—I will pay you in the evening.'

'In the evening?' Unhappily Madhu got up to fetch the salt. Glancing up at the look of dismay on Madhu Pal's face, Banerjee burst forth in surprise and irritation, 'What is the matter with all of you, Madhu? You are almost using force to get a bit of money out of me!' He moved forward and grabbed some salt and put it into a packet. Looking at Ramesh, Banerjee smiled gently, 'We return by the same route, why not go together and talk as we go along?'

Ramesh too stood up. Standing some distance away Madhu Pal asked

piteously, 'Banerjee Moshai, those remaining dues . . .'

Banerjee flew into a rage, 'Madhu, we keep meeting every day—have you lost all sense of shame? That trip to Kolkata has ripped me of most of my money; is this any time to pressurize me for payment? Have you noticed, Ramesh, how these people behave?'

Madhu was immediately subjugated and could only murmur, 'A longstanding debt . . .'

'So what? If everyone hounds a person in this manner, it will become impossible to live in this village any longer!' retorted Banerjee, and gathering up his belongings he left the place in a huff.

When Ramesh entered his house he was met by a man who immediately laid aside the hookah and greeted him respectfully. 'I am Bonomali Parui, the headmaster of your school. I have been coming here for the past two days, but have not been able to meet you and so . . .'

Ramesh immediately attempted to seat Parui with all due honour; but the latter chose to remain standing, saying respectfully, 'Sir, I am your humble servant.'

The man had reached a venerable age, and all said and done, was the headmaster of a school. At this display of overplayed humility, a sense of disgust started brewing in Ramesh. Bonomali Parui now gave voice to all that he had to say, 'A small school had been set up in these parts under the aegis of the Mukherjees and Ghosals. There are at least thirty-forty students who come from far away and neighbouring villages. There was some small amount of government aid, but despite that it has become virtually impossible for the school to function.' Ramesh remembered studying in this school during his childhood. Parui pointed out that the approaching rain would make it impossible for students to study outdoors; however, that could be considered a little later. The present problem was that no teacher had been paid for the past three months, hence personal interests were now at stake.

Ramesh became alert. He seated the headmaster in the living room and began to gather detailed information from him. There were four teachers and thanks to their unstinting efforts, students usually performed well in the examinations. Details as regards the names and all other relevant descriptions gushed forth from Parui. Ramesh also learned that the salaries for the teachers were often gathered as alms from the villagers. Even then, only a measly sum of money had been thus obtained after continually trying for over two months.

This bit of news stunned Ramesh. This school fulfilled the needs of four or five villages and yet only this paltry sum of money had been gathered! He asked, 'How much is your salary?'

The headmaster answered, 'I have to give a receipt for a greater sum, but am actually handed a measly amount!' The matter was not very clear to Ramesh—he continued to stare in incomprehension and confusion at Parui. The latter then explained, 'This is a government regulation. The receipt for a certain amount has to be shown to the inspector, or else all government aid will be stopped. Everybody knows, any student can tell you that I am not lying.'

Pondering in silence for a long while, Ramesh asked, 'Does this not humiliate you in front of the students?'

The headmaster was embarrassed, 'What can be done, Ramesh Babu? Beni Babu is reluctant to give even this amount of money.'

'Is he the head of the school?'

There was some slight hesitation, but Parui seemed to conclude that if the problem was to be solved, then all matters had to be revealed. 'Well,' he said, 'Beni Babu is the secretary, but he does not spend any money on the school at all. Jodu Mukherjee's daughter, she is truly a benevolent lady—if she had not taken an interest, the school would have shut down a long time ago. This year she had promised to have the roof of the school re-thatched; but it is a mystery as to why she has suddenly stopped all help.'

Indulging his curiosity, Ramesh asked a number of questions about Rama and finally said, 'Doesn't her brother study in this school?'

'Are you talking about Jatin? Yes, he is a student.'

Ramesh said, 'It is getting well past your school hours, you can leave now; I will come across tomorrow.'

The headmaster offered his respectful salutations and took his leave.

## 6

BISHHESHWARI'S ACTION THAT DAY HAD RECEIVED WIDE PUBLICITY ALL ACROSS the ten villages in the district. Beni found it personally impossible to be harsh to his mother for having supported Ramesh and for going against social convention; yet he felt that his mother ought to be reprimanded for the embarrassment and insult her actions had brought on him, and so he took the help of Rama's aunt. She was famed to be more than capable of felling any demon who was unfortunate enough to cross her path. It was thus a miracle that Bishheshwari did not collapse in a heap of ashes after this fiery aunt came and spewed poisonous flames of fury at her. All the insults she heaped on Bishheshwari were tolerated without a murmur. In fact, Bishheshwari was well aware that it was her own son who was behind it all and was petrified that in case she answered back even once, this woman would take the first opportunity to bring up Beni's name. This would reach Ramesh's ears—fright of the overwhelming shame that would then result forced her into remaining completely silent.

However, nothing remains secret in a village and in no time Ramesh came to know what had happened. There had been a constant concern in his mind about his Jethaima and he had also anticipated a fallout between mother and son. But that Beni would actually seek the help of an outsider to insult and persecute his mother in this manner—seemed at first to be senseless and unbelievable to him. At the next instant, knowing

this had actually transpired, his rage and fury knew no bounds. He wanted to immediately go across and abuse Beni in no uncertain terms. A man who could stoop so low was not worth any consideration and only fit to be insulted and humiliated. But, just as he was about to convert his thoughts into action, Ramesh realized his mistake—ultimately any such action would only result in further insult to his Jethaima.

After listening to what Dinu and the headmaster had had to say about Rama, a fresh respect for her had grown in his heart. In the midst of all the deplorable and heinous ignorance and ugliness all around, it had begun to seem to Ramesh that besides his Jethaima, the entire village was steeped in darkness. In such a despairing frame of mind, whenever he gazed towards the Mukherjee household, the knowledge that Rama too believed in social good and fairness brought to his thoughts a small ray of light, and with this light came hope, comfort and joy. However, this incident regarding his Jethaima once again filled his mind with an acute disgust and distaste for Rama. There was no doubt in his mind that the aunt and niece had conspired with Beni to indulge in this wrongdoing. But he still could not figure out how he was to deal with these two women or even severely chastise Beni.

It was at this juncture that another incident took place. In some matters there was no division or disparity at all between the Mukherjees and the Ghosals. The pond behind Bhairav Acharya's house was one such common property. At one time it had been large and sprawling, but with the passing years and due to lack of maintenance it had presently become only a small pool of water. No good fish spawn was released there—only the ones that had naturally made it their home had bred there. One day Bhairav came to Ramesh, panting and gasping for breath; the estate accounts were being prepared by Gopal Sarkar and Bhairav hurriedly spoke, 'Sarkar Moshai, have you sent anybody to the pond? All the fish is being caught!'

'Who is catching the fish?'

'Who else? Beni Babu's servant is there and the Mukherjees' guard is also present; only your men are lacking. Hurry up and send someone over.'

Gopal did not evince any excitement at all, 'Our Babu does not partake of any meat or fish.'

Bhairav answered, 'He might not, but the legitimate share he has in the pond and its fish must be wrested!'

Gopal said, 'That is what all of us want and Babu would also have wanted it had he been alive. But, Ramesh Babu is somewhat different.' Glancing at Bhairav's bewildered face, he continued sardonically, 'These are only a few fish you are talking about, Acharya Moshai! The other day a massive tree was cut down and the wood divided between both the houses—we did not get even a small branch. When I came running to inform Babu, he looked up once from the book he was reading, smiled and resumed reading once more. I asked, "What do I do, Babu?" Ramesh Babu did not have the time to even look up again. After a lot

of begging and pleading from me he put down his book, yawned and said, "Wood? Why? Are there no more trees?" Can you believe that? I said, "Why won't there be? But why should you let go of something that is legitimately your due? Who has ever done that?" Ramesh Babu once again became immersed in his book and after remaining silent for a few minutes said, "That is correct, but there is no sense in fighting over a few bits of wood!"

Bhairav was stunned. 'What are you saying?' he asked disbelievingly.

Gopal Sarkar smiled gently and nodding his head a couple of times said, 'That's the way it is, Acharya Moshai, that's the way it is! I have realized the futility of it all since that day. The goddess of prosperity has left along with Tarini Ghosal!'

Bhairav too was silent for a while and then responded, 'But the pond is just behind my house. I should at least inform him once . . .'

Gopal answered, 'That is true, Acharya Moshai, why don't you go and inform him? If one is constantly immersed in books and remains so much in awe of one's subjects, is it possible to safeguard any property? Jodu Mukherjee's daughter, in spite of being a woman, was thoroughly amused. Apparently she told Gobinda Ganguly the other day, "Tell Ramesh Babu to take a monthly retainer and hand over all the property to me." Is there anything more shameful than this?' His face distorted in anger and sorrow, Gopal concentrated on his work again.

There was no woman in the household—hence there were no restrictions about entering any part of the house. Bhairav went in and saw Ramesh stretched out on a broken easy chair on the front veranda. In order to incite Ramesh about his responsibilities, he urgently broached the subject and was concluding a brief introduction about protecting property, when, like a sleeping tiger hit by a bullet, Ramesh roared out, 'What is this audacity every day! Bhojua!'

At this unimaginable and unexpected aggression, Bhairav himself grew agitated. He could not begin to imagine what could have managed to anger Ramesh to this extent. Bhojua was Ramesh's servant from Gorakhpur—extremely trustworthy and strong. He was adept at wielding a lathi, having learnt this from Ramesh himself. As soon as he appeared, Ramesh instructed, 'Take away all the fish forcibly—if anyone protests, drag him here by the roots of his hair! If that is impossible, at least break a couple of teeth.'

Bhojua was actually delighted—for a long time he had not flexed his muscles. At this wonderful chance to do so, he silently entered his room to pick up his lathi and was about to leave. Bhairav quailed in fright at the direction in which matters were moving. He had been brought up in Bengal and was not in the least perturbed by raised voices or the flaunting of strength. But the sight of the squat Hindustani who did not say a word and only nodded, scared him to the very soles of his feet. He recollects that the dog who did not bark definitely bit! Bhairav was a true well-wisher—all that he had wanted, even to the accompaniment of curses and abuses, was to join in the fray and take some fish for himself from the Ghosals' share. But it now seemed as if matters were not moving

according to his plans at all. The owner reacted by cursing aloud; the servant did not even bat an eyelid and only armed himself with his well-oiled lathi silently and purposefully. Bhairav was a poor man; he had neither desire nor any ability to get embroiled in a legal battle. In a few minutes Bhojua was ready to leave and respectfully saluted his master from a distance. All of a sudden, Bhairav burst into tears and firmly clutched Ramesh's hands, 'O Bhojua, do not go! Ramesh my dear, save me; I am a poor man and will not survive even for a day on my own.'

Irritated and amazed at the same time, Ramesh freed himself. Bhojua walked back silently. Tearfully, Bhairav reiterated, 'This will not remain a secret, my dear. Beni Babu will ensure that I do not live even twenty-four hours! My house will burn and not even the gods will be able to save me.'

Ramesh sat in silence with bowed head. Hearing all the uproar Gopal Sarkar left his accounting and entered the room. He said softly, 'What he says is correct, Babu.'

There was no answer to that; Ramesh merely gestured to Bhojua to get on with his own work and silently left the room. It was only the Almighty who was witness to the fearful storm that raged in him at the sight of Bhairav Acharya's immeasurable fright.

## 7

'JATIN, WHY DO YOU CONTINUE TO PLAY, DON'T YOU HAVE SCHOOL?'

'We have a holiday for two days, Didi!'

Hearing this, Mashi grimaced and her face looked even more fearsome than ever. 'That wretched school remains closed for more than half the month! Yet you still insist on spending money on it. I would have had it burnt down by now!' she said contemptuously. Those who maligned Mashi as a liar through and through would be wrong—she could give voice to such truths once in a while and when she did so, did not hesitate to use the brutal frankness which was so typical of her.

Rama pulled her younger brother close and in low tones inquired, 'Why do you have holidays, my dear?'

Jatin snuggled against his sister, 'Our school is having the roof thatched—many new books have been bought and even some chairs and tables! There is also an almirah and a huge clock—why don't you come and take a look one day, Didi?'

Rama was amazed, 'What!'

'Yes, Didi, truly! Ramesh Babu has come—it is he who is organizing everything.' He would have said some more, but seeing Mashi approach, Rama quickly took him to her room. Drawing her brother close she asked innumerable questions and gathered a lot of information about

Ramesh's activities in the school. She found out that Ramesh spent a couple of hours every day personally teaching the students. All of a sudden she asked, 'Jatin, does he recognize you?'

Proudly, the lad nodded vigorously.

'How do you address him?'

This question posed a problem. Jatin had not been lucky enough for such intimacy with Ramesh and neither had he had the gumption to initiate a conversation with him. The manner in which even the much-feared headmaster became tense and alert in Ramesh's presence, caused waves of fear and amazement amongst all the students. Far from calling out, the students could barely summon the courage to look directly at him. This was, however, no confession to make to his sister. The boys had heard the teachers addressing him as 'Chhoto Babu'. So, Jatin put two and two together and said, 'We all call him Chhoto Babu!' But his very manner of speaking gave the game away. Rama pulled her brother even closer and said, 'Chhoto Babu! He is your elder brother! Like all of you call Beni Babu Barda, can't you address him as Chhorda?'

The child grew restive with joy and amazement. 'He is my elder brother? Really, Didi?'

'That's how it works out!' Rama smiled a bit. It then became impossible to hold on to Jatin! He felt as if he would burst unless he imparted this stupendous news to his fellow students. But school was closed! Somehow he would have to hold on to his patience for a couple of days. But how could he possibly be expected to refrain at least from telling the boys of the locality? Impatiently he asked, 'Can I go now, Didi?'

'Where will you go at this hour?' Rama continued to hold on to him. Unable to leave and disconsolately remaining silent, after a while Jatin asked, 'Where was he all this time, Didi?'

Serenely Rama answered, 'He had gone far for higher studies. When you grow up, you will have to move afar to be better educated too. Will you be able to stay without me?'

She clutched her brother close once more. Though he was a mere child, it was apparent to Jatin that there was a strange tone in his sister's voice and he stared at her curiously. Though Rama dearly loved this brother, never before had she displayed such emotional excess.

Jatin asked, 'Has Chhorda completed his studies?'

Just as affectionately Rama answered, 'Yes dear, he has taken all his degrees.'

Yet again Jatin questioned, 'How do you know?'

Rama could only sigh and shake her head in response. Truly, neither she nor anyone else in the village knew anything for sure about Ramesh. It was not that her assumptions were certain to be correct, but somehow a conviction had grown in her that a person who was so conscious about the education of children, was definitely no ignoramus himself. Jatin did not display any further interest in the subject. All of a sudden another question had arisen in his mind and he immediately gave utterance to this: 'Didi, why doesn't Chhorda come to our house? Barda comes every day.'

Like a sudden unexpected shaft of pain, the question ran tremors throughout Rama's body. But she concealed the hurt and smilingly responded, 'Can't you invite him and bring him over?'

'I will go immediately,' said Jatin instantly and stood up to set off on this mission.

'What an impulsive child!' In fearful trepidation, Rama put her arms around her brother and drew him close. 'I am warning you, Jatin, you are never ever to do something like that—never!' Feeling her heart beat rapidly as he stood against her, Jatin gazed in bewilderment at his sister and was silent. First of all, he had never seen her behaving in such an erratic fashion; besides, after being upgraded from 'Chhoto Babu' to 'Chhorda', Ramesh's status in Jatin's entire thought process had undergone a change. But he failed to comprehend why his sister continued to be so scared of Ramesh. All of a sudden, Mashi's shrill tones reached her and Rama quickly let go of Jatin and stood up. The lady herself appeared shortly. She chided Rama as usual, 'I had assumed you had gone to the pond for a dip—is it right to remain without bathing or even oiling your hair so late in the day? You are looking absolutely washed out!'

Rama forced herself to smile. 'You carry on, Mashi, I will join you in a while.'

'How much later? Come out! Beni and the others have come to divide the fish.'

Jatin ran off at the mention of fish. Unnoticed by Mashi, Rama carefully wiped her face and then emerged from the room. There was a huge clamour in the courtyard—a large amount of fish had been netted. Beni himself was present to divide the spoils. All the children of the village had gathered there and were getting under everybody's feet.

The sound of a cough was heard and at the next instance, asking, 'What has your haul been like, Beni?' Dharmadas entered, leaning on his stick.

'Nothing much,' Beni responded offhandedly. He called out to the fisherman, 'Hurry up now and make two divisions.'

The division proceeded.

'What is happening, Rama?' It was Gobinda Ganguly—he had just arrived. 'I have not been able to call on you for a number of days. I thought to myself, let me drop by and make some inquiries.'

Rama welcomed him with a little smile.

'Why is it so crowded?' asked Ganguly and moved forward for a glimpse of the proceedings. And then, as if in sudden surprise, he exclaimed, 'Oh! There is quite a good amount of fish, I see! The large pond was netted, was it?'

No one found it necessary to answer such obvious questions; the division of fish went on and was over soon. Beni was on the verge of sending home his share and gestured for the fisherman to leave. Taking it for granted that the need of the Mukherjees was not much, all present took for their own consumption as much as possible and prepared to leave.

Just then everyone was taken aback by the sight of Ramesh Ghosal's

squat Hindustani servant carrying a long bamboo baton, taking a firm stance in the middle of the courtyard. The man had such an ominous appearance that it immediately attracted all attention. All the youngsters and elders in the village instantly recognized him; as a matter of fact, there were already a number of exaggerated and absurd stories circulating in the village about Bhojua. In the midst of so many people, how this man was able to discern Rama as being the mistress of the household was a mystery; but, respectfully greeting her from a distance, he drew closer. No matter what his outer appearance was, his voice was truly fearsome—very deep and hoarse. Greeting Rama yet again, in a mixture of Hindi and Bengali, he said abruptly, 'I am Ramesh Babu's servant and have come to collect a third share of the fish.' Whether because she was taken by surprise or because she was not able to come up with the words to respond with—Rama remained silent. Suddenly Bhojua turned around and addressing Beni's servant, commanded, 'You, don't leave!'

In fright the man moved back a step or two. For a few minutes there was total silence; then Beni mustered the courage to ask, 'What share?'

Bhojua immediately greeted him respectfully and answered, 'Babu, I did not ask you.'

From a safe distance, in high-pitched tones Mashi called out, 'Do you plan to strike us or what?'

Bhojua glanced sharply at her; at the next instant, the entire house was filled with the terrifying sound of his full-throated laughter. Abruptly stopping his guffaws and in slightly shamed tones, Bhojua again looked towards Rama and asked, 'Ma-jii?' Rama felt the inherent contempt in his attitude despite the courtesy of his speech and the excessive display of respect. She was getting more irritated steadily and ultimately spoke, 'What does your Babu want?'

Noting her irritation, Bhojua suddenly grew somewhat awkward. He softened his harsh tones as much as possible and in a milder tone reiterated his demand. However, what difference did that make—the fish had already been divided! After all, Rama could not face humiliation in front of so many people. Hence, in sardonic tones she responded, 'Your Babu has no share at all in this. Tell him to do what he can!'

'All right, Ma-jii!' Bhojua respectfully acknowledged her words, and gestured for Beni's servant to leave. He himself then got ready to move away. The entire household was stunned at his behaviour; all of a sudden he turned around and in the strange dialect he favoured, apologized for his harsh tones, 'Ma-jii, listening to what people had to say, Babu had commanded me to forcibly take away the fish in the pond. Neither Babu nor I touch fish or flesh, but—' He struck his chest and asserted once again, 'If Babu had commanded, perhaps I would have had to give up my life on the banks of this pond. But, the Almighty was good, Babu's anger waned! He called me and said, "Bhojua, go and ask Ma-jii whether I have any share in the pond." Bhojua respectfully raised his stick to acknowledge her presence and continued, 'Babuji said, "No matter what anyone else says, no untruth will ever be uttered by Ma-jii, she will never touch what belongs to another." Bhojua respectfully continued to salute

Rama a number of times before he took his leave.

As soon as he had left, Beni cried out in high-pitched tones, 'He will safeguard his property in this manner! Let me promise all of you—henceforth, not an iota of anything at all will he get from the pond, do you understand, Rama?' He began to laugh cruelly.

Nothing penetrated Rama's ears. 'No untruth would ever be uttered by Ma-ji'—it was as though the clamour of innumerable hands clapping was creating a furore in her head. Her fair complexion assumed a rosy hue and at the next moment turned pale—as though not a drop of blood remained. The only sane thought that she could retain was—no one should catch a glimpse of my emotion right now! She pulled one end of her sari over her face and made a rapid exit.

## 8

'JETHAIMA!'

'Who is that? Ramesh? Come in, come in, my dear!' Bishheshwari affectionately welcomed him and put out a mat for him to be seated. On stepping into the room, Ramesh was startled. It was quite apparent to him (though her face was not visible) that the woman seated near his Jethaima was none other than Rama. What stung Ramesh was the thought that while people like Rama did not hesitate to mete out insults through an intermediary, they also unhesitatingly and shamelessly drew close when required. Rama was no less embarrassed at Ramesh's sudden advent. It was not merely that she belonged to the same village, but her relationship with Ramesh was such that it was awkward to treat him formally and yet, it was just as embarrassing to make a show of closeness. Besides, what a furore had been created over dividing the fish! She sat awkwardly in one corner, preserving all the social niceties. Ramesh did not acknowledge her presence any further. He went into the room as though oblivious of anyone else, calling out, 'Jethaima!'

'Why suddenly in the afternoon, Ramesh?'

'There is no other opportunity to spend some time quietly with you. You keep busy all the while!'

Not protesting, Bishheshwari merely smiled a bit. Ramesh said, 'Long ago, when I was a child, I had once come to take my leave of you. Today I have come to do so once again. Perhaps this will be the last time, Jethaima!'

Though Ramesh was smiling, his heavy voice bore such an imprint of an overburdened heart that both the women were startled by the deep despair that broke through.

'Bless you, my dear, why do you speak thus?' Bishheshwari's eyes brimmed over with tears.

Ramesh only smiled in response.

In a voice replete with affection Bishheshwari asked, 'Are you not feeling well?'

Ramesh cast a look at his well-built and healthy body and said, 'This is a body used to rigours and hardship, it can endure a lot. No, there is nothing wrong with me physically, but emotionally and mentally I am feeling stifled.'

Relieved at hearing that it was no question of any physical malady, Bishheshwari said with a smile, 'This is your birthplace, tell me what makes it so difficult to live here!'

Shaking his head, Ramesh said, 'There is no sense in elaborating, I know that you are aware of the reasons.'

After remaining silent for a while, Bishheshwari responded gravely, 'If not everything, I definitely do know about some of the issues. That is the very reason why I say, it is imperative that you stay on.'

Ramesh answered, 'Why imperative, Jethaima? Nobody wants me here.'

'It is because nobody wants you here that I will not permit you to run away anywhere. This physical prowess that you are so proud of—is it for the purpose of taking to your heels?'

Ramesh remained silent. For the present, his entire being seemed to revolt against the village and its inhabitants. His latest problem concerned a road—the road that led directly to the station had greatly deteriorated over time. Over the past month or so, its condition had worsened even further. Water frequently accumulated in the large potholes and it was a matter of concern and huge inconvenience for anyone who had to go by that stretch of road. At most times, people would carefully make their way across; but during the rainy season, their miseries knew no end. They would fling a bamboo or two across and with the help of that and other temporary structures, stumbling and at grave risk to life and limb, somehow make their way to the other side. However, despite facing such discomforts, the villagers had made no attempt at all to have the road repaired to date. Ramesh had taken the matter up and, instead of paying the entire sum himself, had tirelessly tried to gather funds from everybody. But it had proved impossible to make any collection, even after ten days had gone by.

There was another bone of contention too; while taking a roundabout route to his Jethaima's house, Ramesh was passing a local shop and overheard the comment, 'None of you contribute anything at all—it is mostly in his interests to do so. After all, his shoes must remain clean on the roads! If nobody donates, then he will definitely have it repaired himself and pay out of his own pocket. Besides, all the while that he was not here, did we not manage to reach the station?'

Another person had responded, 'Why not wait some more! Chatterjee Moshai was saying that he can even be hoodwinked into renovating the temple . . . If you can sidle up to him and appeal to his ego by addressing him as "Babu" a couple of times, that is all that is needed.' This conversation had been searing Ramesh ever since he had heard it.

Bishheshwari struck at this sore point and said, 'What has happened

to the renovation you were planning?’

Irritated, Ramesh responded, ‘That is not possible, Jethaima! No one will contribute anything at all.’

Bishheshwari laughed aloud, ‘Will the work not be done because they do not contribute? You have inherited a lot of money from your grandfather. Why not contribute that amount of money yourself?’

Ramesh flew into a rage, ‘Why should I? I bitterly regret that without understanding the entire situation, I have spent a lot of money on the school. No one should do anything for anyone in this village!’ He cast a scathing glace in Rama’s direction and continued, ‘They assume a person is stupid if he contributes; an attempt to do any good is attributed to self-interest! Even to forgive is a sin, it is taken for granted that a person has retreated in fright.’

Bishheshwari laughed even louder; but Rama’s face became flushed. Angrily Ramesh asked, ‘Why do you laugh, Jethaima?’

‘What else can I do besides that, tell me, dear?’ Bishheshwari sighed deeply. ‘Rather, I would say, your presence is most required here. Anger is about to drive you away from your own birth land, but who is worthy of your anger here?’ Pausing for a while, Bishheshwari continued, as if talking to herself, ‘They are so pitiful, so weak, if you realized that, Ramesh, you would be ashamed of even being angry with them. If the Almighty has been merciful enough to send you here, remain here, my dear.’

‘But they don’t want me, Jethaima!’

‘Of course! You understand from that itself how unworthy they are of your anger? It is not just them, go to any village, they are all the same.’

Suddenly her glance falling on Rama, Bishheshwari said, ‘Why are you sitting there silent and downcast? Ramesh, don’t you siblings converse? No, no—never behave in that manner! Whatever discord there was with his father has disappeared with his death. You cannot be permitted to continue the quarrel.’

Rama, looking down, said very gently, ‘I do not want any animosity, Jethaima! Ramesh da—’

Her sudden mild tones overshadowed Ramesh’s deep and heated timbre. He stood up saying, ‘Jethaima, you should not get involved in all this. The other day you were somehow saved from her Mashi’s wrath; today, if she returns and sends her across, Mashi will stop only after physically dismembering you!’ Ramesh then abruptly took his leave without waiting for further arguments and counter-arguments.

Bishheshwari called out loudly, ‘Don’t go now, Ramesh, listen to me . . .’

Ramesh answered even as he left, ‘No, Jethaima, don’t say a word in favour of those people whose vanity prods them into trampling you underfoot!’ He made his exit without waiting for more.

Stunned, Rama gazed at Bishheshwari for a few minutes and then burst into tears, ‘Why this quarrel with me, Jethaima? Have I tutored Mashi or am I responsible for her actions?’

Jethaima lovingly took Rama’s hands in her own and affectionately

said, 'It is true that you do not teach her, but you are definitely responsible for her actions.'

Wiping dry her eyes with the other hand, in stifled hurt, Rama forcefully denied all charges, 'Me, responsible? Never! I did not have any idea of all this, Jethaima! Then why does he unreasonably blame and insult me?'

Bishheshwari did not continue the argument. She simply said, 'Everybody is not aware of the inside story, my dear. But I can assure you that Ramesh never had any intention of meting out any insult. You do not know, but I have heard from Gopal Sarkar and have realized personally, how much Ramesh respects and trusts you. The other day, when the tree was being cut down and the spoils divided, he did not pay any heed at all to talks about his share. Ramesh laughed at them all as he said, "If Rama is there, I will definitely get what is rightfully mine; she will never usurp what belongs to another." I know for sure, dear, that he still retained that amount of faith and confidence in you—but, because of that unfortunate incident regarding the fish . . .'

In the midst of what she was saying, Bishheshwari came to a sudden halt as she gazed at Rama's downcast and wan visage. Finally she said, 'Today, let me tell you something, my dear—no matter how important it is to preserve your property, Ramesh's life is far more valuable. No matter who says what, or what goals become important to achieve, don't destroy that sentiment with repeated blows. The harm that will result will be irreparable—I can assure you of that.'

Rama sat as still as a statue, unable to utter any more words of protest. Bishheshwari too did not speak any further. After a while, in mild and indistinct tones Rama took her respectful leave.

## 9

EVEN THOUGH RAMESH HAD DEPARTED IN GREAT ANGER AND DISTASTE, HIS anger seemed to dissipate immediately on reaching home. He repeatedly thought to himself, 'Not understanding this simple fact has caused me so much hurt! Truly, who is the target of my anger? These people are so narrow-minded and petty that they cannot even understand what is good for them. They lack education to such a degree that the destruction of a neighbour's strength seems to them to be the best way for them to become stronger! It is the height of foolishness to be upset with people who become agitated at the mere prospect of someone working for their betterment.'

He remembered his life in the faraway city, reading and imbibing stories about a tranquil village life innumerable times. 'Even if society in Bengal lacks everything else, the quiet villages possess a serenity that can never be found in a crowded metropolis. There, simple village folk are satisfied with very little; they soak in sympathy and are used to

participating in the joys and sorrows of one another. It is only there, in those hearts, that the true wealth of Bengal still lies hidden!' so said the books. Alas, what a terrible fallacy! Ramesh had never witnessed such opportunism and spite even in the city. Whenever the lively city had sported some signs of sin, of wrongdoing, Ramesh had thought to himself, 'If only I can once reach my birthplace, that small village, I can escape all these evils. There, religion governs life and society has still preserved its integrity.' But where was all this! Where was religion alive in these ancient villages? If the very essence of religion had disappeared, why did its putrefying corpse reign supreme? It seemed as if rural society was clinging in desperation to this distorted and decomposing cadaver and in the process, sinking deeper and deeper into slimy degradation. But the most pitiful contradiction of ethics was that the jibes of the villagers were directed at city life—where, they asserted, religion was non-existent!

On entering his house, Ramesh found an elderly lady, huddled together with a young boy in one corner of the courtyard. On seeing him, they immediately stood up. Though he was totally ignorant about his visitors and the purpose of their visit, Ramesh felt his heart cry out just looking at the young boy. Gopal Sarkar who was busy with his accounts walked up, 'The boy is from another locality—Dwarik Chakroborty's son. They have come to you for some alms.'

At the very mention of alms, Ramesh flew into a rage. 'Am I the only one to approach with a begging bowl? Is there no one else in the village?'

Gopal Sarkar was somewhat embarrassed, 'You are right there, Babu! But, Tarini Babu never turned anyone away. So, in dire need, everybody makes their way here.'

Gopal Sarkar then explained at length, 'This boy's father, Dwarik Chakroborty died after suffering for six months. Since the proper last rites were not performed, nobody is willing to touch the corpse or undertake whatever needs to be done. But the body will have to be disposed off now, and quickly. Kamini's mother who is of a lower caste, and the Chakrobortys' neighbour, has spent all she had to meet the expenses of this hapless Brahmin family for the past six months. But now even she is penniless and hence has come to beg from you.'

Looking at the boy, but addressing the elderly lady Gopal said, 'Kamini's mother, your neighbours are no less at fault! While Chakroborty was still alive, the rites were not performed, now after his death you bring this child along to beg.'

Kamini's mother shook her head and said, 'Come and have a look for yourself if you do not believe me. If there was anything worth selling, would I have left the bodyuntended and come begging? You must have heard about the matter? These six months I have given all I have. After all, otherwise the children of my Brahmin neighbour would have died!'

Ramesh could comprehend something of the situation.

He remained silent for a while and then asked, 'It is well past noon; if the penance is not performed, will the corpse remainuntended to?'

Sarkar smiled, 'What other option is there, Babu? Nothing can be done outside the dictums of religion. How can the neighbours be blamed—

either way, the body cannot just remain lying there. In whatever manner, they will have to take care of the matter. Hence, begging—well, Kamini's mother, have you been elsewhere?"

The boy opened his clenched fist and showed a few coins. The lady said, 'The Mukherjees and Haldars have contributed! But, a lot more is needed to meet even the minimum cost. So, if Babu . . .'

Ramesh hurriedly spoke up, 'You return home, there is no need to go elsewhere. I will make all the arrangements and send my men over.' After seeing them off, he cast a pained and hurt glance at Gopal Sarkar and asked, 'How many such abysmally poor people are there in the village?'

'About two to three families, not many. They too had been able to eke out some sort of a living; but, having got embroiled in some sort of a legal case, both Dwarik Chakraborty and Sanatan Hazra became virtually destitute. Lowering his voice slightly he continued, 'Matters would not have come to such a pass, but our Boro Babu and Gobinda Ganguly incited and provoked both of them.'

'Then?'

Sarkar continued, 'Then, both these families remained up to their necks in debt to our Boro Babu. Last year he bought off everything—the principle and interest, all of it! Kamini's mother is truly the daughter of a farmer. All that she did for a Brahmin during this period is absolutely remarkable.'

Ramesh sighed deeply and fell silent. Then, sending Gopal Sarkar to oversee the arrangements, he said to himself, 'Jethaima, I accept wholeheartedly your command. If I am to die here, so be it—but, it is impossible to discard this unfortunate village and go elsewhere.'

## 10

ABOUT THREE MONTHS LATER, ONE MORNING AS RAMESH WAS ABOUT TO take a dip in the waters of the holy pond at Tarakeshwar, he suddenly ran into a lady on the steps. For a moment he was so entranced that all he could do was gaze at her unadorned face and it did not even cross his mind to move away. The girl was probably not more than twenty and was about to return after bathing. When she looked up and saw him, she quickly put down the pitcher full of water and, drawing her wet sari closer, looked down and exclaimed, 'You are here!'

Ramesh's amazement knew no end, but he got over his bewilderment. Moving aside to let her pass, he asked, 'Do you know me?'

'I do! When did you come to Tarakeshwar?'

Ramesh replied, 'This morning. My cousins were supposed to be joining me, but they have not turned up.'

'Where are you staying here?'

'I don't know! I have never been here before, but today I will have to put up here somewhere or the other. Some sort of a shelter will have to be found.'

'You have a servant accompanying you?'

'No, I am alone.'

'Think of that now!' As the girl laughed and looked up, their eyes met again. She immediately looked down once again. Somewhat hesitantly she then said, 'In that case, come with me!' Once again she picked up the pitcher of water and moved ahead.

Ramesh was not sure how to react, 'I do not mind going, because, if it were indecorous, you would not have invited me. It is not even that I do not know you, just that I cannot remember. Please tell me who you are?'

'Well, wait outside while I finish my prayers. On the way back, I will introduce myself.' The girl moved towards the temple. Ramesh stood entranced. Some magnetic, physical appeal was emanating through her wet clothes and suffusing him with its magical power. Her entire being seemed so very familiar to Ramesh, but the blocked doors of his memory refused to be opened.

Half an hour later, when the girl returned after her prayers, Ramesh was able to catch another glimpse of her. But, he still could not penetrate the mystery of her identity. While walking along, Ramesh asked, 'Do you not have any relatives with you?'

'There is a maid; she is working at home. I come here frequently, for I am quite familiar with this place.'

'But, why are you taking me along?'

The girl walked in silence for a while and then answered, 'I have to take you along—your meals will become a problem otherwise! I am Rama.'

Personally ensuring that Ramesh ate properly, Rama laid out the mat for him to sleep and left the room. Stretching out and closing his eyes, it seemed to Ramesh that all the twenty-three years of his life had undergone a diametric change in this short span of half a day. Since childhood he had been brought up far from his native place and not under the guardianship of his parents. He had never thought that the act of eating could satisfy any other need, except appease hunger. Hence, this newfound unimaginable satiety filled his heart and soul with a strange sweetness. Rama had not been able to make any special arrangement for his meal—it was very ordinary, plain, day-to-day fare. Hence, it was a great source of worry for her that Ramesh would be unable to eat properly and that she would be to blame! Rama could no longer hide from herself the closeness and intimacy this degree of worry implied and how it had in a flash pushed aside all barriers and restrictions of society. In order to make up for the paucity of food, she was forced to put herself at the fore. The Almighty was the only one to know of the depths of satisfaction that arose from the core of her being in doing so and surpassed even the sense of satisfaction that Ramesh felt.

Ramesh was not used to sleeping during the day. Through a small

window in the room he could see the clouds floating by in the summer sky. He no longer wondered about his relatives who had not yet arrived. It didn't matter to him. In the midst of his daydreams, he heard Rama's voice, and stepped out. From the threshold she said, 'Since you cannot return home today, please do stay here.'

Quickly Ramesh spoke, 'But, I do not know the owner of the house. How do I stay here without his permission?'

Rama answered, 'She says to stay on—the house belongs to me.'

Ramesh was amazed. 'Why do you have a house here?' he asked.

Rama said, 'This is one of my favourite localities, I come here quite frequently. There are not too many people now, but at times there is virtually no place to stand.'

Ramesh said, 'Fine, but wouldn't it be better not to come at all at such a time?'

Rama was silent and merely smiled. Ramesh asked once again, 'You are a great devotee of the reigning deity here, aren't you?'

'I really do not possess that much of piety, but shouldn't all humans make an effort?'

Ramesh kept quiet. Rama sat down on the threshold and changed the subject. 'What would you like to have at night?'

Answering with a smile, Ramesh said, 'Whatever is available! I never think about food till the moment before sitting down to eat. So, I have to be satisfied with whatever the cook decides to present.'

Rama asked, 'Why this disinterest?'

It was not clear to Ramesh whether this was a hidden jibe or a simple jest at his expense. He replied tersely, 'It's mere laziness!'

'But I have never seen you being slothful where others are concerned!'

Ramesh answered, 'There is a reason for that. If one is lazy in one's dealing with others, the Almighty will have to be answered to. Maybe this is also applicable to one's personal matters, but probably not as much.'

Rama remained silent for a while and then asked, 'You are wealthy and so can afford to concentrate on others—but what about those who are not well off?'

'I do not know about them, Rama, because where I'm concerned there are no fixed boundaries or quantities as regards spending. All this accounting is the responsibility of one who keeps track of everything.'

Rama was silent for a while, after which she protested, 'But you have not reached an age to be thinking of answering to the Almighty! You are only three years older than me!'

Ramesh laughed, 'That means you are even younger! God willing, may you have many more years ahead of you. But, speaking for myself, I never assume that this will not be my last day on Earth.'

The lightest of blows that lay buried in this statement did not miss the mark. After remaining silent for a while, Rama asked all of a sudden, 'I did not see you perform the evening prayers. Whether you go to the temple or not is another matter, but shouldn't you at least remember the Almighty every evening?'

Laughing to himself Ramesh replied, 'As a matter of fact, I have not and even if I did, it would not really make a difference. However, why this question?'

Rama responded, 'You seem prone to reflect quite a lot on the afterlife and the like and so . . .'

Ramesh did not respond to this; both remained silent for a while. Rama then gently continued, 'Look, blessing me with long life is only a curse. In our Hindu society, no relation ever wishes long life for a widow.' She paused for a few moments and then went on, 'It is true that I am not exactly waiting to die, but even the thought of living for a long time scares us widows. But this is not applicable to you. It would be indecorous of me to assert my opinion, but when deliberately taking on the problems of another seems childish, remember my words.'

Ramesh could only sigh in response. After a while, in tones similar to Rama's he said, 'It is recollecting your words that I say—today, this holds no meaning for me. I am nobody of yours, Rama, rather, an impediment in your path. But today, as your neighbour, I have received so much warmth and caring! In life, I think that those who are used to all this love and concern would rush to help another on hearing of someone's sorrow and pain. Sitting alone I was just thinking—in this short span of half a day, you have changed my entire life. Nobody has invited me for a meal in this manner and there has been nobody to care about how I have eaten! I have learned from you for the first time that there can be so much joy in such a simple thing as having a meal.'

Ramesh's warm praises for her thrilled Rama's mind and body. She responded almost immediately, 'You will not take much time to forget this. Even if all this does come to mind some day, it will appear as a very negligible part of your life.'

Ramesh made no response.

Rama said once more, 'That you will not be critical of my hospitality when you return home is my good fortune.'

Ramesh sighed deeply yet again and responded gravely, 'No, Rama, I will not criticize, nor will I go about singing your praises. This day is beyond all praise or criticism for me.'

Rama did not answer. Remaining silent for a while and then getting up, she quietly went to her room. There, in the silence, tears coursed ceaselessly down her cheeks.

AFTER RAINING NON-STOP FOR TWO DAYS, IT WAS JUST LETTING UP TOWARDS the evening. Ramesh was at home, examining the accounts with the help of Gopal Sarkar. All of a sudden some twenty farmers, weeping and in a state of desperation, asked for his audience. 'Chhoto Babu,' they said,

'you have got to save us this time—otherwise we will surely starve along with our families.'

Taken aback, Ramesh asked, 'What is the matter?'

'Babu, the fields have flooded; if the water is not let out all the crops will be destroyed and not one single family in the village will have food to eat.'

Ramesh could not grasp the matter from this brief account. After questioning the farmers, Gopal Sarkar explained the entire matter to him. The entire cultivable land of the village was divided into small plots that belonged to various farmers in the village. To the east of this land was an enormous dam which was constructed by the government; to the west and north were other villages and these were located on a higher level. The dam on the southern side belonged to the Mukherjees and the Ghosals. This could be used for drainage and irrigation; but, because fish worth a lot of money was sold every year from the reservoir adjoining this dam, Beni Babu had placed it under strict guard. The farmers had pleaded the entire morning with him to open up the dam but Beni Babu hadn't relented, so they had been ultimately forced to seek out Ramesh.

Ramesh did not wait any longer and left immediately. When he entered Beni's house, it was getting to be evening. Beni was leaning on his pillow, puffing away on the hookah. Paran Haldar sat close by, probably discussing the very matter in question. Not bothering with any kind of introduction, Ramesh came to the point straightaway, 'It will just not do to keep the dam blocked any longer, the waters will have to be let out.'

Handing the hookah to Haldar, Beni looked up and asked, 'What dam?'

As it is Ramesh was greatly agitated, and with Beni feigning ignorance of the matter, his anger only mounted. He replied furiously, 'How many dams are there, Barda? Unless the waters are let out, the crops of almost the entire village will be destroyed. Please give the order for the waters to be released.'

Beni responded, 'Do you realize that along with the water, fish worth a lot of money will also escape? Who will pay for that—the farmers or you?'

Somehow curbing his anger, Ramesh answered, 'These farmers are poor, it is impossible for them to make any payment. I do not understand why I should have to make any payment either.'

Looking towards Haldar, Beni commented, 'This is the way my dear brother is going to manage his estates! Ramesh dear, all through the morning the wretches were stationed here—crying and weeping all the while. I am well aware of everything. Don't you have guards for your estates? They don't have fancy shoes—go and get that organized! The arrangements for water will happen naturally!' Beni and Haldar laughed uproariously at their own joke.

Ramesh was finding their attitude intolerable; he tried his best to control himself and responded humbly, 'Barda, in order to save only three households some little money, crops for the entire year will be

destroyed. It will prove extremely expensive for the poor farmers.'

Beni merely shrugged, 'If that is to be, it will be—if I do not stand to gain, why should I spend any money for those good-for-nothings?'

Ramesh made one last attempt, 'Then, what will they eat through the year?'

As if a truly hilarious jest had been made, Beni could barely stop the peals of laughter that shook his entire body. 'What will they eat? Mind you, those scoundrels will rush to mortgage their property with us and borrow money. Listen, keep a cool head, this is exactly why our forefathers have left us all this; to enjoy ourselves and also leave behind a little something for our children. What will they eat? Let them borrow and feed themselves how they will. Why else are they called low-down?'

Ramesh's face became flushed with disgust, shame, overwhelming rage and a searing regret. However, keeping as calm as possible he replied, 'Since you have decided to do nothing at all, it does not make sense to remain here, arguing with you! I am going to Rama—if she agrees, there is nothing that your dissenting will achieve.'

Beni grew grave, 'Very well, go and find out! Her opinion is no different from mine, she is not an easy woman to get around! You are a mere child, why, she had your father running around in circles. What do you say, Khuro?'

Ramesh was not in the least curious about Khuro's opinion. He did not have any inclination to bear Beni's extremely insulting attitude either and left without a word.

In the courtyard, Rama had just lit the evening lamp and completed her prayers. When she looked up she saw Ramesh right in front of her! She was amazed. Her head bowed, it appeared as though she was respectfully greeting Ramesh himself. In the throes of his overwhelming rage and anxiety, Ramesh had completely forgotten Mashi's harsh insults meted out to him the first day he had appeared in the household. Hence, he had walked straight into the house and waited in silence till Rama had completed her prayers.

A month had passed since their last meeting—in Tarakeshwar. Ramesh said, 'You must have heard about the entire matter. I have come to seek your permission to let out the water.'

Rama's sense of bewilderment concerning the purpose of Ramesh's visit was dispelled. She covered her head with one end of the sari and answered, 'How can I agree? Besides, Barda is not agreeable.'

'I know! But his sole dissent will not make any difference.'

Rama thought for a while, 'True, the waters should be let out! But, what will you do to prevent the fish from escaping?'

Ramesh answered, 'It is not possible to do anything when that amount of water is involved. We will have to count that as a loss this year—or else the entire village faces death.'

Rama remained silent.

Ramesh said, 'Then I have your permission?'

Mildly Rama responded, 'No, I cannot permit that kind of loss.'

Ramesh was stunned into speechlessness. He had not in his wildest

dreams expected this negative response from Rama. Rather, a firm conviction had somehow grown in his mind that Rama would never be able to refuse his earnest appeal.

Looking up, Rama could immediately gauge his reaction. She said, 'Besides, the property belongs to my brother, I am merely the guardian.'

'But, half is yours!'

'Only in theory! Father had definitely assumed that everything would go to Jatin. Hence, half was made out to me.'

Ramesh however continued to plead, 'Rama, you are squabbling just for this paltry sum of money? You are the most prosperous of everybody here; this will be no loss to you. I would never have imagined you could be so cruel.'

Rama continued to respond just as mildly, 'If looking after my own interests means cruelty, so be it! If you are that concerned, why not pay the compensation yourself and make up the loss?'

Ramesh flew into a rage at her barbed remark, 'Rama, whether or not a person is truly worthy can be assessed only when money comes into play! This is the time when no deception is possible and only man's true nature comes to the fore. That is what has happened to you today. But, I never would have thought you were like this! I have always believed that you could never stoop to being petty, but you can! It is a mistake to even call you cruel—you are low-down and far worse than petty!'

Starting in hurt and shock, Rama asked, 'I?!"

'You are disgusting and low-down! Only because you know how desperate I am, you make claims of compensation. Even Barda did not have the gumption to make such a demand! As a man he hesitated, but you as a woman, did not pause to think before speaking. I can afford much more compensation than this, but let me tell you this, Rama—whatever sin exists on Earth, the most heinous is to take advantage of a person's kindness. That is exactly what you are trying to do with me today!"

Rama gazed at him unblinkingly, dumbstruck; not a word escaped her. Ramesh continued in the same calm and measured tones, 'You are not unaware where my weakness lies, but let me clarify—not one more jot of advantage will you be able to extract! Let me also inform you of what I am going to do—I am going to forcibly break down the dam. Try and stop me if you can.'

Seeing Ramesh about to leave, Rama called out after him. As he drew near, she said, 'I do not want to respond to even one insult you have showered on me in my house. But, you must not do what you have set out to do.'

Ramesh asked, 'Why?"

'Only because despite so many insults, I have no wish to quarrel with you.'

It was apparent to Ramesh even in the darkness of dusk how unnaturally wan Rama appeared and the manner in which her lips quivered as she tried to speak. But he was in no frame of mind for a psychological analysis. He immediately responded, 'I have no wish to

enter into any dispute either, you will realize that if you think a little. But then, I have no means to hold on to your goodwill either! Anyway, there is no sense in bickering further. Allow me to leave.'

Mashi had been firmly ensconced in the prayer room upstairs and knew nothing of what had taken place. She came down to find Rama going out with the maid-servant. Surprised, she asked, 'Where are you going so late in the evening, amidst all this slush?'

'I have to urgently meet Barda.'

The maid added, 'The roads are not at all muddy, Didima. Chhoto Babu has had everything paved in such a manner that even fine powder can be scooped up if it falls to the ground! God bless him! The poor can now be safe from snakebites and the like.'

It was almost eleven at night. The sound of many hushed voices could be heard from Beni's courtyard. The overcast sky had cleared somewhat and a pale moonlight flooded the veranda. There, leaning against a post sat a fearsome, elderly Muslim, with his eyes closed. His entire face was awash with fresh blood and his clothes were also bloodstained. In low tones Beni pleaded, 'Akbar, listen to me, go to the police station! Then, if I cannot put him behind bars for seven years, I don't belong to the Ghosal dynasty.' He turned around to Rama and said, 'Rama, why are you silent—you too tell him!'

But Rama continued to maintain a stony silence.

Akbar Ali now sat up straight and exclaimed, 'Wonderful! Chhoto Babu is indeed very capable! The manner in which he wielded the lathi . . .'

Beni grew angry and agitated, 'That is exactly what I am telling you to report, Akbar! Who was responsible for injuring you? Was it that young man or was it his Hindustani servant?'

A light smile played on Akbar's lips. He answered, 'That squat Hindustani? Does he have any idea of how to use a lathi, Boro Babu? Gohar, didn't he collapse at your first blow?'

Akbar's two sons were sitting huddled together some distance away. They had not escaped unscathed either. The one whose name was Gohar nodded but did not speak. Akbar resumed, 'If I had struck that man, he would not have lived. Gohar was enough to make him collapse, Boro Babu.'

Rama moved some distance away. Akbar was one of their Pirpur subjects. In days bygone he had accumulated a lot of property by virtue of his skills with the lathi. Hence, late in the evening, wild with hurt and rage after her conversation with Ramesh, Rama had sent for him to guard the dam. She had wanted to see what Ramesh hoped to achieve merely by relying on that Hindustani servant of his, but she had not imagined that Ramesh himself could be such an expert at lathi-wielding.

Looking up at Rama, Akbar said, 'Chhoto Babu picked up his servant's lathi and wielded it so expertly, so fiercely, that the three of us—father and two sons—could not dislodge him from the dam. His eyes glowed like those of a tiger in the dark, he said to me, "Akbar, you are an old man, move away. The entire village will die unless the waters of the

dam are released—it will have to be done. You also have land in your own village—think of what it feels like, if everything is destroyed.”

‘I saluted him and said, “Think of Allah and do not bar my path, Chhoto Babu. Let me just break open the heads of all those who are sheltering behind you and striking at the dam.”’

Beni could not control his rage and screamed, ‘Traitor! You salute him and come here to me . . .’

Akbar and his two sons simultaneously raised their hands in anger. Akbar said in harsh tones, ‘Don’t you dare call us traitors, Boro Babu! We are Muslims and can tolerate everything but that.’

Wiping away some blood from his forehead, Akbar addressed Rama and said, ‘Who does he call a traitor, Didi? He sits at home and says all this—but only a personal meeting would reveal what kind of a person Chhoto Babu is!’

Beni with a distorted face continued, “Chhoto Babu!” Then, why don’t you go and give this information to the police station? You just have to mention that you were guarding the dam and that fellow came and assaulted you.’

Akbar bit his tongue in embarrassment, ‘Shame! Shame! You tell me to lie through my teeth, Boro Babu?’

Beni answered, ‘Then say something else. Why don’t you go and report your injuries today? Tomorrow I will have him clapped in chains. Rama, try and explain the situation clearly to him once again. Such opportunities do not always present themselves.’

Rama did not speak, she merely looked at Akbar once. Akbar shook his head, ‘No, Didi Thakrun, that will be impossible for me.’

Beni demanded, ‘Why impossible?’

Now Akbar too raised his voice, ‘What are you saying, Boro Babu, don’t I have any shame? Am I not the headman of five villages? Didi Thakrun, I can go to jail if you so command, but this?!’

Rama gently asked just once, ‘Can’t you, Akbar?’

Akbar vigorously shook his head, ‘No, Didi Thakrun, I can do everything but display my injuries in court. Come on, Gohar, let us return home.’ They made a move to leave.

Beni glared at them in futile rage and mentally abusing them, all but turned them to cinder with his burning glances. The flames of fury raged in him with greater vigour for he was unable to comprehend Rama’s dispirited silence. When Akbar Ali left with his sons after ignoring all pleas, reprimands and anger, a deep sigh rent Rama’s heart. Her eyes overflowed with tears for no reason at all and she could find no cause at all to feel that a load was off her mind—despite the insult that she had faced and in spite of being completely vanquished. Returning home that night, she found it impossible to sleep. She kept recalling that image of Ramesh as he sat down to eat before her at Tarakeshwari. The more she remembered, the more she wondered how that handsome body could house such softness and fury at the same time! The image blurred with tears that coursed down her face.

## 12

IN THE YEARS OF THEIR CHILDHOOD, RAMESH HAD LOVED RAMA. IT WAS undoubtedly a childish emotion, but she had sensed its depths that day in Tarakeshwar. But most of all she had realized his feelings, when in the darkness of that evening he had left her house, severing all ties. Ever since that eventful night, the part that Rama played in the incident regarding the dam loomed like an unsavoury void in Ramesh's mind. But Ramesh had not imagined that all his chores and even his thoughts would become so distasteful as a result. When the hypocrisy he had encountered made life in the village begin to seem unbearable, a certain series of events made him straighten up again.

The village of Pirpur was a part of their estates. The greater percentage of the population there was composed of Muslims. One day, a group of the villagers arrived to meet Ramesh. They complained that though they belonged to the area, their children were not being admitted to the village school because they were Muslims. They had taken this to be a hopeless task after making futile attempts a number of times; the teachers would just not accept their children into the school. Ramesh was amazed and angered. 'I have never heard of such wrong and wilful persecution ever before!' he said. 'You bring your children along today itself—I myself will personally see that they are admitted.'

They responded, 'Babu, we might be mere subjects, but we pay all revenues for the privilege of farming the land. We do not have to worry about a Hindu landlord! We don't think there is any point in entering into a controversy on this matter. There will only be fights and quarrels, no positive result will materialize. We would rather set up a small school for our own community and, Chhoto Babu, your help is all that is required.' Ramesh too was tired of the constant skirmishes he saw around him, and hence, deeming the proposal to be a sensible one, agreed. During his interaction with the people from Pirpur, and as he proceeded to work for their community, Ramesh felt his spirits and strength gradually heal. He observed that unlike the Hindu residents of Kuapur, these people did not constantly fight and quarrel. Even if they did so, they did not immediately rush to court to slap injunctions on their neighbours. They accepted the decision of the village elders, whether they were pleased with it or not. During a crisis, the manner in which everyone clustered around to help the needy in whatever manner possible was something Ramesh had never witnessed in any Hindu village.

Ramesh was never particularly taken with the idea of caste differences. The obvious differences he saw when he compared the two villages increased his feelings of disgust for his own village to an even greater degree. He came to the conclusion that it was religion and religious discord that was at the root of all evil amongst Hindus. In contrast, there

was absolute equality amongst all Muslims. Hence, Hindus lacked the unity Muslims possessed and their social set-up was such that they never were able to unite. There was no means of doing away with the caste system. Even to broach the subject was virtually impossible in rural society. So, to mitigate fights and quarrels and establish a better understanding and a spirit of cooperation was virtually unthinkable. Ramesh began to greatly regret all the fruitless efforts he had spent on his own village. A firm conviction grew in him that the inhabitants of his village would continue to exist in the same clamour and rancour they had been spending all their lives in. No positive change could ever be brought about. At the same time, some decisions would also have to be taken about the goings-on in Kuapur.

Due to a number of reasons, Ramesh had been out of touch with his Jethaima for a number of days. After the battle of sorts regarding the dam, he had deliberately not ventured in the direction of Beni's house. But one morning, at the very break of dawn, he went and positioned himself at her doorstep. Even Bishheshwari was completely unaware of the complete trust and faith Ramesh had in her intelligence and experience; it was this that had brought him there. Ramesh was somewhat surprised to see that even at that hour his Jethaima had had her bath and was ready for the day! In that dim light, with a pair of spectacles firmly perched on her nose, she was sitting on the floor, engrossed in a book. She was no less surprised at his advent. Closing the book, she affectionately drew him near and asked, 'Why so early in the morning, dear?'

'I have not seen you for a number of days, Jethaima; I am in the process of setting up a school in Pirpur.'

Bishheshwari answered, 'I have heard of that. But why don't you go to teach at our school any longer?'

'That is precisely the reason why I have come to meet you, Jethaima. All my efforts to help the people here are fruitless. Nobody can bear the good fortune of another. There seems to be no sense in slaving after people who are vain and taken up completely with themselves. The only effect is to increase the number of enemies one has. I would much rather work somewhere where my efforts will bring about a genuine uplift.'

Jethaima responded, 'The situation is not new, Ramesh! Whenever any person has taken on himself the responsibility of social uplift, the number of his enemies has greatly increased. It will not do for you also to join the crowd of the dispirited. The Almighty has given you this burden to shoulder and it is only you who must do the needful. But Ramesh, do you actually take water in the Muslim households?'

Ramesh laughed, 'I see, Jethaima, that word has already reached you! No, as a matter of fact I have not done so as yet, but I do not see a problem about doing so in the future! I do not believe in religious differences.'

Bishheshwari was amazed, 'What don't you believe in? Do religious differences not exist? How can you ignore them?'

'That is exactly the question I have come to ask you today. I accept

that there are religious differences, but I cannot accept that there is anything good about these differences."

'Why?'

Ramesh suddenly grew excitable, 'Do I really have to tell you why? Don't you know that all misunderstandings and discord have this at the root? It is only natural that those whom society and religion has designated as belonging to a low caste, will envy those placed in a higher category. They will rebel against all such restrictions—this is very human! Hindus do not know how to be constructive, they can only destroy. We are being debilitated every single day because we just refuse to acknowledge the very fact that in the normal course of life it is a natural instinct to protect one's own and try to propagate ourselves! If you go through the census, Jethaima, you will be scared! You will witness for yourself the results of insulting and demeaning each other, which the Hindus have brought upon themselves. The Muslims are multiplying each day and the number of Hindus is decreasing. But Hindus will still not take heed!'

Bishheshwari laughed, 'Even after listening to all that you have just said, I am still unable to take heed! All those men who go about counting the population—if they were able to point out the number of men of lower castes who have changed religion only because of a fear of remaining segregated, perhaps your logic might have been acceptable. I agree that Hindus are decreasing in number, but there are other reasons for this. They can of course be called flaws in society; but inferior castes losing their identity is definitely one such reason. No Hindu gives up his religion merely due to the stigma of being inferior.'

Ramesh disagreed, 'But that is what the scholars assert, Jethaima!'

'One cannot argue against conjecture, my dear. If anyone can bring me news that so many low-caste people belonging to any particular village have in a particular year given up their religion merely due to this particular issue, I could accept the point of view of the scholar. But I am quite sure that such information can never be brought forward.'

Ramesh still continued to argue, 'But, Jethaima, it only seems logical to me that there will be feelings of jealousy in those of the lower castes as compared to those who belong to the higher castes.'

Bishheshwari once again laughed at this display of intensity, 'That is not right at all; in fact it's absolutely incorrect! This is not the city; in rural society nobody bothers about whether those belonging to any particular caste are high or low down! It is just like the relationship between siblings—there is no feeling of discord in the younger one at having been born a couple of years later; in villages the same logic applies to caste differences. The various categories of caste are content with their own lot. Nobody quibbles about showing due respect to a Brahmin. The reason is not caste consciousness or envy or jealousy. At least in Bengal, the situation is definitely different.'

Ramesh was rather surprised. 'Then, why do such unpleasant events take place, Jethaima? There are so many Muslims in that village, but there is no discord between them. No one pressurizes another during a time of crisis. The other day, no one in our village was willing to even

touch Dwarik Chakroborty's corpse, because due to a financial crisis, the purification rites had not been performed,' she said.

Bishheshwari answered, 'I am aware of everything, my dear, but it is not caste difference that is at the root! The primary reason is that there is still a true religion amongst Muslims, which we lack. What we could call true religion has all but disappeared from rural society. Only a few superstitions and conventions remain—and from these stems factionalism!'

Ramesh sighed dispiritedly, 'Then, is there no way to redress it at all?'

'But of course there is, my dear! It can only be through education—the path that you are treading, only that path. Hence I repeatedly tell you, do not desert your birthplace under any circumstance.'

Ramesh was about to make some sort of negative response, but Bishheshwari interrupted, 'You will say that the Muslims are also extremely ignorant. But, it is their dynamic religion that is keeping them fresh and vibrant. Listen to what I have to say, Ramesh—if you make inquiries in Pirpur, you will hear of a wealthy man named Zafar. He has been ostracized and made an outcast by everybody. Why? Only because he does not look after his widowed stepmother. But our Gobinda Ganguly—the other day he beat his elder widowed sister-in-law senseless. Far from society chastising him, he is venerated as one of the heads of society! All these crimes are only personal sins for us; and we Hindus feel that it is up to the Almighty to mete out justice in His own way—rural society does not care about it at all.'

It stunned Ramesh to hear all these new facts; on the other hand he found it difficult to accept that this could be the truth. As if she understood his ambivalence, Bishheshwari continued, 'Do not mistake the end as part of the means, my dear! The reason why doubts still continue to trouble you is that you don't see that the disputes and discord that result due to caste differences, are a sign of progress and not the cause, Ramesh. That strife has to come first—if you go to meddle with it, the entire process will be lost or become farcical. You want to verify the truth of what I am saying? Go and spend some time in any of the villages adjoining the city and then compare them to your own Kuapur! You will be able to draw your own conclusions.'

Ramesh was very familiar with two or three villages close to Kolkata. He tried to visualize the scenario there; suddenly it was as though a black curtain was lifted from his eyes, and he gazed at Bishheshwari with wonderment and deep regard. But she did not notice this at all and continued, 'That is why I tell you, my dear, do not desert your birth land! Like you, if others who have been privileged to grow up in an environment outside the village, returned instead of moving away and causing disruption, the villages would not be in such a pitiable state. It would never have been possible for Gobinda Ganguly to be placed on such a high pedestal if you were there, and nor would you have been pushed away!'

Rama came to mind and Ramesh responded in strained tones, 'I do

not feel hurt any longer if I do have to move away.'

Bishheshwari noted the pain in his voice, but could not guess the reason behind it. She asserted, 'No, Ramesh, that is just not possible. If you have come, if you have initiated some work, your birthplace will never forgive you if you abandon the project midway.'

'Why, Jethaima? The village does not belong to me alone!'

Bishheshwari forcefully responded, 'Indeed, it is yours, my dear; she is your mother. Haven't you observed, your mother has never voluntarily made any demands on anybody—her cries have been heard by no one. Yet, you heard them immediately on reaching here!'

Ramesh did not argue any further. After sitting in mute silence for a while, he very respectfully took his leave of Bishheshwari.

He returned home with a heart brimming over with devotion, pity, a sense of duty and a wholehearted resolve to give his best to his village. Dawn had just broken; standing in front of his east-facing window, Ramesh gazed at the sky in silence. All of a sudden a child's voice broke through his reverie. Turning around, Ramesh found Rama's younger brother Jatin staring at him, and awkwardly calling out, 'Chhorda!'

Going up to him, Ramesh grasped his hand and brought him inside, 'Whom are you calling, Jatin?'

'You!'

'Me? Who asked you to call me Chhorda?'

'Didi.'

'Didi? Has she sent you to ask me something?'

Jatin shook his head, 'Nothing! Didi told me, "Accompany me to your Chhorda's house"—she is waiting there,' Jatin turned his head in the direction of the door.

Ramesh was taken aback and hurriedly approached the door. Rama was waiting behind a pillar. He moved closer and said, 'This is indeed my good fortune! But why didn't you send for me instead of taking the trouble to come yourself? Come inside.'

Rama hesitated, and then, clasping Jatin's hand, followed Ramesh inside and seated herself at the threshold. She said, 'Today I have come to ask you for something! Tell me, will you agree?' She gazed steadily at him. That look tugged at Ramesh's heart strings, and he felt at a loss again. The hopes, dreams and resolutions, which only moments before had flared into life, faded into the abysmal darkness all around. However, he asked, 'What is it?'

His dry tones did not escape Rama's attention. She continued to look straight at him and said, 'Give me your word first!'

Ramesh was silent for a while, and then shook his head. 'That is not possible! You yourself have taken away the right I had earlier to make promises with no questions asked, Rama!' he said.

'I have?'

Ramesh answered, 'None other than you had the power. Rama, I will tell you the truth today—it is up to you to believe me or not. If the matter had not completely died out, been destroyed, perhaps I never would have been able to speak of it to you.' He was silent for a while

and then continued, 'Today, as no one stands to gain or be harmed, let me venture to tell you—till that day when you refused me, there was nothing in the world that I would have denied you. Do you know why?'

Rama shook her head mutely. However, her entire body seemed to shrink in a kind of embarrassed fear.

Ramesh said, 'Do not be angry or even embarrassed when you hear what I have to say. Take this to be fiction from a long, bygone era.'

Rama wanted to interrupt Ramesh desperately for she dreaded hearing what he had to say. But her head remained so bowed that there was no strength in her to even look up. In a calm, mild and uninvolving manner Ramesh spoke again, 'I loved you, Rama. Now it seems to me, probably nobody could have ever loved with so much fervour; in my childhood, Ma would often say that we were meant for each other. Then, the day all hopes were shattered, I remember breaking down and weeping.'

The words penetrated Rama's ears like burning lead and seared her entire being. An unknown and unbearably painful sensation tore all feelings and emotions into minute shreds. However, unable to find the means of crying halt to the spate of Ramesh's words, Rama took in the bittersweet words and sat helplessly like a statue carved in stone.

He went on, 'You are thinking that it is wrong to talk of all this to you. I also believed so; that is why that day in Tarakeshwar, when one single day's caring from you changed the entire course of my life, I still remained silent. It was not an easy task to remain voiceless.'

Rama found it impossible to remain quiet any longer, 'Then, finding me in your house, why are you taking the opportunity to insult me?'

'Insult! There is absolutely nothing demeaning in all that I have said. The truth is, the Rama I am talking of never existed in reality and the Ramesh that lived then is no longer the same. Anyhow, that day in Tarakeshwar, for whatever reason, a belief had been born in me that no matter what you said or did, you could never tolerate any misfortune that might befall me. Probably I had assumed that some remnants of the love you felt for me in childhood still existed. Hence I was secure in my belief that I would be content to carry on with the chartered course of my life in the shelter of your shadow. Then, that night when I heard from Akbar that you yourself had—but what is that clamour outside?'

'Babu—'

Gopal Sarkar's panic-stricken voice was heard outside Ramesh's door, 'Babu, the police have arrested Bhojua!'

'Why?'

Gopal's lips were quivering in fright; somehow he managed to utter, 'He was apparently involved in the dacoity at Radhanagar a few days ago.'

Looking towards Rama and Jatin, Ramesh said, 'Not a moment's delay, Rama! Leave through the entrance at the rear. The police are bound to conduct a thorough search.'

Rama had turned blue with fright. 'Is there any danger for you?' she stammered.

'I cannot be sure. Who can say how far events have progressed?'

Rama's lips quivered and she remembered her own complaint lodged with the police. Suddenly she burst into tears and insisted, 'I will not go!'

In stunned amazement Ramesh said, 'Shame, Rama! You should not be here, leave quickly!' Not wasting any more time and firmly taking hold of Jatin's hand, he saw the brother and sister out through the rear entrance and swiftly barred the door.

## 13

FOR THE PAST TWO MONTHS, BHOJUA HAD BEEN IN GAOL WITH A FEW OTHERS who were implicated in the dacoity. The police had drawn a blank with the search they had conducted that day in Ramesh's house. Despite this and the fact that Bhairav Acharya had testified that Bhojua had accompanied him that night to the house of a prospective groom for his daughter, Bhojua had still not been granted bail.

Beni arrived at Rama's house one day and said, 'My dear, a lot of matters have to be reflected upon and only then can any move be successfully planned. If that day you had not registered a complaint at the police station that Bhojua had arrived with weapons and tried to wrest away the fish, would we have been able to harass him and Ramesh to this extent? But if at the same time you had only slightly exaggerated Ramesh's part in the matter—but nobody ever listens to me!'

Rama looked so dispirited and crestfallen that Beni hastily said, 'No, no, you will not have to stand witness! Even if you have to, what does it matter? You have estates to take care of, you cannot afford to break down.'

There was no response from Rama.

Beni carried on, 'But Ramesh isn't one to be vanquished easily—he has also made a very clever move. The new school that he has set up for the Muslims will cause us a lot of problems. As it is, the Muslim subjects are reluctant to accept a Hindu landlord. Now, if they become educated as well, they will start questioning our authority and our very existence might be in jeopardy. I am warning you—there will be trouble, and all because of Ramesh.'

In matters of the estate, Rama had always taken Beni's advice, there had never been any disagreement between the two of them where these issues were concerned. But for the first time, Rama argued with Beni, 'But, it is Ramesh da who has suffered quite a loss.'

Beni himself entertained a few doubts on the matter. After pondering on Rama's argument for some time he said, 'This is not a matter where personal loss is taken into consideration, Rama. As long as both of us are humiliated, that suffices for him—he will bear all kinds of losses just to show us down. Haven't you noticed the manner in which he has been

spending money ever since his arrival? All these low-caste people continually laud him to the skies because he has been supporting their cause. It would seem that he is the only worthwhile human being in the village—and both of us are nothing at all! But this cannot continue for much longer. He has been drawn into the police net—I am assuring you that this is what will ultimately destroy him.' Beni was quite surprised to observe that the joy and triumph that should have resulted from such news was totally lacking in Rama's attitude and expression. Rather, she appeared completely downcast as she inquired, 'Does Ramesh da know that I had registered a complaint?'

'I am not sure, but he will definitely come to know. Everything will come up at Bhojua's trial.'

Rama did not speak any further. It was as if she was trying to recover from a devastating blow. Her mind kept harping on the fact that it was she who had taken the leading role in putting Ramesh into danger and that fact would soon be revealed to the man himself. After a while she looked up and asked, 'Does everybody talk of him these days, Barda?'

Beni answered, 'It is not just our village; I have heard that following the example he has set, schools are being set up in the neighbouring villages as well and roads are being constructed too! Nowadays all these low-caste subjects have begun to think that the white-skinned sahibs are so progressive only because there are one or two schools wherever they live. Ramesh has publicized that if a new school is opened anywhere, he will make a substantial donation. He is sure to spend all the money he has inherited in this manner. The Muslims look on him as some kind of a messiah.'

Like a flash of lightning a thought occurred to Rama, 'If only my name could have been linked with his!' It was only a passing thought but it lit up her entire being; moments later her visage became enmeshed in darkness once again.

Beni persisted, 'But I will not let go so easily. Nobody could ever have dreamed that he would incite all our subjects in this manner and thus become a zamindar! That Bhairav Acharya stood as witness for Bhojua, didn't he? Let me see how he is able to marry off his daughter! There is another plan taking root in my mind, but first let me see what Gobinda Khuro has to say. Further, there is no dearth of dacoities everywhere . . . If the servant can be thrown into jail, we should not have too much trouble with the master either. How right you were when you remarked that first day, "He will be no less an enemy!"'

Rama did not respond to Beni's enthusiastic plans of revenge. Beni did not possess the perceptive powers to understand the frame of mind of a lady whose face did not light up in vain pride at her predictions proving so correct! Rather, a thick, gloomy darkness seemed to have enveloped Rama entirely. Her feelings were so obvious that they could not have escaped anyone's notice—other than Beni himself! Somewhat surprised at her lack of response, Beni spent a few moments with Mashi in the kitchen and was about to leave, when Rama called out and mildly asked, 'Barda, if Ramesh da has to go to jail, won't it also be a

matter of great shame for us?’

Beni was astonished at the question and asked, ‘Why?’

‘He is our relative, Barda. If we do not save him, won’t everybody speak ill of us?’

‘What does it matter to us if a person suffers due to his own misdeeds?’

Rama persisted mildly, ‘It is not as though Ramesh da is actually involved in planning and executing dacoities; rather, the way he spends so much of his own money on others is an open secret! We also have to survive in the village and if we ourselves cause trouble for him, won’t our reputation also suffer?’

Beni laughed uproariously. ‘What is the matter with you, Rama?’ he asked.

Recollecting Ramesh’s face and comparing it to the apparition in front of her, Rama could no longer look up. She said, ‘Even if the villagers do not have the gumption to directly accuse us of anything, they will definitely talk behind our backs. And the Almighty is there! If the innocent are falsely accused, will we be shown any mercy?’

Beni retorted, ‘My goodness! Do you think that that young man believes in the Almighty or in religion? One of our village temples is on the verge of collapsing. When messengers repeatedly approached him for money to repair it, they were driven away extremely harshly with the words, “Tell those who have sent you to spend the money, I have none to waste!” Just think of that! That for him is wastage! What matters to him is building schools for those Muslims. Besides, he is a Brahmin but there are no evening prayers or regular worship that he performs or takes part in. I believe he even accepts water from the Muslims! Do you really believe that he still has bonds with our religion after learning the words and ways of the English? Not at all! He has not been punished in any way—that is all in abeyance. But one day his sins will be apparent to everybody.’

Rama did not bother to argue any further and remained silent. But thinking of Ramesh’s irreligious behaviour gave her a feeling of distaste all over again. She remained standing for a long time and then, going to her room, collapsed on the floor. It was a day she normally fasted on and she was glad that at least she would not have to deal with the complications of a meal in such a frame of mind.

he thoroughly dosed himself with quinine. As he stood by the window, gazing at the golden sunlight outside, he thought, 'Is it possible to make the villagers aware of the consequences of these stagnant pools of water?' The three days of physical pain he had suffered had made him realize that some measures would have to be taken urgently to uproot the very cause of malaria. God would never forgive him for letting the people all around suffer while he just stood around, instead of making some efforts at battling this evil. As the result of a discussion a few days prior to that, Ramesh had come to the conclusion that it was not that the villagers had no concept at all of the harmful effects of bodies of stagnant water. But nobody was willing to leave aside their own work and toil at draining the excess water on another's property or clearing away the weeds and wild plants that caused a problem. Those to whom the land actually belonged, argued that after all, their forefathers had been responsible for all the mess—and so what could they possibly do about it? Whoever was interested in clearing it all up could do so, they would not object; but they all were extremely reluctant to spend their own time and money for the welfare of others.

Ramesh had also realized that there were a number of other neighbouring villages which were likely to be devastated by malaria. He resolved to personally go and survey one such village after his recovery and then decide where his duty lay. This was because a conviction had grown in him that some of the villages had a natural irrigation and drainage system; it might not be apparent to all—but, if pointed out, surely some people would comprehend. At least his devoted Muslim subjects of Pirpur would definitely understand. At long last his engineering skills would be put to the test—the very thought of doing something constructive and helpful cheered him immensely.

'Chhoto Babu!'

All of a sudden the tearful cry made Ramesh turn around. In amazement he saw Bhairav Acharya writhing on the floor and wailing aloud like a madman. His seven-year-old daughter who had accompanied him shrieked just as loudly—and the room was filled with the noise of their wails! In no time, everybody around gathered there. Ramesh was totally nonplussed. He wondered if some death had occurred in Acharya's family or if some other disaster had befallen him. Ramesh could comprehend nothing at all—what had happened, who would be able to explain Acharya's behaviour, and how the weeping could be stopped. Gopal Sarkar, leaving aside all work, had reached the spot. As soon as he approached Bhairav and extended his hand, the latter sat up and fell on his shoulder with another agonized wail. Ramesh was gradually growing impatient as he remembered that this man tended to weep copiously at the slightest pretext. But Gopal's words of consolation finally comforted Bhairav enough to allow him to dry his eyes and sitting up, he divulged the reason of the great sorrow. Ramesh stared in dumb silence after the cause was revealed—it was unimaginable to think that such persecution could be carried out in such a planned manner.

The matter was this: when Bhojua was finally released due to Bhairav's

testimony, Ramesh had sent off the former to his village to keep him away from further attention from the police. The accused was gone—but the witness was now being harassed in no uncertain manner. Somehow sensing grave danger, Bhairav had gone to the court that day; there he had been informed that some days ago, Beni's relative in Radhanagar, Sanat Mukherjee, had filed a report to the effect that a large sum of money was owed to them by Bhairav. Further, his property in Radhanagar had been confiscated and auctioned to meet this debt. It was not a one-sided case, summons had been duly issued. Then, someone claiming to be Bhairav had reportedly accepted the proposal and in court, formally accepted all the legal injunctions laid down on him. Everything—the debt, the accused and the complaint—were fabrications. On the basis of this falsehood, the mighty one had exerted his prowess and, usurping every asset of the weak, now planned to make him a virtual beggar on the streets. Bhairav was trying to fight the case. But redress was not an easy matter in a government court. Till all the money involved in the false claim was deposited in the court, not a word would be heard. It was akin to beating one's head against a stone wall. But where could Bhairav get so much money to deposit, defend himself and seek justice? Hence, though the framework and all the mechanisms of justice existed, the poor defendant would have to die in destitution, robbed of all his assets, without a murmur of protest.

There was no doubt at all that Beni and Gobinda Ganguly were responsible for this entire plot. No matter what disaster befell Bhairav, the villagers would speculate and quite correctly identify the mastermind behind the crime; yet, no one would raise their voice and publicly protest! After all, they did not like to be involved in the private affairs of another or speak in support of someone else. The might that led to the poor rustic citizen being persecuted in this manner was all too apparent to Ramesh, and he also realized with anger and sadness how sharp the sword of justice was that was wielded against them. Hence, he reasoned, just as great wealth and diplomatic cunning protected people against the dominance of kings, a putrid society prevented any justice from being meted out at all. It was only to be expected that a lifeless, rural society that was completely bereft of true religion would remain subjugated to petty and false interests and cow down before these so-called stalwarts of society who continued to live and rule unhindered and completely wilfully.

Ramesh recalled his Jethaima's words now more than ever. That day she had smiled that charming smile and said, 'Ramesh, let your fight against caste distinction and good and evil be damned! Dispel the darkness, my dear, just dispel the darkness! In villages all around, people have embraced blindness—light the lamp of knowledge, my dear. Then, they themselves will be able to distinguish between good and evil.' She had continued further, 'Since you have come, my dear, do not leave. It is because all of you turn your backs that your motherland is in this plight.' True! If he had left, there would be no hope of any redress at all.

He sighed and thought to himself, 'This then is what we take pride

in, this is our pure, tranquil village society—abounding in justice for all! Perhaps one day when there was true life and dynamism here, there was also the strength to mete out punishment to those persecuting the innocent.'

But presently, the village society was lifeless; despite that, the rustic people, instead of discarding the putrid corpse, formed illusory attachments, and grew increasingly weary, jaded, lifeless themselves. Yet, they still refused to look at the truth straight in the eyes. Theirs was a society that did not protect those in danger; instead, it only endangered them further. It continually dragged down people into the abysmal depths of degradation.

Ramesh shook himself from these thoughts and wrote out a cheque for the entire amount that Bhairav owed to the court. Handing it to Gopal Sarkar he said, 'Please get me all the details of the matter and have the cheque deposited. By whatever means, ensure a retrial. Let them be taught such a lesson that never again will they have the audacity to attempt such persecution.'

Gopal Sarkar and Bhairav were both shocked into absolute silence. For their benefit, Ramesh repeated what he had said and it was apparent to all that his words were not in jest. All of a sudden, Bhairav made a mad dash and threw himself at Ramesh's feet. He cried out wildly and began showering blessings in such profusion that it would have been impossible for anyone less strong than Ramesh to free himself. It did not take much time for the entire matter to be broadcast throughout the village. Everybody realized that at long last Beni and Gobinda would not get off so easily! All of them discussed the amount of money Chhoto Babu was spending to get his eternal enemy in his grasp. They did not know that, in actuality, instead of the weak Bhairav, it was the Almighty who had placed on Ramesh the heavy burden of an enmity that would have to be borne by him.

About a month went by. In his battle against malaria, Ramesh had become so engrossed in carrying out various surveys and practising his engineering skills, that he had almost forgotten that Bhairav's trial was to start the next day. He suddenly remembered this the evening before, just at dusk, when the strains of the shehnai were heard in the distance. As he was thinking about the case, Ramesh heard something incredible from his servant: Bhairav Acharya's grandchild's first rice-eating ceremony was to be celebrated the next day. He had absolutely no intimation of the event at all. Bhairav had apparently made fairly elaborate arrangements. The entire village had been invited; but none in the house could inform Ramesh as to whether anyone had come to invite him while he was not at home. It was not merely this; Ramesh suddenly recollected that despite such an important legal issue pending, Bhairav had not kept any sort of contact with him over the past couple of weeks. What could the matter be? However, it did not cross his mind in any way that of all the people in the world, Bhairav would not have thought to invite him.

Ramesh immediately changed and set off in the direction of Bhairav Acharya's house. He saw that alongside the temporary structure set up

for the occasion, all the dogs of the village had gathered in quest of all the waste food. A little distance away lay the musical instruments. Stepping into the courtyard, Ramesh observed the temporary, extremely shabby scaffolding that had been put up. All the ancient kerosene lamps of the village had been borrowed from the Mukherjee and Ghosal households and were flickering dimly in the darkness. They emitted a little light and a lot of fumes—which gave off an unpleasant odour all around. Everybody had finished eating and there was hardly anyone left. The heads of the society, however, still lingered around—Dharmadas was pleading with Harihar Roy to stay on for a little longer. Gobinda Ganguly was talking animatedly with a farmer's son a little distance away. At such a juncture, Ramesh appeared like a spoilsport in the midst of it all. All the faces grew ashen just seeing him; observing two of the most vindictive enemies on such terms of easy familiarity did not lighten Ramesh's expression either! Nobody moved forward to greet him; as a matter of fact, nobody uttered even a single word. Bhairav himself was not present at the time. A little later he emerged from the house on some chore, calling out, 'Gobindada . . .' All of a sudden, catching sight of Ramesh in the courtyard, he started and in a flash ran back into the house. Ramesh stayed outside, an overwhelming astonishment benumbing him. Behind him someone called out, 'Ramesh . . .'

He looked around to find Dinu Bhattacharjee walking rapidly towards him. As he drew closer, Dinu said, 'Come along, let us return home.'

Ramesh merely tried to smile a little.

As they walked, Dinu said, 'Even his parents would not have shown the kindness you have! All are aware of that, but there is really no choice in the matter. After all, we all have our families to think of; so, if you were invited . . . don't you understand, Babaji—Bhairav cannot really be blamed. You young boys brought up in the city do not bother about caste distinctions and all that . . . But, don't you understand his daughter is fast growing up and after all, will have to be married off soon? You do understand, don't you, our society . . .'

Impatiently Ramesh answered, 'Yes, I understand!'

Standing at the entrance to Ramesh's house, Dinu said happily, 'Of course you understand! You are not unreasonable. How can that Brahmin be blamed either—we old people think about the long journey ahead—'

'Yes, of course!' Ramesh hastily entered his house to end further conversation with Dinu. It was very obvious to him that the entire village had ostracized him. Returning to his own room, his eyes smarted with regret, pain and embarrassment. It hurt Ramesh most of all to note that it was Beni and Gobinda who had been so honourably invited by Bhairav. Despite witnessing the entire incident, the villagers not only condoned Bhairav, but for the sake of social norms did not even invite Ramesh—and even regarded it as a matter to be lauded!

Alas! He stretched out on the couch and brooded, 'These ingrates—what sort of penance can they ever offer! O Almighty, will you ever be able to forgive such cruel insults?'

## 15

IT WAS NOT THAT SUCH A SUSPICION HAD NEVER ENTERED RAMESH'S MIND. But next evening Gopal Sarkar confirmed his worst fears—he returned with the information that Bhairav Acharya had thoroughly duped them—in other words, Bhairav had not appeared at the hearing at all! As a result, the case had been dismissed and the security deposit was now in Beni's possession. In a flash, a blinding rage seared Ramesh from head to toe! The money he had deposited on Bhairav's behalf to combat their attempts at counterfeiting and cheating—and instead of saving himself, that sinner had established a camaraderie with Beni himself! This ingratitude incited Ramesh into a far greater fury than the previous day's insult had done. Slowly he stood up and walked out, clad just as he was. Seeing his master's bloodshot eyes, Gopal asked timorously, 'Babu, are you going anywhere?'

Replying, 'I will just be back,' Ramesh hastily left. He entered Bhairav's premises to find nobody there. His wife was busy with the evening prayers in the courtyard; she shrank into herself on being suddenly faced with Ramesh. He had never called on them before and the thought of the reason behind his unexpected call made her quail in fright.

Ramesh asked, 'Where is Acharya Moshai?'

What she replied was inaudible, but it was clear that Bhairav was not at home. Ramesh's upper torso was bare and in the dark even his face remained indistinct. Bhairav's daughter Lakshmi came out of the house carrying her child; seeing an unknown man there she asked, 'Who is he, Ma?'

Her mother could not make the introductions and neither did Ramesh say a word.

Lakshmi was scared and shouted out, 'Baba, some man is standing in the courtyard and refusing to speak!'

'Who is it?' asked her father, stepping out; he then stood absolutely still, as though turned to stone. Even in the pale darkness of dusk, Ramesh's tall and lithe figure was unmistakable.

Ramesh harshly called out, 'Come here!' He then firmly gripped Bhairav's hand and demanded, 'Why did you do such a thing?'

Bhairav cried out tearfully, 'He is killing me, Lakshmi, inform Beni Babu!'

In a flash, the entire household started weeping noisily and raising the alarm; the silence of the evening was broken by the shrill sounds of innumerable voices shrieking lustily.

Ramesh shook Bhairav vigorously, 'Quiet! Why did you do this, tell me!'

Not making any attempt to answer, Bhairav continued wailing in the same manner at the top of his voice. He continually struggled to free himself at the same time.

In no time the entire courtyard became full of villagers—people began

jostling each other to get in. There were stories abounding of Ramesh's legendary strength. The look in his eyes acted as a further deterrent to any person moving forward with the intention of freeing Bhairav from his clutches. Gobinda merged into the crowd as soon as he entered and saw Ramesh. Beni too was slinking away immediately, but Bhairav, catching sight of him, started calling out loudly, 'Boro Babu, Boro Babu'

'Boro Babu, however, did not pay any heed and vanished in the flash of an eye.

Suddenly the crowds parted as Rama rapidly made her way to Ramesh. She caught hold of his hand and said, 'Enough, now let go!'

Ramesh cast a burning glance at her, 'Why?'

Gnashing her teeth and in muffled tones of great anger Rama answered in a sibilant whisper, 'You might not have any shame, but I am dying of embarrassment!'

In front of the courtyard full of people Ramesh immediately let go of Bhairav's hand.

Rama said in mild tones, 'Go home!'

Ramesh left without another word. It seemed a miracle! But as soon as he left in mute obedience, people began looking at each other; such a tame ending to all the exciting drama did not please them at all!

Everyone departed. Gobinda Ganguly revealed himself and wagging his finger remarked with immense gravity, 'He had the audacity to come all the way home and threaten a Brahmin half to death! We will have to discuss what steps can be taken.'

Bhairav was still on his knees; trembling in fear, he gazed helplessly at Beni who had now returned. Rama had still not left. Gauging Beni's motives, hastily she said, 'But, this side too is at fault, Barda! Besides, nothing has happened to cause such furore.'

Beni was amazed, 'What are you saying, Rama!'

Bhairav's elder daughter continued to cling to the post and weep noisily. Like an injured serpent she burst forth, 'You will naturally side with him, Rama Didi. But what would you have done if someone had entered and beaten up your own father?'

Her outburst startled Rama momentarily. It did not matter so much that she showed no gratitude for her father's release. But the jibe that she sensed in the girl's scathing tones infuriated Rama. However, controlling herself she said, 'There is a vast difference between my father and yours, Lakshmi—do not make comparisons. But I did not take sides and only spoke for common good.'

Lakshmi was a village girl and quite adept at verbal skirmishes. She charged ahead, 'Indeed! Don't you feel ashamed to speak in his favour? Nobody says anything just because you happen to be a wealthy man's daughter—otherwise who has not heard of all the goings-on? It is only because you are who you are that you still appear in public, anyone else would have hanged themselves.'

Beni made a pretence of chastising Lakshmi, 'Be silent, Lakshmi! What is the sense of talking about all that?'

'Why not? Why will she speak favourably of a person who has caused my father so much sorrow? What if my father had died?'

Rama had been at a loss for words for merely a very short while. Beni's hypocritical chiding inflamed her once again. She looked at Lakshmi and said, 'Lakshmi, it would be your good fortune to die at the hands of someone like him. Your father would at least have gone to heaven if he had died today.'

Lakshmi too flared up, 'Oh, is that why you too have died, Rama Didi?'

Rama did not answer. Turning towards Beni she said, 'But do you know what the facts are, Barda?' She gazed at him unblinkingly. Her eyes seemed to penetrate the darkness and look into Beni's innermost thoughts.

In a somewhat disgruntled manner Beni responded, 'How will I know, my sister! People gossip—what is the sense of paying it any heed?'

'What do people say?'

Beni said with utter contempt, 'Words don't bruise the skin, so let them talk!'

Rama clearly sensed the false sympathy. She was silent for a while and then replied, 'Maybe gossip does not affect you, but not everybody has such a hidebound skin! However, who is inciting the people to gossip, you?'

'I?'

Rama, exerting great self control over her rage, said, 'It could be none other than you! There is no misdeed in this world that you have not participated in—theft, cheating, counterfeiting, setting houses on fire; why neglect this area of activity?'

Stunned, Beni could make no reply.

Rama continued, 'You cannot possibly comprehend that there can be no greater disaster for a woman. But, I ask—what do you gain by spreading this scandal?'

Beni retorted, 'What can I gain! If people see you emerging from Ramesh's house at dawn, what am I to do?'

Not paying any heed to his explanation, Rama continued, 'Don't think, Barda, that I am unaware of your attitude. But rest assured, if I am to fall, I will not let you survive either!'

Acharya's wife had been standing elsewhere all this while; now she drew closer and said gently from behind the veil of her sari, 'Ma, why are you getting so excited, doesn't everybody out here know you?' She addressed her own daughter and said, 'Lakshmi, you are a woman, don't bring another into disrepute—it will never bode well for you. If you had any humanity, you would have realized the great kindness extended by her to all of us.' The lady took Rama by the hand and took her into the house. The mocking remark was, of course, meant for her husband. Bhairav's wife neutrally taking the part of honour and truth made all the others slink away in embarrassment.

No matter how major an occurrence it was, the educated and innately cultured Ramesh recoiled at the thought of his deplorable lack of self

control. He found it impossible to emerge from his house for two full days. In spite of his unbecoming reaction, Rama had voluntarily come to share in his embarrassment! This thought dispelled to some extent the black cloud of shame that hung around him and like a sporadic burst of lightning gave him a quick glimpse of beauty and sweetness. Thus, even in his gloom, Ramesh experienced some feeling of satisfaction. He resolved to remain in isolation, wrapped in his own mantle of joy and sorrow; that at the same time a virtual mountain of continual humiliation was being heaped on someone else, did not even occur to him.

It was not feasible to remain hidden any longer, however. In the evening, the Muslim subjects of Pirpur came to request his presence at a meeting of their panchayat. Ramesh himself had made all the arrangements a few days before. Accordingly, when word was sent to him, he got ready to leave for Pirpur.

Ramesh had found out that there were extremely poor farmers in every village. They possessed no land at all and lived as tenants on the land of another. They eked out a livelihood by working as bonded labourers on the same land. If for some reason work wasn't available for a few days, or it was not possible to work because of sickness, their entire family would be forced to starve. At one time they had all been prosperous, but debts incurred over a period of time had brought about their present plight.

The matter of getting into debt was not simple either—when the land was mortgaged to meet debts incurred due to social commitments or unfavourable weather—the interest charged was astronomical. The farmer would find it impossible to free himself. He would have no other way but to repeatedly borrow money—in this aspect, both Hindus and Muslims were in the same plight. Most of the moneylenders were Hindus. Ramesh was overwhelmed to find that all that he had read in books about moneylenders was true. A lot of Ramesh's money was accumulating in the bank. He gathered all of that together and put in an intense effort to free the poor and helpless farmers from the clutches of the moneylenders. But a couple of experiences quickly taught him that the farmers were certainly not as helpless or pitiful as one might think at first. They were poor, without too many options and not very intelligent; but their scheming powers were quite potent. In most cases they were neither simple, nor innocent; and they lost no opportunity to lie! They were keen to take loans, but just as reluctant to repay them. Another distasteful habit was the manner in which they coveted each other's wives and daughters. It was difficult to find a suitable bride for a man, but because each family was burdened with a few widows their morals were not commendable either. These people were on the fringes of society, it was a strange relationship that they shared with society proper—that of the hunter and the hunted! Yet, all said, they were so persecuted, weak and totally bereft that it was impossible to remain angry with them for any length of time.

Just as a father is distressed by his wayward son, Ramesh too, felt an inner turmoil when he thought of these dispossessed farmers. Hence he

had invited this panchayat session to discuss matters as regards the new school.

The gloom of the evening had been dispelled by moonlight that flooded the surroundings all around. Gazing out, Ramesh was taking his own time to leave although he was fully dressed and ready. All of a sudden, Rama came and stood at the door. The place was not well lit and assuming that it was the maid Ramesh asked, 'What do you want?'

'Are you going anywhere?'

Ramesh was startled, 'Rama, is it you? What are you doing here at this hour!'

Rama felt that it was redundant explaining to Ramesh the reason of her having no other recourse but to seek the shelter of the evening to visit him. But she was visiting him now with a purpose, and she had to disclose this. Unable to think of how to begin, Rama remained silent for a few seconds. Ramesh too was speechless. After a while, Rama asked, 'How are you keeping now?'

'Not too well, there is the onset of a fever every day.'

'Then, why not go away somewhere for a bit?'

Ramesh laughed, 'That certainly would be the best, but how can I leave?'

His smile irritated Rama. She said, 'You talk of a busy schedule, but what could be more important than your own health?'

Ramesh still smiled as he responded, 'I have never said that one's physical well-being is unimportant. But, there are certain tasks that are far more important than this corporeal body—but, you would not understand that, Rama.'

She shook her head, 'Neither do I want to. But, you will have to go somewhere. Tell Sarkar Moshai that I will render whatever assistance is required.'

Ramesh was amazed, 'You will take care of my work? But . . .'

'But what?'

'But you know what, Rama, will I be able to trust you?'

Unhesitatingly Rama responded, 'A lesser person would not, but you will be able to!'

At this unimaginable utterance in such tones of conviction, Ramesh was dumbstruck. After a while he said, 'Let me think about it.'

Rama shook her head, 'No, there is no more time to think, you will have to leave immediately! If you do not—' Even as she spoke Rama was aware that Ramesh was becoming increasingly perceptive to her urgency. It was only too apparent to him now that unless he chose to leave in the aforementioned manner, grave danger threatened him. Ramesh gauged the reason correctly; however, exerting great self-control he said, 'Fine, if that is so, you have to tell me, what do you stand to gain? You have tried to get me into trouble too many times to be warning me today. The events are not so far back in the past that you will have forgotten. Tell me what is your profit in my departure and I might even consider leaving . . .' He looked expectantly towards Rama for a response, but nothing was forthcoming.

His words caused turbulent waves of sorrow in Rama but Ramesh had no clue of this, for the effect of his cruel jibes was not visible on her face in the darkness. She remained still and got back a semblance of control over herself. She then continued, 'All right, I will tell you the actual reason. If you leave I do not gain in any way. But if you do not, there will be a great loss. I will have to stand witness at the trial.'

Ramesh responded drily, 'Is that all? What if you do not stand witness?'

Rama paused for a while and carried on, 'If not, we will be ostracized and nobody will attend any religious ceremony or social programmes that my family organizes.' Even the prospect of such a misfortune made Rama shudder in horror.

Ramesh needed no further details, but unable to contain himself asked, 'After that?'

In desperation Rama appealed, 'Is there anything more after that?! No, please leave—I am begging you, Ramesh da, or you will be destroying me in every way possible! Please go away from this village.'

Both stood in mute silence for a while. Previously, the very sight of Rama would awaken a storm of emotion in Ramesh. He would hardly be able to control himself, even though he severely reprimanded himself for what he felt. This involuntary emotional bonding which her mere presence evoked would hurt and embarrass him into anger, but even then it was impossible to control himself. Now finding Rama alone in his house and recollecting the incident at Bhairav's house awoke in him an emotional turbulence once again. But Rama's last words stilled the storm and calmed him, for Rama's fright and desperate appeal had made her unadulterated selfishness so clear that even his blind heart was able to see her true nature distinctly.

Ramesh sighed deeply, 'Very well, I agree. But today there is no more time! No matter how important the reason might be to you, tonight I have to attend to matters of far greater importance for me. Please call your maid, I have to leave right away.'

Rama said slowly, 'Then, is it truly impossible for you to leave today?'

'Yes! Where is your maid?'

'There is nobody accompanying me!'

Ramesh was astounded, 'What! How could you be so foolhardy as to come here alone? You did not bring even a maid!'

Rama continued to reply just as mildly, 'What difference would that have made? She would never have been able to protect me against you!'

'No matter! But at least your reputation would have been protected against false rumours. It is fairly late at night, Rani!'

That long forgotten name! Overcome by nostalgia, and intense emotion, Rama was on the verge of blurting out, 'Nothing remains of my reputation any longer, Ramesh da.' However, exerting great self-control all she said was, 'Even that would have been of no use. The darkness of the night will not prevent me from finding my way.' Not wasting any more words, Rama took her leave.

## 16

EVERY YEAR RAMA ORGANIZED THE DURGA PUJA FESTIVAL WITH A LOT OF fanfare. On the very first day of the festival, all the farmers and other locals around would be treated to a hearty meal. There was usually such a stampede on that day every year to partake of the food, that even till the early hours of the next morning there would be virtually no place to discard the leftovers. It was not just the Hindus; even the Muslim subjects of Pirpur would arrive en masse to participate in the festivities and feasting. This year too, despite not keeping in good health, Rama had made elaborate arrangements for the puja. In the specially designated elevated place, the idol of the goddess had been placed along with all that was required for her worship. Below was the massive courtyard in which all the festivities were usually held. The first day of the festival had drawn to a close and it was getting on to be dusk. The half moon was gradually visible, but the huge courtyard of the Mukherjees was largely deserted, barring a few people who lingered there. Inside, heaps of food grew cold and unappetizing as time passed—but not a single farmer appeared to partake of even a morsel!

'Oh! Then is all this food to be wasted by these low-down characters? Such audacity!' A hookah in hand, Beni paced about restlessly. 'I will teach those scoundrels a lesson . . . I will see to it that their crops are destroyed . . .' he ranted. Gobinda, Dharmadas and Haldar agitatedly walked about and speculated about the identity of the scoundrels who had brought all this about. What was most amazing was that both Hindus and Muslims had come to an agreement on this matter! Meanwhile, Mashi became impossible to control indoors—that too was no less of a calamity. In the midst of all the pandemonium only one person remained calm—Rama herself. She did not utter a word against anyone, not a whisper of any regret or complaint escaped her lips. Was it the same Rama? There was no doubt at all that she was extremely unwell. However, she did not admit to that at all and laughed at the very mention of sickness. There was no emotional turbulence or rage or stubbornness in her demeanour. But her eyes seemed to be brimming over with pain and sorrow. If one were a little observant, one could see that a whole ocean of tears was lingering just below the surface—and that the whole world might drown in a flood if she let slip her self-control.

Rama emerged from inside the room and stood beside the idol of the goddess. As soon as they caught sight of her, the small group of well-wishers present there began unanimously abusing all the low-caste characters in no uncertain terms. The only response Rama made to this display of scorn on those who had insulted her was a gentle smile—a smile that spoke of pain. There was no vestige of anger or hatred, hope or despair. Who could say if her smile was meaningless or if there were any hidden depths to it!

Angrily Beni continued, 'No, no, this is not a laughing matter, it is

an absolute disgrace. If I come to know who is at the root of all this . . .' Wringing his hands together, he continued, 'I will tear them apart like this!'

Rama shuddered in horror. Beni persisted, 'You scoundrels, why do you not understand that the man on whose strength you are basing all these actions is languishing in jail. How much time will it take us to deal with the likes of you?!"

There was no response from Rama. She completed the chore she had come for and left just as silently.

Ramesh had been in jail for one and a half months now, on charges of illegal entry and attacking Bhairav with a knife. No great effort had to be made to convict him—somehow the new magistrate had already been made aware of the fact that such crimes were quite natural and likely for the accused. As a matter of fact, he was also concerned about possible links of the accused with incidents of dacoity and the like. The judge was greatly helped by the records at the police station. It was clearly stated there that there were similar instances of crime in the past too, and that Ramesh was involved in a lot of other suspicious events of a criminal nature that had taken place. The magistrate had also not neglected to add that in the future when Ramesh would be out after his jail term, the police would continue to keep an eye on him. There had been no need for too many witnesses. Rama had been summoned. She had said, 'Ramesh entered the house and manhandled Acharya Moshai. I am not sure whether the miscreant carried a knife or not.'

Rama had sworn the above facts to be true in the district judiciary. But what would her response be in the court of the Almighty where there was no custom of promising to adhere strictly to the truth? Who knew better than her that Ramesh most certainly did not knife a soul and, far from carrying such a weapon at the time, he did not even have a blade of grass on him at the time! But in that court of justice she would definitely not even be asked about all these accusations—what she could or could not recollect! In the court of law on Earth, however, there was no way at all to have voiced the truth. Beni and all the other stalwarts of the village society had not wanted the truth. Rama had no doubts at all that to taint Ramesh with the mark of false accusations would make him an outcast from society. But she had not imagined the severe punishment that would be imposed on him. A fine of a fairly heavy sum of money was as far as it would go, she had thought. As a matter of fact, when Ramesh had refused to discard his work and run away, Rama had then angrily even wished that he be fined. 'Let him be taught at least some sort of a lesson!' she had said to herself. However, that the lesson would be so harsh, she had not dreamed; she had never thought that even after looking at Ramesh's wan and sickly face, the judge would be so merciless! It was impossible to believe that he would unhesitatingly pass a sentence of six months' imprisonment, accompanied by rigorous labour.

Rama had been unable to even look at Ramesh at the time. She had later been informed by others that Ramesh had firmly fixed his glance on her and refused to let her be interrogated further. Later, when the

sentence had been passed, in response to Gopal Sarkar's plea, he had refused any further course of action. 'No, even if the magistrate sentences me to life imprisonment, I do not wish to lodge an appeal. Let me go to jail,' he had said.

Truly, when his loyal subject Bhairav Acharya repaid his debt with this false accusation and Rama took the witness stand and could not recollect whether or not he had carried a knife, what could be the justification in appealing? Ramesh's hurt burdened Rama like a gigantic boulder that just refused to be dislodged in any way. It was an overwhelmingly heavy burden. Her conscience could never be appeased by telling herself that she had not actually lied. It was true that she had not actually uttered a falsehood, but neither had she revealed the truth. If only she had realized that concealing the truth would cause her such anguish! It kept on recurring to Rama—how grievous Bhairav's crime must have been to have sent Ramesh into such a frenzy of anger! But, upholding just one request she had made, he had forgiven all and immediately left the place. Who had ever thus honoured Rama by taking her smallest wish to be a command?

Being consumed in the fire of her own guilt, Rama had come face-to-face with the question—did the society for which she had committed such a grievous crime actually exist outside the vested interests of Beni and some other so-called pillars of society? Who did not know of Gobinda's widowed sister-in-law? None in the village remained unaware of Beni's secret liaison with her. But she remained sheltered by a society whose head was Beni himself. True fulfilment lay in blind acceptance of all the shackles that society decreed must be clapped on people in the name of norms that must be followed. This then was what the Hindu religion was all about!

However, after much introspection, Rama could not feel much anger against Bhairav, who was the root cause of so much discord. After all, his daughter was of a marriageable age; and very soon he and his entire family would be social outcasts unless he married her off. The very thought was enough to make any Hindu shrink in fright. She, Rama, possessing so much could still not muster up enough courage to break free of the shackles of social norms. How then could poor Bhairav be expected to do so? She could not deny that only disaster would result if someone like Beni were flouted.

The elderly Sanatan Hazra was passing by. Seeing him, Gobinda forced him into standing before Beni. In harsh anger Beni chided, 'What is there to be so vain about, Sanatan? How is it that you have become so daring all of a sudden?'

Sanatan replied, 'How can that ever be possible, with people like you around, Boro Babu? We are merely the poor!'

'How dare you!' Beni's anger knew no bounds on hearing Sanatan's retort. This was the same Sanatan who at one time would bend low before him in respect and come to salute him every day!

Gobinda rebuked Sanatan sharply, 'We are only wondering at your sudden daring! Can you give any explanation of why you did not even

bother to turn up for food blessed by the goddess at Didi Thakrun's house?'

The old man laughed, 'What daring? Whatever has been done so far has been done by you to me. But, no matter, whether it's blessed food or not, none of us will ever go to that household again for a meal. We are amazed at just how much sin can be tolerated.' Sanatan sighed deeply and looked towards Rama, 'Be a little careful, Didi Thakrun, the Muslims of Pirpur are greatly agitated. God only knows what will happen once Chhoto Babu returns. They have targeted Boro Babu and are on the lookout for a chance to pounce on him—it is lucky that they have not managed to do so yet.' He looked once at Beni; in a flash all of Beni's anger vanished and his face became pale with fright.

Sanatan continued, 'Boro Babu, I will not lie before the Almighty—be a little careful! Try avoid going out at night—one never knows who might be lying in wait.'

Beni tried to say something, but no words emerged. There was probably no greater coward than him.

Rama spoke at long last. In affectionate and pitiful tones she said, 'Sanatan, then, is it because of Chhoto Babu that you are all so angry?'

Looking towards the image of the goddess, Sanatan replied, 'Why will I ensure a path to hell by lying, Didi Thakrun? Indeed it is so! The Muslims are the angriest. They look on Chhoto Babu as a messiah. Let me point out one instance as proof: Zafar Ali, who hates spending money, donated a thousand rupees for the school the day Chhoto Babu was jailed! I have also heard that special prayers are held for him in the masjid.'

Rama's washed out expression was replaced by a joy that flooded her entire being and she gazed unblinkingly at Sanatan in silence. All of a sudden Beni clutched at Sanatan's hand, 'You have got to go to the police and make a statement, Sanatan! Whatever you want will be yours; the property held in bondage will be released to you, I promise in front of the Almighty. Please keep a Brahmin's request, Sanatan.'

In stunned amazement Sanatan gazed at Beni, 'How much longer can I hope to live, Boro Babu! If I commit such a grievous sin, when I die no one will be willing to even touch me with their feet, let alone perform the last rites. Those days are long past, Boro Babu, those days are no longer there! Chhoto Babu has turned everything upside down and put a new way of looking at things in place.'

Gobinda persisted, 'So, that means you will not keep the request of a Brahmin?'

Sanatan vigorously shook his head, 'No! You will be angry, Ganguly Moshai, but the other day, at the new school, Chhoto Babu said—just an outward show does not make a person a Brahmin. I am not a young man and am well aware of all that is going on. Are your activities worthy of a true Brahmin? Let me ask you, Didi Thakrun, you tell me?'

Rama bowed her head without answering. Encouraged, Sanatan continued, 'A new awareness has come upon a lot of us now . . . particularly among all the young men of both villages who gather every

evening at Zafar Ali's house. They have stated very clearly, "If anyone is the zamindar, it is Chhoto Babu—the rest are all thieves." Besides, we pay for all our privileges, what is there to be scared of? A Brahmin is nobody special—he is someone just like me.'

Terrorized, Beni asked in great fear, 'Sanatan, can you tell me, why they are so angry with me?'

Sanatan responded, 'Do not be angry, Boro Babu, but you are indeed the root cause of all the trouble. They have come to know that.'

Beni was silent. Despite hearing a low-caste man like Sanatan spew forth such harsh and unpalatable statements, there was no sign of anger in him! He could not afford to be angry—his heart was pounding madly in fright!

Gobinda was also startled by Sanatan's revelations. He said, 'Then, the gathering takes place in Zafar's house, does it? Can you tell us what happens there?'

Looking at him, Sanatan reflected for a while and ultimately said, 'How would I know, but do not plan on doing anything unpleasant there, Ganguly Moshai! The relationship between Hindus and Muslims there is like that of the relationship between siblings. They are united in every respect. Ever since Chhoto Babu was sent to jail, their anger has been piling up like a heap of dynamite—do not set it afire.'

Sanatan left after giving this advice, but no one felt like talking for a very long time. As Rama attempted to leave, Beni said, 'Did you hear all that, Rama?'

Rama smiled slightly but did not make any response. Rama's passive stance infuriated Beni. 'It is that scoundrel Bhairav who has caused all these problems,' he said. 'If you had not gone there and freed him, Rama, none of these complications would have arisen. You are a woman and do not have to leave the house—you can afford to laugh! But, what will happen to us? Suppose one day they truly crack open our skulls? This is what happens if one works with a woman!' Venting his fear, frustrations and anger in this manner, Beni continued to sit there with a gloomy expression.

Rama was stunned. She was only too well acquainted with Beni; but such a baseless accusation which turned the tables on her left her speechless. She remained standing there, unresponsive; after a while she left. Beni then shouted loudly for more lights and armed guards, and with great precaution left the place in stealth.

BISHHESHWARI ENTERED THE ROOM AND, IN A VOICE CHOKING WITH TEARS asked, 'How are you today, Rama?'

Rama, looking up from where she lay on the bed, smiled a bit and

said, 'I am fine, Jethaima.'

Sitting at the head of the bed, Bishheshwari gently caressed Rama's forehead and face. It was about three months since Rama had been bedridden with malaria and a debilitating cough. She was being treated by the local doctor who continued to make futile attempts to heal her. The old man remained completely at sea regarding the sickness that was continually gnawing on and was gradually destroying every member in her body. It was only in Bishheshwari's mind that the dark and gloomy clouds of a growing suspicion gradually gathered, overshadowing everything else. She genuinely loved Rama like a daughter—there was not an iota of any faked emotion in her relationship with her. It was this heightened degree of love that made her even more alert to everything concerning this young girl. She noted that Rama's eyes seemed to be sinking into their sockets and yet remained as bright as ever. It appeared that in an eagerness to look closer at some distant future, Rama's senses had become even more sharpened and alert.

Bishheshwari called out gently, 'Rama!'

'Yes, Jethaima?'

'I am like your mother, Rama—'

Rama interrupted, 'Why do you say "like", you *are* my mother, Jethaima!'

Bishheshwari bent down to kiss Rama's forehead, 'Then, tell me the truth, dear, what is the matter?'

'I am sick, Jethaima.'

Rama's pale face flushed red for an instant.

Very affectionately Bishheshwari shook Rama's untended tresses, 'That is only too apparent, my dear! If there is something beyond the physical, do not hide it from your mother, Rama—or else, how can a cure be found?'

Outside, the heat of the sun had not yet intensified and a light breeze seemed to carry the tidings of the approaching winter. Rama gazed outside the window and remained silent. A while later she asked, 'How is Barda, Jethaima?'

'He is better, the wound on his head will take some time to heal. But, he should be home from the hospital in another five or six days.'

Feeling the pain in Rama's glance Bishheshwari said, 'Do not grieve, my dear! There was need for this. It will do him good.' Noting Rama's surprise she explained, 'You are wondering, how as a mother I am so casual about such a disaster that befell my son? Truthfully speaking, I do not know whether I am happy or sad at the incident. Those who do not fear being irreligious, those who have no shame—if their fear of death is not high, chaos and anarchy will reign on earth. I am sure that what this Kolu's son did to Beni, no friend or relative could have done more. One has to burn coal, my dear, one cannot wash it clean.'

Rama asked, 'Was there nobody at home at the time?'

'Why not, everybody was present! But Kolu's son did not strike senselessly; he had ostensibly come to sell oil. He knew he would go to jail for what he was going to do. There was no personal animosity—that

is why, when Beni fell with only one blow, he did not shower any more blows, but waited there quietly. And he also said that unless Beni is a lot more careful in the future, whether or not he himself is able to return home, this blow would not be the last one.'

Rama responded quietly, 'This means that there are more people involved! But the lower classes were never so bold in our village—what could be the source of so much defiance?'

Bishheshwari smiled gently, 'Don't you yourself know the answer to that, my dear? Who could fill so completely the hearts of all the impoverished? Such fire can never be completely extinguished; if put out, the surroundings still remain singed with heat. On his return, let him live long wherever he is—I will never sigh on Beni's behalf!'

Despite this assertion, Rama was well aware that Bishheshwari somehow stifled a heart-rending sigh. She pulled her Jethaima's hand close and lay still, clutching it in silence. After controlling herself somewhat, Bishheshwari continued, 'Rama, only a mother is aware of how much a child can mean! I cannot express to you what emotions passed through my mind when they carried away an unconscious Beni to the hospital. But it was impossible for me to curse anyone or even blame anyone for what happened. I cannot forget, my dear, that just because the victim happens to be a mother's son, true justice will be denied.'

Rama thought awhile and answered, 'I am not arguing with you, Jethaima, but if this is so, what sin is Ramesh da paying such a heavy price for? The manner in which we have sent him to jail does not remain hidden from anyone.'

Jethaima answered, 'No, my dear, that it does not! That is why Beni is in hospital and you—' Bishheshwari came to an abrupt halt. She somehow gulped down what she had been on the verge of saying, and instead continued, 'You know, my dear, no action remains without effect or consequence, no matter what the situation. The force generated by any action will strike somewhere or the other. But this force is not always visible or apparent—which is why there is sometimes no definite conclusion and someone pays for the sins of another. But there is no doubt at all that some sort of penance definitely has to be undertaken.'

Recollecting her own role in bringing misery to Ramesh's life, Rama sighed deeply. Bishheshwari went on, 'I have also learned a lesson from all this, Rama, it is not always possible to bring about change just because one wants to do good. There are a lot of major and minor steps that have to be patiently gone through. One day Ramesh had come to me in despair and had said, "Jethaima, their betterment is impossible—let me return to where I have come from!" That day I had prevented him by saying, "No, Ramesh, do not run away from a project that you have already begun." He never could ignore my command. So, the day he was sentenced, I felt as though I was personally pushing him into jail. But later, when Beni was taken to hospital, I realized, no, perhaps it was necessary that he too had to be sent to jail. How was I to realize all the travails of doing good—that the task was so difficult? One will first

have to integrate people—unless people work together no good is possible. From the very outset, Ramesh stood on such a pinnacle of education, reformation and idealism that ultimately none could reach him! But I did not notice all this, my dear. Neither did I permit him to leave, nor could I keep him safe.'

Rama prevented herself from blurting out a few impulsive words. Gauging what she might have said, Bishheshwari remarked, 'No, Rama, there are no regrets about that. But you too, my dear—do not be angry when I tell you, you might have caused his downfall and forced him on the path to destruction, but no matter how great a sin it might have been for you, there is no doubt at all that when he returns, he will definitely be able to see the truth for what it is.'

Not understanding the implication of Bishheshwari's words, Rama responded, 'But why will this have brought him down, Jethaima? No matter how much pain and distress might have been caused by our wrong and sinful act, surely our wrongdoing will push *us* towards hell! Why must it touch him at all?'

Bishheshwari smiled somewhat sadly. 'But of course it will, my dear!' she said. 'Or else, why is sin so terrifying? A person does not reciprocate a kindness, rather quite the reverse—he causes harm instead; what difference does it make, unless the magnanimous person is brought down to abysmal depths as well? You tell me, dear, will Kuapur ever come so intimately close to Ramesh again? On his return it will be only too clear to everyone that the very generosity which prompted him to give such spontaneously, has been destroyed by Bhairav.'

After pausing for a while, she continued, 'But, who knows, may be it is for the good! Even though his healthy, strong prowess could not be accepted by the village, this threatened and hurt being will perhaps achieve some positive goal.' Bishheshwari sighed deeply.

Clutching on to her hand, Rama said in pitiful tones, 'Tell me, Jethaima, what is the punishment for being a false witness and sending an innocent man to jail?'

Bishheshwari who was gazing out of the window and running her hand through Rama's hair, suddenly noticed the tears coursing down her face. She wiped them dry and in tones of deep affection said, 'But that was not your fault, my dear. All the responsibility should be borne by those cowardly men who have taken advantage of a woman's natural fright and aversion at the thought of any scandal. You do not have to bear the burden of even one action, my child.'

This one reassurance freed all the pent-up tears that had been welling up inside her and Rama began weeping copiously. After a while she said, 'But they are his enemies! They say that that it is no sin to bring down your own foe by whatever means. I do not have even that excuse, Jethaima!'

'Why are you neither friend nor foe, my dear?' As Bishheshwari cast a glance in Rama's direction, she started as if struck by a bolt of lightning. The truth that had once appeared in unwarranted flashes, was now unmasked all of a sudden and it was only too clear. Recognition of the

unassailible reality threw Bishheshwari into a pain that she willed herself to suppress. The cause of Rama's agony no longer remained a secret.

Rama's eyes were closed and she did not catch sight of Bishheshwari's knowing expression. She called out, 'Jethaima!'

Bishheshwari responded by gently shaking her head.

Rama said, 'Today I want to make a confession to you, Jethaima. The youth of the village used to gather every evening at Zafar Ali's house in Pirpur to discuss all matters positive—on Ramesh da's instructions. There was a conspiracy to brand them as miscreants and get them arrested by the police. I sent men to warn them, because that would be exactly what the police were looking for! They would have been absolutely unable to protect themselves.'

Bishheshwari shuddered in distaste, 'What are you saying? Beni permitted this senseless intrusion by the police?'

Rama answered, 'I think that the pain Barda is going through is a result of that action. Will you be able to forgive me, Jethaima?'

Bishheshwari bent down and tenderly kissed Rama on the forehead. She said, 'Rama, if as his mother I am unable to forgive this, who will ever be able to do so? I bless you and pray that the Almighty reward you for all that you have done!'

Rama wiped her eyes dry and said, 'This is the one consolation that I have, Jethaima—that he will return to find his arena ready for him! What he had wanted has happened—the rustic farming class has awakened. They have come to recognize and love him. In celebration of all this love, will he not be able to forgive me, Jethaima?'

Bishheshwari could not speak. A tear ran down her cheeks and moistened Rama's forehead. For a long time both women remained silent.

Rama called out, 'Jethaima!'

'What is it, my dear?'

Rama answered, 'There is one sphere in which neither of us have ever differed. We both have loved you.'

Once again Bishheshwari bent down and touched her lips to Rama's forehead.

Rama continued, 'On the basis of that, I am going to make a demand on you. When I am no longer there and if he is still unable to forgive me, please convey a message on my behalf, Jethaima. I am not as bad as he believes me to be. The hurt that I have inflicted on him, has hurt me much more. He will never disbelieve what I have to say.'

Bishheshwari held Rama close and cried out, 'Come, my dear, let us go to some holy place where there is no Beni or Ramesh—the only sight is that of temples all around. I understand everything, Rama. If the time has come for you to make the last journey, it will not do to reach there with these poisonous emotions. We belong to a Brahmin household and have to reach the Almighty in a befitting manner.'

Rama remained speechless for a long while and then, somehow stifling a deep sigh said, 'That is my desire too, Jethaima!'

## 18

RAMESH HAD NEVER IMAGINED EVEN IN HIS WILDEST DREAMS THAT THE Almighty would fashion such fulfilment of all his dreams outside the barriers of his prison. When Ramesh stepped out of prison after his imprisonment term, an unimaginable sight greeted him. Beni Ghosal himself was at the fore, with his head wrapped in a shawl. Behind him were the headmasters of both the educational institutes and some Hindu and Muslim students. Beni embraced Ramesh and tearfully said, 'I have only just become aware of how strong family ties can be! Though I was aware of the manner in which Jodu Mukherjee's daughter was contriving with that scheming scoundrel Acharya to heap insult and injury on you, I chose to ignore the facts and have been punished for that silence! You have been much better off in jail; but these six months, Ramesh, I have only simmered in the fire of contrition . . .'

Unable to find any words at this warm welcome and words of apology from Beni, Ramesh gazed at him in bemused wonder. Parui, the headmaster, prostrated himself at Ramesh's feet. The group behind him moved forward—everyone crowded around Ramesh and jostled to bless him, offer salutations or at least greet him. Beni could not stop his tears any longer and in an emotion-laden voice said, 'My dear younger brother, please do not hold the past against your older sibling any longer—come home! Mother is almost blinding herself with tears.'

A coach awaited them; Ramesh stepped in and took his seat without a word. Beni sat facing him and unfolded the shawl from around his head. Though the wound had healed, the scar was still very prominent. Beni sighed deeply and gesticulating with his hands said, 'Whom can I blame, it is all the result of my own doing—I am paying for all my accumulated sins! But what sense does talking about all that make now?' Simulating deep sorrow, Beni fell silent.

His simple confession moved Ramesh. He concluded that something must have happened while he was in prison and so did not press for any answers. But seeing that Ramesh was not rising to the bait, and that his schemes were being foiled, Beni grew restless. After a moment or two had gone by, once again he drew Ramesh's attention by sighing deeply and saying, 'It is an ingrained habit—the inability to say something and mean something else! Unlike certain others, I have just not learned to be a hypocrite. That is a great fault of mine!'

Observing that Ramesh was now paying full attention to him, Beni lowered his voice still further and said even more gravely, 'The other day, unable to bear the torment any longer, I had said, "What injustice have we done you that you have caused us so much anguish? Mother will have a breakdown if she comes to know of the jail sentence. No matter what disputes we might have as regards property, after all we are still brothers. At one and the same time you cast a blow at my brother

and also hurt my mother! But, the Almighty is there for the innocent.”, Beni looked at the sky as if to seek justice.

Though Ramesh did not offer any opinion, he continued to listen attentively. Beni paused a bit and resumed, ‘Ramesh, that aggressive image makes me shudder even now. She gnashed her teeth and said, “Was not Ramesh’s father responsible for sending my father to jail? Do you think that I would do anything for his release?” So much vanity in a woman was unbearable, Ramesh! I too was angry and said, ‘All right, let him return and then justice will be done.”’

So far Ramesh had been unable to properly take in all that Beni had been spouting. He did not know when his father had schemed to send Rama’s father to jail. But he now remembered the matter being mentioned by Rama’s aunt the first time that he had visited them. He waited curiously for Beni to tell him the rest.

Taking note of this Beni said, ‘She is used to killing—don’t you remember Akbar being sent to fight you during the incident of the dam? But you more than capably handled that hoodlum. However, do you see my condition?’ Beni then delved into the depths of his own lurid imagination and wove a fabricated version of the events that had actually taken place.

Ramesh asked with bated breath, ‘Then?’

Beni smiled in a melancholy manner and continued, ‘Do I remember what followed, my dear brother? Who carried me and how I was taken to the hospital, what happened there and who tended to me—I know nothing! It was only ten days later, when I regained consciousness, that I realized I was in hospital. It is only due to the past good deeds of my mother that I recovered. There can be none like her, Ramesh.’

Ramesh failed to find words to express his shock and disbelief and felt as though he was turned to stone. The only external manifestation of his feelings were his clenched fists. An overwhelming rage and disgust burned within him with such intensity that even gauging its depths was impossible for anybody. Ramesh knew that Beni was low-down—he was also aware that there were no depths to which he would not sink. However, he had had no experience at all of men who could lie so freely and continually, with no compunction at all. So, Ramesh assumed that the fault lay with Rama—and what was being disclosed by Beni was nothing but the truth!

The entire village celebrated his return. Through the day there were hordes of people streaming in—there was such jubilation and so many relationships grew and flourished in such a short span of time! The bitter taste of his brief sojourn in prison that was lingering with Ramesh, vanished completely now. In his absence, a social revolution seemed to have taken place in the village; but it remained no end of a puzzle as to the manner in which all this had been brought about. Ramesh observed that all the positive forces he had initiated and that had continually been retarded by Beni and yet continued to gather momentum, were now a might to be reckoned with! He also came to understand Beni a little better. In spite of knowing him to be extremely harmful and scheming,

the manner in which he was obeyed by all impressed him like never before. Ramesh breathed a sigh of relief at having put an end to the enmity of such a man. One by one everybody in the village came and proffered their regret for the wrongs that had been perpetrated against him. With all their sympathy and Beni's support, Ramesh's enthusiasm grew with every passing day. Once again he tackled all the projects he had taken up, but had been forced to abandon. He visited all the houses in the village and spent time in merrymaking and celebrating. But he avoided any mention of Rama at all costs. He had heard that she was unwell, but evinced no desire at all to find out what her actual condition was. As far as he was concerned, all ties and links with her had been severed. From the moment of his return to the village he had only heard reports of how it was principally Rama who had been responsible for all his miseries. Hence, there could no longer be any doubt that in this instance Beni had not lied.

Five or six days later, Beni began to exert all his wiles on him. There was a huge tract of land in Pirpur over which Beni and Rama had not been seeing eye to eye for a very long time. Beni's intention was to take the opportunity of the rivalry between Ramesh and Rama to usurp the concerned property.

No matter what Beni said, he was innately scared of Rama. Now that she was bedridden and unable to participate in court cases and the like, he was emboldened to proceed. Also, Beni knew that their Muslim subjects would never disobey if Ramesh instructed them. No matter what happened later, never would there be such an opportune moment to claim the property as his own. Greatly surprised when Ramesh refused to intervene in the matter and help him, Beni tried to persuade him in all ways and ultimately said, 'Why not? Did she show any consideration when you were sick that you are thinking of her now? Did your illness hold any meaning for her when she sent you to jail?'

Ramesh could not deny the truth of this statement. But, somehow his mind revolted against active enmity with Rama; despite all the ugliness that Beni tried to influence him with, the picture of Rama in Ramesh's mind effectively put brakes on any kind of action against her. Beni was not to be outdone—he knew only too well how to reel in the fish. Instead of making further attempts at persuasion, he left the matter alone for the time being.

Another fact had come to Ramesh's attention: he was aware that Bishheshwari had never been attracted to worldly matters; but, ever since his return he had noted an actual look of distaste for material things in her expression. The day of his many-splendoured release from jail, he had returned to his Jethaima's house with Beni. Bishheshwari had expressed great joy at his return and in tearful tones had blessed him innumerable times. However, there was something in her tones that only served to sadden him. Now news reached Ramesh that Bishheshwari planned to leave soon for Kashi, never to return. He was astounded, not having been aware of any such plans. Due to an extremely busy work schedule, Ramesh had been unable to meet Bishheshwari over the last

few days; but the previous time he had done so, Bishheshwari had not spoken of any such intention. Of course Ramesh was also aware that she did not like any sort of unnecessary discussion about personal matters. But connecting the present news with the memory of their last meeting, the reason for Bishheshwari's complete detachment from worldly matters became only too apparent to Ramesh. There was no doubt about it, his Jethaima was truly taking her leave. Ramesh's eyes filled with tears at the very thought. Not delaying any further, he reached her house as quickly as he could. It was late in the morning and Ramesh was informed that his Jethaima had left for the Mukherjee house.

Surprised, Ramesh asked, 'Why at this time?'

The maid who had been part of the household for a very long time smiled gently and said, 'What meaning does time have for Ma? Besides, today is their Chhoto Babu's sacred thread ceremony.'

'Jatin's?'

The maid continued, 'They have not invited anybody. Even if they did, none would have gone—all the seniors have ostracized Rama Didi!'

There was no end to the astonishment Ramesh felt. After a moment's silence when he asked about the reason, the maid, greatly embarrassed, said, 'I am not sure, Chhoto Babu; some horrible rumours have been heard about Rama Didi. What would we poor people know of such matters?' She rapidly made her escape.

Ramesh returned home after quietly standing there for a while. This social boycott that Rama and her family faced was the obvious result of Beni's vengeful anger—Ramesh had no reason to make any queries. But the reason for the anger against her and the ugly rumours circulating to defame Rama—it seemed an impossibly difficult task to find out the details of the alleged contention.

## 19

THAT EVENING AN UNIMAGINABLE EVENT TOOK PLACE. DISREGARDING THE injunctions of the court, Kailash Napit and Sheikh Motilal, along with their witnesses, sought Ramesh's intervention. In genuine surprise he asked, 'Why would you accept what I might say?'

Both parties responded, 'Why would we not, Babu? Is your intelligence and power of judgement any less than that of a judge? Besides, it is from gentry like you that judges and the like are chosen. Tomorrow if you work for the government and preside as the judge, we would have had to accept whatever you said. Then, disagreement would just not have been viable!'

Ramesh felt as if his heart would burst with pride at this statement. Kailash continued, 'Both of us can at least explain our points of view to you—which is not possible in any court. Further, unless a lawyer is

given plenty of money, nothing worthwhile is achieved. Here, there are no expenses and no lawyer whose ego has to constantly be appeased. No Babu, whatever you decide, whether we like it or not, we will accept and return home. The Almighty was kind enough to direct us to your home and so both of us have come here directly from the court.'

A small canal was the bone of contention between the two parties. After placing whatever little papers there were in his hands and promising to return the next day, both men along with their witnesses took their leave. Ramesh sat still; all this was beyond his imagination. He had not imagined such honours being conferred on him even in the distant future. No matter whether they actually accepted his judgement or not, the very fact that they rejected a government court and had made their way to him—that filled his heart with pride. The matter was negligible—an extremely petty quarrel; but the prospect of this utterly insignificant issue possibly leading to far-reaching consequences dazzled him. There appeared to be no limits to the heights he could scale for his unfortunate motherland. Outside, moonlight flooded the surroundings and all of a sudden he remembered Rama. Any other day, he would instantly have been filled with rage. But now, far from anger, there was no longer even a feeling of outrage. He smiled a bit to himself and, addressing Rama, said, 'It is through you that the Almighty has shown me such fulfilment, the poison you have forced me to swallow has turned to nectar! If only you were aware of all this, probably you would never have even wanted to send me to jail . . . Who is that?'

'I am Radha, Chhoto Babu! Rama Didi has requested you to please go and meet her.'

Rama had sent a maid requesting his presence! Ramesh was amazed. Why was God playing such scheming games with him?

The maid said, 'If you could kindly—'

'Where is she?'

'She is resting in her room.' Pausing a little, the maid continued, 'Tomorrow there will be no time. So, right now if you could . . .'

'All right, come along—' Ramesh stood up.

After sending the maid across, Rama lay in alert and anxious anticipation on her bed. Ramesh was shown in by the maid; he drew up a chair and seated himself by the bed. It was sheer willpower that prevented Rama from casting herself at his feet. A lamp flickered in a corner of the room; in its dim and indistinct light Ramesh could not make out Rama's appearance very well. All that he had decided and reflected on the way to her home made no sense in Rama's actual presence. He was silent for a while and then gently asked, 'How are you keeping, Rani?'

Rama moved away slightly and said, 'Please call me Rama.'

It was as though someone had struck Ramesh. In a flash his attitude hardened and he responded, 'So be it; I had heard you were unwell and wanted to find out how you are now. Otherwise I have no inclination, desire or requirement to address you by name.'

Rama understood all. She was quiet for a few moments and then answered, 'I am all right now.'

She then continued, 'You might be surprised at my sending for you, but—'

Ramesh interrupted sharply, 'No, I am not! The time to be surprised by any of your actions is long past for me. But tell me, why *have* you sent for me?'

How much his words wounded Rama, Ramesh had no idea. She sat in mute silence for some time and then said, 'Ramesh da, it is on two counts that I have put you to the trouble of coming over. I am aware of all the injustice that I have done to you. But, at the same time, I was sure that you would honour my last request to come and meet me.'

Rama's voice grew thick with tears. It was so apparent that in a flash Ramesh felt all his former affection for her flooding back. He himself was amazed to realize that despite so much chaos and anarchy, his fondness for her had not died at all! His emotions had merely fallen into a kind of stupor. He remained silent for a while and then asked, 'What is your request?'

All of a sudden Rama looked up and immediately cast her eyes down again, 'The major portion of the property Barda is trying to usurp with your help belongs to me. I want to gift that to you.'

Once again Ramesh flared up, 'You need not worry! Never have I helped anyone steal in the past and nor will I do so now. If you do want to gift it, there are others, I will not accept it.'

In the past Rama would also have flared up and retorted, 'The Mukherjees cannot be insulted by accepting anything from the Ghosals either.' But today no such words escaped her. Rather, she said humbly, 'Ramesh da, I realize that you will never be an aid to thievery and I also know that if you do accept, it will not be for yourself. However, the situation is not that—a mistake has to be rectified! Please accept this as a fine for all the wrongs that have been done to you.'

Ramesh was silent for a while and then asked, 'Your second request?'

'I am leaving my Jatin in your hands. Please bring him up to be the kind of person you are; as an adult may he learn to sacrifice self-interest the way you do.'

In a flash all the hardness vanished from Ramesh's demeanour. Rama wiped her eyes with one end of her sari and said, 'There is no time for me to see to all this; but I am sure that Jatin has in him all the qualities of his forefathers. If taught, the inherent qualities he possesses should lead him to be as upright as you, one day.'

Ramesh did not come up with any immediate response—he remained looking outside, at the moonlight flooding the surroundings. A strange kind of pain that he had never felt before coursed through his entire being. After a prolonged silence he turned around and said, 'Look, do not involve me in all this any longer. After a lot of effort I have been able to bring a little light into my life. There is a constant fear that even this will flicker out!'

Rama answered, 'You need not be afraid, Ramesh da, this light will never go out. Jethaima had said that because you were placed on too high a pedestal, the work you wanted to get done was not possible!'

Now, our own misdeeds have brought you down to Earth, you are here with all of us. You are afraid, because now, you see yourself at last as one of the village folk! In the past, such a thought would not even have occurred to you. Then, you were beyond the boundaries of rural life; now you are one of us. That is why your light will never be dimmed—it will glow even brighter.'

The sudden mention of Jethaima emboldened Ramesh. He said, 'Are you sure, Rama, that this light will never go out?'

Rama responded assertively, 'I have no doubts at all! These are the words of Jethaima, who knows all. This is your task. Please take the responsibility of my Jatin and, forgiving my sins, bless me today and allow me to take my leave of you in peace!'

Ramesh's heart trembled, as though repeatedly struck by thunderbolts, but he remained silent with a bowed head. Rama continued, 'There is another favour to which you have to agree. Please say you will!'

Mildly Ramesh asked, 'What?'

'You will not quarrel with Barda on my behalf.'

Not understanding, Ramesh asked, 'What do you mean?'

'Just this, if word ever reaches you one day, please keep this in mind—I bore all in silence and did not utter a single word of protest, even while departing! The other day Jethaima had said that the more we analyse falsehood, it increases in strength. There is no greater sin than increasing evil through one's own impatient actions. Keeping in mind this advice of hers, I have been able to deal with and conquer all sorrow and misfortune—never ever forget this, Ramesh da!'

Ramesh continued to gaze at her in silence. Rama went on, 'Do not be pained, Ramesh da, because today you find it difficult to forgive me. I am sure that a time will come when what seems insurmountably difficult today will smoothen out by itself. Knowing that surely you will be able to forgive me then, I am not anxious at all or troubled in any way. Tomorrow I am leaving.'

'Tomorrow! Leaving!' Astonished, Ramesh asked, 'Where will you be going tomorrow?'

'Wherever Jethaima takes me.'

Ramesh asked, 'But I believe that she will never return again?'

Rama responded quietly, 'Neither will I. I am also taking my last leave from all of you.'

She bent low and touched her forehead to the ground. Ramesh thought for a while and then, sighing deeply, stood up, 'All right, you may leave. But can you not at least tell me the reason for your departure?'

Rama could make no response. Ramesh said once again, 'Only you know why you have to leave with so much left unsaid. But I pray that some day I might be able to forgive you from the very depths of my soul. Only the Almighty knows how painful it is not to be able to absolve you of everything.'

Tears overflowed from Rama's eyes, but in the dim light Ramesh saw nothing. In silence, Rama respectfully bent down to take her leave again, and almost immediately Ramesh left the room. While walking

back, it seemed to him that all the enthusiasm about his future, his work—all had turned pale and indistinct as the moonlight ever since he heard of Rama's departure.

The next morning, when Ramesh reached the house, Bishheshwari had already taken her seat in the carriage, ready to leave. He stood at the carriage door and tearfully said, 'Why are you punishing us in this manner by leaving so abruptly?'

Bishheshwari extended her right hand and blessing him said, 'What is the sense of talking about past misdeeds, my dear, there can never be an end to that!' She continued, 'If I breathe my last here, Beni will perform the last rites; then, I will never find my release. During this lifetime I have struggled and sought relief from the fiery hell of retribution; fear of having to do so in my next birth perforce leads me to run away, Ramesh.'

Ramesh stood speechless, shocked by the implication of his Jethaima's words—they revealed the anguish of a mother's heart as never before. Remaining silent for a while he asked, 'Why is Rama leaving, Jethaima?'

Bishheshwari exerted great self-control on a sudden upsurge of emotion. Lowering her voice, she said, 'She has no place in society, my dear. That is why I am taking her to where the Almighty is! I am not sure whether she will survive there either; but, if she does, I will request her to answer this overwhelmingly difficult question—why did God send her to this Earth with so much beauty, talent, goodness, if only to burden her with the heavy load of sorrow and, in spite of being innocent, cast her out of society! Is this the divine plan to some end or is it a game, played by human society? Ramesh, today there is no one more pitiable than her on this Earth.' Bishheshwari's voice choked even as she spoke. No one had seen her so emotional ever before.

There was not a single word that Ramesh could utter. A little later Bishheshwari said, 'But it is my order to you, Ramesh, never to misunderstand her. Just before my departure, I have no desire at all to complain about anybody. But do not disbelieve my words in the slightest when I say that you have no greater well-wisher than her in this world.'

Ramesh answered, 'But Jethaima—'

Bishheshwari interrupted, 'There is no "but" in this, Ramesh. Whatever you have been told is false. But let all grievances come to an end at this juncture. Let your crusade against all such injustice, envy, jealousy always remain vibrant. This is her last request to you. This is why she has borne all so stoically! Rama is at death's threshold, Ramesh, but she has not uttered a word.'

Now, Ramesh remembered some of Rama's words from the previous night and tears seemed to well up from his inner being. He quickly looked down to hide his tears and exerting all the strength that was in him said, 'Tell her, Jethaima, that which she desires will be done!' Somehow he managed to stretch out his hand and touch Bishheshwari's feet, and then, in unbearable agony, he left.

## Glossary

Barda	Eldest brother
Babaji	A form of affectionate address to one younger
Baba	Father
Boro Ginni	The seniormost lady of a household/the female head of the household
Chhoto Khuro	Younger uncle
Chhoto Khuri Ma	Younger aunt
Chhorda	Youngest of the elder brothers
Didi	Older sister; sometimes also used as an affectionate mode of address
Dada	Elder brother; also a respectful form of address for men
Dadamoshai	Grandfather
Didima	Grandmother
Didi Thakrun	A respectful address to a female member of the household
Ginni Ma	The lady of the house
Jethaima	Elder paternal aunt
Karta	A senior male member of the household
Khuro	Paternal uncle
Khuri Ma	Paternal uncle's wife
Mashi	Maternal aunt; also, an informal mode of address for older female persons
Thakurpo	Younger brother-in-law