

Arun Sharman

SKYLIGHTS

a novel

SKYLIGHTS

The book talks about the growing up of two boys from diverse background - one from a dusty village of UP and the other in the suave, executive corporate quarters in the neighborhood of then Calcutta, now Kolkata. Bizarre incident brings the two together - the former takes up the job of a servant in the house of the latter in the district of Howrah on the banks of Hooghly River. Though growing up under the same roof the two grow up in different worlds. While Ramkhilawan the servant is honing his skills as Captain Domo, Shardul the master's younger son is going to the best public school in the locality. The roller-coaster life meanders through sensational twists and turns for both the adolescences.

After being implicated in false murder charges as an adolescent Ramkhilawan escapes from Fayyabad (Faizabad) on his rickety cycle to Ayodhya to his father who is a sentry at Ramghadhi the birth place of Lord Rama. The concerned father takes the son to colorful swamiji, his Guru. The seer helps to send Ramkhilawan with his disciple Hanuma to Calcutta to work as a help in the house of one of his disciples Mr. Sheshadri, a CEO in a mill. Shardul, who had a life of a sort of a shuttling child, because of the father's search for a better school for his children, finally returns to his parents. The hurricane journey before the return had too many things happening leading to the loss of innocence of the teenager. At very tender age he is exposed to many tangential episodes of sexual revelations, both physical and emotional.

Ramkhilawan too is growing up in upper middle class, urban social set up, where he too is witness to many forbidden revelations, finally, getting married in rather exceptional circumstances, not before his newly wedded wife is deceitfully exploited by the colorful guru.

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ISBN: 978-81-932111-0-6

Price: ₹ 195.00

[part returns go to the various charities run by the author]

For sale in the Indian Subcontinent only.


Publisher:

Prowess.House Inc, (BC1043382) SUITE 2300 - 1066 WEST
HASTINGS STREET, VANCOUVER BC V6E 3X2 CANADA

Prowess House B-804, JeevanDham Complex, Opp. BSNL Telephone
Exchange, Satellite Road, Ahmedabad 380015. Gujarat. India.

Email: prowess.house.in@gmail.com

Web: <http://prowess.house>

 [facebook.com/Skylights-970093926403957/](https://www.facebook.com/Skylights-970093926403957/)

Author: Arun Sharman

Author web: <http://sharmansameep.org>

Cover design and layout – Ruchi Doctor

Printer: Bhagwati Offset, Ahmedabad.

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Dedicated to
ROHINGTON MISTRY

“ *You have to do your own
growing no matter how tall
your grandfather was.*”

– Abraham Lincoln
[16th US President (1861-65)]

LITERALLY AND METAPHORICALLY UNPUTDOWNABLE

Literally and metaphorically “**SKYLIGHTS**” is a journey that nose rounds into the lives of people that they desperately attempt to conceal. There is Ramkhilawan the rustic, bucolic boy, victim of conspiracy, awed, scandalized and in the deal made city savvy in fast forward mode, as he finds a unique past time in peeping through the skylights by accident. He becomes privy to all the covert indulgences of various dramatis persona from diverse walks of life, in the roller coaster narration of un-putdownable story. The revelations maul the innocence of the child by exposing him to all that for which his tender mind is not ripe enough to assimilate.

Shardul, the city boy too is growing up with the village lad in his own home. The camaraderie of the two is not affected by the diverse background, albeit he too cannot escape the loss of his innocence.

The author dissects the psyche both of the two boys and the society and exposes all the chinks in the armors of the hypocrisy of society. A master story teller, Arun Sharman, blends grandma’s simplicity and contemporary craft of story telling to metaphorical peek into the social citadels of protean forms. And by Joe, he succeeds with élan! In the era of satellites he truly takes us on a roller coaster ride to a breathless joy of fascinating detumescences! Rightly said, one has to grow his own life, so do the two boys and in the process share fascinating tales all along their journey, aptly narrated by the author.

So khudos! To you, oh reader, for reading this racy pacy tale. Reiterating what Benjamin Franklin says “***Either write something worth reading or do something worth writing***”.

– Dipali Parmar

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R A M K H I L A W A N

1

Ramkhillawan was a lanky, emaciated teenager. He loved to race up and down on his rickety bicycle, between *Ajoddha*, (Ayodhya) and *Faiyyaabaad* (Faijabad) in his soiled, white *dhoti* and a tattered vest, with a *gamchha* (a thin muslin towel) wrapped round the circumference of his head. His fourteen year old feet were fissured with thick soles. They could easily tolerate the melting asphalt of the summers and the biting cold of winters of Uttar Pradesh. The distance is approximately six kilometers between Ayodhya and Faijabad. He always enjoyed his journey to Ayodhya and back. Often, he would take the lunch box for his father, who was the *chowkidar*, the watchman, at Ramgadhi, the birthplace of Lord Rama. He knew that the whole area was a disputed area, but all the same his duty was to keep guard at its gate as a devote Hindu. His son always looked for the smallest opportunity to visit Ayodhya. Whenever his mother handed him the tiffin for her husband's lunch, the ever eager son would immediately take his rickety bicycle and race off to Ayodhya in a tick. The much hassled and worried mother would keep shouting advises to her errant son to cycle carefully, but by that time the son would be far, far away from the reach of his mother's voice. He was always in a hurry to reach Ayodhya, so that after delivering the lunch box to his father, he could have dip into Sarju to

his heart's fill and after that quickly go to Ma Jaanki's temple to Swami Dattatreya Ojha for the *prasaad* of the huge Malda mangoes. After fulfilling his heart's desire, he would race down to his father to collect the empty, washed lunch box, and race back to Faisalabad to hand over the same to his mother.

That day too he was racing down to Ayodhya, but for totally a different reason. His rickety bicycle creaked all the way, as he laboriously peddled down to his destination, puffing away with his lungs bursting. His younger uncle had been murdered the previous night and most preposterously he was being implicated for the ghastly act. Together with him, the whole town was unaware of that gruesome act till the morning. The scene became all the more macabre, as he did not know he had slept with a dead body the whole night.

It so happened that wandering till the dusk, sans his rickety bicycle that day, he lost his way in the pastures, which indeed was rather unusual for a boy who grew up all his life in those farm fields. But this did really happen in that dark moonless night. Panicked, he lost his way and it was already hours of darkness. The first hut that he came across, he went into it and finding a cot lying there, he fell on to it and soon was fast a sleep. He did not bother about some one else, who was also sleeping there, which gave him some nerve of having some human company in that foreboding dark night. It was in the morning, when the cot began to shake and sway with the chants of “*Ram Nam Satya Hai —*”, Lord Rama's name is the truth, that timorous, he swiftly got up, rubbing his eyes in the bright sunlight. He

was shocked to death when he realized that whole night he was lying beside a dead body and that too of his own murdered uncle. With a petrified scream he jumped from the cot and ran like a mad hare that had seen a ghost, toward an apology of his house. The pallbearers too were taken aback for a moment, when they saw him jumping down from the cot, carrying the dead and they too scampered leaving the cot with the cadaver unattended in the fields for some time. Soon they realized their foolishness and cursing and giggling returned to shoulder the cot with the cadaver.

While the young boy was breathlessly dashing towards his dilapidated house, the pallbearers were heading towards the morgue for the mandatory postmortem. By the time the boy could reach his house the others, with the dead body, reached the filthy, foul smelling, stinking heap of hell called the government morgue.

From a kilometer away one could get the blow of the putrefying pong, thick in the air all around. In an old crumbling one storey building. Heaps of bloated dead bodies were stuffed one over the other, while many uncapped, dirty jars were scattered all over the building, within and without, containing fungal viscera, half dipped in formalin and the rest covered with fungus and wriggling worms, making the whole area a quagmire of bubbling shit-pit.

The pallbearers, with their nostrils tightly covered with their *gamchhas*, fine muslin towels, reached there with the dead body of the murdered victim, the result of some vendetta. The police officer there, to register the murder, was reeking

with alcohol, while the other attendants and the doctor-in-charge to perform the postmortem, were in no better condition. The whole air was ranking with the putrid, fetid stink of a million, fusty eggs, rotting for ages in the rain and the sun. To make the whole ambiance more ghoulish, there was very pitiful illumination in the poorly sunlit, squalid hole.

Sad to say, though, there were a number of government officials present there, but no one was in any way willing to attend to the mourners, with their dear ones, done away to a gruesome death. The throat of the deceased was neatly slit, presumably, with a surgeon's scalp. One of the mourners hesitatingly went to the inebriated police officer and burred the request to attend to the deceased. Intoxicated, the officer shooed the poor man away. One more man took the courage to approach the smashed doctor. The result was more debasing and scary. The drunken doctor howled, with the typical alcoholic slur in his speech, "*Ga-et aa-ut from here! Firrst ga-et the poo-lees ceerrti-fee-ca-te a-end thee-an co-um wi-eth yuuor fu-akeeing dead boowdy.*" Seeing the sorry plight of the poor peasants, the *Dom*, the morgue man in particular, called one of the mourners, who he took to be the leader of the group and with his reeking breath whispered in his ears, "Fool, palm the pimp police and the bastard doctor properly and your work would be done in a jiffy, or else keep waiting till the eternity, and you would be standing here rotting like the dead you have brought with you, getting fucked till the hilt."

"But how can that be? We have lost our dear one and on that you tell us to shell out money to get the postmortem

done fast!”

“Yes, my man!” Gloated the *Dom*, as if he was reciting something from the gospel.

The poor man touched his feet, “Babu, please have mercy on us. We are so very poor, and on top of that from where do you expect us to raise whatever sum they may demand; more so, how could we ever do the sacrilegious act of offering bribe to these government officers! They would put us in jail.”

The *Dom* had a hearty laugh, “That you leave to me, you fool. Just give me one thousand rupees and I would get everything done in a tick.”

The man gaped, “One thousand rupees! Babu, we have never seen the sum with our own eyes, how could we bring the same, to offer you the same!”

“Go get your mother fucked or sisters sold to a pimp, but get the sum, or else this dead body, like the many here, would rot, till the eternity and you would get the everlasting curse of not getting the proper rites done for the dead performed, as prescribed in your religion.”

“Babu, we are *bandhua majdoors*, the bonded laborers, how do you expect us to raise that sum of money, which you advise us to collect and offer to the officers?”

Most carelessly the *Dom* began to puff his *bidi* and blowing the acrid smoke on his face drawled, “*Haraamjede jaake apni marwa*”, go get screwed, you bastard! Is that my headache? If you cannot get the money, then go and get fucked

yourself and never come here begging. It is one thousand rupees or nothing less. If you cannot get that, scram, before they shoot your balls out of you!”

The poor man swiftly withdrew and immediately drowned into a parley with the other mourners. They knew very well that it was a hatch up plot on the part of all concerned, not to let the morgue be a decent place; otherwise they could not make the fast buck they were making on the account of the bereaved relatives and friends of all the departed souls, who were brought there. All the bereaved, who came there desperately wanted to run away from there, as soon as possible, to escape the sickening stench and to escape that stomach-turning reek they would pay anything to anyone there. After a frustrating deliberation for several minutes it was decided that one of them must go to their *Thakur*, the rich Rajput head in the village, and beg for the sum demanded by the government vampires. They knew well that for ages their forefathers were neck deep in debt to the *Thakurs* and it would be nothing but sinking further in the mire of debt, but they had no option to raise that sum at such a short notice. One of them, Haria, ran back to the village to arrange for the money.

He had barely entered the village that he got a shock of his life. There was a posse of police searching for Ramkhilawan, the fourteen-year innocent boy, as a suspect for the murder of his uncle. He smelled the intention of the police in connivance with the *Thakur* to frame the innocent boy for the evil act of the *Thakur* himself. Haria forgot for what he had come to the village. He ran to Ramkhilawan’s house and hurriedly narrated everything,

which he witnessed in the market place. The mother of the poor boy was crestfallen. She did not know what to do. Haria came to her rescue. "Look, *bhaijee*, elder sister-in-law, just send Ramu to *Ajoddha*, to his father and ask him to bundle him off to any distant place for work, till the fire settles down here."

The aggrieved mother saw much sense in the advice of her younger brother-in-law. She immediately went inside the house, where Ramu was hiding, frightened like a hunted animal and hurriedly whispered in his ears the advice of his uncle, Haria. The young boy saw much logic in the counsel of his uncle. He wiped his tears with his tattered vest and hurriedly getting out from the rear of the house, took his rickety bicycle and paddled away frantically, for all his worth, as if his life hung on the paddles, which indeed it did.

This time he paddled like a man possessed and untiringly he reached Ramghadhi to his father in record time. With bursting lungs he breathlessly blurted out all that had happened since the previous night. The father took his dear son in his arms and kissing him, assured him not to worry the least. He had come to the right place and it was a matter of time, when he would be safe as if in a bank-locker and no one would ever be able to reach him. Meanwhile, he assured him that he knew who the criminal behind the gruesome act was. For all he knew, it was no one else but the *Thakur*, to whom his younger brother owed a little money, which he had borrowed for the marriage of his elder daughter. Now the *Thakur* was threatening to kill him or else he should pay back the debt, indeed with all the

added interest. He had offered him an option. He could send his younger daughter to warm his bed and the *Thakur* would wave away his entire principle and all the interest too. The proud *Barai* preferred death to *bejjati*, dishonor, and in the process met his horrid end. The *Thakur* must have found him alone in his fields, manning his new crop, ready for harvesting. The *Thakur's* goons must have stealthily entered the hut and must have craftily slit the throat of the poor man!

The father was in a great quandary. He did not know what to do, nor knew whom to turn to for any help and any counsel. Though he had given his fatherly confidence to his son, yet the poor man himself had no hunch as to what to do. While he was deliberating with all the anxiety, his son was putting his bright brain to over-time. Suddenly, he turned to his father, “Bapu, I think we should go to Swamiji.” The father was keyed up. He praised his stars to be blessed with such an intelligent son. He immediately decided to pay a visit to the Ashram of Swami Ojhaji.

Swamiji was just getting ready for his siesta. Seeing them approaching, he lovingly welcomed them, “Come in, come in, Ramu. What brings you here, at this hour?”

The father immediately fell on his feet sobbing, “Baapji, help us. Please, help us! Your Ramu is being framed for the wrong he has never done! The police and the *Thakur* are framing him for the murder of his own uncle. Please, help him to escape from the clutches of this heinous conspiracy! My lord, please save my son and bless him with a long and prosperous life.”

Swamiji smiled and bent down to lift Ramu's father, "Get up. Do not fret. Maa Jaanki would take care of everything. She is all-powerful and all-merciful. She sees everything. No harm would come to your innocent son. I have a plan for your fortunate son."

The father got up with folded hands and waited with abated breath to hear Swamiji's favorable plan for his son. The Guru directed them to have lunch first and then meet him in the evening after a well deserved siesta, till then they were directed to rest in the basement of the Ashram. Indeed, they had a frugal lunch, as they could not eat well due to the worry that was biting them away. For the same reason they could not have a wink of sleep too. When Swamiji woke up in the evening they were still turning and twisting on the *charpoy*s provided to them.

Swamiji called them to his room. Posthaste they ran to his command. Swamiji's trusted disciple, Hanuman Prasaad, was standing there, with hands folded, behind his master's huge bedecked chair. The father and the son entered the *sanctum sanctorum* of the Ashram in front of Swamiji. The Guru directed them to be seated on the carpet. They could not collect themselves to obey the order and thus affront the Guru by sitting in front of him. They felt it would be disrespect to the Guru if they sat in front of him. He mildly chastised them to obey him. Reluctantly, with their head bowed, they finally sat down. The Swami shared his plan with them. It was a very simple and a practical preparation. He told them, "You need not worry now. Everything has been arranged for the safety of your son. Hanuman Prasaad would take him to Calcutta to the house

of one of my prosperous disciples and there Ramu would work and live happily.”

What does a blind man desire? Two eyes! What could be better than that and who but reverent Swamiji could plan such a safe strategy. The father was immediately free from all the botherations. He immediately prostrated on the lotus feet of his Guru, “Baapji, how could I ever repay you! Even if I gift you shoes made from my skin, then too, it would not be enough to pay back your kind generosity, my lord!”

Swamiji got up and lifted him, smiling, “Now, do not tarry any longer. Get up and prepare for Ramu’s journey. Hanuman has done all the preparations for the travel to Calcutta. You meet him at the station at night. Do not worry for anything. All the care has been taken, for all the needful. Hanuman would look after to all the needs of your son. Indeed, he is going with your son, but I have already detailed Mr. Sheshadri about your son. He would look after him well and pay him well too. Now, forget all your worries and after taking Maa Jaanki’s evening prasaad send your son to a bright future.” Blessing the two, Swamiji took leave of the father and the son, while Hanuman took charge of all their needs. Unburdened of their immediate concern, the two hurriedly went to their abode in the land of Lord Rama, to prepare for the new life, the son was going to face.

They hurriedly packed whatever they could for the son’s journey. As it is, there was not much to be packed; yet it was a father’s heart. He wanted to give whatever was within his humble means. He gave few rupees, a brand new *gamchha*

and a brand new dhoti and bought a pair of brand new Hawaii slippers of some cheap local make for the rough and hardy feet of his son. He even gave to his son a bottle of Jabakusum hair oil and a cake of sparsely used Lux soap and a cake of Rin and finally he handed him a packet of *sattu* for the journey, in case he felt hungry on the way. He did not leave out a plastic water bottle too for his dear son. All packed, the father and the son hurried to the railway station to meet Hanuman, who was already waiting for them therefore quite sometime. Seeing them, he waved his hand to draw their attention. When they saw him, their faces brightened. The father was more relaxed, while the son was excited at the prospect of going to Calcutta, the dream-city of all the people he knew in his town.

The train was at ten, *post meridian* It was Ramu's first visit to any railway station as a passenger, though he had seen many a time trains hurtling by, from the road, as he raced with them on his rickety bicycle, but that was his first chance to see a railway station very much standing there at the platform and really waiting for a train for his own journey. The crowd was swelling by the minute. He was not bothered about the crowd, but his father was rather concerned. The poor father was worried, as to how would his son get even a place to squeeze himself, in the swelling crowd. It was half past ten when the train sauntered on to the platform, huffing lazily. Before the train could come to a halt, the sea of waiting passengers moved like a massive wave towards the general compartment, in which any one could enter, provided he or she carried a valid ticket on one's person for the onward journey. Hanuman caught the right wrist of the lanky teenager and dragged him

forcefully, as only he could do with his brute strength of a well tempered body, subjected to years of vigorous and well disciplined exercises and rich and nutritious diet. Ramu was dragged like bundles of balloons and before the father could know where the two were, Hanuman was already ensconced on a seat near the window with Ramu peeping out of the compartment and frantically searching for his father. It was a furnace within the compartment and was getting ever so sultry by the minute. Waves after waves of humanity kept pushing into the compartment till there was no place even to find a foothold; yet the crowd did not stop shoving in. Much before the train gave the whistle to leave, the compartment was stuffed like sardines. Ramu by then knew very well that it would be impossible for him even to budge a little, why to talk of getting up even for any of the nature's calls. Suffocated and crushed, the poor boy fell asleep, the moment the train left the platform and the father kept waving his hand, not knowing that his dear son was already fast a sleep. Poor him, he kept waving both his hands much after the train left the platform and kept blessing his son for a long and comfortable life. On the other hand, Hanuman was oblivious of the entire happenings around him. He had comfortably placed the tiger skin on the sullied wooden rail-seat and sat on it with his legs folded in lotus *mudra*. Soon, he was lost in chanting Maa Jaanki's *mantras*, after making comfortable place for himself just on the virtue of his brute strength.

Amusingly, the passengers began to settle down, as if a bottle had been vigorously shaken after being filled up to the brim. Every one found some place to breathe and to move a little and by the time the train reached Benaras,

most of the occupants could now bow their heads in reverence to the holiest of the holy cities on earth. It is a well known saying that even if one passes through the holiest of the holy cities, Benaras, even tangentially, touching it just for a moment, all his life's sins would be washed away forever. "*Jai Gangay Mayeyyaa*", the roar of the inmates of the compartment intoning the greatness of Mother Ganga was so very deafening that poor Ramu woke up gobrified. Sedate and serene, Hanuman patted the confused child to comfort him and to suggest him to go back to sleep. The child was now fully awake and was gawking all around to fathom what all was going on. The moment he realized that all were intoning the name of Mother Ganga with reverence, hurriedly he too joined in the tumultuous din, "*Jai Gangay Mayeyyaa*", "*Jai Gangay Mayeyyaa*", "*Jai Gangay Mayeyyaa*" "*Jai Gangay Mayeyyaa*", "*Jai Gangay Mayeyyaa*"!

Hanuman was much pleased with the boy's devotion. This time he patted the boy's back to encourage him to intone the Mother's name with a greater verve. The boy got frenzied. He began to chant the Mother's name like a soul possessed, "*Jai Gangay Mayeyyaa*", "*Jai Gangay Mayeyyaa*", "*Jai Gangay Mayeyyaa*", "*Jai Gangay Mayeyyaa*", "*Jai Gangay Mayeyyaa*", "*Jai Gangay Mayeyyaa*"! The boy got so frenzied that he jumped up and stood straight, even in that cramped up position and began to chant full throated the glory of Mother Ganga. Hanuman was amazed at the strength of the boy's vocal chords. Seeing the boy's devotion, he could not restrain himself. He joined the boy with greater fervor, "*Jai Gangay Mayeyyaa*", "*Jai Gangay Mayeyyaa*", "*Jai Gangay Mayeyyaa*"! It

was a roar that kept rising by the minute, till the train finally left Benaras far behind. Slowly, silence dawned upon the roaring compartment, leaving only Hanuman's chants ringing in the still of the sleepy compartment, while the boy went back into the cozy arms of his slumber, dreaming of a fairy-tale-future in the womb of an unknown magapolis, which had become a mother to many like him before.

Suddenly, the chant roared again as the train approached Kaasi. This time it was a short lived fervor. Before many could join in the holy act, the train clattered away from there. Now Hanuman's chants too had become a feeble burble. Passengers were now drowsy and many were falling on each other in their snooze. Soon Hanuman too was dozing off. The train was roaringly tearing away the dark of the night with a vengeance. The speed was such that the train was swaying and rocking like a cradle, patting all the occupants into deep slumber, with its rhythmic lullaby.

Throughout the night, the train raced on to its destination, stopping at its ordained stops and then moving on, after spilling out or sucking in passengers. By the daybreak, the train had entered the outskirts of West Bengal. The skyline had gradually changed to lush green even in summer, compared to the parched countryside of most of the Uttar Pradesh. The train had its scheduled halts at Asansol, Durgapur, Burdhan stations, before racing on to Howrah. It was now bright early morning sunshine. Most of the passengers were awake and most of the compartments had become comfortably less crowded, as many had alighted on their destinations along the way. Hanuman had attended to his morning rituals in the *Brahma Muhurta*, right before four

ante meridian. It was time to wake up Ramu, who was gloriously lost in his sleep, eagle-spread, as by then, there was space enough in the bogie to indulge in such luxuries, with the compartments virtually empty by then. Stretching himself, the teenager woke up, rubbing his eyes, smiling. Hanuman helped him to the bogie toilet. Refreshed, the two were now ready to salute Calcutta.

The suburban stations were whooshing by, as the train roared on towards its destination. The awed teenager was intently watching all that was swishing by. The lush green countryside was repeatedly punctuated with ponds of various sizes, while at distances there were tall chimneys, spewing smoke in the azure horizon, making the early morning sky look grubby hazy. As Howrah station approached after the suburban station of Liluah, the tracks were suddenly cluttered with a tangled maze of rails, crisscrossing like mangled arteries. The speed of the train suddenly reduced and the engine began to hoot more warning whistles, with the cadence of the wheels announcing great restraint. Other trains, leaving or entering the station were in a similar mood of caution. The train finally passed beneath the roof of the sooted over-bridge, before finally reaching platform number six and coming to a clanging, jangling, rattling, groaning halt.

Much before the train came to a stop, there was a chaotic clamor of coolies, trying to enter the bogies, before one another. Spellbound, Ramu was imbibing the chaotic milieu of the station, which appeared to have more people all over it, than his dear *Faiyyabad*! He was amazed to see the sea of humanity milling all around, in a madding whirlpool of

pandemonium and bedlam! Flexing his muscles, Hanuman got up, pulling with him, awe struck Ramu. Mesmerized, the boy followed his mentor. The hustle and bustle of exiting from the station had enough to give anyone adequate exercise for a day. Hanuman kept pulling the poor boy like a goat, as the teenager kept falling behind, hindered by surging crowds at intervals, till they were out on the road, where there was a different din and commotion, with the added sonic pollution of thousands of horns, honking furiously with enraged irritation. Lost in the din were the screaming whistles of the traffic policemen, cheesed off, who were brushing their choicest expletives with the errant drivers and pedestrians. Pounded by the blitz of the waves of harried ocean of humanity, Ramu desperately tried to keep pace with Hanuman, who was contentedly negotiating his way to the distant bus stand.

Meandering through the morning crowd, the two were heading towards the stand of the bus number 39 to Liluah-Ghusari. Hanuman was an old hand, as far as visiting Calcutta was concerned. In reality, it was not Calcutta actually, where they were heading to, but it was customary to name all such visits to Calcutta thus, as it presented an aura of grandeur to such visits. Their actual destination was G. G. Road, in Howrah district, on the banks of river Hoogaly, the last lap of the Ganges River. It was there that The Standard Cotton Mill, the *sootaakal* for the natives, was situated, where Mr. Sheshadri was the CEO. Hanuman, with the village boy, went to the rear end of the lane of the bus number 99, where an empty bus number 99 was parked. He stepped into the empty coach, followed by Ramu and comfortably took one of the side seats for the two. Most

interestingly, the village boy, all along the journey cared for the bag given to him by his father, more than his life. All along the travel, he clutched the bag close to his heart, even when he was fast asleep, even when he was fervently chanting the glory of Mother Ganga and even when he was desperately negotiating his way out of the station to the bus stand. He held his bag close to his breast so ardently, as if his very survival was locked into the simple cotton bag. How very fascinating that such simple belongings in life are few of the most valued objects for the simple village folks. It was after a wait of nearly forty-five minutes that the bus was packed, just like the bogie of the train, in which they had arrived that far, and then the bus purred to life. The driver put the badly kept bus in gear and pressed the accelerator, when with a jerk the bus surged ahead, shaking all the occupants violently. After few coughs and grunts the bus picked up speed and very dexterously winded through the snarling, morning traffic – a cacophony of all the most dreadful sounds, one could ever imagine of. As the bus gained speed, Ramu took out the *sattu* packet from his bag and offered the same to Hanuman. The two of them relished the simple village preparation as a great delicacy, announcing loud and clear to other passengers in the jerking bus, about their land of origin. Few locals in the bus snickered, “*Saala Khatuaas*”.

The bus was hurtling down the narrow roads and the narrower lanes made all the more clustered by the clanging presence of the grand old trams, the tingling bells of the rickshaw- pullers, the shouts of the hand-cart pushers and the snarling crowd of all the other vehicles of all the shapes, all the sizes, all the colors and all the shades. The

bus was shuddering like a vibrating machine, in turn unsettling the passengers like shaking marbles in a tin box, whether sitting or precariously standing, clutching the bar above or hanging around the body of the bus perilously with a slender foot hold on the footboards or anywhere else on the body of the bus. It was an excellent example of dexterous balancing act in hazardous situations of extreme, unsteady mobility! In all the sweltering shaking and swaying, Ramu was gloriously snoring away, often falling on Hanuman, who kept on straightening him, time and again. On most of the scheduled stops the bus would come to a gradual halt, with the conductor of the bus announcing the stop loudly, but other than that there were more impromptu, out of the bus stops, where anyone could demand a halt or any one on the road could wave the bus to a stop, either to alight or to board the bus respectively. In those situations, the bus would come to a sudden halt, with a bone breaking shock and with the same suddenness, unannounced it would take off roaring, leaving all the passengers totally jarred. In those jarring moments too the boy was splendidly fast asleep. Then and there Hanuman figured out well that the boy was truly cut out to survive well in that anarchic city. The boy was so fast asleep that when G. G. Road Bus Stop arrived, Hanuman had to shake him aggressively to wake him up. The boy woke up baffled and clutching his bag tightly, got up from his seat in a daze. Directing the conductor to hold the bus Hanuman hurriedly pulled Ramu down and before the two could say presto and get their breath back, the bus was already off, raising a dust storm on their sweating face. Ramu wiped his face with his *gamchha*, while Hanuman took his hanky out, from his shirt pocket and emulated the boy. The two stood

there for few confused moments and then Hanuman whacked the back of the teenager, “Come, let us move; we have arrived at our destination. The *Tanti Line*, the weavers’ lane, is a stone throw from here. Hope you are not tired?”

The boy shook his head like a young bear, “Not at all, not at all”. Jauntily, he followed Hanuman, as he headed for the *Tanti Line*.

2

Tanti Line was a row of one room dwellings, the *Kholies*, with a space for kitchen outside and a room inside and a toilet between every six dwellings. Between the two rows of the *Kholies* there was a brick pathway with a hand pump in the center of the pathway, between every ten houses. At the other end of the rows was a temple, dedicated to Maa Kali.

As the name suggested, the residents of the *kehories* were the weavers, the *tanties*, who worked in the weaving department of the *sootakal*. They were mostly from Uttar Pradesh and worked in three shifts of eight hours each. The first shift began at six *ante meridian*, the second shift began at two, *post meridian* and the last shift, the third, began at ten, *post meridian*. When the two reached the line, the second shift was yet to begin and Hanuman's distant, bachelor maternal-uncle, Kalu Mama, was getting ready for his shift. He lived in *Kholi* number 10. In the long row, it was the fifth on the right. Hanuman, accompanied with Ramu, knocked at the curtained door of the *keholi*. Booming voice of Kalu Mama was heard, "Who so ever is outside, please come in".

"It is I, Hanuman Prasad, from *Ajoddha*, Mamu! I am with the boy Ramu, a disciple of Swamiji."

Kalu Mama came out with a *gamchha* on his shoulder, and a tiffinbox in his left hand. He had a lock with a key in its hole, in his right hand. Indeed, he was preparing to lock the *kehli* and go to his duty in the *sootakal*. Kalu Mama was delighted to have Hanuman Prasad at his door. Cheerfully, he welcomed his nephew with Swamiji's disciple, "Come in, come in; I was just getting ready to go for my shift. How are things? How long are you going to stay here and what brings you here?"

There were too many questions in one breath. Hanuman smiled and replied, "Don't you think Mamu, you have asked too many questions in one breath? I have come on Sawmiji's command. Here is Ramu, his disciple. It is his command that I should get a job for him here".

Surprised Kalu Mama asked, "Job for this little boy and that too in the *sootakal*?"

"No, no, no! Not in the *sootakal*. Swamiji has talked to the CEO, the *badaa* sahib of the *sootakal*, and Ramu is supposed to work as the servant in his house". He discreetly veiled the real reason for Ramu's presence there.

"Then it is totally another matter", reflected Kalu Mama, thoughtfully. "Come, let us go then" and he began to lock his *kehli*, "Come, I would reach you to the *badaa* sahib's residence". He pulled the lock to be certain of its safety. Satisfied with his effort he patted Ramu's back, as the three came out of the row dwellings and proceeded towards the *sootakal*, "And where are you from?"

The teenager immediately bent and touched X-factor's feet,

“I am from *Faiyyaabaad*, Sir”.

“Bless you my son; work sincerely; our *badaa* sahib is a very kind man. You would be happy in his house. And, after all you have Swamiji’s recommendation! What else one would need? You would prosper with his blessings.”

They were already at the gate of the *sootakal*. At other time, if the two had come on their own, the security at the gate would not have allowed them to enter the mill compound. With Kalu Mama with them, it was totally a different matter. No one asked them anything; on the contrary the man on the gate inquired the welfare of the three and allowed them to enter with honor.

The residence of the CEO was at the other end of the mill compound. It was a long structure, with large staircases at the two ends, reaching to a wide verandah, common to all the blocks there, where all the senior executives resided. The last of the block was that of the CEO, separated by a partition, with his own staircase, while rest of the executives shared the other one. The dwellings were on the first floor, while on the ground floor were the facilities for recreation for all to share. There was a special guard, with a regal uniform at the CEO’s staircase. When the three reached the CEO’s staircase the guard exchanged pleasantries and enquired the reason for Kalu Mama’s visit.

“*Bhai*, I have come with these genteel folks from my *desh*. They are the disciples of *badaa* sahib’s guru. I think, you remember him. He had visited the sahib, last year, when the great *havana* was performed on the inauguration of the new weaving shed”.

“Oh yes, who could forget that great occasion, when the owners of the mill had come too for the *havana*”. Addressing to Hanuman, “And how is reverent Swamiji?”

“Oh, he is quiet well. It is good to know that you too know him well.”

“Why not! After all, who does not crave for the blessings of holy souls like him?”

“Well said, my friend, very well said! He has sent us with this young man to serve in *badaa* sahib’s house.”

“Ho, welcome, welcome! Sahib had left instructions to let you go up without questions. Please follow me. Sahib is waiting for you two”. He led the way up and the two followed him after taking leave of Kalu Mama, profusely thanking him for all his help.

It was a verandah of the size of a tennis court, humming with the whirr of the air conditioner in the bedroom. Near the partition was the staircase leading to the terrace of the building. Heavy brocade curtains were keeping the light of the bright, sultry afternoon away from the rooms within. The guard gently pressed the call bell once and then waited with abated breath, while the two from Faijabad looked on with great anticipation. An elderly servant came out to attend the bell, “Who is it? Oh, it is you”, he greeted the guard and then pointing at the two from the village, he enquired, “And who are they”?

Affably, the guard informed him, “Oh, Madho Manik, they are Swamiji’s disciples from *Faiyyaabaad*, about whom sahib

had instructed us. Do you remember”?

“Indeed, I do! Hey, I am not all that old as to suffer from the curse of amnesia! Come in, come in; memsahib has just finished her lunch. Sahib is having his siesta, you know, so I cannot disturb him. After all, it is memsahib, who would take the final decision to keep the boy or not. By the way who among the two has been sent by Swamiji to work here”?

The guard pointed towards Ramu, “The boy”.

“Well then, come in and sit. I would immediately announce you two to memsahib”.

The three entered the room, while the guard about turned and went away on his duty at the staircase. It was a huge room, with splendid sofa sets and a very large center table, all majestically placed on a peacock blue, Persian carpet. What attracted the attention of the two villagers was the huge skylight in the center of the room, protruding out like a cubical hat from the roof of the two adjacent rooms, as if straddled upon them. Later on, during his exploration of the whole premises Ramu came to know that similar skylights were there in all the rooms in all the executive residences. While Madho Manik went in to report to memsahib, the two stood there with folded hands, bemused with the magnificence of the splendor in the drawing room.

The lady of the house, in her early thirties, soon entered the impressive room with filial aura, followed by Madho Manik behind, interestingly with a *gamchha* on his left shoulder. The two hurriedly, moved forward and with reverence bent

swiftly and touched the feet of the homemaker. She blessed them with motherly flair and instructed them to sit, while turning towards Madho Manik, directed him to fetch water for the two. “So, Hanuman how is reverent Swamiji?”

“Very well, *maataaji*”!

“And what is the name of this little boy?”

“Ramkhilawan Barai, *maataaji*.”

“So, he is a Barai? Well, what does he know? What I mean, what all work could he do?”

“You see *maataaji*, he is a simple villager. Swamiji desires that you keep him under your motherly shadow and let him learn and serve you.”

“But does Swamiji know that he is a Barai, and we are Brahmins?”

“Indeed, he does! After all, he is so learned and all knowing. Knowing all this, still he has desired that he should serve you. There must be a reason for his desire *maataaji*. I think you would agree?”

“Indeed, you are right. After all he is so very reverent. How could anyone question his command?” Turning towards Ramu, she smiled, “Could I call you Ramu?”

The boy was elated! His face lit up, “That is exactly what my *mai*, the mother, calls me, *maataaji*!”

“Well then it is settled, we would call you Ramu. Now, the

next thing, Hanuman? What would Swamiji desire us to pay him, as his wages?”

“That is very difficult to answer *maataaji*. Swamiji alone could answer that question. I think, you let the boy serve you and when Swamiji visits you next, you could know this from him, till then, do not worry about this.”

“Well then, that is settled. Now, about you. What are you going to do next?”

“Oh, nothing much. I would return by the night train. You see, Swamiji is alone there and without me there is no one who could properly take his care.”

“Why, you won’t stay for a morsel?”

“No, I think I must hurry. I have to go and meet the Rani of Ramgarh too. Swamiji has sent a charm for her. Poor thing, her husband just does not pay any attention to her well-being.”

“How very caring is Swamiji! He lives for others! Give my *pranaam* to him. All the same, you must have some sweet before you leave”. She went in, while the two silently exchanged their approval of the suitability of Mrs. Sheshadri, as a kind mistress. She returned with a plate of *pedaas* with two glasses of cold water and offered that to both of them. The two took the offerings with gratitude. After washing down the sweets with the cold water Hanuman humbly took leave of Mrs. Sheshadri, while Ramu went in with his new mistress.

S H A R D U L

1

Shardul was leaving with one of his uncles when his mother had gone to attend a marriage there. It had been planned that since there was no good school in the town where Mr. Sheshadri was transferred, so his unruly second son Shardul was to study in the city where his uncle lived in his father-in-law's palace. It was a sprawling, palatial building, spread into acres and acres of land. The ruler of the state gifted it to uncle's father-in-law.

It had so happened that the father-in-law was the Deewaan of the state when the last ruler passed away, leaving the throne vacant without a legatee. It was left to the responsibility of the noble Deewaan to find a suitable claimant to the throne. After an in depth study of all the apposite candidates for the gubernatorial position, the Deewaan finally placed his seal of approval on an adolescent from a worthy house of a loyal thakur in a distant *thikaana*. The Deewaan acted as a loyal regent till the pubescent king came of an age and took over the reigns of his kingdom in his hands. The king never forgot the loyalty and the generosity of the devoted Deewaan. He gifted his dedicated regent one of his famous palaces and hundred and fifty one villages with a large number of retinue, horses, camels, bullocks and cows and few elephants. A holy

chariot with two milk white steeds too was gifted to celebrate major Hindu festivals, particularly Deepaawali, the festival of light, to commemorate the victory of Lord Raam over the demon Raavan.

The palace was truly a landmark in the city. With several colossal gates in the periphery for entries and exits, it had an enormous temple in the center. Around the colossal temple the living apartments were constructed with separate sectors of leisure for men and women the *mardaanaas* and the *zanaanas* respectively, including huge discrete swimming pools and vast gardens for the opposite genders. The construction was innovative. It had hundreds of small windows with conduits running round the palace for the flow of wind, to keep the whole palace well ventilated and cool in scorching summers.

He had the exclusive rights to use all the wealth obtained from all the offerings in the form of the consecrations, ardently offered to the deities in the various sections of the temple. Undeniably, the riches were in millions, which were more than sufficient to run the great fiefdom by the Deewaan, sans any bother. For this opulence, interestingly, no one ever gave any thought to the smooth day-to-day working of the palace. Being a sprawling edifice there was place enough for all of Deewaan's needy relatives, who were presented certain portions on the ground floor, in various sections of the palace. In one such section resided Shardul's uncle. He remembers most his unforgettable stay there in series of treasured freeze shots, prized forever in his phenomenal memory.

2

One such indelible image was related to the facility for the one of the most basic fixation of life. We all grow up with it and with conditioning do manage to get some control over it. Freud would have loved to call it the nether norm. After the oral fascination it is the activity of the southern most part of animal anatomy, which needs all the attended attention for its civil execution. Though, many of the countries have got all that is needed to attend to its civilized calling, yet there are nearly two and a half billion unfortunate souls who are deprived of any decent provision for the same. Sanitary excellence is still a dream for the two third of the world population. It was one such related reflection that remained with him all his life.

The section had a provision for service latrine, from where twice a day the night soil was carried over the head of the human scavengers of the other more fortunate souls. The service was a “T” shaped construction. The shorter, vertical arm of the “T” was the entry from the courtyard to the longer, horizontal part of the “T” with nearly one and a half dozen muckholes. Albeit, there was a door at the entry point, but it was an apology of a door. Its hinges were so rusted that it could not be buzzed a millimeter, even if a one-and-a-half-tonner army truck pulled it. Because of its

sorry plight the users of the muck house had not only forgotten to use it, but were rather oblivious of its existence. The only mode of making one's presence felt was the age-old cough-signal. Anyone entering for his or her morning ritual with a water pot in his or her hand, filled from the nearby cement tank, would never fail to cough and if the response was not reciprocated immediately it indicated the availability of the muck house for his or her use. If a cough-signal came as an answer from within then the person at the gate had to wait.

In normal circumstances it was all right to indulge in such polite exercises. The situation would take a foreboding turn when the muck house was occupied and the person at the entry was in a very embracing urgency for his or her natural calling. It was all the more demanding in the later part of the day when the stench would burst the cranium with its blasting reek together with the blatancy thrust upon the wretched being waiting at the gate, squirming like a snake in the throes of epilepsy, as then it would be some time till the evening when soil would be removed by the scavengers.

True, it was appalling for all the humanity that well in the premises of a palace with a temple, man was carrying the filth of another man on his head, but alas there was no other means in the constrained circumstance in those taxing times of human history. The most laudable reality of the whole application was the way the modesty of all was well protected in those complex drills of mundane human deed. It never happened that anyone had to be embarrassed by the intrusion of another during the execution of one's most private act.

3

Interestingly, what could not be sullied in the most vulnerable state of affairs, endured an enduring blow by the most unintended *faux pas*! It also proved to be a very special and also lasting impression in the deep recesses of adolescent Shardul's frontal lobe. Although, it was the first impression of its kind, but it could not be termed the best one in its category. Yet, it had all the ingredients of an incident, which would be tied in with him all his life.

An 'L' shaped partition, signed off with a flimsy curtain, defined the bathroom in the bowels of the kitchen. The bather made his or her presence felt to an outsider by either chanting couplets from the scriptures or humming the popular songs from the contemporary movies, while in the different stages of a bath. The action protected the bather from the intrusion of any one else and thus the sanctity of his or her modesty was safely guarded.

One fateful morning the unimaginable happened. Shardul's elder cousin of late had attained womanhood. On the day in question, she was savoring her recently reached womanhood as an overture to her elaborate bath. As it would be expected of her, she was in her skin only and was languidly admiring her extravagantly endowed female form

with gorgeous ebony sheen. She was fully conscious of her treasures blessed by the munificent providence. She was so lost in her pensive vanity that she committed the sacrilege. Poor thing forgot to indulge in the act to define her presence in the bathroom. She was as quiet as her leisurely beating heart, not heard even by herself. In such a seraphic serenity, pubertal Shardul came rushing to take bath, as he was getting late for his school.

He came like a hurtling St. Bernard and finding his elder cousin in front him he screeched to a stunned halt, profusely apologetic sans a word. The taken aback lady was immediately drenched with profuse sweat. Her startled hands flew to cover her most intimate modesty but failed to conceal the luxuriously thick, springy pubic bush, completely. The trickling sweat gave an erotic sheen to her perfectly formed lactating paraphernalia, gifting her in totality an alluring wet look!

With stunned, popping eyes the pubertal boy found himself in the klutziest state of affairs. Frozen there in front of a mortified woman in distress, he was ogling with his mouth open and eyes bursting out, the forbidden sight of distressed, lissome lass with amazing attraction for the boy who had never seen an unclad magnetic female form. And the very next moment his stunned eyes began to blink briskly and he skedaddled away from there like a terrorized rabbit. Alas, before he could bolt from there, in those ephemeral, ethereal moments, a lifelong vision had painted an eternal, erotic frieze on the deep recesses of his cerebrum with all the attended details of a *tour de force* nude. After all he was a simple earthling; even the destroyer

among the Triumvirate in the Hindu Pantheon, Lord Shiva, could not be left un-smitten from such apparition of his consort, while she was taking bath. The helpless, besotted God went on to create the beautiful, melodious *Veena* after the shape of the well endowed stunning, celestial form of his unclad consort!

The image became for him the gold standard for an ideal female form. All his life the self-stipulated gold standard of the flawless female form kept visiting him like an apparition at the most unexpected instances. Every woman he came across, he subjected her to his self-stipulated gold test of female grace and beauty and credited her with points of failure or success as she fared on his scale of perfect ten. Long after the most astounding encounter of innocence and beauty, the two cousins could never see eye to eye without extreme discomfort. It was always an uneasy confrontation of two disconcerted, shy souls with their own common, zealously guarded tender, prickly enigma.

4

After the arrival of his mother, significant changes were seen in Shardul's behavior. She had come to attend a marriage in the family. Most of the relatives were gathered for the occasion. Everyone was told that Shardul had changed a lot since the arrival of his mother. It was reported that he used to be a very docile child before. He would ever be so ready to be of use to one and all. He just had to be told for an errand and he would dart like a trained hawk to fulfill the command.

Knowing his submissive disposition all took advantage of his weakness. In the scorching heat of mid afternoons people did not have any qualms in sending the little boy to go and get a cigarette or two, or worst still to get a packet of condom, urgently demanded by 'once in a life time opportunity' offered by the providence to those indulging in hush-hush illicit liaison. He was not only very obedient but was rather trustworthy too. One of the daughters of his uncle's brother-in-law had done the mistake of getting pregnant outside wedlock and that too by cohabiting with one of her cousins. Only Shardul was privy to the top secret, as he was asked to keep alert vigil over the closed room, while the two lovers indulged in the intense callings of Eros.

Incidentally, all changed after the arrival of Mrs. Sheshadri. It seemed that whatever the young boy was doing was under duress and the fear of coercion. He revealed to his mother in private that every one there used him as a servant and sent him to all sorts of odd jobs - right from getting cigarettes to buying unmentionable things. Why unmentionable? For this the only answer he had was the express instructions of the commanding authority who would send him to fetch the unmentionable things. The mother was not only pained but was rather disturbed to know the sad plight of her son. Once knowing the reality she did not react as desired by all when the meek calf became a very belligerent cub.

It was another of the usual day when one of his cousins brawled with him. As if he was waiting for such an opportunity. Without wasting any time he grabbed the offender and then it was one of the worst scuffle ever witnessed by any one in the history of the palace. The mother did not come to separate the two gladiators. Finally, they were separated by the intervention of his uncle. Soon after that it was known to all that Shardul was to leave with his mother, meaning, that he would no more be living in his uncle's house for his studies. The news had caused great flutter among many hearts, particularly the hearts of many pubertal girls who found him to be very helpful and respectful to them and a great, sporting companion in their leisure hours. By that time the mother too had made up her mind.

She knew well that it was not possible for her to take her son back to where Mr. Sheshadri had recently taken up his

new appointment at Clive Nagar. It was a place in the distant outskirt of the city of joy. The beautiful agriculture town was a British industrial township, very well planned by them with all the community amenities, which would put the best of the present day facilities of any Indian metropolis to shame. The only problem was the absence of a good public school there. For this Mrs. Sheshadri was at a loss to decide for the future education of her son. With the worried mind she went off to sleep, postponing the final decision for the next day, when the said marriage would be over and she would prepare to leave. Before retiring, the son had taken her word of honor to take him away from her brother's house, where according to him, he suffered the worst step-motherly treatment. On second reflection it did not seem to be all that bad. Mrs. Sheshadri's brother kept requesting her to leave her son with him as he was rather attached to the young boy. No amount of coaxing and cajoling could convince the pubertal boy to stay back. While all the efforts were on to reason out with the determined boy, Mrs. Sheshadri was parleying with her husband on trunk call.

The couple finally decided to reach the boy at Ooty, not only the queen of hill stations in the South but also the ancestral home of Mr. Sheshadri, where his widow mother lived with her unmarried brood of two daughters and a son. The elder of the two daughters was a teacher in a renowned convent, where she had been trying to convince her brother to send his children for good education. Filial love on the part of the grandmother and the uncle and the aunts was not the true reason for the magnanimous advice from the sister to the well-off elder brother. There was more than

what was made to understand. The mother and her brood in Ooty were keen to have Mr. Sheshadri's kids so that he would provide them, at a regular basis, a handsome cheque to take care of his kids. Whether the cheque would be used for the noble cause as desired by the concerned father was to be seen. But before that reservation for the mother and the son for Ooty was done. After two days they left for Ooty by train.

5

The mother was not very keen to leave her son with her in-laws. There was not much love lost between the two but it was the express wish of her husband to leave the pubertal boy with his grandmother. Most reluctantly the mother had accompanied her son to her in-laws place. To her, Ooty held no special attraction, as it did to many travelers who flocked to the southern queen of hill stations, particularly to escape the sufferings of summers. All that she had in her mind was to hurriedly reach her son at her in-laws place and return to her home, as other children and her husband must be finding it hard to coup up with her absence. Though she was blessed with a very faithful servant, yet her wifely duties and mother's heart compelled her to return home as early as possible. This is what she exactly did. Reaching her son to his grandmother's place, she returned the very next day to Bombay from where she took a flight to Calcutta to reach Clive Nagar as early as possible. On her way back, all the way she was in tears for her son, whom she had to leave at her mother-in-law's place. She had no faith in her in-laws. She was certain that her son would be neglected there, but she wanted her husband to know this before getting her son back. What a sacrifice she felt she was doing and that too at the expense of her own son. Being a Hindu housewife she could not

curse her husband but at the same time she could not pardon his cruelty towards his son. Many a time she scoffed at her husband's idea on her return journey of believing his sister and mother, but beyond that she could not do anything more. If she had her way she would have sent her son to a good boarding school in Calcutta itself, but would have never allowed her brood to suffer at the uncaring, selfish hands of her in-laws.

6

Through out her return journey she was thinking of her son. She knew that the whole plan of separating her son from his mother was nothing against the son or the mother. It was like a smooth sting operation to make her husband send extra money to his mother. As it is, he was already providing her sum enough to take care of her remaining dependent, good-for-nothing sons and daughters and all their needs, right from entertainment to their education. It seemed that her greed was fathomless. She craved to squeeze as much money as she could from her only caring son. The other sons were shiftless and were on the contrary too demanding from the only generous son for as much as they too could wheedle out from him.

She, indeed, was furious and upset at their shenanigan. According to her, it was nothing short of emotional blackmail of a very concerned son. She squirmed at her helplessness in failing to make her over zealous husband see through the scheming of his mother and sister. Before she reached Clive Nagar, her son, Shardul, was fast a sleep in his new abode.

The room was not yet fully constructed. One of its windows had yet to be fixed. There was no electricity

connection in that room. A big kerosene globe was used to light the room at night. The walls were infested with bedbugs. As a corollary, the apology of a bed was like a pit of parasites. God only knows how one could ever sleep in comfort in that jungle of marauders. But for busted Shardul, sleep was the only balm, as the bard of Stratford-on-avon would have agreed.

The very first morning he got up in his granny's house, he was full of red marks all over his body. Scratching madly he began to throw everything from the house from the whole of a window. Hearing the din, the old lady came running. Aghast, she tried to restrain her grandson. The boisterous boy refused to do anything with that hell of a room. Truce was reached. It was decided that the unruly boy would not have to occupy that room. Thus pacified, the boy agreed to have his bath, followed by an insipid, stale breakfast, before going to the local missionary school for his admission.

It was not all that difficult to get admission in a prestigious school those days. The act was made all the easier, as the boy's aunt was a teacher in that school. The aunt had well smelled a rebel in her animated nephew. To avoid unruly scenes in future, she got the boy admitted in the school, as a day-boarder, where he would stay in the school till late evenings till dinner and then return to so called home, only to retire for the nights. To the boy the arrangement was better than living in that hovel of rats, bats, cats and lunatics; further more he would be saved from eating the poison doled out there by his very own people.

The very first letter he wrote to his parents was an appalling eye-opener for the mother. Alas, the father was yet not

ready to except whatever his 'urchin' of a son had penned. He had totally a different analysis of the letter. He was of the opinion that the boy was not interested in studying, so was heaping all sorts of unfounded allegations upon his own dear ones. The final verdict was for the son to stay with his grandmother.

The boy too was true son of his father. He made his habit of penning letters to his parents a daily ritual. The missives had litany of grievances. The father still thought them to be absolutely baseless, while the mother, with every passing day became more vocal against her dear son being compelled to stay with his own worst enemies, his own uncles, aunts and the grand-mother.

The boy probably had the toughest time of his life. Albeit, he was in the school for most of the time, but night had to be with his own people, whom he never preferred to call his own. On their part they very well knew that he was the proverbial hen that lay golden eggs, but their greed and sloth had made them extremely incautious. They kept multiplying their follies, which were meticulously registered by Shardul, who religiously mailed them to his mother with a frenzy of a boy possessed. At any cost he wanted to return to his parents.

Most reluctantly he would get up to go to school. That day too he was late for the school. Being the nephew of a teacher in the school, the principal did not punish him for his repeated follies of reaching school late. More so, sister Martha, the principal had a soft corner for the boy, because he sang so well. Incidentally, she also looked after the

refectory during lunch hours. The two of them would never forget the incident one afternoon, when Shardul had just joined as a day boarder.

All were seated for their lunch. The girls being larger in number were more intimidating and vocal. Their cacophony was at its peak, when a missile like object came flying and landed in one of the senior girl's lap. She screamed, as if it was the end of the world. There was a sudden silence, followed by a din of shrieks from all the corners of the refectory. The commotion was deafening. All eyes turned to the source of the piercing screech. In the row of the boys was Shardul, petrified, with ashen face. Hadley Chase would have loved to call it white as cold beef.

Sister Martha did not take time to understand the reason for the sudden fuss. She was manning the lunch and with amusement was watching helpless Shardul desperately negotiating to scoop out the pulp from the cut mango in the shape of a cup. Before she could even say Tom Johns, the mango cup with its obstinate kernel slid under the pressure of the knife and the fork in his clumsy hands. That was the unguided missile, which had caused the sudden commotion. She immediately went to the rescue of the shocked boy and filially taught him the proper use of knife and fork and how to hold them. The boy never forgot the compassionate gesture of Sister Martha.

Petrified and ashamed he feigned severe headache, the moment the afternoon session commenced. The principal informed his aunt. She was busy starting her next class. Curtly, she suggested letting the boy go home alone. The moment he was out of the school gate, he ran like a free

bird, in the afternoon sun, towards the only market in the hill town. He loved *pedas*, a sweetmeat, made of thickened milk and sugar, in small coin sized disks. He loitered in the market till he reached the only sweetmeat shop, which made the exclusive *pedas*. Bang opposite that shop was the house of Mr. Pearl. His granny called him her most obedient son.

Shardul had always admired Mr. Pearl's congenial disposition. After buying the sweets, he thought of sharing them with him. He stealthy sneaked in his house. The door was not latched. Quietly he sailed into the house and went inside. It was all dark. He first acclimatized to the afternoon darkness. He was excited. He thought to surprise uncle Pearl. Very quietly, like a cat, he went towards the bedroom. He was startled. There were whispers coming from the bedroom. Cautiously, he approached the bedroom. There was a slit between the loosely shut doors. He peeped into the room. There was his youngest aunt, unclad below her umbilicus, sans her *salwaar*, a type of pajamas, eagle spread on the cot, with her knee bend. Mr. Pearl was hovering over her in similar nakedness. He gaped and the packet of his favorite sweet fell from his hands. The thud startled the lovebirds, about to float into pined for ecstasy. The troubled child beat a hasty retreat from there and took breath, only when he reached his room at home. The poor lovebirds could never know who had shared their most intimate secrete. The sobbing aunt was accusing Mr. Pearl for being all that careless for not bolting the entrance door of his house. In turn, he on his part was sheepishly consoling his paramour not to fret. He convinced her that the intruder would have certainly failed to recognize her. How puerile of them. The boy had a lasting imprint, of

their most intimate act, in the crevices of his cerebrum.

It indeed was one of the most unforgettable afternoons of his life. There in his room was his youngest uncle, frantically coaxing himself for quick masturbation, sans any embarrassment. The sudden intrusion by the boy did not distract him from seeking the ultimate fruit of bliss his body hungered after. He was under the total spell of Eros. Shamelessly, he grinned sardonically and informed the little boy that he was performing magic.

The boy was still unnerved, yet inquisitive. He certainly wanted to witness the magic. The uncle was with his hoarse running commentary, "Look at me. It would become a big bully rat and then I would chant some *mantras* and presto it would shrink to its humble dimensions. And if you too want to learn this magic, you must steal peeps of the female bushes. The more you see them growing, the faster you would learn the magic". By point of time, the uncle was virtually in trance and his voice had faded into an inaudible gruff. Indeed, that afternoon was just too much for the little soul to swallow. The surprises did not end there. There still was something more before the afternoon could sign off.

The eldest son of his eldest *mama*, his mother's eldest brother, had suddenly arrived by a bus from Mumbai to meet him, or rather to take the stock of his plight. Actually, his mother had covertly planned to send her nephew to find out her son's condition. The strategy paid dividend.

The nephew stayed for a week. On the surface he made it look like a casual visit. Deep in to his heart he was no less than a Sherlock Holms. His alertness saved him; else he

would have become a victim of his own heart and would have lost himself forever to Shardul's teacher aunt. The detail report by the undercover agent shook the father from his slumber. The operation "rescue Shardul" got momentum by the *satyagrah* of his mother. She gave an ultimatum that she would not take a morsel of food till her son was brought back home from the clutches of her witch of a mother-in-law. The adjective she kept to herself and rest she spelled out loud and clear. Poor father was left with no choice. The eldest son of another of her brother was expressly sent to fetch the much beleaguered son.

7

The inbuilt relief of the excitement of returning to his mother was enough to exhaust the little boy. As the Beatles would have loved to sing, he slept, in the train to Howrah, like a log. On reaching the station of Clive Nagar he had to be literally shaken. Once awake, he was soon as fresh as a daisy. There was spring in his thrilled gait. The very first cycle rickshaw that invited him he jumped on it, without waiting for his cousin to decide. The poor cousin felt rather embarrassed on the vulgar exhibition of elation by the son of the general manager of the biggest jute mill in the country. The protocol would have demanded that the GMs car would come to fetch the boy. It so happened that it being a Sunday, the GM had gone out with his British bosses, for a visit to the Sunderbans, the abode of the Royal Bengal Tiger. They had arrived unannounced from Sussex for a sudden, short holiday. Mr. Sheshadri was in a fix. For the love of his responsibility, he sacrificed the filial temptation to wait to fetch his son from the station.

All the way to the officers' colony, the cousin kept his cool externally, but was seething with rage within for the boy's mundane behavior like a commoner. While the excited boy directed the rickshaw driver through the morning bazaar, the cosine remained oblivious of all the surroundings, till

they reached the massive landing of their dwelling. It was nothing but the vulgar bourgeois influence, which was responsible for all the class conflict going on in the country, particularly in the eastern India. Consequently, the moment they stepped down from the rickshaw, the cousin slapped Shardul real hard, to remind him he was the son of no ordinary a person. He was the son of the GM of the place and had no right to be maudlin and shamelessly display his thrill. The little boy never forgot the humiliation and ugly demonstration of physical power. Since that very moment he hated him and all that the cousin stood for, particularly the kitsch demonstration of class.

The pride of the boy prevented him from crying and letting others know about his humiliation and also depriving his 'fascist' cousin from having any pleasure of any satisfaction of his power over a little boy. The mother too could not know for many years to come the hurt of her darling child. She was lost in attending to her son while her other children were busy with their various activities.

Shardul did not tarry long with her dear ones. He changed, had something to munch hurriedly and rushed off to the riverbank. To reach there he had to negotiate through vast lawns with meticulously kept gardens. Between the lawns and the riverbank was a gravel road, stretching from one end of the area of the officers' quarters to the other end where the railway line began to haul the jute bails from the jetty. In future the jetty held a mesmerizing attraction over the psyche of the growing boy. He would often spend hours playing there, mostly in rains, as it was covered from top, and gave heady feeling during the heavy pours above

and the rapidly flowing river below.

Standing at the bank he watched a corpse floating with several vultures perched on the dead drift. For a long distance his eyes followed the two till a passing ship obstructed the view and blew its siren, splitting his eardrums. With a startle he cupped his ears firmly and with amazement watched the passing ship. All the scenes were wonderful to the bewildered child. He felt a little tired standing for so long, so he sat down on a nearby green bench and for a long time watched the passing by of vast sheets of hyacinth. He was amazed to see the continuous flow of waves after waves. It was his first experience with a river and that too from such close quarter. He was feeling joyous for reasons not known and also because he was away from his 'bully' cousin.

Suddenly, he found a long shadow stretched on his feet. He looked up. The security man was standing there. A tall handsome young man, smiling, "Are you the son of the GM, who arrived today?"

Inquisitive, yet with pride, the boy nodded his head with shock of thick hair, "Yes".

"So sir, why are you sitting here?"

"Just like that."

"Its already afternoon. Memsahib must be worried. You must return home. It is too hot here in the sun".

Grudgingly, Shardul got up and began to drag himself towards the palatial edifice for the GM. The security man,

Mr. Shaitan Singh, felt the boy might be having some trouble in walking. He quickly brought his black bicycle and coaxed the boy to sit on it. Reluctantly, he heaved himself on its sitting road. The robust Mr. Shaitan Singh gently swung his legs, and was very next moment dexterously cycling away the boy on the gravel path towards his destination.

The little boy was musing over the color of the bicycle and also debating whether he would face his unfavorable cousin back at home or not. The color of the cycles actually identified the different members of the hierarchy in the workplace. To begin with, in the vast sprawling premises of the mill compound, all the employees had to use cycles for all their travel needs. The color red identified the top executives. Blue represented the middle rung. Green denoted the rest, except the security, who used the black colored bicycles. The top executives were also provided with a car for emergencies and weekend travel needs. They also had a boat to themselves for river excursions in the evenings or on weekends even in the mornings. There were two river launches for the senior and the other employees, respectively, to go across the river to Calcutta.

“Here you are Sir,” announced the friendly security guard, as he stopped the bicycle and got down from it. The sullen boy saw at a distance that his cousin was going in a rickshaw towards down town. That was enough to cheer up the despair in the bothered boy. He jumped from the bicycle and raced up, leaping the wooden stairs in twos and threes and soon he was knocking at the main door. The Nepali help, the ubiquitous Bahadur, opened the door with

filial Mongoloid, welcome smile, and greeted the boy in the tennis court sized verandah. Charged with adrenalin, the excited boy did not wait for any courtesy. He raced through the loggia to reach his parent's room, where his mother was finishing her morning prayers.

He rushed towards her and wrapped her in his little arms from the behind. The proud, elated mother turned around and took the boy in her lap and profusely filled his cheeks with her filial kisses. "Where were you all along?" She queried, and continued, "You know, your poor cousin was asking for you before going away to Calcutta, to his office."

The news of the departure of the cousin pumped him with euphoria. It was time for jubilation! He yelled, "yippee!" Very next moment he shot out like an elated, frenzied puppy and raced through the whole house.

With his hands spread like an aeroplane, he crossed the children's room, with ceilings touching the sky, and flew through the dining room with its huge dining-horse, filled with the best Sheffield crockery. As he entered the king-sized drawing room he had to suddenly put breaks to his joyride. There was his father sitting with few British. He beat a hasty retreat and went back to his mother, who had finished her morning prayers and was busy with the servants in the kitchen, assisted by the ever obliging, faithful Bahadur.

8

The lunch was served. There were the two of them- the mother and the son. The two other siblings were away to the school, where it was planned to send him too, temporarily. The mother was over bending to indulge him. The apron was placed and the table properly laid. The son on his part was not sparing any effort to demonstrate his table manners learnt at the convent. The mother was swelled with pride! She had cooked his favorite vegetables and stuffed parathas. The son too was doing justice to the motherly efforts. His most favorite sweetmeat, the fried, succulent, thickened milk *Gulabjamun* was specially brought from the most prestigious sweetmeat shop in Calcutta, The Tiwari Brothers. He could not wait to liberally pamper himself with the rich, luscious, silken, golden brown sweet balls. The mother indeed was ecstatic.

Lunch over, the mother retired for her siesta. The son took his skates out and was creating a ruckus in the vast verandah. Poor Bahadur had to hurriedly rush from the kitchen and mildly chastise him. The exhilarated boy took all that in high spirit and went back to his room to savor *Chandamama*, the monthly, illustrated magazine for children. Soon he was immersed in the adventures of the wise, valiant king, *Vikramaditya* and his encounters with the

ghost. The euphoria had sufficiently tired the boy. He dozed off to the dream world of Anderson's Fairy Tales.

The return of his siblings from school woke him up. He had never felt so close to his brother and sister as he felt then. The three of them then whizzed out of the house before the mother could even think of protesting. Racing down the wooden stair they rejoiced in the thumping hubbub accompanied with, "she will be coming down the mountain when she comes, when she comes----". The chorus halted at the door of Mr. Ganguly.

He resided just below the Sheshadries. He had two sons. Both studied in the same school, near the railway station, as his brother and sister. They were the terrible foursomes, before he arrived on the scene. After his arrival it was expected that they would be fearsome five. Nothing of that sort happened. He would visit them now and then but not as frequently as his brother and sister. The most memorable occasion was when he had held a small play on the occasion of the spring festival of *Sarswati Puja*, the worship of the deity of learning, with the marching of "One foot up and one foot down that's the way to London town". Except those instances, he was usually on his own, an introvert, aloof, in his personal world, with people of his picking.

One of the early associations was the young, dashing, dandy security personal Kalyan Singh. He had recently stepped out of his teens and had got the coveted appointment of security personal, courtesy his uncle, who was the head of security there. Kalyan Singh had not only secured a lucrative job but had been blessed with a spacious quarter with his not long wedded teen-aged bride. With all

these apparent add-ons to take care of one's joy, there was something grossly amiss in his lately married life. Or was it more in relation to the life of the newly wedded bride? To her utter chagrin, she failed to understand the undesired remoteness her husband kept from her. Not that, he did not attend to her mundane household needs, but there certainly was something off beam in their connubial exchanges. So the day he brought along the adolescent son of his boss for lunch she was ecstatic. As if after an era she had some one not far from her age with her. She hurriedly prepared the best dishes she had learned from her mother and grandmother for the chief's pubescent son. While she delighted in noshing him her best cuisine, she could not know the hidden reason for her husband to bring along his chief's son with him. Suffice it was for her to have the boy with her, while her husband excused himself for some unexplained errand. The young boy too took a great liking for the village belle. Her heady rustic disposition was like magnate for him, albeit he could not understand the reason for the same. The result was that he visited her rather too often till he was admitted in the same school, where his brother and sister went. Before that he just waited to sneak into her little abode, mostly unannounced, when the dandy husband was on duty. One such rendezvous left a lasting imprint on the lad's mind.

The husband, as usual was on his morning shift. The lad's school had not started yet, formally. With new football, he drifted to the dandy's abode. The unclothed bride was all set to take bath, when unaware of the private ritual he kicked the ball at the bathroom door. The very next moment the unlatched door was ajar, with the teen-aged

bride startled with a gaping mouth! The instant, when she sighted the lad, she pulled him in and tightly embraced him to her unclad bosom! The familiar bucolic tang had again covered the boy's senses, indeed with esoteric, intoxicating fascination! Awestruck, yet frightened, the boy tried to free himself from the most desired detention, but went limp as the teenaged bride sighed with satisfaction. Suffocation had made the boy breathless and he suddenly liberated himself from the enthralling hold and scampered out, with his ball, like a freed rabbit.

9

The school, to which the Ganguly kids went with his brother and sister, was not of his liking. It was a single story Victorian building near the station, with as many spacious rooms as there were classes, with provisions for the office space and the principal's office. Several classes had doors opening towards the main road. That helped to distract the already disinterested students to get more unfocused by the snarling traffic and its sonic pollution. The jangling of the trains added to the bedlam. In such pandemonium it indeed was demanding much from the harried students to concentrate on the academic monotony. For Shardul the drag was manifold, because of the medium of instruction. All along in the past he was first exposed to Hindi medium of teaching followed by a short sojourn with English medium. Now the poor boy was expected to coup up with Bengali medium. It was rather much for the boy to handle. Disinterest in studies was obvious. He paid little attention to what was going on in the class. The teachers too were suffering him merrily, as he was the son of one of the top honchos in Clive Nagar. This gave him the liberty to indulge in daydreaming and to plan his trysts with Kalyan Singh's wife whenever possible.

The moment he would return from school, he would have

hurried snack. His other siblings would go for their post-school nap, while he would be off with his football. Whenever Kalyan Singh was on duty he would sneak up to his teenaged bride and be with her till late evening. It seemed that the teenaged bride's body was ever so famished for a mannish company. After that it did not matter if the male-mascot was pubescent. She would celebrate in the lad's company all the more, as the calf hailed from upper crust. She would feed him with her own hands and often make him suckle her dry but firm, full, young, aching breasts. The lad loved every moment of her indulgence, all the more the moments, when she would make him caress her in her most intimate recesses, while he frantically suckled her. He could never know, following all those calisthenics, why she would writhe like a snake in agony, moaning deliriously, before swooning into a trance. After that he would leave her, collect his football, and would joyously return home.

10

It was the Sunday before which Shardul left for his next school. Hussein, the boatman for the GM's boat was told to bring the boat to the jetty by six, *post meridian*. The Gangulies and the Sheshadries were going for a long boat ride in the river *Hooghly*, the last part of the holy Ganges, before it merges into Bay of Bengal. Indeed, the kids were excited and the mothers were bothered. After all it was the latter's duty to see to all the food arrangements. Bahadur was burdened with the responsibility of beer. The men returned from their clubs rather early; had luxurious bath and dressed in their casuals, were followed by their wives in cumbersome saris for a boat ride.

Sharp at six, Hussein was at jetty number one. Bahadur and Khokhan from the Gangulies were loading the provisions hurriedly. Soon the two families arrived in their holiday attires. One by one, Hussein helped all to board GM's big red boat, with a mustard canopy near the rudder end. The boat stopped rocking after all took their chosen seats and Hussein took the oars, while his son went to the rudder end. The sun was preparing to set, trying all the hues from its palette on the muddy canvas of the lazily flowing *Hooghly* for its last masterpiece of the day.

As the darkness descended, the majestically sailing ships in the middle of the river were lighted like beautiful brides and in tandem at the shores, buildings and roads joined them in a festival of illumination. To witness the gaiety, the full moon too was hurriedly climbing up on the horizon to take a vantage seat in the cosmos amphitheatre.

While steering the boat towards his village, Hussein was humming boatman's song from East Pakistan. Bahadur had already drowned beer bottles in the river water, after tying their necks with nylon strings. Mr. Sheshadri was detailing Mr. Ganguly about the academic plans for his younger son. The two ladies were at a loss to understand why Mr. Sheshadri insisted on sending his son away from home again. True, *Shantiniketan* was a world-renowned center for education, because of Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore, but beyond that it had no credential for primary education in the fast changing education wants of free India. Mrs. Ganguly could not agree to the Bengali medium of *Shantiniketan*. She had been behind Mr. Ganguly to send their children to an English medium school. Her brother was a tea state manager in Darjeeling. She had made up her mind to send her sons there next year. Mrs. Sheshadri was unlike Mrs. Ganguly. She was docile and laconic. Unless cornered, she would not express herself much. It was after a long time when she had put her foot down to get her son back from his grandmother. Again she had retreated to her submissive, concise self. Although, she disagreed with her husband in regard to her older son's education plan, yet she kept her opinion to herself and tacitly agreed to whatever he decided.

Hussein's village had arrived. It was there that they had decided to have moonlight supper. Before the adept boatman could securely anchor the boat Shardul had jumped off under the cries of caution from all. As the others alighted from the boat one after the other, Bahadur pulled out all the submerged beer bottles from the river and Khokhan took off other picnic-paraphernalia from the boat. Hussein's wife was there with her daughters to receive the worthy guests.

Durries were spread near the bank of the river. Plantain leaves were neatly spread to serve food. For the ladies and the children fresh green coconuts were kept ready to accompany the officers with their beer. Once all was readied, beer was served to the gentlemen with succulent fish fries to go with Bacchic sips. The predilection for fish for the Bengalis was understood, but Mrs. Sheshadri failed to understand the love for the same in her Brahmin husband and children. Being a liberal, she never objected to gastronomic penchant of her folks, but could never approve wholeheartedly their culinary indulgence.

While the men had their drinks the others played *antakshari*, a song competition in which the opposition sings a song from the last letter of the previous song by the opponent competitor. The loser is one who cannot sing the next song from the last letter of the previous song. Mrs. Sheshadri was never the loser. Her unblemished record remained untarnished. The full moon celebrated her one more uneventful victory with glorious satisfaction. Hussein's wife suggested for kerosene lamps to be lighted, but aesthetic temperament of Mr. Ganguly ruled otherwise and they

indulged in memorable mix of East and West palates. Hussein's wife had even arranged for *Calcatia Paan* to sign off the moonlight dinner. Thanking her profusely the big shot guests sailed back to their jetty, listening to Hussein's joyous songs all the way.

11

Unaware of all the preparations, Shardul went to sleep, only to be shaken up the next day, the Monday, to get up fast and get ready to go to *Shantiniketan* for his next stint with one more educational experiment. Bahadur and the senior priest of the local Kali temple were to accompany the boy to his new schooling destination. Under somber settings the boy took leave from his dear ones. The cycle rickshaw was waiting to take the three to the railway station, from where they were supposed to take a train to *Bolepur*, the railhead for *Shantiniketan*.

An uneventful train journey through lush green rural Bengal took them to *Bolepur* by dusk. The three took a cycle rickshaw to *Shantiniketan*. The accompanying priest seemed to be well familiar with the place. He directed the rickshaw puller to his friend Mr. Kanai Sanyal's house. Mr. Sanyal was in charge for the primary section. He accompanied the visitors and the potential pupil for *Shantiniketan* to the guesthouse. It was a simple but aesthetically kept dwelling, keeping alive the aesthetic proclivity of the noble laureate. Night had fallen. Mr. Sanyal arranged for all their hospitality and left with the assurance to meet in the principal's office the first thing next morning. Tired and sad, the lad fell asleep just after the supper. Bahadur and the priest went out

for a stroll, when the former smoked his last bidi of the day, in spite of the protests from the later.

Next morning all three proceeded to the principal's office. In keeping with Gurudev's philosophy, classes were already on under the shady trees. The students were sitting on the ground while the teachers were busy teaching them near the blackboards, close to the tree trunks in respective classes. It was the beginning for the lad to gradually develop a dislike for the place. The aversion was further compounded when he had to wash his own utensils after meals and had to make his own bed at night, including tying the mosquito net. The only silver lining, according to the dissenting boy, was the big, soft, succulent Rasogulla, a sweet, syrupy round cottage cheese ball, in the glass of milk at night before retiring.

The prudent principal could easily see through the opposition of the pubertal lad. He counseled the accompanying priest to take the boy back with him and admit the child in a more favorable school in accordance of the boy's liking. Incidentally, the priest was instructed otherwise. He insisted that the boy must be given an opportunity to develop a liking for the world renowned institution; after all that was the express wish of the boy's father. As a challenge, the principal agreed to give a try to the sage suggestion. Leaving the fretting boy in the charge of the so called caring warden the two escorts returned to Clive Nagar.

As it was expected Shardul never took liking for the school. Apart from the disagreeable, daily routine the medium of instruction was a major hurdle for the reluctant boy to find

anything endearing in the noble ambience. It came as a great relief to the much hassled boy when he was finally withdrawn from the school for good, after few months. To his utter delight and amazement he found that his journey back was not to Clive Nagar, but to another destination in the grand city of Calcutta. When he alighted from the train at Sialdah station, he could not resist asking Bahadur, where were they going after all. “Not to Clive Nagar indeed”, was the comforting answer from Bahadur. “But where”, the boy kept insisting. And in no time the answer was in front of him. The hand pulled rickshaw was standing in front of a three story building in a lane called Creek Row.

Once again the elated boy was racing up the stairs to the third floor, only to find that much had happened during his absence. His father had changed horses for the better, just the way the son was made to do. Now the patriarch had become the CEO of a big textile industry. He had sent his daughter to a boarding school and now there were the two brothers, mother and father and Bahadur left at home. The mother, as usual, was ecstatic to have her son back to her bosom. Incidentally, the father was off to his office. With no school to go to, the two brothers were like two free calves with everlasting gamboling.

12

Shardul had become a free bird. As the restless, boisterous boy did not have anything to do, he earnestly got down to the task of exploring the neighborhood. He found that on the third floor their immediate neighbor was a widow with a female canine companion. Her only unmarried daughter was the glorious keep of an industrial widower. Being the only women on the floor, Mrs. Sheshadri did not have much choice for a female friend. Albeit, the CEO's wife, ever so busy in attending to her various house hold chores meticulously, could not claim to be living in a vacuum on an island. She had to have someone to interact with now and then and all the more because of the new place. Shardul often imitated the Bengali screechy advice of the widow to her female canine companion, "*Maye chelera badi te thake*", females do not loaf about, and they stay at home. On the second floor were two government offices and below that on the first floor was the hostel of the nearby dental college.

The ground floor had several shops, of which Shardul's preferred was the bakery that baked the choicest cakes and breads of various verities and qualities. Among the range of products his favorite was the fruitcake, which he had made part of his regular breakfast. For the same he would get up

early in the morning and rush down to the bakery the first thing in the morning and get fresh fruitcake daily. The regular visits had made everyone in the bakery his friends. All the workers early in the morning waited for him to buy the first, fresh fruitcake. It was there on rare occasions he bumped into soulful *meidi*, the middle sister.

She lived in the old crumbling mansion of the Nag family, bang opposite the three-story edifice, across the road. He had often seen her from his third floor balcony. Many an afternoon he had found her reclining on an old Victorian couch, under the *Chemeli* creeper, with her eyes buried into a book, her just washed, long, luxurious, jet black, shining tresses lazily drooped, touching the old marble floor of the majestic verandah, while their faithful Dalmatian snoozed under her couch. Her mysterious, dolorous temper endeared her to the young lad in an unexplained adoring conduct.

She was the only unmarried daughter of the family; otherwise all her brothers and sisters were married. The senior most of them had children as old as Shardul. The closer he came to her the more he desired to have her company. Having nothing to do the whole day, he would sneak out to her on the slightest pretext, and attend to many of her errands much before she could even ask him for. Reaching the morning bread and some time some cake had become his couched obligation. He often desired to have her with him for walks to the Wellington. She always disheartened him on such instance. She did not mind to spend long hours with him in her own house, but declined to be with him anywhere else, even to his third floor flat.

Most mysterious aspect of their relation was Shardul's newfound love for Bengali language, the most important cause of his deep dissatisfaction with *Shantiniketan*. *Mejdi* did not know English, nor did she know Hindi. It was now left for Shardul to pick up workable Bengali, if he desired to enjoy intimacy with her. He had found something worthwhile to do. In earnest he began to learn Bengali from Mr. Mitra, the superintendent in the government office on the second floor. He could hardly suffer his English, but having no option he had to put up with the atrocities the superintendent heaped on Queen's English. There were expressions when the superintendent made an utter fool of himself, but the lad stoically tolerated him, as his need was more pressing than the fool's folly.

Though the devoted student was learning Gurudev's language rapidly, he failed to make much use of the same with the person he most desired. *Mejdi* was just too laconic. She rarely participated in any conversation, and if she ever opened her mouth it was a monosyllabic exercise. With such rarity of verbal exchanges between the most inequitable partners, it was amazing for all to note that the two communicated remarkably well. The lad too did not know how he loved to be with her. Many an afternoon he would sit by the head end of the couch, savoring the *Jabakusum* whiff from her jet black, shining tresses. Often he would be garrulous, and on occasions to impress her he would exhibit his adroitness in English. To her, all that was meaningless, yet the boy was rather dear to her and she occasionally opened her mouth to correct his halting Bengali. Those flashes for the blissful boy were the most cherished moments. Years after he left Calcutta, he could

still not make sense of the mystery of his relation with that enigmatic soul he called *mejdi*, who communicated with him with her effusive silence. She was so aloof yet so near!

She was an antithesis of the teenaged bride of Kalyan Singh. Latter's blatant indulgence was no match to the formers remote reservedness. The same could be easily mentioned about their comparative attitude and body languages. The rustic headiness of the teenaged was rather too poor a match to the sophisticated aristocracy of the elegant, forlorn city splendor! The more she was unreachable the more ardently the lad tried to reach her, so much so that she began to occupy all canvases of his dreams. Every day he desperately desired to share all his dreams with her. All his attempts found her to be going further away into lucid world of oblivion. Her atrabilious temper made him all the more quixotic to delve deeper into the puzzling vivacity of her furtive past. Somewhere in the bygone years he found she had lost someone deeply dear to her. Who was he? The naïve, yet inquisitive lad, began to suffer pangs of jealousy!

Her big, desolate, lonely eyes began to haunt him. It surprised him to think that he had ogled the whole anatomy of the teenaged bride at Clive Nagar, and here was an elegant lady he could not see even her well covered feet, except her Venus like, well chiseled melancholic, mysterious face. He was often tempted to hold her most desired face in his boyish palms and feel the mystery of its smoothness. He could never muster enough courage even to touch her dainty hands, why mention her face.

It was during those sweet, emotional revelries the sudden arrival of the out of favor cousin marred the dreams of the companionable lad. To worsen the situation was the sudden advent of an incessant, heavy pour, which inundated the Row, leading to knee deep water, stalling all traffic in the street and closing all the business there. The inundation kept his father from reaching home, and they had to keep in touch over the phone from his mill guesthouse.

Marooned thus, the lad had not only to suffer his unwelcome cousin but the pain of separation from *mejdi*. Because of the pour *mejdi* never came out even in her verandah. Those were truly painful days except the togetherness with Bodibabu, the cousin's friend. He had come with the cousin. Interestingly, he lived in the next lane, in his dilapidated mansion and had recently got married. Soon after his marriage some unexplained discord had cropped up between him and his in-laws, including his newly wedded wife. The trauma had left the simpleton badly troubled. It was a change from the entire ordeal that he had come to stay with Sheshadries for few days.

He was otherwise a soul with pleasant disposition. He turned out to be an opposite of his friend, the cousin. He had plenty of tricks up his sleeve, which kept the two marooned boys enthralled and in return made his own sufferings rather tolerable. It was during that period Shardul came to know from him about the Pathan.

The notorious gangster was Bodibabu's tenant. He had played a major role in recent Hindu-Muslim riots in the otherwise peaceful city. Another shockingly hateful piece of information was that he had slit open Aniruddh's throat,

just because he was smitten with infatuation for *mejdi*. *Mejdi* never responded to his lurid advances. Sadly, she was caught in the mayhem of riots with Aniruddh, while returning from the university. Pathan found his chance to remove the young man from his path. Taking advantage of the anarchy, he killed Aniruddh. Being witness to that gory act, she was shell-shocked and could never get out of its harrowing reminiscence.

On knowing the gruesome account, the little boy had suddenly found a mission in his life. He vowed to kill the man who had inflicted insurmountable grief to his *mejdi*. He restlessly waited for the rain to abate, and till then he got very friendly with Bodibabu. His days and nights were immersed in meticulously planning the ways to do away with the goon. In the committed process he lost all interest in everything around him, even in the piping hot tea and pakora sessions. All the time he queried Bodibabu with fusillades of questions regarding Pathan. The cousin's friend was amused and intrigued with the boy's curiosity but was ever so ready to inform the boy about Pathan all that he knew. By the time the pour stopped the two had become great buddies, because of which the very day the rains halted he went along with Bodibabu to his dilapidated mansion in the next street.

Pathan's seedy joint was on the ground floor right in front of the entrance of the mansion. When the lad went there first time with Bodibabu, the mobster was having his early drink near his radio. Bengali news was on. Seeing Bodibabu he invited him. The owner of the mansion with the little lad went to the hoodlum's hole. He introduced the boy to

Pathan. The lout offered drink to Bodibabu and Sandesh to the boy. The former declined his offer on the pretext that it was too early in day to accept the generous offer, but the boy joyously accepted the friendly gesture of the goon, with the sole aim to develop an early camaraderie with him. Pathan too took an instant liking for the little boy. That was the beginning of the many visits of the boy to his squalid pad. Before leaving the one room apartment Shardul made a detailed picture of the room. Pathan had an iron cot and two chairs and a small table. There was a Murphy radio and a black Cinny electric fan, a tube light and a jaundiced bulb with a naked wire hanging from the ceiling to precariously plug the electric heater when needed.

In all his visits after that the lad did not find any change in the room, except that the proximity between the two increased by the day. The boy was rather garrulous and Pathan loved his talkativeness. The unequaled company of the two was a great entertainer for Pathan. With passage of time he became rather careless with the little boy and would often doze off while the boy appeared to be glued to the radio. On one such careless late evening, when the sun was still to set and dusk was knocking at the door, the mighty Pathan snoozed off after an unscheduled, large slug of rum. Shardul was as usual intently listening to the radio. Seeing the murderer deep in sleep on his belly, the boy looked at the naked wire hanging from the ceiling. He switched it on and pulled the wire down. With a resolve, carefully he held the two naked ends of the live wire and firmly pushed them on the bare back of the slayer. It was matter of minutes before the killer breathed his last. Coolly, with great satisfaction, the boy walked out of the room,

never to return there forever, not even to meet Bodibabu.

The next day when he went to meet *mejdi*, she was reading *Jugantar*, her daily Bengali newspaper. There was a hint of gratification on her otherwise forlorn face. It was the first instance that the boy saw a faint, ephemeral smile with great contentment. He felt fulfilled. That day he did not speak at all. He was ecstatic when his idol uttered with disdain, “At last, *rakshasber ant bolo*,” the fiend is dead! It was an effort for the boy to hide the temptation to share the secret with her. He was successful in his attempt. That too was the cause to feel on top of the world for the little David, who returned to the third floor apartment with an elated bounce in his gait, with the joy of a task well done.

The revenge had adorned the lad with great courage. The mother often used to wonder how her son could go on errands even late in night. Then there were the rumors of Patha Ghosh, who people thought must have been behind Pathan’s death. Patha was the Hindu nemesis of Pathan. Till Pathan lived the two of them were the most talked about leaders of the warring underworld groups. With Pathan gone Patha reigned supreme. Because Patha was Pathan’s rival, he was sort of a hero for Shardul. If the mother ever expressed her apprehension about any danger, which could befall upon her son, he would always comfort her with paeans for Patha, whom he described as his friend and hero. One night while he was returning from Wellington, after his early training in the boxing ring, he met Patha Ghosh in person. He touched the feet of his hero and congratulated him for doing away with Pathan. “*Naare, aami kichu kori naai; o saalaa, bhaanchod aamaar naamer bhaye moregelo*”, boasted the

living hero, no he did not do anything, the sisterfucker Pathan died due to the fear of his name only, and he affectionately petted the elated lad puffed up with his swank. As the elated boy hurried back home Patha warmly called, “*Hey, soon, kaalke bahire beraabi naa, gandogol hote pare. Bujelis?*” There could be trouble the next day so do not get out, understood, was the friendly advice of the don.

As if the little boy understood everything he waved back like a grown up and hurried back. Reaching home he could not restrain to share Patha’s solidarity with him. The mother shooed away his boast and warned him to keep away from such antisocial. The father too was not comfortable with the goings on. More so it was rather tiring for him to travel to and fro from his work place. He planned to talk to the company secretary to soon get dwelling for him and his family in the mill premises and if that would still be late then to get something decent near the mill rather than the present distant abode.

True to his warning Patha started one more communal riot. Mr. Sheshadri, who could not leave his house on account of the riots; fumed at his company secretary to find out quarters for him close to his work place at the earliest. As luck would have it, the visit of USSR prime minister and the president, Mr. Khrushchev and Mr. Bulganin was imminent. The state government took rapid steps to quell the unrest and restore peace as soon as possible. The world knows that the visit was a world record of public gathering.

13

Mr. Sheshadri had to rush to her hometown, as her father had taken seriously ill. Mr. Sheshadri was too busy attending to his new duties as the CEO of the company. It was left for Bahadur to shoulder the responsibility to look after the two boisterous boys. To burden him all the more, the company secretary had finally found a decent, though again a temporary residence for the CEO within few kilometer of his work place.

It was in a suburb of Calcutta, right on GT road. The owner was Mr. Oswal, the eldest among six others. They all had their own lucrative businesses and their own sprawling, palatial dwellings in the same hugely spread out compound. It was like a mini locality. The entrance gate was manned by Gurkha securities. Then there was a metal road nearly 250 meters long. On the left side of the road was the row of respective houses of respective Oswal brothers, starting from the entrance with the eldest brother and ending with the youngest. On the right side of the road was an expansive *maidan* for future development with a temple in the middle of it. Just before the eldest brother's house was a dainty two-storied edifice, owned by him, to be rented to the CEO. It was tastefully made with three bedrooms, a family room and other facility corners. In front of it was a

beautiful patch of green with well-maintained hedges and flowerbeds. With Mrs. Sheshadri's absence the onus to shift houses fell on Bahadur's trusted shoulders. Indeed, with élan he fulfilled his duty, in spite of having two lads full of beans on the rampage. Many a time Mr. Sheshadri mused, how could he ever do without his Gurkha!

Apart from all the convenience for Mr. Sheshadri, it turned out to be blessing for the kids. They had the entire place on earth to play and while away their otherwise monotonous city days in Calcutta. The elder brother was closer to Bahadur, but for Shardul the whole world was rather small. He was like royal Bengal tiger, which needed vast land to survive. After breakfast Bahadur would get busy for remaining household chores, while the elder brother followed him like a puppy everywhere he went. For the younger one, it was like a long journey to explore the straggling area.

It was in the very start of his planned exploration that he chanced upon the barren Mrs. Oswal, the wife of the eldest Oswal. She was a short, obese milk white bail of cotton, the trade in which her mirror image husband dealt in. Loaded with gold and diamond, she was always clad in the most expensive silk saris her husband could afford. Instead of *Jabakusum*, she smelt of *Brahmi Anvala*. Her husband with a black toupee too was loaded with gold and diamond, but unlike his corpulent wife, preferred *Finlay Addhi* for his *kurta* and *dhoti*. His girth was strangely enormous. It was quite sometime later that Shardul came to know the secrete of the enormity of the Oswal girth. Traveling with Mr. Oswal in his battleship like Desoto, the inquisitive lad

encountered a mammoth bag of fluid under his *dhoti*. Only after years he came to know that it was a colossal hydroceal, which might have needed a wheelbarrow to carry it.

Soon after running into Mrs. Oswal, an ordeal for Shardul started. The lady would lure him in her air-conditioned chamber in afternoons. She would load him with choicest sweets from the best sweetmeat shops of Calcutta and often with exotic imported chocolates including liquor chocolates, which often left the lad rather heady and dizzy-tizzy. In the beginning the lad felt vulnerable. Soon he too began to indulge in what the coddling, pining lady craved for. Amusingly, the lad was beginning to understand the fanciful female vagaries. Mrs. Oswal was no exception. Her kinkiness too was absorbing. After cosseting the child with choicest sweets the lady would pull him in her arms and then make him lick her in her most personal, protected alcove, while she herself sucked and fondled his pubertal maleness. The boy was amazed to experience her abundant offerings. It was learning for the growing cub the various features of female framework. It was not only rose pink marble smooth, but also butter soft like an ice cream softy. The more he licked it the more lubricated the cove became, with perpetual trickle of sweet and sour champagne. It seemed he was getting addicted to her heady aromatic nectar, while being energetically worked upon on his own intimate coziness. He was getting used to a sense of tense rigidity, while the lady went into paroxysm of a soul possessed. Her shuddering, corpulent body shook the massive, seasm bed like an earthquake. Amazingly, the same woman who was so deeply intimate in her connubial hollow with the innocent child, would feign any recognition

in the evenings, during prayer times, in the family temple. No matter what the boy did to attract her attention, there she presented an alien's familiarity. The boy too was fast learning the ropes of female perfidy.

Mr. Oswal was a different treat. He loved the boy with all the filial immoderation. Often he would take the boy with him to Calcutta. After completing his work in his *guddi*, the office, the two of them would go for a noon show and after that they would go for ice cream to Capri. The sojourns would be winded up with a visit to New Market, with the purchase of an expensive toy or any other gift for the favorite boy. On holidays, when Mr. Oswal took the boy home, the lady would show the least intimacy with her pleasure pet. With all such variants in their behavior, the boy never confronted the corpulent lady for any explanation. He believed that discretion was best in that game of deceit between the husband and wife.

14

At last, the rightful abode of the CEO was made available. Mrs. Sheshadri too had returned from her hometown and all were preparing to move to their fitting address. Shardul was the happiest to bid adieu to the Oswal estate. He never felt so very eager to leave a place as he did for Oswal land. The reason was not far to see. No one else but Mrs. Oswal was the sole cause of his disenchantment. He had never felt so relieved parting from a woman before. The very first encounter with the mind blowing female form in the apparition of his cousin was the gold standard for all his future opinions regarding feminine magnificence; Kalyan Singh's teenaged bride was still a soul to remember; *mejdi* was just unforgettable! But Mrs. Oswal? As far as he was concerned she was best forgotten! Her two timing and duplicate treatment with him were in very bad taste according to him. It seemed he was in a hurry to part with all that was related to her. So, when the very first, massive Tata-Mercedes truck carrying the Sheshadri belongings drove out of Oswal Estate he raced up to it and forced himself into the front seat, near the driver. All through the three kilometers of the journey to the mill compound he gloriously sang all the songs he could remember. On entering the mill compound he felt the safest and when the truck stopped in front of the mammoth executive

residential building he was the first to jump out and survey the whole area in one sweeping glance. While the laborers downloaded Sheshadri belongings the junior Sheshadri regally strolled the length and breadth of the executive quarters, inspecting every detail of the construction.

On the ground floor there were several divisions. On the entrance of the premises was the first staircase to climb up to the respective quarters, after which there was the club canteen with card room for the officers, followed by the various indoor playgrounds. The first among them was of Badminton, followed by Table Tennis and then the last for Billiards. After that was the CEO's exclusive staircase. On reaching the first floor of the same the staircase landed in to the verandah, the size of a tennis court. At the other end of which was the partition, separating the CEO's quarter from the others with an exclusive staircase going up to the common terrace, which in itself was as big as a football ground. At intervals on it were the enormous skylights, astride adjoining rooms below, like cubical hats above. From the terrace one could see the Hoogly bank at a distance.

The quarter proper had several colossal rooms with vast kitchen and several bathrooms and lavatories. The furniture in each room aptly defined the room. The drawing room had massive sofa-sets with peacock blue carpet and thick brocaded curtains to keep out the bright sunlight. The bedrooms were with massive beds with bedposts to tie mosquito nets. Dining hall was in the same fashion as the one in Clive Nagar. Bathrooms with spacious cupboards had the best fittings with very big bathtubs for luxurious baths.

In installments all the Sheshadri belongings arrived, to be finally followed by Mrs. Sheshadri, Bahadur and the older son, on Bahadur's back. By that time Mr. Sheshadri too arrived to oversee that the luggage movement was properly attended to. Satisfied, he soon left, leaving the rest to his meticulous wife.

While Mrs. Sheshadri attended to the final placing of all the belongings, her sons had gone to the officers' canteen to indulge in the ritual of high tea, while the canteen manager attended to the needs of Mrs. Sheshadri. It was dusk by the time all was settled and dinner from the canteen was served. They all had luxurious baths before dinner and after listening to *Binaca Geetmaalaa* they all retired to their air-conditioned bedrooms.

Next morning was a very busy day for all. Mrs. Kundu, the labor officer's wife, had arrived early to plan for the schooling of the two boys. It was decided that they had too long a Sabbath from education and no more delay could be entertained. On the judicious advice of Mrs. Kundu it was finalized to send the boys to the nearby All Saints Higher Secondary School. It was left to Mrs. Kundu to take the boys and get them admitted.

The very next week the two boys formally started their schooling. Mrs. Sheshadri had a great sigh of relief. After all, her sons' education was finally well taken care of. Now she could attend to many other family demands that needed her express attention. Alas, she had to again leave for her hometown as her father had met with an accident. In her absence Mr. Sheshadri's younger sister came to look after

the house till Mrs. Sheshadri returned. The village smart aunt cut a sorry figure when she got the uniforms of her nephews stitched wrongly. It so happened, that she went to the school to get the cloth for the uniform. The gray for the trousers was given to her, together with the maroon ties and the school badges for the two boys. She thought that the shirt and the pants would be of the same color so she got the uniform stitched all gray. The nephews too donned the uniforms proudly. It was only when they reached school they realized their aunt's folly. It was rather late to correct the mistake. They became butt of mockery, when they appeared like sweepers wearing all gray dress. The older of the two threw tantrums when he returned humiliated from school. Although all had a hearty laugh, but after that the two boys could never trust their aunt for anything. The whole episode was narrated to their mother on her return. She was not much humored. Hurriedly, she got her sister-in-law's mistake rectified and finally the kids went to the school with their head held high. It was during this time that Ramkhilawan had arrived. The two boys met him on their return from the school one afternoon.

R A M K H I L A W A N

1

Bahadur was preparing to go to Nepal. His marriage was fixed. Madho Manik was the new senior help in the CEO's residence. Ramkhilawan was the novice to be trained to help Mrs. Sheshadri. The arrangement was being mulled over when the two boys returned from their school. The younger brother, as usual, began to throw tantrums, the moment he was informed about Bahadur's imminent departure. He would have nothing of it. He insisted to accompany his surrogate mother. At one point of time it appeared impossible to restrain the unmanageable child. Ample cajoling and coxing and convincing were employed to placate the frantic child. Bahadur too tried his best to assure the boy to return early. Finally, the child did calm down, after he was allowed accompanying Bahadur to the station. For Ramkhilawan the love of a child for the servant of the family was rather touching. He could not believe that a servant could command so much of love in a family. Back at Faiyyaabaad, a servant was no more than dirt. An animal had more respect in a family than the servant there.

Bahadur's train was at eleven, post meridian. Salamattulla, the CEO's driver, was instructed to stay back to reach Bahadur to the station. As the younger boy was to

accompany him up to the station, the older son and Ramkhilawan too enjoyed the permission to accompany them.

It was the same road that Ramkhilawan had taken to come from the station. The road to the station at night was virtually deserted. The rural lad was enjoying every moment in the luxurious Plymouth. The station too seemed rather empty, compared to the morning he had alighted from the train from Fajjabad. With plenty of promises and assurances, Bahadur bid farewell to the young lads. On their way back home Shardul bought chocobars for all. As next day was the executive picnic, arranged on the arrival of the CEO's family, the two school kids were all excited. Ramkhilawan too was hesitatingly savoring the eve of expectant revelry. He was trying to fathom what actually a picnic was. The two younger kids tried their best to graphically define what a picnic was after all, but failed miserably to communicate with clarity to the rural lad. At last, Salamattulla had to intervene and affectionately chastise the rural lad to have patience till the next day to experience for him what exactly a picnic would be.

Listening to the songs of the Sheshadri kids he returned home with them, without understanding a word of the alien language of their songs. He was tempted to sing his folk songs but was hesitatingly apprehensive of irking them and the driver. On reaching home, in short, he was finally at ease that the two younger boys would be a great company to him during his services in Sheshadri household.

2

Like high octane, adrenalin was at its peak to shoot up the excitement to the pinnacle. Short of few winks, the Sheshadri kids probably did not sleep the whole night. The story was no different for the rural lad who was all geared up by five ante meridian. In their own way they did not want to leave anything unattended to, lest they would rue after reaching Sunderban, the picnic destination. Shardul had collected his football while his younger brother had collected most of his toys. Ramkhilawan did not have anything to collect, but he did not want to be left out on the account of being late. He was all ready before the cars and the trucks arrived for respective errands.

The cars were to carry the senior officers to the destination while the two trucks were there to carry all the junior officers, their children and all other supplies for picnic, respectively. The three rushed down as soon as the vehicles arrived at six ante meridian. The Sheshadri kids were busy inspecting all the operations while the rural lad was called up to help in all them. The drivers of the trucks got ready after the supplies were loaded in one of them.

The first to come down were the Pillais. Mr. Pillai was the weaving master, middle aged Madrasi, with a very agile wife,

three daughters, Savitri in sari, the eldest and married, with a baby to suckle, Satyavati and the youngest Uma, in revealing skirts, and deep necked blouses. Among his three sons, the eldest was an outcast, Mahesh, who had married a Muslim in Yugoslavia, followed by Gopal and then the youngest Naresh. After Mr. Pillai came Mr. Ghoshmaulik, the spinning master with his beautiful wife and two little sons. Portly Mr. Sinha was next to come with a tubby wife. He was the dying master. His children were studying in Kanpur so his wife used to shuttle between Kanpur and Howrah too often, leaving her husband lonely over and over again, to all the mischief he could conjure up. One by one they all climbed the ladder to board the truck. The Sheshadri kids elected to follow the junior officers and their families, as they thought it to be more exciting to be in an open truck than to be in the closed executive cars. Several retainues occupied the truck with the supplies and it left much early to get ready for the picnickers.

The last to come down were the senior officers, the Sheshadries, who pulled back their kids from the junior officers truck in their cars, as they did not want their broods to create problems for all their unacquainted people; the Deewnaji with their two lovely daughters Sango and Kammo; Mr. Lunia and his rustic village smart pudgy wife and the all knowing foolish thick-glassed only son, Goloo, with pox mark on his mousy face. They all boarded the three cars for them and followed the truck carrying the junior officers with share of their kids.

No sooner had the vehicles left the mill premises the kids were at their boisterous best. Sheshadries found it difficult

to shut down their younger son, while Mr. Deewnaji with his daughters was as ridiculously noisy as baying canines at full moon night, so much so that Mrs. Deewnaji had to censure them to behave. While the Lunias went off to sleep the moment the cars started. The occupants of the truck were loud with impromptu antakshri, except Savitri, who was busy attending to her baby.

3

The provision truck was racing up to Sona Mukhi village near Sunderban, on the banks of the river, with similar name. Madho Manik was the in-charge on it. Being his junior, Ramkhilawan was like a peacock. His mentor directed him to get everything ready before they reached the riverbank. He was getting all the vegetables peeled, cut and properly diced, as instructed by his guru with the help of Abdul, the chief chef of the officers' canteen and his assistant. There were two other laborers to help for all the odd jobs. Madho Manik was with the driver, nudging him to be on time at Sona Mukhi for breakfast, as Mr. Deewnaji and Mr. Ghoshmaulik, in particular, were sticklers for punctuality. His eyes were restlessly tunneled ahead of the racing truck. They had crossed the sleepy strand road long back, and were zipping through the Red road. The driver, Doodhnath, tried to educate the man from Orrisa, "Do you know this is the biggest and the widest road in the whole country? Even a plane could land on it!"

"Stop showing off! It is of no relevance to me whether it is the biggest or the smallest road in the country. Attend to your driving and stop teaching me. It is such showing offs that lead to accidents."

The driver laughed, “You have really grown old.”

“What age has to do with careful driving? You keep to your driving and keep your sermons to yourself.”

The driver did not open his mouth after that. It was Madho Manik who broke the silence, “Where have we reached?”

“Why you want to know that? How would that help to prevent accident?” Ridiculed Doodhnath.

“Didn’t I warn you to keep your smartness in your arse?”

Laughing, Doodhnath informed him that they had crossed Taratolla road.

“Don’t tell me!” Madho Manik was astonished.

“That is what you call sleek driving, my old man!”

They were on Diamond Harbor road. The old faithful had thought, being such a famous road it would be truly exemplary. In a way it was, but in the converse sense. It was in a bad shape. The worst bumps were suffered on its stretch. Madho Manik was cursing the government for being so apathetic towards its upkeep. Abdul abused the driver for his rash driving, “Bokachoda saalaa, can’t you be careful?” Ramkhilawan giggled, as he heard the rustic outburst after a long time. He was soon transported to his hometown, where such language was routine rather than an exception. The moments he tarried there he felt sad that he had left his entire dear ones behind and did not know how they were. He shook his head and brought himself back to the present. Seeing him jerk his head suddenly, Abdul asked

him, "Saalaa, what is wrong with you now?"

"Nothing!" And the rural lad continued his chore of peeling, cutting and dicing.

It was after several hours of driving that they reached the dak- bungalow on the bank of river Sona Mukhi. The company secretary Mr. Bose had made all the arrangement for the picnic, through the help of the forest minister of West Bengal government. The river was so named, as throughout the day, from sunup to sundown, the water of the river, flowing into the Bay of Bengal, glowed like gold. To make the golden hue still more dazzling the green Casuarinas bang on the bank, presented verdant contrast to the bright yellow of the river, after which the village on its bank too got similar name. As soon as the truck halted in front of the gate, the chowkidar came running, even before Doodhnath could think of honking the horn. He rushed and flung open the gate and then stood anxiously till the truck entered and was properly parked under a huge Banyan tree at the far end of the dak-bungalow. Soon after the truck stopped, the other attendants got busy in getting the breakfast ready before the officers arrived.

Abdul had already brought the three big kerosene stoves down and with the help of his helper was getting ready to cook *aaloo-mutter*, *jhol*, *luchies* and tea. Ramkhilawan was reaching the diced vegetables, kneaded dough and other needful for tea, with the help of the laborers. Madho Manik was busy laying down the durries for proper sitting arrangement. Doodhnath, with freshly lit bidi, went to a secluded corner of the dak-bungalow to relieve himself and

sauntered back, where the others were busy with breakfast preparation. Suddenly, he heard the sound of oncoming vehicles; immediately, he threw away his bidi.

4

The truck was followed by the officers' car. The first to alight from the truck was Satyavati. She was a very attractive teenager with all the oomph one could think of. To knock out wind from any one was her tantalizing dress. Taking her hammock in one hand and a thick Carpet Beggars in the other she bounced towards the thickest growth of Casuarinas. There she tied the two ends of her hammock to two Casuarinas, tested the safety of the ties by sitting in the middle of the same. Satisfied about the safety she swung her shapely legs with stiletto and stretched on the sturdy net of the same. For a long time she shut her eyes and finally with a sigh she opened the eyes as well as the heavy Carpet Beggars. While she was attending to her pleasures, Mr. Deewnaji was calling all the others to pay attention. When all gathered round him he started, "Now, listen very carefully. No one should wonder near the river at any cost and should not, mind you, should not even think of touching the water in the river. Just remember the river is out of bound for all. Further more remember this too that this is a tiger infested land. Do not venture too far. You would never know where a tiger is lurking to make you its meal."

"Hey, don't tell me it is all that dangerous a place. Why the

hell you all chose this place for picnic in the first place. We could still return!”

“Bull shit, Mr. Lunia!” Retorted Mr. Deewnaji, “Why do you panic? After all I have just cautioned you all. We have youngsters with her. They must be warned. Just see Satyavati. Before we all could say presto she has disappeared.”

Mrs. Pillai pleaded, “No, she has not disappeared anywhere. She is just there between those tall trees.”

“That is exactly what he said. She is not with us. She has gone away. After all we have come for picnic together. She should be close to all of us.” That was Mr. Sinha in unison. In reality he cared two hoots who went where. He was rather lecherous. It was the pang he felt to be deprived of the voluptuous sight of a sexy teenager, in most revealing manner, which ached him the most.

Mr. Sheshadri intervened, “I think we should not let any one go too far away and near to the river. That I think would be fine. Now let us get on with the picnic party for which we are here. Let us not pick faults.”

That did the trick. All took their seats where it pleased them. Round pillows were immediately provided to all by Madho Manik. Mr. Lunia with his family stretched on the durries and was soon lost in another installment of sleep. All the other officers grouped together and were soon lost in the dissection of the body politics of West Bengal. The starting point was the bonus policy of the government. Mr. Sheshadri was concerned that it would not be possible to

meet the 8.33 % payment of bonus to the workers. He rued that the labor officer could not be with them on the account of the illness of his eldest daughter. The ladies got busy in supervising the breakfast preparations. The older children were either absorbed in cards or carom while the Pillai sons were immersed in their chess.

Breakfast was ready. The servants and the ladies helped to serve the same and after that they too took their breakfast in turns. While all this was going on Shardul went to his mother and whispered, “Could he play with Bhayyaji?”

Indeed the baffled mother was taken aback. After all who was Bhayyaji? When she was informed that the son referred to Ramkhilawan she had a hearty laugh and an express approval. The boy was elated. He left his older brother playing with his latest train sent by their uncle from LA. He went to the reincarnated Ramkhilawan in the embodiment of Bhayyaji. The rural lad too was amused with his new incarnation and relished the new identity. He was very happy to be with the master’s younger boy, who in turn was actually younger than him.

The two were soon busy exploring the dak-bungalow compound. In next to no time Bahyyaji sighted the choukidar’s bicycle. He was rapturous. He had found something, which he enjoyed the most in his hometown, traveling between Ajoddha, (Ayodhya) and Faiyyaabaad (Faijabad). He borrowed the bicycle from the choukidar, who just could not refuse as the request came from the CEO’s servant for his younger son. Evading all the sights, the two took the bicycle outside the dak-bungalow quietly

and then taking Shardul on the front rod, with his football in his electrified hands, Bhayyaji flew like an airplane on the rough village road, peddling frantically, just the way he did back home. Shardul was immensely thrilled. In their enthusiasm the two did not know how very far they had gone. It was when the two got down relieving themselves they realized they had left their folks way behind. It seemed to Bahyyaji that he must have covered the distance between Faiyyaabaad (Faijabad) and Ajoddha, (Ayodhya). He was panicky. He remembered what Mr. Deewnaji had told. He was sweating. Knowing his mind, Shardul was unnerved too! In his nervousness his football slipped from his hands and rolled down in the river waters. God only knows from where Bahyyaji gathered courage. He ran and removing his white cotton dhoti and the milk white vest he jumped into the rapid Sona Mukhi! His long swims in Sarju back home truly came handy. Soon he retrieved the ball and came running to Shardul, when they heard the roar of a tiger. The two froze! Minutes later they collected their wits, Bhayyaji wrapped his dhoti on his wet jangiya, pulled on his vest and was racing back the cycle with trembling Shardul on the front rod. As they distanced from that spot, Shardul spotted a tiger on the opposite bank of the river, drinking water. He nudged Bhayyaji to peddle faster. The moment they reached the dak-bungalow Shardul jumped from the rod and ran sobbing to his mother. Soon all knew what had happened. Indeed, Bhayyaji was amply chastised as Mr. Deewnaji kept boasting about his warning. The choukidar came to their rescue. He assured them that there was no man-eater tiger in that area, more so, no tiger ever came to their side of the river, and if it ever did, it never did in daytime. To make them feel safer, he advised them to get

into the dak-bungalow as an added safety. That was the most acceptable advice. They all went in and safely bolted the gate as well the doors of the dak-bungalow from within. Much of the excitement was robbed by the lurking fear, consequently, the picnic was winded up, soon after lunch was finished, and the gang returned unfulfilled.

5

Whole night Bhayyaji could not have a wink of sleep. Apprehending dismissal, he tossed in his bed. As morning approached he planned his next move. He feared he would be sent back to his home, where the police warrant waited to apprehend him. Amusingly, he was unaware of Mrs. Sheshdari's filial compassion. Hesitatingly, when he reported for his duty in the kitchen, Mrs. Sheshdari was already there, supervising breakfast. The two boys were at the dining table, all dressed up in their school uniform. The lady of the house lovingly twisted his pinna and gently reproved, "In future do not be late like this. Be here before every one." He gurgled, in relief, with his head bent, "Never mammaji, never! I would always be on time."

"Now go and have your breakfast first, quickly, and then come and help me to serve these monkeys."

They protested in unison, "Mummy!"

The filial hand ruffled their hair with caring titter. Shardul held it for a while with deep affection, "Mamma!"

In a jiffy Bhayyaji was on the table with children's breakfast. Potato sandwiches, spiced with chosen herbs, Bournvita and plantains were in front of the boisterous boys. It was

those rare occasions when both the brothers were ready on time. Usually, the younger would be slow and late, consequently, the older would grab his breakfast and dash off to school, leaving the younger to be escorted by Madho Manik.

Bhayyaji was relieved. His folly was condoned. He vowed to work with greater dedication for his master. When he was directed to do away with his afternoon siesta and go down to the officers' canteen to learn all types of cooking, he gladly accepted the directive from his mistress. He was rather zealous to fulfill the smallest desire of his mistress. After all he was so lightly and affectionately pardoned for his folly, which could have cost valuable lives. From the very first day he began his learning at the hands of the chief chef Abdul, in the officers' canteen. Every afternoon when the mistress rested, he gladly went to the officers' canteen and with devotion learned all that Abdul taught him. True, the master was a martinet, but Bhayyaji was no less dutiful, diligent learner. He picked up most of the cuisines in very short time. The result too was not far to see. The teenager rural lad gradually took up the responsibility of arranging most of the parties in the CEO's residence. The proof of the success was the approval of the mistress. Mrs. Sheshadri gradually became less involved in the kitchen chore. Though she was always there from morning till night, but most of the routine work she left for Bhayyaji. The one thing she invariably attended personally was the needs of her children and her husband. There she did not trust any one, not even Bhayyaji. The lad knew this very well and never did carp.

With time the lad had learned a lot about cooking. He could now deftly prepare in jiffy many of the Indian delicacies, particularly the Punjabi, the South Indian and Bengali gastronomical delights. His dosas were large, paper thin, crispy rolls, stuffed with the most exotic fillings, both vegetarians and non-vegetarians; the tandoors were zesty, fiery, crunchy, yet succulent chunky bites; the sweets from the East were soft, luscious lip smacking encounters! He was steadily graduating to Chinese and Continental cooking. Mrs. Sheshadri took great pride in exhibiting her budding international chef. With time, her parties were the most sought out, because of excellent food offered to the guests. After every party, for a long, long time her food was admired in most of the reflections in various forums. There were few sly attempts to filch Bhayyaji from the Sheshadris. It was deep loyalty of the rural lad towards his mistress, which foiled all those wicked attempts by their rivals. This in a way was the lad's gratitude to the compassion of his mistress. The time arrived when his Chowmien were better than Piping or The China Garden or even from The Emperor of the Seven Mountains. His continental offerings once won the company a lucrative contract from a French Consortorium and that was the proof enough that the young lad had arrived in the world of international kitchen kinetics.

6

Two years had passed. Bhayyaji had taken over all the responsibilities of the household chores. Mrs. Sheshadri could now leave most of the household tasks on his shoulders. Consequently, her visits to her daughter in the hostel, as well her visit to her hometown had become frequent. In one such visit during the marriage of her elder brother, when she returned she was accompanied back with her younger brother Naagmani. He was a man of many talents. Most prominent was his musical dexterity. He was unusually deft in playing flute. That quality endeared him to many soon. His incorrigible affability made him universal X-factor, the mysterious man who could fix all. All had forgotten his original name. He is still affectionately remembered as the darling X-factor. He had actually come to start some profitable business with the help of his influential brother-in-law, who had by then graduated from just being the CEO of the giant company to a political power to reckon.

The corporation elections were round the corner. All the neighborhood industrialists had finally chosen Mr. Sheshadri as the consensus candidate to represent the industries in the vicinity. The general manager of the next-door Shreeram Jute mill, Mr. Mani, mooted the idea. They

actually had become great buddies. Mr. Mani convinced all the other industry honchos about Mr. Sheshadri's credential as the consensus candidate to represent the local industry fraternity. They felt that the place being prosperous because of all the industries there, it was obvious that the chairman for the corporation should be from its fraternity. The move was also to safeguard the industry interest, as the communists were ever ready to scuttle all the progressive moves by the local industrialist. The biggest problem used to be calling of wildcat strike at the slightest, irrelevant provocation. After protracted deliberations Mr. Sheshadri's name was finalized.

For the first thing first, he was made a primary member of the local unit of the Indian National Congress, with the two bullocks and a plough as the ubiquitous symbol, with the help of Mr. Maheshwari, as the local Congress President. He was a colorful oddball, with very strange preferences in life. On one hand he had constructed the most impressive temple in the shape of a full scaled aeroplane, called the Dream Wings, and on the other he had no qualm in taking his widow daughter-in-law to his pleasure bed, for his carnal gratifications, and no one could ever raise an eyebrow against it.

Then started the political baptism of the new entrant. Mr. Sheshadri was an assiduous learner. It did not take him long to learn the ropes of the trade, which has often been defined as the sanctuary of the scoundrels. The novice too did not take long to understand the deeper meaning of the paradigm. The biggest hurdle was a worker from his own mill, the all-popular Kalu Mama, from the mill's weaving

department. He was a hard-core communist, a member of the Communist Party of India, popularly known as, CPI. Being the chief contestant against the Congress candidate he had overnight become a cult hero among the worker community of the locality. Before the elections could formally get underway the result was a forgone conclusion. It was already being accepted by all that Mr. Sheshadri was a sitting duck and would lose to the champion of the workers, Kalu Mama. Many in private were questioning the sagacity of Mr. Sheshadri forever contesting election and that too in Bengal milieu, though being a person from Maharashtra. Poor political greenhorn did not know from where to kick-start his campaign. One thing was religiously commenced. He had devotedly started the people contact exercise in earnest and had opened the football field sized terrace of the officers' residence building for innumerable election meetings and parties to lure the voters. The industrialists' federation too had generously loosened the string of its purse to meet the financial demands of the challenging elections.

Albeit, Mr. Sheshadri was not the one to be easily intimidated with the challenges of the political callings, still he was not taking any chances. For such deliberations, he suddenly remembered that Bhayyaji was close to Kalu Mama. That triggered the chain reaction to find ways to convince Bhayyaji to persuade Kalu Mama to change side and desert his mother party CPI. Knowing Kalu Mama's commitment to his party it seemed an uphill task to even contemplate the impossible, but that is where Mrs. Sheshadri came to play a major role. All knew that she had immense influence upon Bhayyaji. It was often reflected

upon in private that Bhayyaji could offer his right hand for her. Taking cue from such loyalty, Mrs. Sheshadri was finally approached to win through upon Bhayyaji to turnaround Kalu Mama and bring him in to the Congress fold.

7

It was one of those tiring days after surfeit of political indulgence by Mr. Sheshadri, that too after fulfilling all his responsibilities of the CEO of his gargantuan industry, with all its demanding attention. Busted, he returned home and was soon in bed, whacked, not having any appetite even for a morsel. Mrs. Sheshadri could not accept his dosing off sans any food. Indeed, he had quickly refreshed himself, but that did not free him from his aching body and bursting mind. The doting wife, against all his protests still directed Bhayyaji to bring piping hot Asparagus soup with few bread sticks. He had to concede to her care. It was then, while savoring the soup, in the warmth of his caring wife that he laid out the idea mooted by many of his political well wishers and advisers in front of his better half. He began hesitatingly, “You see, there is a problem with the elections”.

Worried, the wife quipped, “Pray, what is it? Is it going to harm you in any way? Please do not go ahead with it. Leave it immediately and withdraw your candidature, immediately”.

“Calm down”, the political novice hubby balmed his troubled wife, “there is nothing like that. Just a little hitch;

and if you help a little that too would be comfortably ironed out”.

Before he could say the next word she butted in, “Pray, tell me, how could I ease you and remove any or all hurdles from the path of your success?”

“It is not all that complicated or difficult. You would have to just take help from your protégé, Bhayyaji”.

She had a sigh of relief, “Oh, is that all? You just ask anything and my child would do anything for you. Please just come to the point”.

Relieved, the greenhorn politician told his wife what he exactly wanted, “You see, Kalu Mama is from the opposition party”.

“So what?”

“I am coming to that”, first let me finish”.

“Go ahead, I am listening”.

“Kalu Mama is very close to your Bhayyaji”.

“Hum”.

“You request Bhayyaji to prevail upon Kalu Mama to either withdraw his candidature or leave his party and join our Congress party. You could assure him that Kalu Mama would be well taken care of and he would not lose anything. Bhayyaji could also explain that this CPI-VPI is all of no consequence. It would help him in no way neither to his

workers nor his so called social cause. After all, if we win then we would definitely be able to fight for the workers' rights better and get them better privileges from the mill owners".

"My, you really made a mountain out a mole hill", she continued, "This is the simplest thing my boy could do. He would not fail and more so, Kalu Mama I am told is devotee of Reverent Swamiji. I would further supplicate to Reverent Swamiji to direct Kalu Mama to follow your desire for the larger good of --- what they call proletarians. Right?"

"Fine, that is exactly what I pray for. You have truly put my troubled mind to great ease".

"Fine then, quickly finish your soup and go to sleep. Be assured, tomorrow Kalu Mama would be by your side, campaigning for you and for your party".

Comforted, the tense, tired husband slipped into snug slumber.

8

Bayyaji was summoned from Faizabad, where he had gone for a short vacation. He was informed by the lady of the house to meet Reverent Swamiji before returning and to put a word with him to prevail upon Kalu Mama to either withdraw his candidature or to change sides and embrace Congress party. He too was counseled to do the same at his level on his return.

No one could ever know what actually happened, but the final result was that Kalu Mama was seen cosseting with congress workers, more so with Mr. Sheshadri. More than a fish that would take to water, Kalu Mama took to congress cap. His were the most vociferous slogans, “Chaap legega kis ke upar? Joda bail ke mathe par” – on who would you stamp? Certainly, on the pair of bullocks! Even the congress workers were amazed with the turn around of Kalu Mama. The only person who was savoring the change was Mr. Sheshadri. The good husband was thanking his wife profusely, while all the party workers were heaping praises upon him for making the kill and slapping CPI where it hurt the most.

Till the elections the football field like terrace had become the venue of all the election activities. This made it

necessary for Bhayyaji to stay there for longer hours and even sleep there. It was during that period he made a great titillating discovery. He found that if he peeped from the skylights into the various halls below he could see everything, but he would not be seen by anyone as it was dark on the terrace. This made him like the terrace all the more and with the excuse of elections he had all the reason to be there alone, whenever he so desired. With his fidelity he had all the liberty to use the terrace as and when he so desired, so from there on he began to sleep there accept in rains, and in turn had a seventy mm peep in the most intimate moments of unsuspecting occupants below.

The result of the election was a foregone conclusion. Sans any worthy opposition Mr. Sheshadri won the election hands down and that too with record margin ever for the corporation elections. Mr. Sheshadri became the Mayor of the corporation and became all the more occupied with his added work, so much so that he had no time to attend to any of the household callings. They were the sole responsibilities of the lady of the house, which included hunting for matches for her husband's siblings like his younger sister, Basanti.

9

The young lady was never tired admiring herself as the most oomph girl. She was so inebriated with the most intoxicating drink of all, narcissism, that she cared too hoot for any one except herself. God knows how many matches she had casually rejected! In such a situation poor X-factor could never be a candidate for the same. With all his talent he was shamelessly snide upon by the oomph girl in the Sheshadri house. More so, she was firm believer that a brother at his sister's house was like a dog, just the way a son-in-law would be in his in-law's house or a father would, in his daughter's house.

Seeing her snooty attitude, even Bhayyaji took an instant dislike for her. Take it or leave it, like her or not, no one could save himself from the magnetism of her oomph aura! In such a pitiable state, vis-à-vis the conspiracies of hormones, Bhayyaji could never peel himself away from her vice like erotic pull. He very well knew that a slip here or a slip there would cost him dearly, yet his helplessness was pathetic. He had to force himself to concentrate on the daily chore, which were a pleasure for him before that. In such disturbing moments he happened to chance upon a ray of light, literally.

As usual he was lazing away on the terrace in the safe arms of the darkness of late night, when he chanced upon a ray of light emanating from one of the darkly painted panes of the skylight. He sat like a zombie staring at it in the dark, when a lightening flashed in his agitated mind. He dragged himself to the scratch, the source of light emanating from the room below, and with dry mouth and trembling body he shut one of his eyes and from the other he strained to peep in with a thumping heart! He could not believe his eyes. There was the goddess of his dreams, taking bath in the bathroom, which was clearly visible from there, while the person peeping in could not be seen as there was total darkness on the outside. It was like the greatest gift he got in his life. The poor rustic became a granite statue! He could not believe his eyes! He was desperately trying to swallow with his ogling eyes the entire universe of the Venus of his most intimate desire! With a dry mouth he desperately tried to gulp down every instant of the apparition, while impulsively gratifying himself. He probably had found the greatest gift of his life after the employment in the Sheshadri house.

The nights became the most desired period of his 24x7 life! He very nimbly scratched paint from few more vantage sites on the pains, taking care that the immoderation was never noticed by any one.

It was one such early night when he was left dumbfounded. Amazed, he was staring at the Venus of his most cherished desire in her most intimate ablutions! She was totally oblivious of any one admiring her from anywhere in her intimate lavation. And then he was aghast! He could not

believe his eyes. Hunkered down, his Venus was leisurely shaving herself in her most privy alcove! He could not take any more. He rushed down to his quarter and with all his cloths on he sat trembling, under the shower in his personal bath. The cold water succeeded in calming him down to an extent. Collected, he got up; he changed and hurriedly though much expectantly he went to the bathroom of his Venus. As expected she had left for the dining room, where the whole family was waiting for her and restlessly calling Bhayyaji. He hurriedly went in the bathroom and desperately searched for the shaven treasure he came for. Mercifully, there were one or two bunches of the same were still there in the tiny drain of the bathroom, not yet drained off. With a lightning speed he grabbed them, swiftly shoved them in the right hand pocket of his kurta and rushed to the kitchen to attend to the dinner awaited by all ravenously.

That day his mind was not at all in his daily chore. An upheaval was going on in his troubled mind. Not only while he served all their supper, but after that too while he took his, he was weaving elaborate plans to how to enhance his voyeuristic pleasure. With every morsel that he was gulping and not chewing and swallowing, he was deeply mulling over to attend to all other skylights on the terrace, the way he had discovered in his own master's house. He did not want to tarry. Having his supper was an effort that day. He was just thinking of taking a new Bharat shaving blade from his shaving kit and rush to the terrace with an excuse of feeling rather stuffy and suffocating. Hurriedly, he completed all his remaining chore of the night and stealthily took the stairs to the terrace. Once there he heaved a deep sigh and looked in all directions. Once

satisfied that there was no one on the terrace, except him, he went over Mr. Sinha's block, which was several blocks away from his master's. With feline caution and a rodent's alacrity he furtively scratched a little paint from the Northern pane of the skylight. Satisfied that sufficient ring was made to peep in, he comfortably ensconced on the floor there and with great caution and touch-me-not stance, one eye shut, he peeped in. He got a lump in his throat! He could feel his dhoti lifting up like a tent! He caught his membrum virilium in his shaking hand and with a gaping mouth he was madly taking care of the new found corporeal demand of his rustic body! The scene down there in the privacy of Mr. Sinha's bedroom was like an amative apparition! The corpulent, portly lump of protoplasm of Mr. Sinha was heaving over his helpless wife, whose sari was lifted up to her waist, while she was lost to the world with total disdain and indifference. Mr. Sinha was like an animal possessed, while the wife was forlorn like someone who was lost in a distant land and not there. Soon, Mr. Sinha heaved himself from the rotund mass of his wife and was breathing heavily, as he lay bushed beside his indifferent wife, already snoring with the relief from the clutches of her demanding husband. The young village rustic had found the best toy to keep him humored forever. Now he was planning for the next day for a yet another skylight tryst! He just could not wait for the next day to arrive. Whole night he got up repeatedly to see time in his Chinese watch! Moment it was dawn he hurriedly got up and got ready for his daily chore much before even his mistress came to the kitchen. He was frantically completing his work, knowing fully well that the pleasant velvety dark of the night was still hours away. By lunch time he had

selected yet another new Bharat blade to scratch another peeping ring at the desired pane of the next skylight!

Finally the time for yet another tryst quietly arrived. By that time he had finished all his household chores and had even cleaned and latched the kitchen. Once he was sanguine that all the members of the family have gone to bed he snaked on the terrace with his usual feline stealth! For a moment he stood alone on one end of the expanse of the massive terrace, and then with an impish smile went near the skylight over Mr. Madora's block. Once he was comfortably ensconced near a pane then he made yet another big enough ring to peep down.

The moment he peeped down, he was surprised. There was the middle-aged miracle of Mrs. Madora in the bath, with her well preserved marble body, all for him to savor! He could not believe his eyes at the goddess like apparition, when unexpectedly appeared Mr. Madora, just returned from the factory. He was removing his tie while talking to his wife in the bathroom. The rustic from Faiyyabad could not hear any word of the conversation, when suddenly it appeared that Mr. Madora became furious on some retort from Mrs. Madora. He banged opened the bathroom gate, pulled out his belt and mercilessly began to thrash the wet body of his helpless wife, who probably never expected that reaction from her husband; or was she used to that behavior, mused Bhayyaji! He was aghast the way the husband was pasting his wife who while trying to ward off the swinging belt fell down and suddenly she kicked her husband. The tormented fell down and probably became unconscious. The wife swiftly got up, dressed and collecting

few necessary belongings left. Next day there were whispers desperately trying to underplay the Madora discord, no one knowing what actually happened. As a star witness to the real spectacle, Bhayyaji was having the last laugh and was thanking his skylight discovery!

10

Next morning there was one more surprise. A younger cousin of his master, who just got married, arrived unannounced to stay in the sprawling block for few days before he would get an apartment for his newly married status. With her legendary magnanimity, Mrs. Sheshadri gladly welcomed her cousin-brother-in-law and his newly married adolescence, coy wife. The new couple was provided the rare room of the block. The fair adolescence, belle was a little younger than Bhayyaji. That made the hormones work over time for Bhayyaji. He had an excellent tool to gratify his inquisitive carnal longings. He did not loose time in making the requisite peeping ring at the earliest.

Soon he was at his voyeur best! To him it was something of a bonanza to witness the rollicks of newlywed indulging in uninitiated nuptial callings, with all the coy clumsiness and compelling cravings! To his rustic mind all the antics were rather foolish except the terminal panting and puffing by the uncle and the timid helplessness of the aunty, a rabbit in the jaws of a wolf. He had become a dyed-in-the-wool Scopophilic! On the other hand the poor newlywed was gloriously unaware of being ogled by a pair of concupiscent eyes during their most intimate conjugal act.

It was during those amorous moments that the village rustic one night just floated to the last block. The block was vacant since many months, so preparing to peep in it was just futile. But, Bhayyaji had become so sexually adventurous that on the spur of the moment he decided to have a deko in it. To his utter surprise what he saw was just unreliable to him. There was the younger son of Mr. Pillai. He was desperately trying to violate the younger son of Mr. Ghoshmaulik, with a heap of chocolates in front of him while Mr. Pillai junior was abusing the innocence of Ghoshmaulik junior away undeterred.

The peeper felt nausea. It was rather distasteful to his simple rustic mind. For a moment he decided to rush down and call everyone to witness the heinous crime Pillai was perpetuating, but on a second thought he reflected otherwise. How would he explain how he came to know of that and indeed what was he doing on the terrace at that hour. He soon abandoned the idea and quietly came down and slipped into his bed, as if he himself had committed a felony and was afraid that someone could know about it. Next morning when he got up he thought there would be a commotion. Alas, the commotion was only in his head. Nothing of the sort happened and the day went on just the way it did in past many, many years – uneventful!

S H A R D U L

1

Mrs. Love was the class teacher of class four, a rotund, good humored middle aged, filial lady. Yvette was her red-riding-hood of a daughter. A butter soft, pink, fairy! Indeed, the school was all boys' school but as the mother was the class teacher the girl was allowed to attend the classes, sitting in the center front bench alone, just in front of her mother's chair on the teacher's dais. Bryan Hunt and William Wong the old daddies of the class were always at some mischief at the back of the class. They were rather overage for the class but were allowed to be there on compassionate ground as Bryan was from tribal belt of Khasi Hills and Wong, though being a Buddhists had converted to Christianity on the allurements by all the goodies the community could shower upon him and his family, a euphemism for being compassionate and helpful for the distressed family, when actually it was shameless doling out of allurements to entice the poor tribal and the backwards into the fold of their community. Shardul being a dreamy student was not able to cope up with the English medium class hence was given the back seat, which he took as a blessing, as there he could indulge in dreaming all the more. The two big daddies were just in the row in front of him so he was covered by their bulky built. He could always over hear their giggles and all the erotica that was laced with

those cackles. The teacher, the mother of angelic Yvette, was blissfully unaware of all the loutish fantasies the two shared about her innocent daughter. He even saw them masturbating in the class many a time when the teacher was glued to the black board for longer durations to chalk some long lessons to be copied by all the students.

Yvette was rather convivial with him so the teacher too was a bit lenient with him in spite of him being a dreamer in the class. To him the angelic daughter of the class teacher was the most beautiful friend ever. He would not tolerate any more sacrilege against the beatific friend of his. Very next Sunday he went to the school early and straight away went to the teachers' quarters. Yvette was lying in the hammock with her doll. Seeing him she cheered up and beckoned him to join her with her doll. Hesitatingly, he went close to the hammock. At that very moment the mother came out and quipped, "Hey, young man, how come you are here and that too so early on a Sunday?"

"Good morning Ma'am!" he blurted, and then continued, "I came to meet you for an urgent matter."

"My, could there be anything urgent with you at this tender age!" The teacher then pulled the young boy's leg, "Are you in any way in love with my little Yvette?"

Poor Shardul, he was all red on his cheek and just did not know how to respond to the tease of his teacher. For a European the remark was full in jest but for the little Indian boy it was enough to sink him in to the ground, immersed in tons of shyness. To make the matters all the more embarrassing Yvette was there having great fun at the

expense of the little Indian boy, all burdened with his traditions, where even thinking of such things was nothing but a taboo. But before he could be made to suffer any further the teacher had a hearty laugh, as she came near the abashed boy, and filially ruffled his hair. "Yes tell me what you had to say, my boy?"

He collected himself and blurted, "Ma'am, the two big daddies of the class speak very badly about Yvette!"

"So?" The teacher was enjoying the concern of the little boy for her pretty daughter.

"I do not like it and you must throw them away from the class." He anxiously babbled again.

"Yes Sir that is exactly what we have done. They have been sent back to their Khasi Hills!" Assured the mother and then she continued with her bombshell, "This too you should know my boy. We would miss you a lot in England. Next year we are not returning to the school."

"Why, ma'am?" , Gaped the astonished boy.

"Ho, it is simple. Your friend's father has got a job there and we all would now be migrating there. Yes, whenever you desire to meet your friend Yvette please do not hesitate to come to England. We would love to have you with us, any time. Is it not Yvette?"

The daughter clapped with joy, "Yes, mum, he must come to England to live with us. He is my best friend here. You must promise to come!" She extended her fairy like soft, pink hand to shake.

With sadness the little boy extend his hand with a forced smile, “Yes, when I grow up I would certainly come to meet you.” That was the end of the sweet-sour meet of the two little friends who had come to meet on that leisure Sunday for something more pleasing and in turn they got the notice of painful parting soon.

It was for many years that Yvette remained the ideal female in his mind with whom he scrumptiously compared cerebrally all the female he met in his life thereafter. Her softness, her charm of her prettiness and the soft chime of her fairy like voice haunted him in dreams for many years to come that so much so he finally did go to meet her years later only to be crestfallen to find a buxom, corpulent Amazon with crocking voice of one suffering from Grave’s disease, the reason for the hoarseness in the mellifluous voice, which he had heard in his childhood. Something similar happened with one more of his childhood friend Kanupriya.

2

Kanupriya was the beautiful dotting daughter of Mr. Deewnaji. All in the officers' enclave were amazed to see her attachment to Shardul. The boy loved her dotting on him but outwardly would often slight her for no rhyme or reason. It was all the more blatant till Yvette was in India. After the British left for her forefathers' shore, the boy began to value the dotting of the beautiful, little Kanupriya. What a girl she was! With her bob-cut coiffure and milk white complexion she was like a little Devi. Her mother was rather fussy about bringing her up and would shower all attention on her angel to make her look like a charming doll. The love of her daughter for the boisterous son of the boss of her husband often made her humorously remark to the boy's mother, "Behenji, I am to of the opinion that when the two grow up we should get them married", and then she would have a hearty laugh. The boy's mother always kept her calm and dignity on all such deliberations. The crux of the fact is that the two little ones were the most inseparable little souls in the whole enclave, loving each other, without knowing about it.

Kanupriya would wait eagerly daily for Shardul to return from school. The moment she knew that he had returned from school she would rush to Sheshadri house and would

return only at bed time. The mother of the daughter too was totally carefree about the whole set up. Taking advantage of the predilection Kanupriya had for the boy, he would often inflict the only punishment on the dotting friend by closing the connecting door, thus preventing her from coming to meet him, which was the ultimate cruelty for her. Albeit this did not happen too often mercifully, but whenever this took place it was the mothers who had to come running as firefighters, as the poor daughter would be singeing in total mournful panic.

Poor Kanupriya was always ready to do anything and everything to please her friend. So much so the two just could never know what they were doing, whenever they indulged in coitus, which left the boy ecstatic and the girl painfully pleased, as she thought that she had helped to make her friend happy! Indeed, the two knew this much very well that the act they were so fervently, though clandestinely indulging into, did not have any approval of their seniors, so they were extremely cagey and cautious about it. One may question the rationality of such young children knowing anything about coitus but for Shardul it came rather unsuspectingly, sans any effort from his father's cousin, who in turn sans knowing that he had exposed the young boy to the forbidden knowledge.

As with all such officers, who jump horses for the betterment of their future, so did the Deewanjis. One man's meat became another man's poison. When Mr. Deewanji decided to leave, the little crestfallen Kanupriya had to part from her friend. Indeed, the two exchanged million promises to never forget each other and would meet when

they grew up. Regrettably, after several years they came face to face one evening outside New Market, when the two mothers recognized each other and revived their old camaraderie. It was Kanupriya's mother to rib Shardul first, "Hey lover boy, do you remember your lady love?"

The boy was dismayed. The high school girl standing aloof in front him was a thin, as if emaciated, buck toothed duckling with face full of pimples. Seeing Kanupriya, he was deeply hurt but kept all his covert feelings to himself and just grinned stupidly on Mrs. Deewanji's remark.

3

The precocious boy's share of pangs did not end with the departure of Kanupriya. His puppy love for senior Tanvi, lovingly called Tanu, became his terrible bane and probably it was then the teenaged realized what ache of infatuation could be! She was not only older in age but also senior in academics. Interestingly, in his life such disparities were never any hindrances in cementing interpersonal relations; rather there were occasions when such discrepancies were more of a blessing than any kind of hindrances. The teenager's dreamy, inquisitive disposition with spontaneous sincerity endeared him to many and what fascinated more was his impudence to indulge into rebellious, romantic fantasies. Furthermore, his ability to spin yarns in fascinating stories endeared him to all the more to many more; more so to the fairer sex, where his innocence made them feel less threatened. Tanu who had come on her long vacation after completing her first year college was no exception.

True to her name 'Tanvi' she was tall, thin, with a frail built and pensive complexion, skirting more on pale fairness with rather large, wistful eyes, had an entrancing charm of a lost damsel. The magnetism of her absentminded temper was rather powerful to suck anyone in the vortex of her

captivity with her very first breath. Her tall frame, with well formed dainty breasts and knee long tresses gave her a dreamy dryad disposition.

It was winter dusk on her first arrival. She was standing in the balcony of her verandah watching the tourney-court game going on in the floodlight lit court down below. The boisterous teenager with ocean of energy fascinated her attention. He was all over the court at the same time. His services were the center of her attraction. They would slice through the air in a lethal curve, just millimeter above the net and would swishing, land down on the ground like a zipping missile, without giving any chance to the opponent to even touch it, and if he or she ever managed to catch it more often than not would sprain his or her fingers. She was really bemused to watch his service after service and was totally unaware when in her great supportive indulgence often applauded raucously on his devastating services, which left the opponents flummoxed! She was further amazed to see how much focused the teenager was to his game, like the proverbial Arjuna, in Mahabharata that he was totally unaware of any admiration being showered upon him by an unknown spectators, who had begun to admire him in silence of her arcane yearnings. It was end of the game when his deadly service sliced through air and gave him his wining point when Tanu wildly yelled, "Daroon! Bravo!" That was the time Shardul looked up to his stranger fan. He could not believe his eyes at the dusky silhouette of a charming mirage, which in time to come, would become his inseparable shadow and shower him with brief blitz of passionate predilection, only to leave him high and dry in the sea of loneliness for a long, long time to

come.

Next evening Tanu came down with her sister-in-law Mrs. Ghoshmaulik, who would often come down to meet other ladies in the court as her doubting, suspicious husband would not allow her to meet people otherwise. Sitting there the two Ghoshmaulik ladies were attending to two different callings. While Mrs. Ghoshmaulik was busy quenching her thirst of gossip-mongering with other ladies of the enclave, Tanu was closely admiring Shardul with dreams in her eyes. His every dash, his every throw, swayed the birdlike heart of the damsel, being baptized by the *affaire de Coeur*! When suddenly there was a commotion.

All the eyes turned to the chair where Mrs. Patnaik was. She had suddenly fallen and Mr. Patnaik, instead of helping the poor creature, was shamelessly guffawing away. Shardul living his game dashed towards the fallen, unconscious woman and shouted some orders to the handsome durbaan the security person there ogling at the game. The old, agile man was on the double and before any one could know what had happened he was back with the car key of the CEO's car. It was an example in disaster management drill. With the help of others he immediately put unconscious Mrs. Patnaik and in a jiffy took her to the officers' infirmary there. Fortunately, the attending physician had come to attend to some accident in the engine room and was just preparing to leave, when the excited boy stopped the car with a screech! The nurse and the compounder came running with the stretcher as the young boy kept shouting instructions. Hearing the commotion the physician came out and was aghast to find that Mrs. Patnaik was sinking. He

immediately ordered for a central line while hurriedly, though meticulously, went about attending the unconscious patient. He was aghast to find that the lady's blood pressure was falling fast and with ominous thready pulse. He suddenly found bruise marks all over abdomen and her chest. So that was the reason he quietly inferred. Again the poor house wife must have been mercilessly walloped by her suspicious husband and had suffered internal bleeding, leading to shock syndrome. He immediately resuscitated her to the best of his ability and advised to rush her to the nearest referral hospital. Without wasting a second the concerned teenager got the sinking patient dumped into the car and drove like a man possessed to the referral hospital. By the time the accompanying physician could finish the admission formalities, several of the ladies and gents from the court had followed them there. Tanu too was also in the cavalcade. To her, the unacquainted hero was more important than the recovering, battered house wife. She could not restrain from enquiring from her sister-in-law the moment they returned to her brother's quarter about the maverick, radical teenager, like a peacenik of a man, who according to her must not have had his driving license.

4

Tanu was finding her stay there rather too desolate and forlorn. The rambunctious, termagant Pillay sirens were too much for her pensive, poetic solitude, where she was moving in trance like a princess under a magic spell. In that loneliness Shardul appeared to be her only ray of hope. Alas, she had not been formerly introduced to him yet by her sister-in-law and though being rather senior to the teenager, her coy, meek, modesty did not allow her to push herself upon him and introduce herself. Nights were not a problem as her elder brother Mr. Ghoshmaulik did not give the whole family to think anything else other than what he dictated to do in the family. If he desired that all had to listen to the LP of Ravishanker, then so was it. More so, sharing the household chores with her sister-in-law right from the evenings were too demanding to allow her to think anything else other than the fury of her elder brother. Same could be said for the busy mornings, but it was the afternoons which were like loads of granite on her heavy burdened breast that made her restless in her lonesome moments.

It was one of those dreary afternoons, when Tanu was trying to coax herself to a siesta when her sister-in-law came to her room, "If you are not busy then could you

come with me to Didi's place?"

It was that genre of music for which she was waiting for all those days of onerous, desolate aloneness. She quickly jackknifed and arranging her saree slipped her cute feet in her simple *keholapuries* and was soon off with her sister-in-law to the Sheshadries. The affable Mrs. Sheshadri was her usual hospitable self. After the mandatory pleasantries she straight away came to the point, "Could Tanu help Shardul with his Bangla lessons; the boy is finding it a bit difficult to handle?"

Nothing could be closer to Tanu's heart than the generous request of Mrs. Shehsadri. Her affirmative was forthwith. She could not wait to confirm her approval, "*Aami praan lagiye debo oke Bangal shekhabar jaunney.*" And that was it. All were happy and the very evening Shardul was informed about his new Bangla teacher. Soon after his games he had to sit with Tanu. It was a pleasantly hilarious duo – the teacher did not know English well and the taught was inadequate with his Bangla, for which the teacher was deputed. Soon it became difficult to know who was the taught and who the teacher was. The Bangla taught was teaching English to his Bangla teacher and vice versa the English taught was teaching Bangla to her English teacher, thus complementing each other in a clubby, buoyant bonhomie. Often the two would have a hearty laugh on their mirthful circumstances and it would be always Tanu reminding both to be serious about their duty.

The camaraderie of the two gently but steadily stepped out of the tuition room to the court outside and on many an occasion to the long, cerebral walks to the tranquil solitude

of Gulmohar Railway Officers' Colony, a distance away from their abode. The colony was laid by the British and had a typical British ambience with all the civic facilities within the campus. There were neatly laid down roads with sprawling bungalows on both sides of the roads with liberal space, both for parking and unending lawns. On both the sides of the roads there were massive Gulmohar trees, lovingly covering the roads all throughout the year and laying vermilion carpets from April to July. One could take any road to stroll for the constitutional walks, all were rather quite, calm and comforting and always left one totally distressed after those tranquil, intimate walks. The colony had its own post office and even a well equipped Railway hospital.

Those were the serene roads with their own balmy solitude, which were unhurriedly bringing the two unsuspecting souls closer by the day. The two were surprisingly unaware that they were growing upon each other without even knowing it, and they never realized that they had begun to miss each other too often, if they parted for short periods. It was all the more dolorous for Tanu to suffer distance from Shardul. The intimacy was not auguring anything propitious for both of them, more so for Tanu, who should have known better that her brother had called her from the sleepy, paternal town to find a match for her and get her married soon. Well aware of all the consequences, Tanu had still thrown herself in the choppy waves of maddening, forbidden ocean of Eros! She was the elder of the two and on that a woman too, but like a blind fatalist was daringly going ahead on to the satin, bloody path to passionate love and that too sans revealing it to him for whom it was

meant.

On one of those walks that Shardul once introduced his classmate Shantanu to Tanu. The lady was fascinated with the love story of Shantanu and his Kashmiri ladylove, Pompus. The revelation gave her more reasons to indulge into her newfound revelries. In some other times Shardul would not have shared with Tanu the secretes of Shantanu's love for Pompus but the situation was such that something had to be done quick to bring back Shantanu; the captain of the school had to be brought back to his lightning form and that too fast or the school would lose to St. Thomas in the final. Shardul had an added responsibility of the cheerleader of the team and had to see that not only the yelling was vociferous but the team too was in its best form. It was then that he shared with Tanu, the secret.

Of late, Shantanu's form had deteriorated for one simple reason – he was passing through depression as he was not allowed to meet his ladylove by her elder sister, who acted like a parade sergeant and prevented the two lovebirds from meeting like an evil chaperon witch. Shardul had to find a solution soon or the school would lose the match. He devised an elaborate plan and made Tanu know about it. The poor, simple middle class damsel was amazed with his planning and was thrill to the hilt to see it executed. The plan was rather simple, albeit very innovative. The conniving brat decided to send wedding cards to all the officers of the Railway colony inviting them on the auspicious occasion of the wedding of Pompus' elder sister. The cards were secretly printed in Delhi and then after all the addresses were penned they were meticulously dusted

off of all the possible fingerprints – some caution! Once all cards were ready to be posted, then on 31st. March night all the cards were dropped in the Railway Colony post office. Indeed the next day, the 1st. of April there had to be commotion. The moment the first card reached to the very first officer he immediately picked up his phone and exulted, “Congrats, my friend! But don’t you think that it has been too sudden and none of us ever had any information about the sudden marriage of your daughter?” Pompus’ father was soon pulling his hair and after few more such calls he pulled out the telephone wire and threw the instrument out in the lawn out of fury. That did not deter the officers from congratulating the disgusted father. They began to reach in hoards to the girl’s residence and soon there was a long row of all sorts of vehicles from the girl’s house to the end of the road and beyond it. The elder sister was furious and ashamed to face the world. The very evening the elder sister took the very first train to Jammu and left the colony all open for her younger sister to meet her beau Shantanu. Even today, those who remember the incident when they meet, nostalgically remember the sting and praise the person who pulled off that savvy subterfuge, still not knowing, who exactly was the architect of the same!

For Tanu it was a piece of brilliance that brought her still closer to ‘rakhosh’ the ‘devil’ as she lovingly began to call him. On his part Sahrdul too was not untouched by the cupid arrows. Most of the time he would daydream about the princess of his dreams with all her splendor covered only with the long, luxurious flowing jet black tresses, making lovely motifs all over her butter tender, subtle,

supple, silk smooth fair, flowing dermatological glory! The love had made a poet of him and he had even picked up enough Bangla to pen his first poem to her in chaste Bangla: -

“Aami debota raja nai

Tomar swapno desher sathi!

Bolo na poojibe amay toomi

Bolo bhalo bashi, sudhu bolo bhalo bashi!

Door aaakashe

Tomar hath dhore

Cholo chole jai roop kathar desh;

Priteer chandh, gandh pratiange mayke

Sheje chole aisho bhalobashar bheshe!

Aami jajabor paakhi

Gale aashibo na ki jaani –

Bolo na poojibe amay toomi

Bolo bhalo bashi, sudhu bolo bhalo bashi”!

I am neither God nor a king, I am friend of your dream world; please do not tell me you would worship me, just say that you love me! Holding your hand far in the sky, let us go to the land of the fairies; so please deck up with love's rhymes and fragrance and come with me to the land of love! I am gypsy bird and do know this that once I am gone I would not return, so please do not tell me that you worship me but declare that you love me, that you only love!

5

It was 1 ante meridian. There was a frantic knock at the door of Mr. Sheshadri's door. The din was so much that everyone in the house woke up, including the servants and the children. Mr. Sheshadri came out in his sleeping gown. He found Mr. Karamchand standing there with the son of Mr. Rathod, the handsome, elderly security person of the officers' enclave. The son was sobbing, "Sir, please save my father"!

"Okay, calm down and tell us what has happened to your father." Comforted Mr. Sheshadri.

The agitated son blurted, "Sir, my father has consumed poison after an altercation with me. Kindly, help me to take him to the civil hospital"!

Without any further ado, the CEO took the car key out from his drawer and handing over to Shardul directed him to take the patient immediately to the civil hospital. The mother protested but to no avail. Before the father could even think otherwise the son had dashed out with the other two men, like a big, bold benefactor. The poor, concerned mother kept complaining that it was very irresponsible and wrong on the part of the father to let the teenager take the dying patient to the hospital and that too in the dead of

night. The father just hushed up all to go to bed and assured that rest would be attended to in the morning.

Without license the plucky boy zipped the car to the door of Mr. Rathod and very next moment the dying man was bundled in the car. For a long, long time it was the talk among all the employees how daringly the junior Sheshadri drove the car and in no time reached the dying man to the hospital. Mr. Karmacahnd, who had accompanied the father and the son to the hospital with Shardul was lost in the chaos of the uncivil civilities of the civil hospital, where nothing seem to be in order, except the commotion and the anarchy related to it. The beds were full with two patients on many beds, while there were more patients crowded on the floor, moaning, groaning and suffering. Seeing the hapless Mr. Karmanchand, Shardul took reigns in his hands and like a seasoned, experienced authority shook the whole administration of the slipshod hospital staff. The resident surgeon came scuttling to Shardul and began to profusely apologies. Most authoritatively, the teenager waved his hand to forget all and get to work. Once he was convinced that he had shaken the hospital staff sufficiently to get to attend the dying old man he left with confidence. All his actions and decisions were the talk of the locality for a long time. Indeed, the very next day in the morning every house was abuzz with his exploits. How Tanu could be left uninformed about all that most desired talk going on the whole morning. She went to see if her '*rakbosh*' was at home. Alas, he had left for his school.

She anxiously waited for her '*rakbosh*' to return. She went to Sheshadri house to wait for her '*rakbosh*' at the time of his

return. Regrettably, he did not come. Actually, when he returned he straight away went to his father's office and finding that the handsome security person was no more he was a bit agitated and wanted to go to the hospital. The father had already heard about his feats of the previous night. He illusively felt proud of his son and asked the secretary to send the security chief with his son with enough money, to the morgue, where the dead body of the deceased man was shifted for the postmortem.

With the same élan the teenager accompanied the security chief as he had taken the dying man yester night. Reaching the morgue the boy was shocked to see the reality of life. The naked truth of life was in front of him. Many dead bodies were scattered like trash there, both inside and also outside the ruinous, stinking apology of a morgue. It was worse than a shit pot with the stench of million fetid eggs. The nose was exploding with the putrid reek! There was a cadaver of a young mother with her belly slit open and a dead fetus hanging out from there, with million worms wriggling all over; there several other cadavers of dead of different age were scattered, whom the vultures, the dogs and the cats were trying to claim as their right. It was an effort to keep away from the scurrying, big, fat, monstrous rats, who were fearlessly screeching away all over the apology of a morgue. It was an effort for the shell shocked teenager to control himself and keep is calm collected.

“Where is Rathod's body”? The badly disturbed boy shouted.

Sheepishly, the security chief pointed to the badly lit room where the ripped up body of the handsome Rathod was

most carelessly lying eagle spread with all the indignity that could be heaped upon an individual. The boy could not take it any more. He would have vomited but for the pride, which was his hallmark, he some how or the other managed to keep his cool and demanded who was there to make the body dignified, sew it up, and finally hand it over to them. Immediately, lumbered a smashed, reeking *dom*, the man responsible to sew up the cadavers after the postmortem and help to dispose them off with appropriate last rites. The agitated boy wanted to know what was keeping the rascal from finishing the job. The answer was simple – a hefty bribe. He took out the bundle of notes from his pocket and demanded the price. The *dom* could not believe his eyes. Drunk as a skunk, in his sozzled state, he hurriedly went to Rathod's cadaver and in no time sewed it up with a large menacing needle.

With great care and respect the disturbed boy got the body in the car and went to the nearby cremation ground. Before reaching inside, the acrid smell of burning flesh was strongly floating in the air. As he entered he saw few cadavers in various stages of consumption by the flames of the pyres. There were few souls hunched up in the wintry night warming themselves in the warmth of the pyre flames. Everything was just disgusting for the teenager. He just ordered the son to speed up the needful and return after the rituals.

The frightened boy now desperately wanted to return to the safe comfort of his mother's bosom. He was getting restless and by the time he reached home he was a wreck. In the arms of his mother he just broke down and then started the

ordeal for the poor mother to console the son that everything was fine with the world and he need not get so scared and panicky. Nothing could calm the delirious, petrified child. The mother was accusing her husband for being so very careless and sending an immature child to such a shocking exposure in his life and that too without any emotional support. Poor mother recited the whole night all the *mantras* she had learned all her life, right from the most powerful *mrityuanjay mantra* to the reading of Gita. Nothing was of any use. The boy was terribly upset and inconsolable. Poor mother kept awake till the wee hours of morning when exhaustion put the boy into a disturbed slumber.

The condition of their son was kept a closely guarded secret lest the family and the much eulogized son became butt of ridicule. To an extent the family did succeed in guarding the pride of their son but it could not be possible to keep Tanu away from him. He too was rather comforted when his mother announced that Tanu would be with him to comfort, console and counsel him, thus calm him down. The whole exercise was the effort of the exclusive request from Tanu herself to be permitted to take care of the junior Sheshadri. The much agitated Mrs. Sheshadri too found great solace in Tanu's offer and readily agreed to have her services for the well being of her messed up son.

The concerned damsel was soon with her beloved, traumatized '*rakbosh*'. The '*rakbosh*' too felt rather safe, secure in the arms of his messiah. He was blabbering, "Oh, I am not Gautama Buddha! I am shit scared of all that I witnessed! Believe me, it was reeking horror personified"!

The mother in Tanu hid the frightened child in her arms and comforted him, “No, my darling ‘*rakbosh*’ you are getting all wrong. It was neither the end nor the beginning of life. Why do you forget Gita? It clearly teaches that what we see is all illusion. We neither die nor are born. It is only the body that changes its clothing. The ‘*aatma is eternal*’ and that is what is the truth”. With her filial sermon she took him in her bosom burying him deeper inside her all the more. The comforted boy’s body became taut and with that Tanu too began to feel the passion of the molten lava flooding her nerves. Neither knew when the mother in Tanu had exposed her milk white, firm, virgin breasts to his craving lips and soon the terrified boy was sucking the virgin, inverted nipples, one after the other, hungrily, while her body was getting wired up by the breath and the two never knew when they immersed in each other till the besotted violent explosion shattered them into their fanatical shreds! Both had bathed in their *lovesfire* and felt much sanctified and reborn. The virgin *faire l’amour* had freed the frightened boy from much of his fear!

She lazily attended to her ruffled *saree* and replaced her beautiful breast back to their place as she buttoned her blouse and limpidly mumbled, “*Sonamoni, aami aas?*”?

The indulged ‘*Sonamoni*’ remonstrated, “*Naa*, you cannot go”! And the very next moment he pulled her face and took her burning, succulent lips in the captivity of his craving lips! It was at that moment the emergency siren of the mill began to restlessly hoot. Startled both of them got up. It was the sign of dire crisis. Both of them rushed out and found that all had come out of their houses and were at the

railing of the verandah, craning their necks to see what was happening at the far end of the mill.

Eerily they could see that several posses of police were swarming all over the premises and there was commotion in the helter-skelter rush of the workers all over the compound. And before the anxious onlookers in the balcony could know what all was going on the mill ambulance came hooting in the officers' enclave and before the restless vehicle could stop out jumped the mill medics and frantically waved to Mrs. Ghoshmaulik to come down. Poor frightened wife ran down, instinctively, spontaneously, instantly followed by her shocked sister-in-law. The moment they boarded the ambulance the vehicle was off to Belle View, the upper crust clinic for the rich!

6

That was the last the poor boy saw of his love. Indeed, he was crestfallen and the love that he never could think of had taught him not only *Bangla* but had awoken the poet in him who penned some dulcet, doleful lyrics in the memoir of his lost love. In the solitude of his room he would sob, singing the forlorn song –

Jey gaan tumi bhalo beshe chiley

Shey gaan kore, paure

Koto baithaa bhooge chi;

Gabheer raater, maun vishaader

Soor jaino soonechi!

Tomaar kauto kathaa jokhon

Money uthe aay

Booker kauto dheoo oothey

Chokher tatey ghanaay!

Jey praan tumi bhalo beshe chiley

Shey praan koto

Tomay dekeche;

Gabheer raater, maun vishaader

Soor jaino soonech!

After singing the song that you loved, what an ache I have suffered, as if I have heard the mournful notes of the silent wail of dark, gloomy night! Whenever many of your tête-à-têtes come to my mind, how very many waves of my breast come and collect at the banks of my eyes; whenever the heart that you loved so much yowled for you, it appeared as if I heard the mournful notes of the silent wail of dark, gloomy night!

Soon the facts came floating to all. Mr. Ghoshmaulik had brought few muscle men from UP, to teach a lesson to few troublemaker workers. The union got the hint of the closely guarded secret and before the hired muscle men could do anything the union goons struck and fatally injured Mr. Ghoshmaulik. That was the last of him in the mill. After that the Ghoshmauliks never returned to the mill and the lonesome boy accepted his aloneness as his cruel fate and went on with his life, as life was not ready to stop its

onward journey for any one, why talk of the little sad boy, who had found some solace in the company of his father's cousin, who had recently shifted to the megapolis and was a bachelor. A chain smoker, with yellow sulcus between his right index and middle fingers had the perpetual stink of nicotine. His aquiline nose was like a vulture beak, hence his friends called him *The vulture* both affectionately and some with derision for his libidinous escapades. The sobriquet with time shrunk to just V, not for victory but still for Vulture, the deadly bird he was for all who knew him. His most notorious act in his own boast was 'uncapping the lids of the tiny *dibiyas*, euphemism for the *hymen* of the sacred, intimate scabbards of every dignified woman.

He had joined an iron foundry, which had the makeshift residence for the staff in the factory compound itself. On the ground floor was the factory premise and on the first floor were the pigeon hole like rooms for the staff. Whole day it would have been a nightmare for an uninitiated visitor to have a wink of rest in those rooms, why talk of sleep in that din and clamor below. Shardul often petted 'Vs' back for being able not only to rest whenever he could in his room but often could sleep snoring comfortably with the constant din below.

After being brutally traumatized by the devastating severance from his mystifying love, Shardul had not only become laconic but a recluse too. In those lonesome moments V was his escape. He would often come to Vs room on many evenings and listen to the radio. With the time, all in that foundry well knew the teenager. Many a time the manager would call him up in his office to shoot in

the breeze or for a genial gab fest. All found him a glib *raconteur*. They all admired his courage to dare to dream differently, often in most wacky manner, verging on absurdity, yet many a time they proved to be wonderful to think about. This habit of dreaming differently made him interesting to all. In their leisure time whoever was free would come to Vs room to be with the boy and travel with him to his fantasy lands. Shardul too had began to savor the new found attention from one and all in the foundry that it became the most favored destination for him.

Whenever the mother or the father found him missing, uninformed, they would immediately infer that he must have gone to Vs place. More often than not they were cent-percent correct. In emergency they always found him to be there so they too had got used to the idea of him being there.

It was one such day, during the tension between the minority and the majority communities in the area. Fearing a bloody onslaught of the tension, the authorities for precaution had kept the Army on alert. They were not wrong too. That fateful day Shardul had gone to Vs place and incidentally V had gone on a tour for his company. Soon after Shardul reached the foundry, the riots between the two communities broke out. Army came out with vengeance as it was rumored that the minority community had chopped the head of a Gurkha soldier and had hanged it from a tree. The Army personal too went on a rampage. The situation turned into a bloody massacre and poor Shardul was trapped in the foundry, where his father phoned him to stay put there till the situation calmed

downed.

He had no option but to stay in V's room. The staff that liked him so much arranged for his comfort and also for his meals for next three days till the arson with blood bath went on. It was during that first night when the boy was rummaging through V's magazines that he laid his hands on a pillow book, full of bold, obscene triple -x porno-pictures and libidinous, lascivious tales of sex and scandal! The boy was truly scandalized and thus V became the cause of the forbidden knowledge for the innocent boy. He was aghast while ogling at the carnal world of naked erotica. He could not believe his eyes that such a world too existed, other than his private, personal, protected world, which was to him a zealously guarded sanctity of very loving, honorable souls in his very private world. He found it difficult to accept the unashamed nakedness in those blatantly obscene pictures. He was in dilemma. On one hand he disapproved of them while on the other hand the devil tempted him with all the enticement possible and he could not take his eyes away from the forbidden book. God only knows how many times he must have turned the pages of that book that by the morn he had virtually memorized the book. Suddenly, he had truly lost his innocence and his craving to have more of that muck was already raising its hood, both literally and metaphorically.

Till he had laid his hand on the book he only knew that those in love only indulged in those intimate acts; but after the forbidden revelation of the book his whole attitude towards sex changed. Now sex too became a haunting companion to him. Not only those fateful three nights but

many a night in his life tortured him with diabolical debates of virtue and sin, so much so for a long, long time he was haunted by the fear and anxiety that onanism would eat him away, just the way termites eat up trees and make them hollow, so that finally they fall down and wither. After all those compelling acts the guilt would accompany him for days. Many incidents of the past came back to him to clarify many things in the light of the forbidden book.

The law and order did not return sans its price. It took its pound of flesh. For three days the army marched round the city more so in more sensitive areas, shooting suspects on sight, who dared to break the curfew. After three days when sanity returned and the mayhem began to trickle off, the count was disgusting, with one soldier beheaded and his head hanging from a tree and many wounded, suffering in various government hospitals and several dead waiting to be cremated or buried after the apologies of postmortems.

With the return of law and order and the necessary calm the perturbed boy returned home in the comfort of sanity of his mother's lap, though the erotica was always riding on his back, like a clinging *betaal*, the Ghost! It was after that he began to suffer in his dreams at nights. The blatant images returned repeatedly to haunt him and to tempt him to indulge in all that, which was apparently forbidden by his society. The perpetual male longing for a woman and all the associated expletives laced with those cravings were now getting clearer to him. Today he remembers the play *Equus* by Peter Shaffer where Dysart gives Alan a placebo "truth pill" and revealing a tryst with Jill, begins to enact the event. Jill, who had taken an interest in Alan, had asked him to

take her to a pornography theatre. While there, they ran into Frank, Alan's father. Alan was traumatized, particularly when he realized that his father was lying when he tried to justify his presence in the theater. However, this occurrence allows Alan to realize that sex is a natural thing for all men - even his father. Alan walks Jill home after they leave. However, Jill convinces Alan to come to the stables with her. Once there, she seduces Alan and the two start having sex. However, Alan breaks this off when he hears the horses making noises in the stables beneath. Jill tries to ask Alan what the problem is, but he shouts at her to leave. He begs the horses for forgiveness, as he sees the horses as God-like figures. Dysart has stepped in, and fills in the blanks of Alan's thought, and also speaks for Equus. "Mine!...You're mine!...I am yours and you are mine!" cries Equus through Dysart, but then he becomes threatening: "The Lord thy God is a Jealous God," Equus/Dysart seethes, "He sees you, he sees you forever and ever, Alan. He sees you!...*He sees you!*" Alan screams, "God seest!" and then he says "No more. No more, Equus," and blinds the horses with a hoof pick, whose eyes have "seen" his very soul.

The reason for the perpetual, furious combat between V and one of his colleagues Mr. Ramaji from Bihar became clear to him. As he liked and favored V more, so he wanted him to win the war between him and his colleague. There was sexual conflict with loads of prejudiced dilemmas and predicaments in every man's psyche, he realized!

It was clear that the woman with whom both were claiming to be going steady was none other than a Dolly, the whore.

As for her, the proposition to be with V and marry him finally was more propitious. After all he was senior, intelligent from a good family, and with the certainty to rise rather high in his profession, while Ramaji was no match to V in all the mentioned departments. Before Sahrdul could find any way to help his uncle, V one day approached him on his own.

7

Yes there indeed was a problem. V was being threatened by Ramaji's advances to his love. Albeit Shardul did not approve that a whore should get the honor of being called 'aunty' after marrying V, yet he was excited about confronting Ramaji's advances to Dolly and was scheming to counter that. V was apprehensive that Ramaji may poison his manager's ears about his clandestine peccadilloes. He was not certain whether the rascal opponent had already done so or not. With trepidation he had approached his nephew for urgent help. It indeed was amusing that V had decided to seek help from that greenhorn brat of a nephew. After all he was a teenager with no experience in worldly affairs, yet V had a strange faith in the ingenuity of his nephew, which the scheming mind of the teenager was capable of solving.

The innovative boy planned to phone Ramaji next day impersonating Dolly. Next day he phoned the manager in a woman's voice. He was amazed how perfect he had impersonated a woman or to say Dolly.

"Hello", answered the manager on lifting the receiver.

"Hello", called a woman from the other end, "Is Mr. Ramaji there?"

“May I know who is calling?” The manager was at his courtesy best with a wriggling sycophancy!

“No, I need to talk to Mr. Ramaji only!”, retorted the woman at the other end.

The manager seemed to have chickened off. Shardul could hear at his end that the manager was calling for Ramaji and soon he answered, “Ma’am he is just coming. Kindly hold the line for a second”.

With a shaky voice Ramaji blurted “Hello”.

Shardul was at his best impersonation, “What it this? You take so long to take my phone. I have been thinking of you whole night and want to meet you urgently today at the river bank at the Ashram”.

He was edgy and nervous; with his voice shaking with nervousness he answered, “Please tell me. Yes I would, yes I would yes”.

Shardul reprimanded him, “You fool, what is this yes, please tell me, please tell me; if you cannot come at five in the evening then say so”.

Frightened shit, the bucolic buffoon blurted again, “No, no, I will, I will”!

The manager was bemused with his ‘I will, I will’, while Shardul banged the phone down to make the annoyance of the impersonated Dolly heard loud and clear. The plan was executed with such precision and élan that Ramaji was totally fooled. He was mortally afraid if the manager

confronted him about the woman on the phone. Mercifully, few buyers from the South entered at that very moment and poor Ramaji was spared any further anxiety. He rushed to his table and frantically got down to finish all his work much before five, *post meridian*.

Sharp at the appointed time Ramaji went to the Ashram at the river bank. The sprawling precinct of the Ashram was teeming with hundreds of visitors, while those near the bank were being coaxed to take a boat ride across the river and back at a very competitive price. Many did take the ride while there were other who preferred to just sit at the bank alone or with friends to shoot in the breeze. There were still those who just preferred to leisurely walk the length and the breadth of the beautifully laid gardens and the lawns in the Ashram. Yet there were those who just came there as it was a socially acceptable place for which questions were not asked and eyebrows not raised, if some one returned home from there, as it was always presumed that one must have gone to visit the temple there and then had spiritual indulgence of some sort.

Alas, the same could not be inferred for Ramaji. He happened to be rather tense as he entered the sacred lawns of the Ashram. His edgy eyes were furtively searching Dolly. Restively, he measured the whole length and the breadth of the Ashram many times, to have the forbidden tryst with his inamorata, but to no avail. Relentlessly, dusk was languidly spreading its wings of long shadows everywhere to finally engulf all in its silken darkness. With every passing ray Ramaji was getting hopelessly nervous and restlessly concerned.

While poor Ramaji was frantically searching his beau here, there and everywhere, there were two pairs of eyes of V and Shardul, who were having great fun at the cost of the suffering lover! From a distance behind, lost in the ever swelling crowd in the Ashram, the two were enjoying the discomfiture of the silly lover boy.

Ramaji was getting dry mouth and breathless. As it is, he suffered from paroxysm of bronchial asthma. His breathlessness could be attributed to his malady, as it not only flared in inimical weather conditions, but also during stress and strain. He desperately wanted to meet Dolly. He wanted to pre-empt V's all moves to woo her.

Shardul knew well, after he had seen Dolly with V at Victoria Memorial Gardens, that it was impossible for any one to separate the oomph looking, heavily painted woman of pleasure from V. While V was head over heel for her, she was sanguinely calculative to inveigle and entice credulous V for her secure future, away from the sordid life, in the squalid pigeon holes by the hour, in the dingy corners of the brothels in the dark streets of the city. He strongly disapproved the match as he could never collect himself to have Dolly as one of his respected relations but at the same time he admired his uncle's stupidity and Dolly's effrontery.

Repeatedly, one thing he just could not digest and that was his uncle marrying Dolly. After seeing her with him at Victoria Memorial and also V combating with Ramaji for the slut, he was convinced that if something was not done fast the irreparable damage to the family honor would be done forever. Not only at the earliest but at the very first opportunity, he wrote anonymous letters to V's father and

his older brother about the imminent scandal and the certainty of their family reputation suffering permanent disgrace, dishonor and would be sallied forever shamefully! The rushed missive did the needful. In a jiffy V was married off to a teenaged girl. As he did not have a family quarter to cohabit with his newly married wife, soon after marriage he came to stay with Sheshadries for a brief period. It was amusing that after that V seldom met Shardul and was immersed in the arms of his teenaged wife in all his spare time, till he moved in his first rented flat in Calcutta. Many things changed with that, and the availability of the pillow books from V became impossible.

It was a Sunday, when he had been to V's place near Lindsay Street to collect them for lunch at home. They were not yet ready so he excused going to New Market and come back in a while, by then they would be ready to accompany him. He went on Chowringhee Road and parked his father's car across Grand Arcade and then went strolling and window shopping there. There he found many forbidden books, wrapped in transparent, yellow covers displayed on the footpath. Watchfully, albeit hesitatingly, he approached one such stalls and asked in murmurs if the 'Book' was available. One look at Shardul and the shop owner knew that the buyer was a tyro at buying such books and could be easily fleeced. Surprisingly, the shop owner well knew the language. He immediately took a book out, swiftly wrapped it in an old news paper and handed over the packet to the edgy boy, while demanding in whispers a hefty amount, which the boy timidly handed over pronto, and soon after made a hasty retreat to his car, with a *bumpaty-bumpaty* heart. Lo and behold, before the neophyte calf could start the car

there came few musclemen, impersonating as plainclothes policemen and threatening him to shell out a hefty bribe or go with them to the police station for keeping in possession the forbidden 'Book'! The greenhorn was nervy and with all his strength flunked the book into a distant dustbin, and before the imposters could pronounce 'presto' he rocketed away from them in seconds, sans fetching his uncle and aunt!

R A M K H I L A W A N

1

Much before Shardul returned, Ramkhilawan had left for Faizabad. Kalu Mama had gone to Mr. Sheshadri's office to request for Ramkhilawan's leave. There was an urgent message from his home. His mother was serious and he being the eldest his presence was necessary. Mr. Sheshadri was rather concerned about the mother's wellbeing. Immediately, he sanctioned a week's leave with instructions to the cashier and the labor officer for extra money to be paid to his Major Domo. Kalu Mama had taken particular care that the boy travels in comfort, so he had got a birth reserved in the train after paying a hefty bribe. He accompanied the bewildered boy and counseled him to inform immediately about everything there at his home. Touching the elder's feet the teenager took to his birth.

Indeed, he was rather worried. Albeit troubled, he dozed off to a cozy slumber on his reserved birth. Never in his life had he had such a luxury of having the whole seat to himself. He was not only blissfully lost snugly in the arms of Morpheus, but was gloriously floating in the wonder world of dreams. All the images from the skylights were juxtaposed into motifs, which were choreographed into whirlwind dances of love, lust and erotica! The faces could

not be held clearly but he very well thought he recognized them; or that could be an after thought that prompted him to have some acquaintance with whatever was happening in the black holes of his dreams! He felt as if he was being sucked in by ocean of whirlpool! There was the virgin body of V's teenaged wife faded in the oomph of Satyavati and the marble grace of Mrs. Madora's matured magnetism. He was swimming in a turbulent sea of carnal crevices when suddenly he felt that the sea had become rather choppy and very next moment he felt as if thrown away from his cozy birth.

His eyes were wide open and he found himself on the floor of the compartment. What woke him up completely was an excruciating pain in his left wrist. It was then that it dawned upon him that the whole compartment was in disarray. Virtually all the passengers were scattered on the floor of the compartment together with their luggage and the compartment was filled with shrieks, shouts, moans and groans of various tonality and volume. He too was now fully awake and could apprehend what had happened. There was something seriously wrong with the train. The confusion of all the shrieks and the shouts soon informed him that the train had met with an accident and there was chaos in the whole train.

Unsteadily, he got up and was relieved that only his left wrist was cracked, otherwise his whole anatomy was intact. He looked around and was dazed to see many with numerous injuries that disturbed him badly. He probably was the one passenger in that compartment who could get up on his feet, otherwise rest of them had various injuries

incapacitating them from lifting themselves while he shockingly suspected that few passengers were dead too. The thought really gave him creeps. He horribly wanted to get out of the dimly lit, suffocating compartment. He searched for his bag hastily. It was lying on a fellow passenger who probably had broken legs and a twisted left arm. He clumsily picked up his bag and headed for the exit with intolerable pain in his left wrist. As he reached the door he found people running helter-skelter screaming full throated. As he limped down out side the derailed train he was taken in arms by a policeman, “Are you all right”? He broke down sobbing, “My wrist is broken. Please help! Please help! Please—”! The policeman gave him his arm and escorted him to a distant, where few injured passengers were whimpering. Leaving him with the group the policeman left him sobbing and moaning. It was then he got the complete picture of the situation. In the dark of the night the train had rammed into another train which should not have been there on the same track. The impact had been like an earthquake that not only derailed both the trains, but threw away all the passengers and strewn their luggage in total pell-mell that there was nothing left but few twisted boggies, few dead and many badly injured and few fortunate ones like him with minor injuries.

It was unusually quick for the railway authorities to evacuate the injured to Lucknow in King George’s Medical College for better treatment. Ramkhilawan was taken to the orthopedic department for the needful. He had sustained a minor Colle’s fracture. A young resident soon plastered his injured wrist and directed a harried nurse in the ward to give him a pain killer, a Brufen, and a sleeping pill, a

Calmpose 10 m.g., and admit him for the day in the ward. Worried, frightened, and dog tired he dosed off to sleep after the sleeping pill with pillow made of his bag, tied to his right wrist.

There was a commotion that woke him up. There was a group of dignitaries slowly moving from one injured to another till it reached Ramkhilawan. In Shehsadri house he had learned enough etiquette to present himself with dignity in front of such dignitaries. He stood up with folded hands. The head of the unit together with the superintendent of the hospital examined him and declared that he was fit to be discharged. The two doctors turned towards two senior officers who were from railway ministry. The senior of the two railway officers turned towards junior railway officer following them with a register and few cheque books. He handed over a compensation cheque from the railway ministry to Ramkhilawan. Humbly, the young boy took the cheque and touched the feet of all the officers in the group while profusely thanking them. The superintendent came and petted his cheek, "See young man, we are really sorry that you suffered this injury. This cheque is a small gesture from the railway ministry and the government to say we are sorry and wish you speedy recovery. Like all the injured you too are given a cheque of rupees fifty thousand. Encash it at the earliest and get well. If you have any problem please come to my office during office hours".

As the group moved ahead, Ramkhilawan again touched feet of the superintendent and profusely thanking all left the ward. He could not believe that he had suddenly

become a rich man with fifty thousand rupees in his kitty. As he picked up his bag and began to move towards the exit, a pat was there on his shoulder. He turned and saw the same clerk who had given him the cheque.

“Yes?” He queried.

“Come in that corner”, the clerk whispered.

“But why, Sir?”

“Do not ask any question. Just take out one thousand rupees and pay up!”

“One thousand rupees for what?”

“For the fifty thousand you got!”

“But that is for the compensation, the Sahib said”!

“Yes that is right, but for the release of the same you have to pay to us or we would cancel it”.

The threat was palpable. Prudence was better part of valor. He decided to pay up the bribe. He did not want to lose the fifty thousand for the one. He quickly took one thousand from his wallet hidden under his disheveled dhoti and handed it hurriedly to the corrupt clerk and left the hospital quickly.

He indeed had become city savvy dude. The megapolis had brought a metamorphosis in him. After refreshing himself and having something to bite he soon hired a taxi for Faizabad. In milk white dhoti, kurta, Bata shoes and

Anchor socks, late afternoon he was home. His father together with his two younger brothers and two younger sisters came on the double to greet him and meet him. He briskly bent down to touch his father's feet as his younger siblings were touching his feet.

His father sighed, "Ram be praised that you have arrived safe and sound and that to so fast. We heard of the accident and were very worried"!

"Yes, bhaiyaa, we were shit worried" blurted his younger brothers.

"Mind your tongue" chastised father.

"Yes", exulted the two younger sisters, while the youngest took his bag and ran inside the apology of a house. The father embraced him and then circling his right arm round the son's left shoulder he moved inside the house, "Lord Ram be praised! Justice has been done. The zamidaar, the landlord, who murdered your uncle, my younger brother, is rotting in jail for life. Thank God, you can live in peace now! "

The son faced his father with joyous relief written all over his concerned face, "Really bapu?"

"Yes my son", the father triumphantly petted his son's back.

In that two room of a hole with a kitchen the mother was lying in the dim light of a small kerosene wick lamp. The son touched her feet and asked his father about her malady.

"She has advanced T.B. son. The doctors have given up

hope here in Fayyabaad. Now it is all in Ramji's hands"! The old man sighed.

"No father", triumphantly the son announced, "All is not lost. We will get the best treatment for Ma. Because of my injury due to the rail accident the ministry has given me a compensation of fifty thousand rupees. With the help of that I will take Ma to Luckhnow for the best treatment and she will certainly get well!" He turned towards his youngest sister, petting her rough, dry cheek, "What do you say, Chutki"?

With joy full of confidence in her brother's word, the little girl gleefully agreed, "Yes, bhaiyaa, you can bring back Ma from the jaws of Yam Deveta, the God of death, too"!

The feeble mother mumbled with moist eyes and choked voice, "Yes beeti, (daughter) your brother is now very capable to save his mother from the clutches of death!" Trying to get up, she mumbled, "Beta, (son) now you have come I am free of all fear and anxiety."!

The city savvy boy nodded his head as he realized that he must get a bank account opened in the town and immediately get the cheque deposited there to get the money fast so that he could soon plan to take his mother to the capitol of the state of UP.

Accompanied with his jubilant, proud father and the neighbor, whom he addressed as chacha, (father's younger brother), he went to the nearest SBI branch. He quickly completed the necessary formalities for a minor's account, as he was not yet eighteen, he opened an account in his

name. It was soon after that the bank manager wished him an early recovery from his wrist injury and handed over all the necessary papers with a fresh cheque book.

He returned home; after resting for a while went out to the town bazaar to meet the doctor, who was treating his mother. The town doctor was surrounded with a crowd of patients. Seeing a well groomed young man the occupied doctor got up to receive him. Taking advantage of the misunderstanding of the town doctor that the visitor could be a prosperous client, as was the tradition to address patients thus, as the clinic there was known as a shop. After exchanging salutations the teenager directly came to the point, “Dactarsahib! I am the eldest son of the T.B. patient you are treating for past few months. I am told she is real bad. Could I take her to Lucknow for better treatment”?

The doctor was disappointed. He had thought the person in front of him was a rich man. Annoyed he blurted, “Indeed, she is your patient, suffering from the last stge of T.B. You could take anywhere. It is your goat; cut it from head or from tail. It is your prerogative”.

“She is my mother and not a goat”! Annoyed, the son got up and left the clinic. Reaching home he called a family conclave together with the neighbor chacha. He shared plan with them, “I have decided to take Ma to Lucknow. The doctor here treats all patients as goats then how could he treat human beings! Tomorrow I would hire a taxi and would take Ma there in the hospital where I was treated for my accident injury. It is a very big government hospital. Ma would certainly get well there. I have found out that T. B.

now a days is no more a killer disease. And more so, I have the most important ingredient for any treatment – Money! When would this money be useful if not now”?

“Bless you my son”, sighed the rekindled mother. The father placed his trembling hand over his head. Chacha butted in, “May I speak”?

“By all means, chacha”!

“My humble submission is that you take your chachi, (aunt) with my elder daughter Ramia with you to Luckhnow. While you would be attending to all the needs of outside, the two would attend to bhabhi (elder sister-in-law). Please do not refuse. I too have a right to serve bhabhi”!

The father was filled with gratitude and the son was elated to have such an uncalled help. Both in unison, “Are, how we could ever refuse your participation in family matters. You are our pillar”! The son continued, “It was on the confidence of you being here that I was totally relaxed on home front there. May lord bless you and chachi and Ramia, but you must ask them both for their consent”.

“Hey, what is there to ask? It was actually their suggestion. I just had to consent to it. That is exactly what I deed. So now prepare to go without any delay”!

2

He could not wait for the cheque to be cleared. He decided to leave a withdrawal slip with his father to withdraw the necessary amount the moment the cheque was cleared and proceeded to Lukhnow in a taxi early morning with his mother, chachi and Ramia so that he could be at Lukhnow by ten a.m. As planned he was at King George's Medical College by ten. He straightway went to the superintendent's office; fortunately he was in his chair. Ramkhilawan introduced himself, showing his plaster in left hand as the proof. The chief officer immediately recognized him and requested him to take a seat. "How are you? Tell me what can I do for you? Hope you got your compensation money by now."

"I am good. I have deposited the cheque for clearance in SBI at Fayaabad. Hope it would be cleared soon. I have come to you, Sir, for my mother."

"What of your mother?"

"I am told by the local doctor at Fayaabad that she is suffering with last stage of T.B. and would not live long. I need your help and the help of your whole great hospital to cure my mother to good health."

“Oh, only that? Do not worry. I thought you have come with some complaint. Where is your mother?”

“Sir, she is outside in the taxi.”

“Do not worry. Take this note and go to the T.B. ward. You would find Dr. Majumdar there. Just give this slip to him and he would do the rest. Admit her today only. We would do our best. If you have anything to say please feel free to come to me.” He wrote a note for Dr. Majumdar and gave it to him.

With a relief he took the note and left with a big ‘thank you’ to the super. As he went out of that block he asked from the gatekeeper the direction to the T.B. ward. Following the direction he reached at the T. B ward. He, together with chachi and Ramia, helped the ailing mother to alight from the taxi; paid the taxi fare and went to hunt for Dr. Majumdar. The office was the first door on the right. A peon was sitting there preparing *kbaini* (tobacco) in his palm. With disdain he looked at Ramkhilawan for a second and again got busy in preparing his fuel. Ramkhilawan stretched his hand to give him the note.

“What is it?”

“A note from the super; to be given to Dr. Majumdar.”

Detached he took the note and with apathy went inside the office. Soon he was out, “Sir is calling you in.”

Ramkhilawan deferentially went inside. The head of T.B. ward was sitting there with a pipe in his mouth under a banner informing – Cancer cures smoking. “Yes, what

could I do for you?" Genially he queried taking his pipe out of his mouth.

"Sir, my mother is serious!"

"Where is she?"

"Sir, sitting outside."

"Stupid, bring her in. Here take this slip and give it to the matron of the ward. She would do the needful; I am coming in a while. Now go and admit your mother quickly, so that we could attend to her fast." He handed over the slip to him.

Taking the slip, Ramkhilawan went out to bring along his mother, chachi and Ramia. Cautiously, he escorted his mother to the ward with the careful help of chachi and Ramia. Leaving them under the charge of the matron he went to the cash office to pay the required charges. It was there he came to know the possibility of getting a private room for his mother. He was just ecstatic. He rather paid for a private room for his mother. The money back in SBI was an added comfort. On the way back he bought plenty of fruits for his mother and some victuals for chachi and Ramia. By the time he reached the ward his mother was already allotted a bed with a clean white sheet, a pillow with green cover and a red blanket. Chachi and Ramia were standing at the head end of the bed, talking in whispers with the patient. He handed the bag of fruits to chachi and went to the matron. She was ready with a prescription, meaning that Dr. Majumdar had already attended his mother. He was all praise for the efficiency of the doctors,

nurses and others. He refused to believe that the government hospitals were butcher houses; more so he wanted to forget the incident of shelling out a bribe as an aberration. He informed the matron that his mother was fortunate to have a private room, hence could she help to shift her to the room. The matron was all angel for it. Taking the prescription he went out to get medicine, leaving his mother for the matron to shift her to the comfort of a private room.

3

It was now a week in the hospital. While mother's fever went down and the blood stopped appearing in the sputum; chachi, Ramia and the son got more acquainted with each other. To make the matters more comfortable the father too paid a visit to the hospital with sufficient money from the bank and was pleased to see his son's efficient arrangements. Comforted, he left all in the able care of his son.

Ramkhilawan on his part did not fail to rise to his family's aspirations. He would get up rather early and go to the nearby dairy shop to fetch milk for all, and then he would go for a long walk on the banks of Gomati. After returning from there he would take his bath and then attend to all the medications his mother had to take. After administering the medicines he would go to the nearby restaurant to get breakfast for all. By then chachi and Ramia too were ready after their bath and prayers.

It was then one pleasant moment that the mother rather pleased with all the developments suggested to her son, "Re, Khilia, why don't you take out Ramia for a stroll outside the hospital. Her mother is always near me to take care and more so my condition is also improving too."

He nodded his consent; on a second thought, like an elder he turned, "But have you asked Ramia, if she would like to go."

"What is there to ask? She is young and has desire to see the city; more so, for so long she has been cooped up here! It must be suffocating for her young heart. No, you take her with you when you go out."

"Okay then I am going to get breakfast for all of us," turning to Ramia, "Come let us go."

The village belle jackknifed, as if waiting for such an invitation and followed Ramkhilawan as he went out of the private room.

With twinkle in her eyes Ramia followed Ramkhilawan . The path from the T.B. ward to the road outside was teeming with suffering multitude. Both had to negotiate their way avoiding colliding with any human or cattle! Reaching the main road Ramia felt intimidated by the rush of the traffic. She had never seen so many vehicles of such varied verities ever. To her poor village life all that she knew were the numbered rickety bicycles in her locality proudly possessed by few fortunate; the few audacious, teenaged Romeos among them occasionally tried to attract her attention sans success and left their shots there only.

With butterflies in her tummy and awe in her blinking eyes she was being lead by caring Ramkhilawan . To her this new found attention was a treat she was not accustomed with, but was relishing every breath of it. A little away from the hospital on the left was a busy, crowded dhaba, a roadside

restaurant. It was obvious to the most uninitiated that it was virtually patronized by patients and their relatives in the hospital or those who had come for a day's visit there.

The owner, Bhajanlal, lovingly addressed as Bhajia, no pun intended in Hindi, was from Faizabad, with whom Ramkhilawan had hit a genial chord, as he had been coming to him rather often, not only for some victuals, but just to yak, even late in night, when also the place would be swarming with clientele! Seeing him with Ramia, Bhajia winked taking her to be his wife. With an affable grin, and a shake of his head, silently Ramkhilawan negated the unsaid assumption by the dhaba owner, who shrugged his shoulders in apology, while he kept his eyes on her.

Ramia felt a little uncomfortable with such an unexpected attention, while Ramkhilawan placed his order in that milieu of dissonance. With her eyes down, Ramia kept observing the nosy gazes all around! Ramkhilawan's query brought her to attention, "Why don't we have something here? After that we would take the food in the ward for ma and chachi."

All her life Ramia never had the luxury of having breakfast in any restaurant, leave aside a dhaba! Her oscillating head extended her ready, quiet consent. Ramkhilawan gestured her to sit beside him on the corner of a nearby wobbly bench. She meekly, with joy though, took her seat. Ramkhilawan ensconced himself beside her. With flair he ordered for two a sumptuous breakfast of fritters, sweets and tea made in pure milk; together with he also ordered for take-away to the ward for his mother and Ramia's

mother too.

As he was paying the weather took a turn for the worst. That was not the usual for the capital of UP, (Uttar Pradesh). There was a sudden, blinding dust storm. Ramkhilawan jackknifed and directed Ramia to rush with him. He collected the food parcel and raced towards the hospital. Ramia followed him on a hurried gait. It was clear she was not used to running at all and what ever speed one is asked together in such situations was probably not becoming of a village teen belle of the place. By the time Ramkhilawan, with the food packet, was rather close to the ward porch, there seemed to be a cloud burst and Ramia was all soaked to the skin as Ramkhilawan dashed in cover of the ward to save the food packet from being drenched in the wild cat pour!

Certain that he was under cover, away from any threat of being sopped, he turned toward the road. There was soaked Ramia trying her best with all the coyness of a teen, village belle to hurry up, and in the process all her young body swayed tantalizingly, revealing the magnetism of erotic female form to hundreds of eyeballs! Ramkhilawan was transfixed like a stunned antelope! In spite of being witness to so many female forms in their totality in his numerous nocturnal trysts, what he was watching then was something that took his breath out! Pulled by the allure of the magic moment he just forgot to buck her up to speed up, till she was safe under the porch roof. The trance was broken, as if he woke up from a riveting reverie, "You should have raced! See you are completely wet! Let us quickly go to the room". And the two rushed along. Seeing the plight of the village

belle the two ladies moaned in amazement, “Poor little thing! See what has happened to her”! Turning to Ramkhilawan his mother chastised him, “Khilia, couldn’t you protect her? What a man you are! Shame on you! Poor thing would catch cold”. Turning to Ramia she cajoled, “Dear, dear! Come, my child. Change immediately, before the cold seeps into your bones”.

Leaving the food packet with chachi, Ramkhilawan left the room for Ramia to change. While he waited outside, his fantasy ran amok! In the riot of that fantasy there was more than sheer physicality! The all encompassing sensuality was deeply bejeweled by a rousing love for the village belle which was filling the city savvy villager with seraphic possibilities of anticipated ecstasy, with unending pizzazz laced with unfounded moxie! The canvas of his dreams began to fill with hues of urban chaos and rural serenity! In that absentmindedness of blissful carousing he was already negotiating through the maze of domestic economics and callings of nuptial responsibilities!

He was startled by a pat over his shoulder. His reverie was shaken and then shattered. The riveting reverie suddenly evaporated into the thin air, when he faced his quizzed father- smiling, questioning with gesturing hand! As he was caught doing something wrong he fumbled to collect himself, “Nothing much Bapu! I was just planning to return home with Maa as soon as she is discharged from the hospital. Gullible, rustic father was in awe of his city savvy son. He was weaving more blissful dreams. Contentment in his filial touch, he put his right arm around the shoulders of his son and silently, as if in trance, led him to the room

where his wife, the mother of his son had recovered and was eagerly waiting to be proudly taken home by her husband and her son!

As he stepped into the room his wife fumbled to hastily cover her head, while his friend's wife turned her face towards the wall and Ramia still quiet drenched, was preparing to change, moved towards him to touch his feet.

The father too was taken aback to see Ramia soaked. "What is this? The girl will get pneumonia! Can't you all see! And Khilia, you are from such a big city, you should have been more responsible". He touched the head of the bent girl, "Now, go and change immediately or I would be angry with you. We two are going out. Be quick, lest you catch cold"!

With his arm still around his son the father ushered him out of the room.

"Look Khilia! I do not want to beat about the bush".

Ramkhilawan gaped, as the father continued, "The thing is, I want Ramia to be my daughter-in-law"!

Ramkhilawan could not believe his ears. He gawked further. The father thought he had reservation. He chastised him, "Look, I have made up my mind. It is Ramia or no one. I will not hear any 'no' from you. That is final"!

Ramkhilawan by now was some what collected. With bowed head he mumbled, "If that is your order then I have no objection. How could I go against your wish! You are my father and you would always thing the best for me".

The father was ecstatic. He embraced his son, “That is my son”! Pulling him with his hand he headed towards his wife’s room, “Come, and let me tell this to my *mehararoo*, my wife”!

By the time the two reached the room Ramia had changed into dry attire. Elated father was not able to control himself from expressing his joy, shamelessly. As he rushed in he exclaimed, “Look, I have made this final decision”! The three women stared at him with abated breath, as exclaimed, “I have made up my mind to make Ramia my daughter-in-law. Khilia too has consented”!

The simple village belle did not know where to hide, to hide her shyness. The girl’s mother took her daughter in her arms, covering her in her *pallu*, the end of her sari. Ramkhillawan’s mother got up from her bed, where she was lying, all ready to leave for home and gestured Ramkhillawan to come in her arms. With butterflies in his tummy the son obeyed and bent to touch his mother’s feet. The euphoric mother blessed him profusely as she took him in her arms and kissed his forehead!

“Now, do not delay. I have a lot to do. It is my eldest son’s marriage that I have to prepare. You ladies get ready with all your belongings. God only knows what all you women carry. I am going to get a taxi”, turning to his son, “And you, see that all dues are paid. I do not want people slandering me behind my back for unpaid bills”!

4

Ramia's father had left no stone unturned to make the marriage of his loving daughter memorable. Every one from the community had been invited. Without the knowledge of any one, Ramkhilawan had handed over a big chunk of his earnings to him, even before the marriage could finally be solemnized. The financial windfall had filled the father-in-law to be with great confidence. He had ordered the best Banarasi saris from Varanasi and the jewelry from Luckhnow. He even arranged for the best caterer from Delhi for the D-day! It was his deep desire to have *rundees*, the dance girls, from Banaras.

The bride to be was on the seventh heaven. She could not thank her stars enough for having such a trusting and loving life partner. Albeit every *saawan*, rainy season, she had accompanied all the women of the locality, but this time around she specially visited the Kaalbhairav temple to thank and pay obeisance to all compassionate Lord Shiva, responsible to bless every girl with a loving and caring husband. Poor girl had trying times facing the pleasant jibes of her friends. God only knows that nothing of any sort did happen between the simple village belle and the city savvy rustic, yet the friends were there with unending tickles. The commonest pleasing taunt was, "Tell us you

slut, what all you did with him in Luckhnow that he is hooked, rod, line and hook so helplessly?” And only answer the poor girl had in her coy bashfulness, with lower lip pressed between her teeth, was to hide her face in her palms, giving rise to innumerable fantasies to her childhood friends to dream about and probably feel jealous about.

Ramkhilawan too was weaving reams of dreams. The surprise was that the city savvy rustic has suddenly become a responsible man. He was not having visions of carnal extravaganza! He was meticulously charting out his marital journey to the “I”! For those moments he had forgotten all the apparitions from the skylights. It seemed that they had all disappeared. He was building a cute, cozy house for his family and his expected children. Like a management guru he went still further in his future to plan a business, and the first thing came to his mind was a flour mill. Before he slipped into deep slumber he had decided that the first thing in the morning he would be to go to Gania, who had proposed a partnership in his flour mill.

Right from the morning there was festivity in the air in the locality. Not only the households of the two families, but the whole locality, had donned the best they had within their means. Shameless music was blaring from the long loud speakers. Both the families were frantically trying to meet the dead line of the auspicious moment predicted by the local pundit.

As planned, Ramkhilawan had visited Gania at his flour mill not only to invite him to his marriage but to agree to sell his flour mill at Ayodhya to him. He was delighted that Gania

agreed after few riders. They did not seem to deter him. He immediately agreed to his terms and finally insisted that Gania should come to his marriage.

It was like a clock-work-orange. All seemed to be going as planned when suddenly just when the couple was taking the last round around the sacred marriage fire a lighted torch landed amidst all the guest where the *runddies* were making voluptuous gesture in their folk dances. The first one was followed by a salvo of many more with blood curdling cries from the 'Thankurs' locality, threatening to annihilate the backward class people for daring to equal the status of the upper class in their marriage. Chaos prevailed soon. People desperately ran helter-skelter in every direction. No one knew what was happening as entire backward class locality become an inferno.

Ramkhilawan caught Ramia's wrist in his iron like grip and ran like a possessed man, dragging his just married bride to no where land. No one knew who was going where. Flames were leaping meters high to engulf all avidly. Mercifully there was the clang-clang of the fire tenders at a distance. All were oblivious of the bell. By the time the fire tenders reached not a soul was left there dead or alive. In the morning papers the local news paper shamelessly announced that lighted *bidi* thrown by some drunken guest in the marriage party set the whole marriage venue to inferno! Police too could not find anyone there and closed the case as an accidental fire.

5

Whole night the two ran like mad. Hiding from the sight of any upper class, gasping, they reached Swamiji's Ashram. Swamiji's deputy Hanuman was just getting ready to go for bath in Sarju River. Seeing Ramkhillawan so early in the morning, that too with a woman, he was surprised. He queried silently in gestures, and when he was comforted that the woman was the wife of the man, he made the two comfortable to hear their horrifying narration. The narration was just too much for the simpleton. He requested them to wait for Swamiji to return from his river bath.

Soon they heard the flop-flop of Swamiji's wooden slippers. Moment Swamiji arrived, the couple prostrated to pay its obeisance. Swamiji lifted the two and comforted them, "Your people arrived a while back", turning to Ramkhillawan "Your father and your father –in-law all are safe. They are safe in the basement. You two could go there and rest. I would meet you after sun rise when the morning puja is over". Turning to Hanuman he directed him to make the couple comfortable.

Going to the basement and meeting all dear ones safe and sound was like a dream come true. Ramkhillawan could not

believe his eyes. After that dastardly attack of class hate no one could believe that anyone would have survived the carnage! The mayhem left all concerned shell shocked, except Ramkhilawan. In his city sojourn he had learned innumerable lessons, which are never taught in any school or college. Safe in the precincts of the Ashram he could direct his attention to the planning of immediate, safe future.

He decided that his parents should not return to Faiyyabaad immediately. Father and mother should stay at Ramghari, till he could find a solution for his mother's safe return there. For his parents-in-law he planned that he would besiege Swamiji to provide them some job in his Ashram till matters cooled down. For his adolescent wife he had to plan for stay with her parents till his *gauna*, the tradition of fetching adolescent wife after marriage, when she finally comes of an age to be able to shoulder her wife's responsibilities. Till then he thought she would be safe at the Ashram working for Swamiji, who had so filially saved his life years back. All thus planned the exhausted couple slumped in to deep slumber till they were woken up by Hanuman's shake, "Come, Swamiji is calling you".

Yawning, the two got up. With their hands they creased their nuptial attires and followed Hanuman lazily. In his audience room, Swamiji was seated on a thrown like red, satin chair, fit enough for kings. The two prostrated at his feet and meekly set down in a corner. It was then they turned to see around and found that all their dear ones were already present there. The newly wed bride got up, with her face covered in a long veil and went about touching feet of

the elders and finally went and quietly set beside her mother.

Mesmerizing voice of Swamiji echoed, “You all are safe here. You need not fear any one any more. I have talked to the Superintendent of Police of Faizaabaad and have apprised him of everything. The culprits would be behind bars soon. Fearlessly, you all could safely return to your homes”.

Suddenly Ramia’s mother wailed, “Mai-baap, please do not throw us in the hands of those wolves. They would mince us to pieces and finish us. Please keep us under your protection shield, at the least my innocent daughter. Like deadly devils they would devour her without even a belch! Please, my lord, please”, and she began to sob! Swamiji gestured her to come near and putting his comforting hand on her head resonated, “Do not worry. Your daughter would stay here till her *gauna* and after that she could go. Right? Now you all have food and rest. When you all go, please let Hanuman know about it. He would arrange for your transport”.

“Mai-baap”, got up Ramkhilawan, “I was thinking that Maa and Baapu could stay at Ramghari till matters cooled down and then they could return home. And with your blessings, I too have got an errand or two to attend. With your blessing I have decided to buy a flour mill here”.

“Wonderful! Let it be like that! You have become a worldly man Khilia! Wonderful! A rich man, hain! Then be it so”, and the meet dispersed, as Swamiji left the audience room. With tears in their eyes all met each other, thanking their

stars, particularly Swamiji for his generosity.

6

Ramkhalawan had no time to meet his wife. He got busy in settling the purchase deal of the flour mill. After running from pillar to post and getting things done in various offices with less difficulties, courtesy Sawmiji's influence he could finally seal the deal in record time. Finally Swamiji inaugurated the newly bought mill on an auspicious day decided by him.

While he was breathlessly busy in speeding up the deal his village belle was deeply immersed in Swamiji's services. She would attend to all his needs right from morning till night and if need be would press his tired legs before he slipped into a comfortable sleep.

In matter of few days she had won over Swamiji's heart and soul. Swamij would often humorously comment that with her devotion and service she had enslaved him. Whoever heard the filial comment, particularly Ramkhalawan and family, all felt blessed and blessed the young bride for her services.

Ramkhalawan had finally managed to get his reservation for Calcutta. He went to Swamiji to take his blessings and his leave. Swamiji chanted few mantras and handed over to him sweets and flowers consecrated to Sita Mayya, with brief

direction, “Look, take care and travel safely. Just because you have become city smart does not mean you have become a big man for us. And, extend my blessings to your mistress and tell your master that his visit to the Ashram is over due. Now proceed on your journey safely with Sita Mayya’s blessing. May Sita Mayya save you from all dangers”!

With comfort in his heart and peace in his mind Ramkhilawan left the Ashram. While his wife remained back in the Ashram to look after Sawmiji’s comfort, his parents and his in-laws all accompanied him to the station. The train was on time. He touched everyone’s feet and took leave for Calcutta. The parents went to Ramghari and the in-laws returned to the Ashram to prepare to return to their devastated home next day, leaving Ramia at the Ashram in the service of their beloved Swamiji!

It was that very night that innocent Ramia went through her ablution by Swamiji. The night bulb was on. Swamiji was prostrated like Lord Vishnu in his king sized sandal wood bed. Ramia with her long veil was pressing Swamiji’s tired legs. Swamiji gently got up. Sat in padmaasan; took the little teenage bride on his lap. He passionately embraced the bashful girl. The innocent village belle curled up in his arms helplessly, not knowing what to do. The fiery lips of the seer were singing the virgin lips of the virgin. Like a rabbit in the clutches of a loin, the girl felt that her long, village skirt was being lifted by the Swami and then he baptized her into womanhood as she gave a stifled scream heard only by her!

S H A R D U L

1

Racing through Sunday's empty Calcutta roads he crossed Howrah Bridge. His heart was still beating like a bellow. Desperately he was trying to calm himself. The trepidation of being caught by those imposters and then taken for a ride would not only have mortified him, but would have shamed his family, particularly his mother. He could never think in his wildest dream to hurt his mother in any way. With a lump in his throat, dry mouth and moist palms, he was zipping through Grant Trunk Road, frantically, frequently confirming with the rare view mirror that he was not being followed. All the destinations known to him since the family moved in there were as if not existing. He was oblivious of the very house where he had rather short sojourn and where he was further deprived of his innocence!

Probably he had never prayed with such unction. Hysterically, he was mumbling Gayatri Mantra, as taught by his mother. She had convinced him that in any peril if one chanted the Mantra with devotion all dangers would disappear. Together with the Mantra he was simultaneously cursing him and swearing never to succumb to libidinous liberties. 'Why, why, why', were the questions echoing in his mind, and tormenting him. How debased he had gone, he

thought! Just for a momentary fun he had subjected him to the possibility of irreparable shame. Mumbling all the prayers he could retrieve from the deep recess of his cerebral registration, he was desperately craving to reach into the safety of his room at home.

The only thought frantically whirling in his cranium was to rush in his room, bolt himself from within and sit down to study in earnest. He promised to himself never to give his mother any moment of despair with his behavior and with his school results. The latter were real abysmal. He had with consistency of a veteran never failed in his class. That was all he could be forgiven of. Other than that he had not done anything praiseworthy academically, to sing paeans to. He was always having very poor grades, because of which his father always felt embarrassed. The paternal embracement made the mother's life hell. The poor boy could never find a way to extend the stressed mother any respite from repeated humiliation at the hands of the disappointed father.

The train of tortured thoughts so clouded his attention that for a moment he did not realize he had reached his destination. He was in the car porch at his house when the sentry there smartly saluted him. He hurriedly pressed the breaks, and jumped out of the driver's seat. The young respectful sentry came on the double. Without looking at him, Shardul flunked the car key at him and in twos and threes climbed the stairs leaving the young security personal gaping. Like a frightened rabbit rushed to his room. Like a missile gone berserk, with his out stretched right arm he pushed the door of his room open with his fully open palm

and dashed in. The next moment he had bolted the room from within and was eagle spread over his king sized bed, gasping! With great effort he could control himself from sobbing! At last he was in the safe precincts of his home, with only one nagging question, “Was the momentary craving of the flesh worth all that panic and the peril of disgrace and dishonor”? He had learnt a lesson. His reverie was broken on the call of his mother, who had come to know from the security man that ‘chota baba sahib’, the younger son, had returned.

2

“When did you return?” The mother queried. Getting up from the bed the son replied, “A while back”.

“You don’t look good. What’s the matter?”

“Nothing much”, he answered rubbing his eyes, “I just felt a bit tired with a headache”.

“But what happened to your uncle? You went to fetch him. Is it not?”

“Yes, but near Grand Hotel I felt bit giddy so I returned.”

Worried, the mother put her palm over her hassled son’s forehead, “Are you all right? Let me see!”

“No, Ma, do not fuss. I am good.”

“No, you are not good. You are burning with fever! Itnaa badaa hogayaa hai, you have grown this big, yet do not know that you have fever! Let me measure it”. Leaving the son surprised she went to fetch thermometer, while the son for the first time tried to feel himself properly and found his body burning!

The mother returned with the thermometer. Shardul opened his mouth to put the instrument under his tongue, while the mother looked at the wall clock to measure time. After two minutes she pulled out Hicks thermometer and saw the temperature. She got worried. It was touching nearly 103.

Concerned she reprimanded her son, “See, this is what you all youngster do. To make matters worse your Bhayyaji too has gone to his home town!”

Taken by surprise the son queried, “Why, why has he gone there so suddenly?”

“His mother is not well. Now, lie down and do not make matters worse for me. Behave! I am sending for the doctor”.

After the mother left, the son felt too lonely. His only friend at home had left. He felt rather sad. He did not know with whom he would pass time and share his pain and pleasure. Suddenly, life had become a lonesome burden. He was on his back staring at the roof and soon after he pulled a sheet over his head, closed his eyes and was lost in lucid trance, with melancholia of Bhayyaji’s absence. In sorrow of loneliness he did not remember when the doctor did come and saw him and left with detailed instructions and prescription to his harried mother. The malady finally turned out to be a mystery that resolved on its own in a day or two and he resumed his classes, armed with a doctor’s certificate.

3

His grade had again fallen. He was dejected. With trepidation he waited for the dreaded call from the head master's office. He did not have to wait long. In a day or two he was sent for. He did not know what misfortune was waiting for him, but he was certain, whatever it was, it would be catastrophic. So was it. The stern head master looked at him, "So, finally the time has come to part! Fine if that is your wish, here is for you. We have to surrender to your demand. So at last you want to leave the school."

The frightened boy blurted, "No, No, brother, I could never dream of that!"

"I do not think so", there was sarcasm in the steely voice.

Shardul was not the one to wriggle for mercy. He was rather proud for any genuflexion or mercy petition. He stood defiant looking at the head master, as if stating that whatever was being done was totally unjust. He had not done any such crime which called for that draconian, cruel injustice. Still he want to give a last try, "I can assure you brother, my grades would improve from henceforth!"

"Any miracle taking place?" The head master's disdain was at his best.

“No, brother, I would work very hard and would not let you down”, there was resolute resolve in the teenager’s voice.

“I wish, you could”, the scorn continued with loads of mockery! With a sickening pleasure he handed over to the depressed boy a letter to his father. Devastated, the miserable boy took the envelope with his head up. He stood there without knowing what he wanted to say.

“You may now leave, and get admitted in Ma Kali School”, came the grave, booming voice of the head master and the boy trudged out with heavy feet.

He went to his class room. The tall lanky Mr. Douglas was there in the middle of some complicated co-ordinate problem. Without looking at the boy he answered to his soft “May I” request with matter of fact “Come in”.

The boy dragged himself to his seat, as all other students stared at him with unasked question. Shardul knew all had something to ask but no one would dare to do so. His worst fear was the content in the envelope. Did any one else know about it? He shivered with the very thought. He could not pay attention and the class ended and he did not know what was happening all around him.

Mercifully, that was the last period of the day. The mother had promised to come and fetch him, as he had been unwell in past few days. He was much against his mother’s idea to do so, but this time he could not prevent the mother’s resolve. True to her word she was there with their Impala at the school gate. To his utter surprise Mr. Douglas too was waiting for transport there with his trademark bag

in his left hand.

The sad boy approached him, “Good evening Sir! Waiting for some one?”

“No, I have to go to St. Mary’s. I am just waiting for some transport. I am rather late.”

“Sir, why don’t you join us? We are going that way, too. My mother is also here. She would be delighted to meet you.”

“Are you sure, it won’t be a bother?”

“Certainly Sir, it would be a pleasure!”

The two approached the nearby Impala. The obedient student opened the front door for his respected teacher as he also introduced him to his mother, “Ma, Mr. Douglas is our maths teacher. He is coming with us. He has to reach St. Mary’s on the way. I told him, he is most welcome and it would be a pleasure to have him with us.”

“Hello Sir. Honored to have you with us! I am going to New Market. It was planned in the morning. I had told Shardul that I would come to fetch him and then we two would go there. He is so funny, he kept protesting that he would come walking. Could this be acceptable? He has recently recovered from a bout of unknown fever. I could not leave him thus.”

“Oh, thank you mam”!

“You are most welcome”!

The petrol guzzler moved, as if preparing to sail over the badly kept roads. Some American miracle!

“By the way, how is the boy doing Sir”?

“He could improve”, quipped Mr. Douglas, turning his head a bit towards the mother.

“Meaning”?

“It is just that he has to put his mind a little bit more to make up”.

“And pray, how that could be done”?

“Mr. Douglas suddenly turned his head completely and glowingly suggested, “There is a way. This summer vacations he could put extra effort to buck up! All that I could do is to stay back and help him. Some how the other, I like your son; he seems to be talented but a dreamy child, who does not know how he should go about with his priorities”.

There could not be any better proposal for her beleaguered son. She profusely thanked him and made him promise to stay back in summer vacation at their sprawling dwelling with her son! The son was still lost and sad. The able teacher could sense his dejection.

“Are you not happy, Shardul?”

The student was at his lost spirit, “It is not that. Probably you do not know what the head master thinks.”

“Up date us.”

The disconsolate student dropped the bomb, “I think he is removing me from the school.”

“What?” The mother was aghast, “You never told this to us!”

Burdened with tons of guilt, with bowed head, the son answered with a lump in his throat, “But, how could I! I too did not know this till the last period. He called me and handed over this envelope addressed to father!”

As he took the accursed envelope, Mr. Douglas took it from him. It was not sealed so he opened it and somberly went through its content. With a sigh of relief he comforted the tortured souls, “Do not worry. I would handle it”, assured the Good Samaritan, as he handed over the letter, and turning to Shardul again, “Now, you forget about it. Think as if you never had it, and get down to real hard work. I am moving in from the very first day of summer vacation. Is that clear?”

The two were ecstatic. Their joy knew no bound! Mrs. Sheshadri could not restrain from inviting Mr. Douglas, “Why don’t you join us for muffins and tea at ‘Muffins Et Al’, Sir?”

“I wish I could. I am already late. It could wait for some other time. More so, I would be with you from the first, in a week or so!”

The tormented boy could never believe that his fortunes

would take turn for such comforting tide. Miracles do take place. He promised to have more faith in all the prayers his mother had taught. He was totally unburdened. Already, he was mumbling prayers to thank the almighty for his munificence! The mother was just rapturous, “I could never thank you sufficiently, Sir, ever, for this bountiful gesture. We all would wait to welcome you, Sir. You do not know how grateful my husband would be. Once again million thanks to you, Sir!”

No matter how spontaneous and unplanned the decision was, Mr. Douglas was rather pleased to have taken it. As he prepared to alight, he assured, “Do not worry mam, after month and a half your son would be a different person!”

Mother believed the sincerity of the learned, experienced teacher, as he crossed the road. She put a comforting palm over her son’s weighed down shoulder and gently pressed it with all her filial assurance.

4

The mistress of the house got frantically involved in doing up the house for the generous soul coming to change her son for the better. The big air-condition room was chosen for the honors. Two large beds were made for the teacher and the taught with proper lights and convenient tables at easy reach. A dining table was placed unobtrusively so that every moment was used for the metamorphosis of the young pupa into a beautiful butterfly. A rather big table was placed in one corner for studies, where the two men could comfortably sit for hours sans fatigue. As the 'D' day approached activities became more frantic. Poor lady was missing the services of her favorite cook, Bhayyaji. Hesitatingly, she had to take help from the manager of Blue Fox to get an able cook for the period of stay of Mr. Douglas. True to his friendship the manager soon arranged for an excellent multi-cuisine cook with good knowledge of British food. A fridge was put in the room. It was well stocked with fruits and various beverages, just a day before the expected arrival of the master.

A week later the much waited summer vacation began. Till then Shardul just could not know what Mr. Douglas did; but for certain it was confirmed the head master had forgotten to hand over transfer certificate to the frightened

hare. With fear free heart, the teenager entered in his done-up room and was swayed by the practical opulence for comfortable learning. He was impressed with the meticulousness of his loving mother, who had so very painstakingly attended to the minutest detail for the comfort of the teacher and the taught.

Sans any delay the Impala was sent to fetch Mr. Douglas. The tall lanky British came soon with very little baggage. The father was already there to receive him with the mother excitedly waiting for his arrival. He was ushered in the large drawing room to have leisure munching of chosen muffins from 'Muffins Et Al' from Chouranghee Road, to be washed down with the best quality Tetley!

Mr. Douglas was stumped, "What was the need of all this"?

"Indeed, this was the least we could attend to", was the father with plenty of expectations. He could not believe that there are still souls there who would go out of the way to help souls like him with no hope for their child. The mother just could not help thanking the Englishman repeatedly to the extent that he began to feel a little embraced. Among all those adult expectations the teenager was trying to figure out what exactly is expected of him. He for one thing was very clear, come what may he would never let down generous Mr. Douglas. With butterflies in his tummy, he was planning never to fail. He would do anything demanded of him by Mr. Douglas. For him there was only one path – not only to excel all his excellence but to become the most excellent student in the whole world. Was that possible? The question would now and then disturb him, but he moved on to fanaticize till the dinner

was served.

It was from the kitchen of the best hostess in the area. It would not be anything but the best. For the starter was Levens Hall Wild Rabbit & Leek Turnover, Piccalilli. For the fish course was whole salt baked Sea Trout to Share, Cockles, Potato Salad, Fennel & Samphire. The main course had real British sumptuousness. It had Barbeque "Beer Can" Cornfed Chicken, Summer Beans, Potato Skins, Tear & Share Bread to sign off with dessert, containing Raspberry & Chocolate Pavlova, Sheep's Milk & Nut Ice Cream Pots. The guest was totally flummoxed with the offerings, "My, I feel I am in London! This is just unbelievable! Amazingly, you have brought the best British cuisine on the table. How could you do this?"

"It is all the doing of my able wife", replied the master of the house.

"I must compliment you for being able to prepare such a lavish British dinner. It is just unthinkable anywhere in India and that too with such finesse! Bravo! You deserve the Queen's medal for being the best cook I have ever come across! Thank you madam, thank you very much!" The satiated teacher praised the lady as he washed his fingers in the finger bowl! Shardul was amazed that albeit the family was vegetarian, still what an offering his able Ma had prepared. He was proud of his mother, more so being a vegetarian she was ready to go to any extent for the welfare of her children. Indeed, the whole family had vegetarian food, but that too was no less than what was offered to the British teacher, who had to finally request before leaving the

table, “Please do not take this much of trouble for me. This would make me rather uncomfortable. Kindly, let me share the same exotic vegetarian meals like your family. As an after thought I feel I too could learn a lesson or two of better life from your family. I would turn vegetarian from now onwards!”

Amazed and honored, all got up and applauded the announcement. The mistress of the house was on the seventh heaven. Not able to restrain her joy she exulted, “Believe me Mr. Douglas. I would put all my heart and expertise to serve you the best vegetarian offerings not only from my country but from around the globe!”

The teacher was elated, “I am really blessed to have such wonderful friends! I look forward to every meal with elated excitement!” Turning to Shardul, “Young master, now you are left with no choice but to excel in everything. Let us go to our room and let your parents have well deserved rest. Your loving mother has toiled enough and so has your concerned father.” He turned to the parents and also to the servants in waiting, “Once again a very big thank you to you all. Good night.”

5

What a massive hall with jam-packed audience! On the dais are the most known dignitaries. The president of India too is there with the education minister of Singapore and Solzhenitsyn, the Nobel Laureate too! What a heady gathering of the intellectual galaxy of the year. The master-of-the ceremony comes on the stage and takes to the mike. “And the best student award goes to, master Shardul ----- and there is deafening, standing ovation as the young prodigy speedily climbs the steps of the stage. How he wished his elder brother too was there! He had gone for further studies to Bombay. Alone he receives his memento and the certificate of honor from the President who exuberantly shakes his hand with him in such a way that the teenager’s body shakes.

Suddenly, Shardul feels that he is being shaken. He opens his eyes. He is in his room, being awakened by Mr. Douglas. “Young man get up and get ready for the day”.

The sleepy colt then realized that there was no president and no award. He was dreaming in his room. He looked at the radium clock. It was 4.00 a.m. Wishing his teacher good morning he became alert and briskly moved toward the attached bath. While he was taking his hurried bath he

heard the honeyed strains of Bach's Partita 2 – Chaconne. He could not believe that such a serious mathematician like Mr. Douglas was a violin virtuoso! He hurried further and rushed to see his master deeply lost in playing Chaconne. Obediently he went and stood beside the tall Englishman, till he signed off Chaconne with élan!

The teacher turned to his taught, “So, are you ready?”

“Sir!”

“Then let’s go.”

He led the young boy by giving a pat over his shoulder and leaving the house silently. He took the back gate of the officers’ quarter that lead to the river front. He briskly led his young companion to the river bank. Reaching there he uttered his first words after leaving the house, “So, this is how we would begin our day daily, even on Sundays and holidays. Got it?”

“Sir!”

They began to stroll along the river bank. “So, from tomorrow we leave our house at 4.00 a.m. After that we have 40 minutes walk here. We return home to have violin lesson. I know you are interested in music. We will begin from tomorrow the basics of it and by the end of the year you be ready to perform in the annual concert of the school. This too is clear to you?”

“Sir!”

“After the violin lessons, you will have to solve not less than

50 sums a day. We would increase the number with your proficiency. After that we would have breakfast in our room and soon after that you would sit down with chemistry followed by physics. That would be followed by English literature. You would not only read, but would have to memories passages form Shakespeare and poems from your selection of Golden Treasury. By that time we would be close to lunch. We would have luxurious lunch and then rest a while. You know the British believe that after lunch rest a while. Hope this is acceptable to you?”

“Sir, not only this but all that you would tailor for me. I want to prove to you and Ma and rest of the world that I will keep my word and would excel my excellence. I promise never to fail you and Ma’s aspiration!”

“In afternoons, we attend to history and geography and moral science. Evening again we come for walks here and return to do more sums and take tests. I would give you test. Together with you, I too would be busy whole day, both to prepare the question papers and to solve every problem of yours.”

“And, the violin----?”

“Yes, the violin comes back finally! That would be the last thing in the day; practice till 11.00 p.m. and then off to bed. Come now let us be off to our bench work!”

6

A week had passed. Stock was taken. There was incredible progress. The boy thought to be a dullard was gradually shaping into a well oiled workaholic machine. Shardul had pushed himself into the furnace of excellence. What he lacked in brilliance he compensated with his ruthless diligence. Moments came even in the very first week when Mr. Douglas had to restrain his taught to take a break for a while, though personally he was feeling contended that his method was put to use by the committed boy to the fullest.

Shardul's math had improved remarkably and with that his self-confidence. Physics was no more as intimidating as he always felt. There were days when he thought suicide was better than the torture at alter of physics. Chemistry though full of mystery was not all that scary after all. History and geography became pleasure reading. English and Hindi were rather captivating because they were more of appealing stories than anything else. In short he never had this romance with his studies ever. He was enjoying every moment of freedom from the ignorance he had so erroneously feared. Mr. Douglas has filled him with self confidence. He began to believe in himself. He realized that if one put his mind to anything sincerely nothing was

impossible. He began to quote Napoleon Bonaparte more and more. The tests that Mr. Douglas gave him became child's game for him. On his own, one day he told Mr. Douglas, "Could I have bit stiffer test?"

It was the time of reckoning! Mr. Douglas was getting a bit relaxed. His disciple was getting into the right mode of academic excellence. He piled him with more work. Incidentally, that did not deter the young crusader in any manner. He began to put more effort to, in order to fit much more than before. This prompted Mr. Douglas to introduce painting in the daily timetable for the burdened child. Without letting him to know the teacher brought quite a number of water color sheets and few canvases and all sorts of color tubes and enough turpentine oil and set of brushes.

Now in afternoons Shardul was expected not to rest, rather attend to his painting lessons. Though not many entered the room without permission, but the sweeper and other errand boys and maids had sneak preview of what was going on in that room. They would enlighten the mistress of the house with the progress of her dear son.

With such adherence to his task Shardul had finished solving more than 2000 sums and had completed attentive reading of all the books more than ten times. He had drawn the relevant pictures mainly from bio-science and geography. He would draw any plant or animal picture in a jiffy and geography pictures were a child game. He would sit on the floor and with chalk draw the needed pictures many times, so much so he could draw all the pictures blind

folded by then. For any one to look back and ponder on such a progress was something unimaginable journey in the intellectual world!

7

Ramkhillawan had returned. Shardul had missed him when he found him absent in the beginning; since then the boy had got so deeply involved in his studies that he did not notice the return of his Bhayyaji! It was a matter of surprise for all. The village rustic too had matured unexpectedly. He too began to consider his master's son as his junior master and the formal distance was for all to see.

Except on the dining table, Shardul seldom met Ramkhillawan. As it is, the boy deeply immersed in improving himself academically, was rather oblivious of virtually all the members of the family and of the visitors who visited the family. For the parents that was a comforting sign. It was all the more comforting when they would come to know from Mr. Douglas that the taught was showing signs of metamorphosis. The boy was turning into a diligent taught. It only meant that somewhere down the line the boy had no confidence in himself, which he was slowly gaining!

Mr. Douglas had put his heart and soul in experimenting with his method of improving a poor student. He too was rather elated that the boy was improving more than he expected. Armed with the confidence he introduced

painting in the boy's routine. Now the boy was expected to paint regularly in afternoons.

It seemed that Shardul had a natural talent for fine art. Under the able guidance of Mr. Douglas he soon bloomed into a commendable landscapist. No one could believe that his water colors were anything less than masters. Indeed, he had copied most of them but the efforts were praiseworthy. Mr. Douglas was upbeat. He had already planned to have an exhibition of the collection during the annual function of the school. The violin lessons too were going on well. That too was an encouraging development. He began to train Shardul for Mozart's violin sonata in F (K. 377). With the boy's dexterity the buoyant teacher was confident that his taught would carry the same with élan in that year's annual function of the school.

While Mr. Douglas was dreaming about his student's presentations both in the forthcoming examinations and the annual function, Mr. Sheshadri's mother expired. That day the mistress of the house came up with the request that Mr. Douglas prolong his stay in their house till they return from their home town after the prescribed funeral rituals. The generous teacher accommodated the request and stayed back even after the school opened after summer vacation.

The parents had left and the teacher and the taught would go to school together and would return together in the family Impala. The management of the school, particularly the head master, were pleasantly surprised and happy to see the ocean of change brought about in Shardul's life by Mr. Douglas's experiment. In one of the school management

committee's meet it was decided that from next academic year the experiment could be done on a larger number of students and if successful could become a routine with poorly performing students.

Time flew and half yearly were round the corner. It was for the first time that there was no anxiety in Shshsadi family. All were relaxed and profusely thanking Mr. Douglas, who had by now moved to his school quarters after the return of the parents.

The result was a forgone conclusion. The resurrected student had performed commendably. He did not sleep on his new found laurels. He pushed himself still harder for the annual preparation, both for the finals and as well as the school annuals.

8

It was a resurged Shardul! He was everywhere. He was seen in the school drill with his proud mother applauding his every step. The father could not make it. For him video recording was being done. His watercolors were admired by one and all, and some one from Renaissance Art Gallery, from Park Street, made some enquires about the water colors. On the stage too his solo on violin sailed through pleasantly. In short it was like the newborn boy carried the day elegantly!

The hurly-burly of the annuals ended on great note. The folks from the art gallery finally landed at Sheshadri house. They wanted to know if the boy had any originals. Interestingly, he did have number of originals, mostly in cubic experiments. The 8” by 11” watercolors were a treat to the eyes. No one could believe the novice had stroked so masterly. The agent from the art gallery took half a dozen of them with a signed contract for many more in future. No one in the house could ever believe that Shardul was the same boy whom they thought was a lost child. The news went to Mr. Douglas. The elated teacher hugged the boy. He was grateful to the boy for making him proud.

The annuals were round the corner; so were many more

competitive examinations. The exuberant student was raring to take, not only the annuals, but many other competitive exams, particularly the one for scholarship to Cambridge. He was very well prepared even by the standard Mr. Douglas had set. He passed with flying colors both the annuals and the scholarship test for Cambridge. He rushed with his results to teachers' quarters to meet his messiah mentor. He was crestfallen. Mr. Douglas had left without leaving any forwarding address. The desperate student tried his level best to get the address. To his utter chagrin no one could provide him the same, not even the head master. He was desperate, as the date for his departure to Cambridge was fast approaching.

The 'D' day for him to fly to London came. All were just about to board the impressive Impala, when the postman came with an express telegram. It was at that very moment Shardul was bidding goodbye to his friend and his house help Bhayyaji. The telegram was addressed to Ramkhilawan. It was a joyous message – you are blessed with a son!

Arun Sharman

Saturday, 21 December 2014, 11.40 *ante meridian*

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