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WAITING FOR THE MAHATMA

OTHER BOOKS

by R K Narayan

THE MANEATER OF MALGUDI

THE GUIDE

THE FINANCIAL EXPERT

MR SAMPATH

THE ENGLISH TEACHER

THE DARK ROOM

THE BACHELOR OF ARTS

SWAMI AND FRIENDS

* * *

AN ASTROLOGER'S DAY AND OTHER STORIES

LAWLEY ROAD

* * *

NEXT SUNDAY

MY DATELESS DIARY

WAITING FOR THE MAHATMA

R K NARAYAN

INDIAN THOUGHT PUBLICATIONS
MYSORE

Tran l ted t F e h G m n H b ew etc

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PART ONE

His mother, who died delivering him, and his father, who was killed in Mesopotamia, might have been figures in a legend as far as Sriram was concerned He had, however, concrete evidence of his mother in a framed photograph which for years hung too high on the wall for him to see, when he grew tall enough to study the dim picture, he didn't feel pleased with her appearance, he wished she looked like that portrait of a European queen with apple cheeks and wavy coiffure hanging in the little shop opposite his house, where he often went to buy peppermints with the daily money given him by his granny Of his father, at least, there were recurring reminders On the first of every month the postman brought a brown, oblong cover, addressed to his granny Invariably Granny wept when the envelope came to her hand It made his childish mind wonder what could be there in that envelope to sting the tears out of her eyes It was only years later he understood that his granny had been receiving a military pension meant for him When the envelope came she invariably remarked I don't have to spend your pension in order to maintain you God has left us enough to live on,' and took it to the fourth house in their row, which was known as the 'Fund Office (what it meant, he never understood) and came back to say 'There is nothing so fleeting as untethered cash You can do what you like with it when you are old enough'

§

That portrait in the opposite shop fascinated his adolescent mind The shopman was known as Kannu, a parched, cantankerous, formidable man, who sat on his haunches all day briskly handing out goods to his customers Until eleven at night, when he closed the shop, his hollow voice could be heard haranguing someone, or arguing, or cowing his credit-demanding clientele What do you think I am! How dare you come again without cash? You think you can do me in? You are mistaken I can swallow ten of you at the same time, remember' The only softening influence in this shop of cigars, *beedis*, explosive aerated drinks, and hard words was the portrait of the lady with apple

cheeks curls falling down the brim of her coronet and large dark eyes 'Those eyes look at me, Sriram often thought For the pleasure of returning that look he went again and again to buy something or oth r at the shop

Whose is that picture? he asked once pausing between sips of a coloured drink

How should I know? Kannu said It s probably some queen probably Queen Victoria although he might with equal justifica tion have claimed her to be Maria Theresa or Ann Boleyn

What did you pay for it?

'Why do you want to know all that? said Kannu mildly irritated If it had been anyone else he would have shouted If you have finished your business be gone Don t stand there and ask a dozen questions

But Sriram occupied a unique position He was a good customer paid down a lot of cash every day and deserved respect for his bank balance He asked Where did you get that picture?

Kannu was in a jovial mood and answered You know that man, the Revenue Inspector in Pillaiah Street He owed me a lot of money I had waited long enough so one day I walked in and brought away this picture hanging in his room Something at least for my dues

If there is any chance said Sriram with timid hesitation of your giving it away tell me its price

Oh oh! said Kannu laughing He was in a fine mood. I know you can buy up the queen herself master *amindar* But I won't part with it. It has brou ht me luck Ever since I hung the picture th re my business has multiplied tenfold.

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One evening his grandmother asked Do you know what star it will be tomorrow?

No How should I? he asked comfortably reclining on the cold cement window-sill and watching the street. He had sat there morning to night ever since he could remember When he was a year old his grandmother put him down there and showed him the various diversions passing outside bullock carts horse-carria es, and the first few motor-cars of the age, honking away and rattling down the road He would not be fed unless he was allowed to wat h the go ngs-on of the street. She held a spoonful of rice and curd to his lips and exclaimed

'Oh, see that great motor-car Shall our little Ram travel in it?' And when he blinked at the mention of his name and opened his mouth, she thrust in the rice This window became such a habit with him that when he grew up he sought no other diversion except to sit there, sometimes with a book, and watch the street. His grandmother often reproached him for it. She asked 'Why don't you go and mix with others of your age?'

'I am quite happy where I am,' he answered briefly

'If you left that seat, you would have many things to see and learn,' said the old lady sharply 'Do you know at your age your father could read the almanac upside down, and could say at a moment's notice what star was reigning over which particular day?'

'He was probably a very wise man,' ventured Sriram.

'He *was* very wise Don't say 'probably,' corrected his grandmother 'And your grandfather, you know how clever he was! They say that the grandfather's reincarnation is in his grandson You have the same shaped nose as he had and the same eyebrows His fingers were also long just like yours But there it stops I very much wish you had not inherited any of it, but only his brain'

'I wish you had kept a portrait of him for me to see, Granny,' Sriram said 'Then I could have worshipped it and become just as clever as he'

The old lady was pleased with this, and said 'I'll teach you how you could improve yourself' Dragging him by the hand to the little circle of light under the hall lamp, she took the brown-paper-covered almanac from under a tile of their sloping roof Then she sat down on the floor, clamoured for her glasses till they were fetched, and forced Sriram to open the almanac and go through it to a particular page It was full of minute, bewildering symbols in intricate columns She pushed his face close to the page

'What is it you are trying to do?' he pleaded pathetically

She put her finger on a letter and asked 'What is this?

'*Sa* ' he read

It means *Sadhaya* That's your star' She drew her finger along the line and pointed at the morrow's date. 'Tomorrow is this date, which means it's your birth star It's going to be your twentieth birthday, although you behave as if you are half that I am going to celebrate it Would you like to invite any of your friends?

'No, never,' said Sriram positively

§

So all alone next day he celebrated his twentieth birthday His guest as well as hostess was his grandmother No one outside could have guessed what an important occasion was being celebrated in that house in Kabir Street numbered 14 The house was over two hundred years old and looked it. It was the last house in the street, or 'The first house' as his great grandfather used to say at the time he built it From here one saw the backs of market buildings and heard night and day the babble of the big crowd moving on the market road. Next door to Sriram's house was a small printing press which groaned away all day and next to it another two-hundred year-old house in which six noisy families lived, and beyond that was the Fund Office, where Granny kept her grandson's money A crooked street ran in front of these houses their closeness to the market and to a Higher Elementary Town School, the Local Fund Dispensary and above all to the half-dozen benches around the market fountain, was said to give these houses in Kabir Street a unique value.

The houses were all alike—a large single roof sloping down to the slender rose-wood pillars with carvings and brass decorations on them, and a *pyol*, an open brick platform under the windows on which the household slept in summer The walls were two feet thick, the doors were made of century-old teak planks with bronze knobs and the tiles were of burnt mud which had weathered the storms and rains of centuries All these houses were alike you could see end to end the slender pillars and tiles sloping down as if all of them belonged to a single house. Many changes had occurred since they were built two centuries ago Many of them had changed hands the original owners having been lost in the toils of litigation, some were rented out to tradesmen, such as the Sun Press the Butter Factory or the Fund Office, while their owners retired to villages or built themselves modern villas in Lawley Extension. But there were still one or two houses which maintained a continuity a link with the past. Number 14 was one such There the family lineage began centuries ago and continued still though reduced to just two members—Sriram and his grand mother

§

Granny had somewhere secured a yard-long sugarcane for the celebration, although it was not the season She said 'No birthday is truly celebrated unless and until a sugar-cane is seen in the house It's auspicious' She strung mango leaves across the doorway, and decorated the threshold with coloured rice-powder A neighbour passing down the road stopped to ask What's the celebration? Shall we blow out the ovens in our houses and come for the feast in yours?'

'Yes, by all means Most welcome,' said the old lady courteously, and added as if to neutralize the invitation, 'You are always welcome.' She felt sorry at not being able to call in the neighbours, but that recluse grandson of hers had forbidden her to invite anyone. Left to herself she would have engaged pipes and drums and processions, for this particular birthday was a thing she had been planning all along, this twentieth birthday when she would hand over the Savings Pass Book to her grandson and relinquish the trust

§

It was an adventure accompanying Granny to the Fund Office, four doors off She seemed to shrink in stature under an open sky—she who dominated the landscape under the roof of Number 14 lost her stature completely in the open Sriram couldn t help remarking, You look like a baby, Granny' Granny half-closed her eyes in the glare and whispered, 'Hush! Don t talk aloud, others may hear'

'Hear what?

Whatever it may be. What happens behind one s door must be known only to the folk concerned. Others had better shut up'

As if confirming her worst suspicion, Kanni cried breezily from his shop Oho, grandmother and her pet on an outing! A fine sight! The young gentleman is shooting up, madam!

Sriram felt proud of this compliment, he was seized with a feeling of towering height, and he pursed his lips in a determined manner He gripped in his right hand the brown calico-bound pass book presented to him with a somewhat dramatic gesture by his grandmother a moment ago

Oh, the young *subedhar* is going to the right school with the right book,' Kanni remarked 'He must live to be as great as his father and grandfather put together'

Granny muttered quickening her steps Don t stand and talk to that man he will plague us with his remarks that s why I never wanted your grandfather to sell that site opposite but he was an obstinate man such an obstinate man! He was also fond of this Kanni who was then a young fellow

Was Grandfather also buying plantains?

Not only plantains she muttered with a shudder recollecting his habit of buying cheroots in Kanni s shop She had thought it degrading for any person to be seen smoking a cheroot Like a baby sucking a candy stick! she was wont to remark disturbing the even tenor of their married life She had always blamed Kanni for encouraging her husband to smoke and never got over a slight grudge on that account

Before reaching the Fund Office they had interruptions from other neighbours who peeped out of their doorways and demanded to be told what extraordinary thing made the old lady go out in the company of her grandson They could understand her going out all alone on the first of the month in the direction of the Fund Office—that was understandable. But what made the lady go out in the company of the young fellow who was—an unusual sight—holding on to a bank book?

What! cried a lady who was a privileged friend of Granny's does it mean that this urchin is going to have an independent account?

He is no longer an urchin cried the old woman He s old enough to take charge of his own affairs How long should I look after him! I m not immortal Each responsibility should be shaken off as and when occasion arises to push off each responsibility This was a somewhat involved sentiment expressed in a round about manner but her friend seemed to understand it at once and cried, coming down the steps of her house How wisely you speak! The girls of these days should learn from you how to conduct themselves which pleased Granny so much that she stopped to whisper in her ear I was only a trustee of his money From today he will take care of his own money

Wisely done, wisely done the other cried and asked How much in all?

That you will never know said Granny and walked off Sriram who had gone ahead asked How is it Granny you stop and talk to everyone! What were you telling her?

Nothing she replied You follow the same rule and you

will be a happier man Your grandfather ruined himself by talking Anything that happened to him, good or bad, was bound to be known to everyone in the town within ten minutes, otherwise his soul felt restless'

Why should anything be concealed from anyone? asked the boy

'Because it's better so, that's all,' said the lady

All these interruptions on the way delayed her arrival at the bank The clock struck four as she showed her face at the counter

'Must you be on the last second, madam?' the manager asked 'Is there any reason why you could not come a little earlier?'

'No, none,' she said, 'except that I m not a young creature who can frisk along' The manager, used to her ways, got down from his high seat, opened a side door, and without a word, let her in

Sriram was being initiated into the mysteries of banking The bank manager opened the last page of his pass-book and said 'What figure do you see here? Sriram wondered for a moment if he was testing him in arithmetic, a most terrible memory of his early school days He became wary and ventured to say Thirty-eight thousand, five hundred rupees, seven annas, and six pies'

'Quite right!' cried Granny She appeared surprised at the intelligence he exhibited

Sriram asked petulantly, 'What did you take me for, Granny? Did you think I would not be good enough even for this?

'Yes, she said quietly How should I think otherwise, considering how well you have fared in your studies!

The manager, a suave and peace-loving man, steered them out of these dangerous zones, by changing the subject 'You see, this is your savings deposit You may draw two hundred and fifty rupees a week, not more than that Here is the withdrawal form See that you don t lose it and that nobody gets at it'

'Why? Would it be possible for anyone else to get at my money with that form?

Usually not, but it s our duty to take all possible precautions in money matters,' said the manager

Granny for some reason felt upset at Sriram s questions, Why do you ask so much? If the manager says, "Do this," or Do that, it's your duty to obey, that is all'

I always like to know what I am doing said Sriram and added There s nothing wrong in that

Granny turned to the manager and said with pride You see the present generation! They are not like us How many years have you been seeing me here Have you ever heard me asking why or how and why not at any time

The manager made indistinct noises not wishing to displease either his old customer or the new one He placed before the old lady a letter tapped the bottom of the page with his finger and said May I have your signature here? It s the new authorization and you won t be bothered to come here often as before

After twenty years relief Granny cried She had the triumphant expression of one who had run hard and reached the winning post Sriram did not fully realize what it all meant but took it quite casually He simply said If I had been you I wouldn t have taken all this trouble to accumulate the money

You are not me and that s just as well Don t say such things before this man who has watched and guarded your property all these years!

Sriram wanted to test how far the magic toy put into his hands would work. He seized the pen holder stabbed it into the ink well wrote off a withdrawal for two hundred and fifty rupees, tore off the page and pushed it before the manager with an air of challenge. Let us see if I am really the owner of this money!

The manager was taken aback by the speed of his activity He smiled and said But my dear fellow you know we close at four and cash closes at two every day If you want cash you must be here before two on any working day Change the date and you can come and collect it the first thing tomorrow Are you sure that you want all that sum urgently for the first draw?

Yes I am positive said Sriram. I would have taken more if you had permitted more than two hundred and fifty at a time

May I know why you need all this amount?' asked Granny

Is it or is it not my money? asked Sriram.

It is and it is not said Granny in a mystifying manner Remember I don t have to ask you what you do with your own funds It s your own business You are old enough to know what you do I don t have to bother myself at all about it It s purely your own business But I want to ask you—just to know things, that is all—why you want two hundred and fifty rupees now It s your business I know but remember one thing.

One is always better off with money unspent It's always safe to have one s bank balance undamaged

Quite right, quite right,' echoed the bank manager Great words of wisdom I tell you, young man, come tomorrow morning' he said, picking up the form

Granny cried Give it here,' and, snatching the paper from his hand, said, 'Correct it to fifty You need only fifty rupees now and not two hundred and fifty I'd have torn up this, but for the fact that it is your first withdrawal form and I don't want to commit any inauspicious act'

'Ah! That's a good idea,' said the manager 'It's better if you carry less cash about you nowadays with pick-pockets about'

He dipped the pen in the ink and passed it to Sriram Write your signature in full on all the corrections'

Sriram obeyed, muttering, 'See! This is just what I suspected! I m supposed to be the master of this money, but I cannot draw what I want! A nice situation!

The manager took the form back and said 'Come at ten-thirty tomorrow morning for your cash'

'I hope you won't expect me to come again with my grandmother!' Sriram said with heavy cynicism

Next day Sriram stood at Kanni s shop and ordered coloured drinks and plantains How much? he asked after he was satisfied

'Four annas,' said Kanni

Sriram drew from his pocket several rolls of notes, and pulled one out for Kanni It was a veritable display of wealth Kanni was duly impressed He immediately became deferential

Have you examined your pockets to see if there may not be some small change lying somewhere there?

If I had small change, would I be holding this out to you?' asked Sriram grandly

All right, all right'

Kanni received the amount and transferred it immediately to his cash chest Sriram waited for change Kanni attended to other customers

Sriram said, 'Where is my change?

Kanni said 'Please wait I have something to tell you You see——'

An itinerant tea vendor just then came up with his stove and kettle to ask for a packet of cigarettes And then there

four other customers The place was crowded and Kannu s customers had to stand on the road below his platform and hold out their hands like supplicants All the while Sriram stood gazing on the portrait of the rosy-cheeked queen who stared out at the world through the plantain bunches suspended from the ceiling School children came in and clamoured for peppermints in bottles Kannu served everyone like a machine

When everybody was gone Sriram asked How long do you want me to wait for my change?

Don t be angry master Kannu said He pulled out a long note book, blew the dust off its cover turned an ancient page and pointed at a figure and asked Do you see this?

Yes said Sriram wondering why everybody was asking him to read figures these days He read out Nine rupees twelve annas

It s a debt from your grandfather which is several years old I'm sure he d have paid it if he had lived—but one doesn t know when death comes I used to get him special cheroots from Singapore, you know

Why didn t you ask Granny?

Granny! Not I He wouldn t have liked it at all I knew some day you would come and pay

Oh, Sriram said generously Take it by all means and turned to go

That s a worthy grandson muttered Kannu Now the old man s soul will rest in peace.

But where will the soul be waiting? Don t you think he will have been re-born somewhere? said Sriram

Kannu did not wish to be involved in speculations on post mortem existence and turned his attention to the other customers

Before going away Sriram said, I can buy that picture off you whenever you can sell it remember

Surely surely When I wind up this shop I will remember to give it to you not till then it s a talisman for me

If the lady's husband turns up and demands the picture what will you do?' Sriram asked which made Kannu pause and reflect for a moment what his line of action should be

§

Sriram walked down the street not having any definite aim. He felt like a man with a high-powered talisman in his pocket something that would enable him to fly or go anywhere he pleased.

He thrust his fingers into his *jibba* pocket and went on twirling the notes He wished he had asked the manager to give him new ones he had given him what appeared to be second-hand notes probably the Fund Office Manager reserved the good notes for big men Who was a big man anyway? Anyone was a big man Himself not excluded He had money, but people still seemed to think he was a little boy tied to the apron strings of his grandmother His grandmother was very good no doubt, but she ought to leave him alone. She did not treat him as a grown up person It was exasperating to be treated like a kid all the time Why wouldn't she let him draw two hundred and fifty instead of fifty, if he wanted it? It would be his business in future, and she ought to allow him to do what he pleased Anyway it was a good thing he had only fifty to display before Kanni If he had shown two hundred he might have claimed half of it as his grandfather's debt Sriram was for a moment seized with the problem of life on earth was one born and tended and brought up to the twentieth year just in order to pay off a cheroot bill? This philosophical trend he immediately checked with the thought 'I shall probably know all this philosophy when I grow a little older, not now ' He dismissed his thought with 'I am an adult with my own money, going home just when I please Granny can't ask me what I have been doing '

He walked round and round the Market Road, gazing on shops, and wondering if there was anything he could buy The money in his pocket clamoured to be spent But yet there seemed to be nothing worth buying in the shops He halted for a moment, reflecting how hard it was to relieve oneself of one's cash A man who wore a cotton vest and a tucked-in *dhoti* held up to him a canvas folding chair,

'Going cheap, do you want it?

Sriram examined it This seemed to be something worth having in one s house. It had a red striped canvas seat and could be folded up There was not a single piece of furniture at home

'Ten rupees sir, best teakwood '

Sriram examined it keenly, although he could not see the difference between rosewood and teak or any other wood

'Is this real teak? he asked

'Guaranteed Mempi Hill teak, sir, that is why it costs ten rupees if it were ordinary jungle wood, you could have got it for four '

I will give seven rupees, said Sriram with an air of finality looking away He pretended to have no further interest in the transaction. The man came down to eight rupees Sriram offered him an extra half rupee if he would carry it to his door

Granny opened the door and asked in surprise, 'What is this?'

Sriram set up the canvas chair right in the middle of the hall and said, This is a present for you Granny

What! For me! She examined the canvas and said, It's no use for me. This is some kind of leather probably cow hide, and I can t pollute myself by sitting on it. I wish you had told me before going out to buy

Sriram examined the seat keenly dusted it, tapped it with his palm and said 'This is not leather Granny it is only canvas

What is canvas made of? she asked

Sriram said I have no idea, and she completed the answer with, Canvas is only another name for leather I don t want it. You sleep on it if you like

He followed this advice to the letter All day he lounged on this canvas seat and looked at the ceiling or read a tattered novel borrowed from the municipal library When evening came he visited the Bombay Anand Bhavan and ordered a lot of sweets and delicacies and washed them down with coffee After that he picked up a *beeda* covered with coloured coconut gratings chewed it with great contentment and went for a stroll along the river or saw the latest Tamil film in the Regal Picture Palace.

It was an unruffled, quiet existence which went on without a break for the next four years the passing of time being hardly noticed in this scheme—except when one or the other of the festivals of the season turned up and his granny wanted him to bring something from the market Another Dasara! or Another *Deepavali*! It looks as though I lighted crackers only yesterday! he would cry surprised at the passage of time

§

It was April. The summer sun bone like a ruthless arc lamp—and all the water in the well evaporated and the road-dust became bleached and weightless and flew about like flour spraying off the grinding wheels Granny said as Sriram was starting out for the evening Why don t you fetch some good jaggery for tomorrow and some jasmine for the *puja*? He had planned to go towards Lawley Extension today and not to th and he felt reluctant to oblige her But she was insist

'Tomorrow is New Year's Day'

Already another New Year!' he cried. 'It seems as though we celebrated one yesterday'

'Whether yesterday or the day before, it's a New Year's Day I want certain things for its celebration. If you are not going, I'll go myself It's not for me! It's only to make some sweet stuff for you'

Grumbling a great deal, he got up, dressed himself, and started out When he arrived at the Market he was pleased that his granny had forced him to go there.

As he approached the Market Fountain a pretty girl came up and stopped him

'Your contribution?' she asked, shaking a sealed tin collection box

Sriram's throat went dry and no sound came. He had never been spoken to by any girl before, she was slender and young, with eyes that sparkled with happiness He wanted to ask, 'How old are you? What caste are you? Where is your horoscope? Are you free to marry me?' She looked so different from the beauty in Kannu's shop, his critical faculties were at once alert, and he realized how shallow was the other beauty, the European queen, and wondered that he had ever given her a thought. He wouldn't look at the picture again even if Kannu should give it to him free

The girl rattled the money-box. The sound brought him back from his reverie, and he said, 'Yes, Yes', he fumbled in his *jibba* side-pocket for loose change and brought out an eight-anna silver coin and dropped it into the slot. The girl smiled at him in return and went away, seeming to move with the lightest of steps like a dancer Sriram had a wild hope that she would let him touch her hand, but she moved off and disappeared into the market crowd

'What a dangerous thing for such a beauty to be about!' he thought It was a busy hour with cycles, horse carriages and motor-cars passing down the road, and a jostling crowd was moving in and out of the arched gateway of the market. People were carrying vegetables, rolls of banana leaves and all kinds of New Year purchases Young urchins were hanging about with baskets on their heads soliciting 'Cooly, sir, cooly? She had disappeared into the market like a bird gliding on wings He felt that he wanted to sing a song for her But she was gone. He realized he hadn't even asked what the contribution was for

He wished he hadn t given just a nickel but thrust a ten rupee note into her collection box (he could afford it) and that would have given her a better impression of him, and possibly have made her stand and talk to him. He should have asked her where she lived. What a fool not to have held her up He ought to have emptied all his money into her money box. She had vanished through the market arch.

He vaguely followed this trail hoping that he would be able to catch another glimpse of her If ever he saw her again he would take charge of the money box and make the collection for her whatever it might be for He looked over the crowd for a glimpse again of the white sari over the shoulders of the jostling crowd, around the vegetable stalls But it was a hopeless quest, not a chance of seeing her again. Who could she be and where did she come from? Could it be that she was the daughter of a judge or might she be an other worldly creature who had come suddenly to meet him and whom he did not know how to treat? What a fool he was He felt how sadly he lacked the necessary polish for such encounters That was why it was urged on him to go to a college and pass his B.A Those who went to colleges and passed their B.A were certainly people who knew how to conduct themselves before girls

He passed into the market arch in the direction she took At the fly ridden jaggery-shop he said tentatively A lot of people are about collecting money for all sorts of things

The jaggery merchant said sourly Who will not collect money if there are people to give?'

I saw a girl jingling a money box. Even girls have taken to it Sriram said, holding his breath, hoping to hear something

'Oh, that, the other said, I too had to give some cash We have to. We can t refuse.

'Who is she?' Sriram asked unable to carry on diplomatically any further

The jaggery merchant threw a swift look at him which seemed slightly sneering, and said She has something to do with Mahatma Gandhi and is collecting a fund You know the Mahatma is coming.

Sriram suddenly came out of an age-old somnolence and woke to the fact that Malgudi was about to have the honour of receiving Mahatma Gandhi.

In that huge gathering sitting on the sands of Sarayu, awaiting the arrival of Mahatma Gandhi, Sriram was a tiny speck There were a lot of volunteers clad in white Khaddar moving around the dais The chromium stand of the microphone gleamed in the sun Police stood about here and there Busybodies were going about asking people to remain calm and silent People obeyed them Sriram envied these volunteers and busybodies their importance, and wondered if he could do anything to attain the same status The sands were warm, the sun was severe The crowd sat on the ground uncomplainingly

The river flowed, the leaves of the huge banyan and peepul trees on the banks rustled, the waiting crowd kept up a steady babble, constantly punctuated by the pop of soda-water bottles, longitudinal cucumber slices, crescent-shaped, and brushed up with the peel of a lime dipped in salt, were disappearing from the wooden tray of a vendor who was announcing in a subdued tone (as a concession to the coming of a great man), 'Cucumber for thirst, the best for thirst' He had wound a green Turkish towel around his head as a protection from the sun

Sriram felt parched, and looked at the tray longingly He wished he could go up and buy a crescent The thought of biting into its cool succulence was tantalizing He was at a distance and if he left his seat he'd have no chance of getting back to it He watched a lot of others giving their cash and working their teeth into the crescent 'Waiting for the Mahatma makes one very thirsty,' he thought

Every ten minutes someone started a canard that the great man had arrived, and it created a stir in the crowd It became a joke, something to relieve the tedium of waiting Any person, a microphone fitter or a volunteer, who dared to cross the dais was greeted with laughter and booing from a hundred thousand throats A lot of familiar characters, such as an old teacher of his and the pawnbroker in Market Road, made themselves unrecognizable by wearing white Khaddar caps They felt it was the right dress to wear on this occasion 'That Khaddar Store off the Market Fountain must have done a roaring business in white caps today,' Sriram thought Far off, pulled obscurely to one side was a police van with a number of men peering through the safety grill

There was a sudden lull when Gandhi arrived on the platform and took his seat

'That's Mahadev Desai,' someone whispered into Sriram's ears

Who is the man behind Gandhiji?

That's Mr Natesh our Municipal Chairman

Someone sneered at the mention of his name Some people conveniently adopt patriotism when Mahatmaji arrives

Otherwise how can they have a ride in the big procession and a seat on the dais?

Over the talk the amplifiers burst out Please please be silent

Mahatma Gandhi stood on the dais with his palms brought together in a salute A mighty cry rang out Mahatma Gandhi ki Jai! Then he raised his arm and instantly a silence fell on the gathering He clapped his hands rythmically and said I want you all to keep this up this beating for a while People were half hearted And the voice in the amplifier boomed No good Not enough I like to see more vigour in your arms more rhythm more spirit It must be like the drum beats of the non violent soldiers marching on to cut the chains that bind Mother India I want to hear the great beat I like to see all arms up raised and clapping There is nothing to be ashmed of in it I want to see unity in it I want you all to do it with a single mind And at once every man woman and child raised their arms and clapped over their heads

Sriram wondered for a moment if it would be necessary for him to add his quota to this voluminous noise He was hesitant

I see someone in that corner not quite willing to join us Come on you will be proud of this preparation

And Sriram felt he had been found out and followed the lead

Now a mighty choral chant began *Raghupathi Raghava Raja Ram Pathitha Pavana Seetha Ram* to a simple tune led by a girl at the microphone It went on and on and ceased when Mahatmaji began his speech Natesh interpreted in Tamil what Gandhi said in Hindi At the outset Mahatma Gandhi explained that he'd speak only in Hindi as a matter of principle I will not address you in English It's the language of our rulers It has enslaved us I very much wish I could speak to you in your own sweet language Tamil but alas I am too hard pressed for time to master it now although I hope if God in His infinite mercy grants me the longevity due to me that is one hundred and twenty five years I shall be able next time to speak to you in Tamil without troubling our friend Natesh

'Natesh has a knack of acquiring good certificates someone murmured in an aggrieved tone

'Runs with the hare and hunts with the hounds,' said a schoolmaster

'He knows all of them inside out. Don t imagine the old gentleman does not know whom he is dealing with

'I notice two men there talking,' boomed Gandhiji s voice 'It's not good to talk now, when perhaps the one next to you is anxious to listen If you disturb his hearing, it is one form of *himsa*' And at once the commentators lowered their heads and became silent People were afraid to stir or speak

Mahatma Gandhi said I see before me a vast army Everyone of you has certain good points and certain defects, and you must all strive to discipline yourselves before we can hope to attain freedom for our country An army is always in training and keeps itself in good shape by regular drill and discipline We, the citizens of this country, are all soldiers of a non-violent army, but even such an army has to practise a few things daily in order to keep itself in proper condition we do not have to bask in the sun and cry 'Left' or "Right" But we have a system of our own to follow that s *Ram Dhun*, spinning on the *charka* and the practice of absolute Truth and Non violence'

At the next evening s meeting Sriram secured a nearer seat He now understood the technique of attending these gatherings If he hesitated and looked timid, people pushed him back and down But if he looked like someone who owned the place, everyone stood aside to let him pass He wore a pair of large dark glasses which gave him, he felt, an authoritative look He strode through the crowd The place was cut up into sectors with stockades of bamboo, so that people were penned in groups He assumed a tone of bluster which carried him through the various obstacles and brought him to the first row right below the dais It took him further away from the sellers of cucumber and aerated water who operated on the fringe of the vast crowd But there was another advantage in this place he found himself beside the enclosure where the women were assembled Most of them were without ornaments, knowing Gandhiji's aversion to all show and luxury Even then they were an attractive lot, in their *saris* of varied colours, and Sriram sat unashamedly scanning the gathering his favourite hobby for the moment being to speculate on what type he would prefer for a wife

He fancied himself the centre of attraction if any woman happened to look in his direction Oh she is impressed by my glasses—takes me to be a big fellow, I suppose

recollected Gandhiji s suggestion on the previous day All women are your sisters and mothers Never look at them with thoughts of lust If you are troubled by such thoughts this is the remedy walk with your head down looking at the ground during the day and with your eyes up looking at the stars at night He had said this in answering a question that someone from the audience had put to him Sriram felt uncomfortable at the recollection He will probably read my thoughts It seemed to be a risky business sitting so near the dais

Gandhi seemed to be a man who spotted disturbers and cross thinkers however far away they sat He was sure to catch him the moment he arrived on the platform and say You there! Come up and make a clean breast of it Tell this assembly what your thoughts were Don t look in the direction of the girls at all if you cannot control your thoughts Sriram resolutely looked away in another direction where men were seated A most uninteresting and boring collection of human faces wherever I turn I see only some shopkeeper or a school master What is the use of spending one s life looking at them? Very soon unconsciously he turned again towards th women telling himself So many sisters and mothers I wish they would let me speak to them Of course I have no evil thoughts in my mind at the moment

Presently Mahatma ascended the platform and Sriram hastily took his eyes off the ladies and joined in the hand clapping with well timed devotion and then in the singing of *Raghupathi Raghava Raja Ram* After that Gandhi spoke on non violence and explained how it could be practised in daily life It is a perfectly simple procedure provided you have faith in it If you watch yourself you will avoid all actions big or small and all thoughts however obscure which may cause pain to another If you are watchful it will come to you naturally he said When someone has wronged you or has done something which appears to you to be evil just pray for the destruction of that evil Cultivate an extra affection for the person and you will find that you are able to bring about a change in him Two thousand years ago Jesus Christ meant the same thing when he said Turn the other cheek.

Thus he went on Sometimes Sriram felt it impossible to follow his words He could not grasp what he was saying but he looked rapt he tried to concentrate and understand This was the first time he felt the need to try and follow something

the first time that he found himself at a disadvantage. Until now he had had a conviction, especially after he began to operate his own bank account, that he understood everything in life. This was the first time he was assailed by doubts of his own prowess and understanding When Mahatmaji spoke of untouchability and caste, Sriram reflected, 'There must be a great deal in what he says We always think we are superior people. How Granny bullies that ragged scavenger who comes to our house every day to sweep the backyard! Granny was so orthodox that she would not let the cavenger approach nearer than ten yards, and habitually adopted a bullying tone while addressing him. Sriram also took a devilish pleasure in joining the baiting and finding fault with the scavenger's work, although he never paid the slightest attention to their comments He simply went about his business, driving his broom vigorously and interrupting himself only to ask, When will master give me an old shirt he promised so long ago?'

He suddenly noticed on the dais the girl who had jingled a money-box in his face a few days ago, at the market. She was clad in a *sari* of Khaddar, white home-spun, and he noticed how well it suited her Before, he had felt that the wearing of Khaddar was a fad, that it was apparel fit only for cranks, but now he realized it could be the loveliest of stuff. He paused for a moment to consider whether it was the wearer who was enriching the cloth or whether the material was good in itself But he had to put off the whole problem. It was no time for abstract considerations There she stood, like a vision beside the microphone, on the high dais, commanding the whole scene, a person who was worthy of standing beside Mahatmaji s microphone. How confidently she faced the crowd! He wished he could go about announcing, 'I know who that is beside the microphone into which Mahatmaji is speaking' The only trouble was that if they turned and asked him, What is her name? he would feel lost It would be awkward to say, 'I don t know, she came jingling a collection box the other day at the market. I wish I could say where she lives I should be grateful for any information'

At this moment applause rang out and he joined in it. Gandhiji held up his hand to say, It is not enough for you to clap your hands and show your appreciation of me. I am not prepared to accept it all so easily I want you really to make sure of a chance in your hearts before you ever think of asking the British to leave

the shores of India. It's all very well for you to take up the cry and create an uproar But that's not enough I want you to clear your hearts and minds and make certain that only love resides there, and there is no residue of bitterness for past history Only then can you say to the British Please leave this country to be managed or mismanaged by us, that s purely our own business, and come back any time you like as our friend and distinguished guest, not as our rulers, and you will find John Bull packing his suit-case. But be sure you have in your heart love and not bitterness

Sriram told himself looking at the vision beside the microphone, 'Definitely it's not bitterness I love her

'But, Mahatmaji was saying If I have the slightest suspicion that your heart is not pure or that there is b tterness there I d rather have the British stay on It s the lesser of two evils

Sriram thought *Oh revered Mahatmaji have no doubt* that my heart is pure and without bitterness How can I have any bitterness in my heart for a creature who looks so divine?

She was at a great height on the platform and her features were not very clear in the afternoon sun which seemed to set her face ablaze. She might be quite dark and yet wear a temporarily fair face illumined by the sun or she might really be fair If she were dark, without a doubt his grandmother would not approve of his marrying her In any case it was unlikely that they would have her blessing since she had other plans for his marriage a brother's granddaughter brought up in Kumbum a most horrible countrified girl who would guard his cash If Grandmother was so solicitous of his money she was welcome to take it all and hand it to the Kumbum girl That would be the lesser of two evils but he would not marry the Kumbum girl an unsightly creature with a tight oily braid falling on her nape and dressed in a gaudy village sari when the thing to do was to wear Khaddar He would refuse to look at anyone who did not wear khadi khadi alone was going to save the nation from ruin and get the English out of India, as that venerable saint Mahat maji explained unturningly He felt sad and depressed at the thought that in the twentieth century there were still people like the Kumbum girl whom he had seen many many years ago when his uncle came down to engage a lawyer for a civil suit in the village.

Sriram wanted to go and assure the girl on the grandstand that he fully and without the slightest reservation approved of

her outlook and habits It was imperative that he should approach her and tell her that He seized the chance at the end of the meeting

Mahatmaji started to descend from the platform There was a general rush forward, and a number of volunteers began pushing back the crowd, imploring people not to choke the space around the platform Mahatmaji himself seemed to be oblivious of all the turmoil going on around him Sriram found a gap in the cordon made by the volunteers and slipped through The heat of the sun hit him on the nape, the huge trees on the river s edge rustled above the din of the crowd, birds were creating a furore in the branches, being unaccustomed to so much noise below The crowd was so great that Sriram for a moment forgot where he was, which part of the town he was in, and but for the noise of the birds would not have remembered he was on the banks of Sarayu If that girl can be with Mahatmaji I can also be there,' he told himself indignantly as he threaded his way through the crowd There was a plethora of white-capped young men, volunteers who cleared a way for Mahatmaji to move in Sriram felt that it would have been so much better if he had not made himself so conspicuously different with his half-arm shirt and *mull dhoti*, probably products of the hated mills He feared that any moment someone might discover him and put him out If they challenged him and asked, 'Who are you? he felt he wouldn t be able to answer coherently, or he might just retort, Who do you think you are talking to, that girl supporting the Mahatma is familiar to me I am going to know her, but don t ask me her name She came with a collection box one day at the market '

But no such occasion arose No one questioned him and he was soon mixed up with a group of people walking behind Mahatmaji in the lane made by the volunteers, a crowds lined the sides He decided to keep going till he was stopped If someone stopped him he could always turn round and go home They would not kill him for it anyway Killing! He was amused at the word no word could be more incongruous in the vicinity of one who would not hurt even the British One could be confident he would not let a would be follower be slaughtered by his volunteers

Presently Sriram found himself in such a position of vantage that he lo t all fear of being t ken fo an in rude and walked along with a jaunty and familiar air, so that people l ring the route

looked on him with interest He heard his name called Sriram! An old man who used to be his teacher years before was calling him Even in his present situation Sriram could not easily break away from the call of a teacher it was almost a reflex he hesitated for a moment wondering whether he would not do well to run away without appearing to notice the call but almost as if reading his mind his teacher called again A moment! Sriram He stopped to have a word with his master an old man who had wrapped himself in a coloured shawl and looked like an apostle with a slight beard growing on his chin He gripped Sriram s elbow eagerly and asked Have you joined them?

Whom?

Them—— said the teacher pointing

Sriram hesitated for a moment wondering what he should reply and mumbled I mean to

Very good very good said the master In spite of your marks I always knew that you would go far smart fellow You are not dull but only lazy If you worked well you could always score first-class marks like anyone else but you were always lazy I remember how you stammered when asked which was the capital of England Ho! Ho! he laughed at the memory Sriram became restive and wriggled in his grip

The teacher said I am proud to see you here my boy Join the Congress work for the country you will go far God bless you

I am glad you think so sir said Sriram and turned to dash away

The teacher put his face close to his and asked in a whisper What will Mahatmaji do now after going in there?

Where? Sriram asked not knowing where Gandhi was going although he was following him

Into his hut replied the teacher

He will probably rest answered Sriram resolutely preparing to dash off If he allowed too great a distance to develop between himself and the group they might not admit him in at all

A little boy thrust himself forward and asked Can you get me Mahatma s autograph?

Certainly not replied Sriram gently struggling to release himself from his teacher's hold

His teacher whispered in his ear Whatever happens don t let down our country

No sir never I promise replied Sriram gently pushing

away his old master and running after the group, which were fast disappearing from his view

They were approaching a wicket gate made of thorns and bamboo He saw the girl going ahead to open the gate He sprinted forward as the crowd watched He had an added assurance in his steps now he felt that he belonged to the Congress The teacher had put a new idea into his head and he almost felt he was a veteran of the party He soon joined the group and he had mustered enough pluck to step up beside the girl It was a proud moment for him He looked at her She did not seem to notice his presence He sweated all over with excitement and panted for breath, but could not make out the details of her personality, complexion or features However, he noted with satisfaction that she was not very tall, himself being of medium height Gandhi was saying something to her and she was nodding and smiling He did not understand what they were saying, but he also smiled out of sympathetic respect He wanted to look as much like them as possible, and cursed himself for the hundredth time that day for being dressed in mill cloth

The Mahatma entered his hut This was one of the dozen huts belonging to the city sweepers who lived on the banks of the river It was probably the worst area in the town, and an exaggeration even to call them huts, they were just hovels, put together with rags, tin-sheets, and shreds of coconut matting, all crowded in anyhow, with scratchy fowls cackling about and children growing in the street dust The municipal services were neither extended here nor missed, although the people living in the hovels were employed by the municipality for scavenging work in the town They were paid ten rupees a month per head, and since they worked in families of four or five, each had a considerable income by Malgudi standards They hardly ever lived in their huts, spending all their time around the municipal building or at the toddy shop run by the government nearby, which absorbed all their earnings These men spent less than a tenth of their income on food or clothing always depending upon mendicancy in their off hours for survival Deep into the night their voices could be heard clamouring for alms, in all the semi-dark streets of Malgudi Troublesome children were silenced at the sound of their approach Their possessions were few, if a cow or a calf died in the city they were called in to carry off the carcass and then the colony at the river's edge brightened up, for they held a feast on the flesh of the dead animal and made money out of its

hide Reformer looked on with wrath and horror but did little else since as an untouchable class they lived outside the town limits beyond Nallappa s Grove where nobody went and they used only a part of the river on its downward course

This was the background to the life of the people in whose camp Gandhi had elected to stay during his visit to Malgudi It had come as a thunderbolt on the Municipal Chairman Mr Natesh who had been for weeks preparing his palatial house Neel Bagh in the aristocratic Lawley Extension for receiving Gandhi His arguments as to why he alone should be Mahatma ji s host seemed unassailable I have spent two lakhs on the build ing my garden and lawns alone have cost me twenty five thousand rupees so far What do you think I have done it for? I am a simple man sir my needs are very simple I don t need any luxury I can live in a hut but the reason I have built it on this scale is so that I should be able for at least once in my lifetime to receive a great soul like Mahatmaji This is the only house in which he can stay comfortably when he comes to this town Let me say without appearing to be boastful that it is the biggest and the best furnished house in Malgudi and we as the people of Malgudi have a responsibility to give him our very best so how can we house him in any lesser place?

The Reception Committee applauded his speech The District Collector who was the head of the district and the District Superintendent of Police who was next to him in authority attended the meeting as *ex officio* members

A dissenting voice said Why not give the Circuit House for Mahatmaji?

The Circuit House on the edge of the town was an old East India Company building standing on an acre of land on the Trunk Road Robert Clive was supposed to have halted there while marching to relieve the seige of Trichinopoly The citizens of Malgudi were very proud of this building and never missed an opportunity to show it off to anyone visiting the town and it always housed the distinguished visitors who came this way It was a matter of prestige for Governors to be put up there Even in this remote spot they had arranged to have all their conveniences undiminished with resplendent sanitary fittings in the bathrooms It was also known as the Glass House by virtue of a glass fronted bay room from which the distinguished guests could watch the wild animals that were supposed to stray near the building at night in those days

The dissenting voice in the Reception Committee said, 'Is it the privilege of the ruling race alone to be given the Circuit House? Is our Mahatmaji unworthy of it?'

The Collector, who was the custodian of British prestige, rose to a point of order and administered a gentle reproof to the man who spoke 'It is not good to go beyond the relevant facts at the moment If we have considered the Circuit House as unsuitable it is because we have no time to rig it up for receiving Mr Gandhi'

It was a point of professional honour for him to say *Mr* Gandhi and not *Mahatma*, and but for the fact that as the Collector he could close the entire meeting and put all the members behind bars under the Defence of India Act, many would have protested and walked out, but they held their peace and he drove home the point

Since Mr Gandhi's arrival has been a sudden decision, we are naturally unable to get the building ready for him, if I may say so, our chairman's house seems to suit the purpose and we must be grateful to him for so kindly obliging us

'And I am arranging to move to the Glass House leaving my house for Mahatmaji's occupation

That seemed to decide it, and his partisans cheered loudly It was resolved by ten votes to one that Mahatmaji should stay in Neel Bagh, and the chairman left the meeting with a heavy, serious look He wrote to Gandhiji's secretary, receiving a reply which he read at the next meeting Mahatma Gandhi wishes that no particular trouble should be taken about his lodging and that the matter may be conveniently left over till he is actually there'

The council debated the meaning of the communication and finally concluded that it only meant that though the Mahatma was unwilling to be committed to anything he would not refuse to occupy Neel Bagh

The dissenting voice said, 'How do you know that he does not mean something else?'

But he was soon overwhelmed by the gentle reprimand of the Collector The communication was finally understood to mean, 'I know Mahatmaji's mind, he does not want to trouble anyone if it is a trouble'

'He probably does not know that it is no trouble for us at all'

'Quite so quite so,' said another sooth sayer And they were all pleased at this interpretation

A further flattering comparison was raised by someone who wanted to create a pleasant impression on the Chairman Let us not forget that Mahatmaji takes up his residence at Birla House at Delhi and Calcutta I am sure he will have no objection to staying in a palatial building like the one our Chairman has built

The dissenting voice said Had we better not write and ask if we have understood him right and get his confirmation?

He was not allowed to complete his sentence but was hissed down and the District Superintendent of Police added slowly Even for security arrangements any other place would present difficulties

For this sentiment he received an appreciative nod from his superior the District Collector

When Gandhi arrived he was ceremoniously received all the big wigs of Malgudi and the local gentry being introduced to him one by one by the Chairman of the municipality The police attempted to control the crowd which was constantly shouting Mahatma Gandhi ki Jai When the Chairman read his address of welcome at the elaborately constructed archway outside the railway station he could hardly be heard much to his chagrin He had spent a whole week composing the text of the address with the help of a local journalist adding whatever would show off either his patriotism or the eminent position Malgudi occupied in the country s life The Collector had taken the trouble to go through the address before it was sent for printing in order to make sure that it contained no insult to the British Empire that it did not hinder the war effort and that it in no way betrayed military secrets He had to censor it in several places where the Chairman compared Malgudi to Switzerland (the Collector scored this out because he felt it might embarrass a neutral state) a reference to the hosiery trade (since the Censor felt this was a blatant advertisement for the Chairman s goods and in any case he did not want enemy planes to come looking for this institution thinking it was a camouflage for the manufacture of war material) and all those passages which hinted at the work done by Gandhiji in the political field. The picture of him as a social reformer was left intact and even enlarged anyone who read the address would conclude that politics were the last thing that Mahatmaji was interested in In any case in view of the reception the Collector might well have left the whole thing alone since cries of Mahatmaji ki Jai and Down with the Municipal Chairman

made the speech inaudible The crowd was so noisy that Mahatmaji had to remonstrate once or twice When he held up his hand the crowd subsided and waited to listen to him He said quietly, This is sheer lack of order, which I cannot commend Your Chairman is reading something and I am in courtesy bound to know what he is saying You must all keep quiet Let him proceed'

'No', cried the crowd We want to hear Mahatmaji and not the Municipal Chairman'

'Yes,' replied Mahatmaji 'You will soon hear me, in about an hour on the banks of your Sarayu River That is the programme as framed'

By whom?'

'Never mind by whom It has my approval That is how it stands On the sands of Sarayu in about an hour Your Chairman has agreed to let me off without a reply to his very kind address You will have to listen to what he has to say because I very much wish to '

This quietened the mob somewhat and the Chairman continued his reading of the address, although he looked intimidated by the exchanges The Collector looked displeased and fidgety, feeling he ought to have taken into custody the dissenting member, who had perhaps started all this trouble in the crowd He leaned over and whispered to the Chairman, Don t bother, read on leisurely You don t have to rush through, but the Chairman only wished to come to the end of his reading, he was anxious to be done with the address before the crowd burst out again He did not complete his message a second too soon, as presently the crowd broke into a tremendous uproar, which forced the Police Superintendent hastily to go down and see what was the matter, an action which had to be taken with a lot of discretion since Gandhi disliked all police arrangements

Through archways and ringing cries of Gandhi ki Jai, Gandhi drove in the huge Bentley which the Chairman had left at his disposal People sat on trees and house-tops all along the way and cheered Gandhiji as he passed The police had cordoned off various side streets that led off from the Market Road, so the passage was clear from the little Malgudi station to Lawley Extension There were police everywhere, although the District Superintendent of Police felt that the security arrangements had not been satisfactory All shops had been closed and all schools, and the whole town had gone into festivity on this occasion

School children felt delighted at the thought of Gandhi Office goers were happy and even banks were closed They waited in the sun for hours saw him pass in his Bentley a white-clad figure fair skinned and radiant with his palms pressed together in a salute

When they entered Neel Bagh whose massive gates were of cast iron patterned after the gates of Buckingham Palace the Chairman, who was seated in the front seat waited to be asked 'Whose house is this? But Gandhiji did not seem to notice any thing They passed through the drive with hedges trimmed flower pots putting forth exotic blooms and lawns stretching away on either side and he kept his ears alert to catch any remark that Gandhiji might let fall but still he said nothing He was busy looking through some papers which his secretary had passed to him

The thought that Gandhiji was actually within his gates sent a thrill of joy up and down the Chairman s spine He had arranged everything nicely All his own things for a few days had been sent off to the Circuit House (which the Collector had given him on condition that he limewash its walls and repaint its wooden doors and shutters) He felt a thrill at the thought of his own sacrifice Some years before he could never have thought of forsaking his own air conditioned suite and choosing to reside at the Circuit House for anybody's sake The Chairman had now surrendered his whole house to Gandhiji No doubt it was big enough to accommodate his own family without interfering with his venerable guest and his party (a miscellaneous gathering of men and women dressed in white khaddar who attended on Mahatmaji in various capacities who all looked alike and whose names he could never clearly grasp) but he did not like to stay on because it seemed impossible to live under the same roof with such a distinguished man and to take away a little from the sense of patriotic sacrifice that his action entailed So he decided to transfer himself to the Circuit House

He had effected a few alterations in his house such as substituting khaddar hangings for the gaudy chintz that had adorned his doorways and windows and had taken down the pictures of hunting gentry vague gods and kings He had even the temerity to remove the picture of George V s wedding and substitute pictures of Maulana Azad Jawaharlal Nehru Sarojini Naidu Motilal Nehru C. Rajagopalachari and Annie Besant He had ordered his works manager to secure within a given time all the

available portraits of our national leaders', a wholesale order which was satisfactorily executed, and all the other pictures were taken down and sent off to the basement room He had also discreetly managed to get a picture of Krishna discoursing to Arjuna on Bhagavad-Gita, knowing well Gandhi's bias towards Bhagavad-Gita. He had kept on the windowsill and in a few other places a few specimens of *Charka* (spinning wheels)

No film decorator sought to create atmosphere with greater deliberation He worked all the previous night to attain this effect, and had also secured for himself a khaddar *jibba* and a white Gandhi cap, for his wife a white khaddar *sari*, and for his son a complete outfit in khaddar His car drove nearly a hundred miles within the city in order to search for a white khaddar cap to fit his six year old son's dolicho-cephalic head, and on his shirt front he had embroidered the tricolour and a spinning wheel

Now he hoped as he approached the main building that his wife and son would emerge in their proper make-up to meet Gandhi he hoped his wife would have had the good sense to take away the diamond studs not only in her ears but also in their son's He had forgotten to caution them about it. The moment the car stopped in the decorated porch of the house, the Chairman jumped down, held the door open and helped Mahatmaji to alight

'You are most welcome to this humble abode of mine, great sire,' he said in confusion, unable to talk coherently Mahatmaji got down from the car and looked at the house

'Is this your house? he asked

'Yes, sir, by the grace of God I built it four years ago, the Chairman said, his throat going dry

He led Gandhi up the veranda steps He had placed a divan in the veranda covered with khaddar printed cloth He seated Gandhi on it and asked his secretary in a whisper 'May I give Mahatmaji a glassful of orange juice? The oranges are from my own estates in Mempi' A number of visitors and a miscellaneous crowd of people were passing in and out. It seemed to the Chairman that Mahatmaji's presence had the effect of knocking down the walls of a house, and converting it into a public place—but that was the price one had to pay for having the great man there People were squatting on the lawns and the Chairman saw helplessly that some were plucking flowers in his annual bed, which had been tended by his municipal overseers

Gandhi turned in his direction and asked 'What were you saying?' His secretary communicated the offer of oranges

Gandhi said 'Yes most welcome. I shall be happy to look at the oranges grown in your own gardens

The Chairman ran excitedly about and returned bearing a large tray filled with uniform golden oranges He was panting with the effort. He had gone so far in self-abnegation that he would not accept the services of his usual attendants He placed the tray in front of Mahatmaji.

My humble offering to a great man these are from my own orchards on the Mempi hills, he said. 'They were plucked this morning.

Then he asked, May I have the honour of giving you a glass of orange juice? You must have had a tiring day

The Mahatma declined, explaining that it was not his hour for taking anything He picked up one fruit and examined it with appreciative comments, turning it slowly between his fingers The Chairman felt as happy as if he himself were being scrutinized and approved. On the edge of the crowd, standing below on the drive, Mahatmaji noticed a little boy and beckoned to him to come nearer The boy hesitated. Mahatmaji said *Ao Ao*— in Hindi. When it made no impression on the boy he said in the little Tamil he had picked up for this part of the country *Inge Va*' Others pushed the boy forward he came haltingly Gandhi offered him a seat on his divan, and gave him an orange This acted as a signal. Presently the divan was swarming with children. When the tray was empty the Mahatma asked the Chairman Have you some more?' The Chairman went in and brought a further supply in a basket and all the children threw off their reserve, became clamorous and soon the basket was empty 'There are some flowers and garlands in the car Gandhi whispered to his secretary—this had been presented to him on his arrival and all along the way by various associations The place was fragrant with roses and jasmine. These he distributed to all the little girls he saw in the gathering The Chairman felt chagrined at the thought that the event was developing into a children s party After the oranges and flowers he hoped that the children would leave, but he found them still there. 'They are probably waiting for apples, now I suppose! he reflected bitterly

Gandhi had completely relaxed. His secretary was telling him In fifteen minutes the deputation from—will be here, and after that —— He was reading from an engagement pad.

The Chairman regretted that both the District Superintendent of Police and the Collector had turned away at his Buckingham Palace gate after escorting the procession that far as an act of official courtesy if they were here now, they would have managed the crowd For a moment he wondered with real anxiety whether the crowd proposed to stay there all night But his problem was unexpectedly solved for him Mahatmaji saw one child standing apart from the rest—a small dark fellow with a protruding belly and wearing nothing over his body except a cast-off knitted vest, adult size, full of holes, which reached down to his ankles The boy stood aloof from the rest, on the very edge of the crowd His face was covered with mud, his feet were dirty, he had stuck his fingers into his mouth and was watching the proceedings on the veranda keenly, his eyes bulging with wonder and desire He had not dared to come up the steps, though attracted by the oranges He was trying to edge his way through

Mahatma s eyes travelled over the crowd and rested on this boy—following his gaze the Chairman was bewildered He had a feeling of uneasiness Mahatmaji beckoned to the young fellow One of his men went and brought him along The Chairman s blood boiled Of course people must like poor people and so on, but why bring in such a dirty boy, an untouchable up the steps and make him so important? For a moment he felt a little annoyed with Mahatmaji himself, but soon suppressed it as a sinful emotion He felt the need to detach himself sufficiently from his surroundings to watch without perturbation the happenings around him Mahatmaji had the young urchin hoisted beside him on the divan 'Oh, Lord, all the world's gutters are on this boy, and he is going to leave a permanent stain on that Kashmir counterpane' The bo was making himself comfortable on the divan having accepted the hospitality offered him by the Mahatma He nestled close to the Mahatma, who was smoothing out his matted hair with his fingers, and was engaged in an earnest conversation with him

The Chairman was unable to catch the trend of their talk He stepped nearer, trying to listen with all reverence The reward he got for it was a smile from the Mahatma himself The bo was saying 'My father sweeps the streets'

With a long broom or a short broom? the Mahatma asked The boy explained, He has both a long broom and a short broom He was spitting out the seeds of an orange

The Mahatma turned to someone and explained It means that he is both a municipal sweeper and that he has scavenging work to do in private houses also The long broom ought to be the municipal emblem

Where is your father at the moment?

He is working at the market He will take me home when he has finished his work

And how have you managed to come here?

I was sitting on the road waiting for my father and I came along with the crowd No one stopped me when I entered the gates

That s a very clever boy Mahatmaji said I m very happy to see you But you must not spit those pips all over the place in fact you must never spit at all It s very unclean to do so and may cause others a lot of trouble When you eat an orange others must not notice it at all The place must be absolutely tidy even if you have polished off six at a time

He laughed happily at his own quip and then taught the boy what to do with the pips how to hide the skin and what to do with all the superfluous bits packed within an orange The boy laughed with joy All the men around watched the proceedings with respectful attention And then Gandhi asked

Where do you live?

The boy threw up his arm to indicate a far distance There at the end of the river

Will you let me come to your house?

The boy hesitated and said Not now—because because it s so far away

Don t bother about that I ve a motor car here given to me you see by this very rich man I can be there in a moment I ll take you along in the motor car too if you will show me your house

It is not a house like this said the boy but made of bamboo or something

Is that so? said the Mahatma Then I ll like it all the more I ll be very happy there

He had a brief session with a delegation which had come to see him by appointment when it left he dictated some notes wrote something and then picking up his staff said to the Chairman Let us go to this young man s house I m sure you will also like it

Now? asked the Chairman in great consternation He mumbled Shall we not go there tomorrow?

'No, I've offered to take this child home I must not disappoint him I'd like to see his father too, if he can be met anywhere on the way'

Mahatmaji gave his forefinger to the young boy to clutch and allowed himself to be led down the veranda steps The Chairman asked dolefully, 'Won't you come in and have a look round my humble home?'

'I know how it will be It must be very grand But would you not rather spare an old man like me the bother of walking through those vast spaces? I m a tired old man You are very hospitable Anyway, come along with us to this little man's home If I feel like it, you will let me stay there'

The Chairman mumbled, I hoped—— But Gandhiji swept him aside with a smile

'You will come along with me too Let me invite you to come and stay with me in a hut'

Unable to say anything more, the Chairman merely replied, 'All right, sir, I obey'

The warmth of Mahatma's invitation made him forget his problems as a Chairman and his own responsibilities Otherwise he would not have become oblivious of the fact that the sweepers' colony was anything but a show piece Not till the Collector later sought him out and arraigned him for his lapse did it occur to him what a blunder he had committed

The Collector said, Have you so little sense, Chairman, that you could not have delayed Mr Gandhi's visit at least by two hours, time to give the people a chance to sweep and clean up that awful place? You know as well as I do, what it is like All of which the Chairman took in without a word

He was gloating over the words spoken to him by Mahatmaji Not till his wife later attacked him did he remember his omission in another direction She said in a tone full of wrath, There I was waiting dressed as you wanted, with the boy, and you simply went away without even calling us!'

Why couldn't you have come out? he asked idiotically

'How could I when you had said I must wait for your call She sobbed With the great man at our house, I did not the good fortune even to go before him And the child—what a disappointment for him!'

When they got over their initial surprise, the authorities did everything to transform the place All the stench mysteriously vanished, all the garbage and offal that lay about, and fresh

hide put out to sun dry on the roofs disappeared All that night municipal and other employees kept working with the aid of petrol lamps light there was such a rarity that the children kept dancing all night around the lamps Gandhiji noticed the hectic activity but out of a sense of charity refrained from commenting on it Only when it was all over did he say Now one can believe that the true cleansers of the city live here The men of the colony tied round their heads their whitest turbans and the women wore their best saris dragged their children to the river and scrubbed them till they yelled and decorated their coiffures with yellow chrysanthemum flowers The men left off fighting did their best to keep away from the drink shops and even the few confirmed topers had their drinks on the sly and suppressed their impulse to beat their wives or break their household pots The whole place looked bright with lamps and green mango leaves tied across lamp-posts and tree branches

Gandhi occupied a hut which had a low entrance He didn t like to oust anyone from his hut but chose one facing the river sand after making certain that it had been vacant the occupant of the hut having gone elsewhere The Chairman brought in a low divan and covered the floor with a coarse rush mat for Gandhi s visitors to s t on Sriram lowered himself unobtrusively on the mat Gandhi sat on his divan and dictated to one of his secretaries They wrote voluminously Mahatmaji performed a number of things simultaneously He spoke to visitors He dictated He wrote He prayed He had his sparse dinner of nuts and milk and presently he even laid himself down on the divan and went off to sleep It was then that someone turned off the lamp and people walked out of the hut

Sriram now felt that he could not continue to sit there Although no one bothered to ask him what he was doing he could not stay any more When he saw the girl was preparing to leave the hut he felt he had better get up and go otherwise someone might say something unpleasant to him

The girl lifted Gandhi s spinning wheel put it away noiselessly and tip-toed out of the room She passed without noticing him at first but the fixed stare with which he followed her movements seemed to affect her She went past him but suddenly stopped and whispered You will have to go now and Sriram sprang up and found himself outside the hut in one bound

Sriram felt a little piqued "You seem to be a very ill tempered and sharp-tongued girl. You can't answer a single question without a challenge."

"Hush! You will wake up Bapuji standing and talking here," she said.

"Well if he is going to be awakened by anyone's talk it will be yours because no one else is doing the talking" he replied.

"I have a right to ask you what you are doing here and report to our *Chalak* if I don't like you" she said with a sudden tone of authority

"Why should you not like me?" he asked.

"No one except close associates and people with appointments are allowed to enter Bapuji's presence"

"I will tell them I am your friend and that you took me in" he replied

"Would you utter a falsehood?" she asked

"Why not?"

"None except absolute truth-speakers are allowed to come into Mahatma's camp People who come here must take an oath of absolute truth before going into Mahatma's presence"

"I will take the vow when I become a member of the camp *Till then I will pass off something that looks like truth*" he said

"When Mahatma hears about this he will be very pained and he will talk to you about it."

Sriram was now genuinely scared and asked pathetically "What have I done that you should threaten and menace me?"

This softened her and for the first time he noticed a little tenderness had crept into her tone

"Do you mind moving off and waiting there? We should not be talking like this near Mahatmaji's hut. I will go to my hut and then join you there"

She turned and disappeared she had the lightening like motion of a dancer again the sort of pirouetting movement that she had adopted while carrying off other people's coins in a jingling box. She passed down the lane He moved off slowly He was tired of standing He sat on a boulder at the edge of the river kicking up the sand with his toes and ruminating on his good fortune. He had never hoped for anything like it It might have been a dream. This time yesterday he could not have thought he would talk on these terms to the money box girl. He realized he had not yet asked her name He remembered that he had felt hungry and thirsty long ago I wish they would

give us all something to eat in Mahatmaji's camp' He remembered that Mahatma ate only groundnuts and dates He looked about hoping there would be vendors of these articles The Taluk Office gong sounded nine He counted it deliberately, and wondered what his granny would make of his absence now She will fret and report to the police, I suppose' he reflected cynically He wished he had asked his teacher to go and tell Granny not to expect him home till Gandhiji left the town On second thoughts it struck him that it was just as well that he had not spoken to the teacher, who would probably have gone and spread the rumour that his interest in Gandhi was only a show and that he was really going after a girl What was her name? Amazing how he had not yet asked her it, and the moment she came back he said, What is your name?'

Bharati,' she answered 'Why?'

Just to know, that's all Have I told you my name is Sriram?'

Yes, you have told me that more than once, she said, 'I have heard again and again that you are Sriram'

'You are too sharp-tongued,' he replied, It is a wonder they tolerate you here, where peace and kindness must be practised'

I am practising kindness, otherwise I should not be speaking to you at all. If I didn t want to be kind to you I wouldn't have gone in and taken my *Chalak's* permission and come right away here We must have permission to talk to people at this hour There is such a thing as discipline in every camp Don t imagine that because it is Mahatmaji s camp it is without any discipline He would be the first to tell you about it if you raised the question with him'

You have the same style of talk as my grandmother She is as sharp-tongued as you are, Sriram said pathetically

She ignored the comparison and asked, 'What about your mother?

'I have never seen her, my grandmother has always been father and mother to me Why don't you meet her? You will like her both of you speak so much alike?'

'Yes, yes, said the girl soothingly, someday I will come and meet her as soon as this is all over You see how busy I am now

She became tender when she found that she was talking to someone without a mother, and Sriram noticing this felt it was worthwhile being motherless and grandmother tended She sat on the same step, with her legs dangling in the river, leaving a gap of a couple of feet between them The river rumbled into

the dark starlit night the leaves of the huge tree over the ancient steps rustled and sighed Far off bullock carts and pedestrians were fording the river at Nallappa s Grov Distant voices came through the night Mahatmaji s camp was asleep It was so quiet that Sriram felt like taking the girl in his arms but he resisted the idea He feared that if he touched her she might push him into the river The girl was a termagant she would surely develop into the same type as his grandmother with that sharp tongue of hers Her proximity pricked his blood and set it coursing

There is no one about What can she do? he reflected. Let her try and push me into the river and he will know with whom she is dealing and the next moment he blamed himself for his own crude thoughts It is not safe with the Mahatma there He may already have read my thoughts and be coming here He was a Mahatma because awake or asleep he was fully aware of what was going on all round him God alone could say what the Mahatma would do to someone who did not possess absolute purity of thought where girls were concerned. It meant hardship no doubt but if one was to live in this camp one had to follow the orders that emanated from the great soul. He struggled against evil thoughts and said Bharati? she looked startled at being called so familiarly and he himself felt startled by the music of her name

What a nice name! he remarked

I am glad you like it she said 'The name was given by Bapuji himself

Oh, how grand! he cried

She added, You know my father died during the 1920 movement Just when I was born When he learnt of it Bapuji, who had come down South made himself my godfather and named me Bharati which means — I hope you know what.

Yes Bharat is India and Bharati is the daughter of India I suppose

Right, she said and he was pleased at her commendation.

After my mother died, I was practically adopted by the local Sevak Sangh and I have not known any other home since, she said.

Do you mean to say that you are all the time with these people?

What is wrong in it?' she asked. It has been my home.

'Not that, I was only envying you. I too wish I could be with you all and do something instead of wasting my life

This appealed to her and she asked, 'What do you want to do?'

The same as what you are doing What are you doing? he asked

'I do whatever I am asked to do by the Sevak Sangh Sometimes they ask me to go and teach people spinning and tell them about Mahatmaji's ideas Sometimes they send me to villages and poor quarters I meet them and talk to them and do a few things I attend to Mahatmaji's needs

'Please let me also do something along with you,' he pleaded 'Why don't you take me as your pupil? I want to do something good I want to talk to poor people'

'What will you tell them?' she asked ruthlessly

He made some indistinct sounds I will tell them whatever you ask me to tell them,' he said, and this homage to her superior intelligence pleased her

'H'm! But why?' she asked

He summoned all his courage and answered, 'Because I like you, and I like to be with you'

She burst into a laugh and said, That won't be sufficient. They ' she indicated a vast army of hostile folk behind her back. 'They may chase you away if you speak like that

He became sullen and unhappy He rallied and said presently, 'Well, I too would willingly do something'

What? she taunted him again

He looked at her face helplessly, desperately, and asked, 'Are you making fun of me?

'No, but I wish to understand what you are saying'

She relented a little, presently, and said, 'I will take you to Bapu, will you come?

He was panic stricken No, no, I can't'

'You have been there already'

He could give no reasonable explanation and now he realized the enormity of his rashness He said, No, no, I would be at a loss to know how to talk to him, how to reply to him and what to tell him'

But you sat there before him like someone always known to him!" she said, like his best friend'

She laughed and enjoyed teasing him

'Somehow I did it, but I won t do it again,' he declared, He may find me out if I go before him again

Suddenly she became very serious and said, 'You will have to face Bapuji if you want to work with us'

Sriram became speechless His heart palpitated with excitement He wished he could get up and run away flee once and for all the place be done with it and turn his back on the whole business for ever This was too much The gods seemed to be out to punish him for his hardihood and presumption

He cried Bharati tell me if I can meet you anywhere else, otherwise please let me go He was in a cold sweat What should I say when I speak to him? I would blabber like an idiot

You are already doing it she said unable to restrain her laughter

He said pathetically You seem to enjoy bothering me I am sorry I ever came here

Why are you so cowardly? she asked

Sriram said resolutely I can t talk to Mahatmaji I wouldn t know how to conduct myself before him

Just be yourself It will be all right

I wouldn t be able to answer his questions properly

He is not going to examine you like an inspector of schools You don t have to talk to him unless you have something to say You may keep your mouth shut and he won t mind You may just be yourself say anything you feel like saying He will not mind anything at all but you will have to speak the truth if you speak at all.

'Truth! In everything! he looked scared

Yes in everything You may speak as bluntly as you like and he will not take it amiss provided it is just truth

Sriram looked more crushed than ever In this dark night he seemed to have a terrible problem ahead of him After brooding over it for a while he said Bharati tell me if I may meet you anywhere else Otherwise let me go

She replied with equal resolution If you wish to meet me come to Bapuji the only place where you may see me Of course if you don t want to see me any more go away

This placed him in a dilemma Where? How? he asked

Come to the door of Bapu s hut and wait for me

When? Where?

At three a m. tomorrow morning I ll take you to him.

Saying this she jumped to her feet and ran off towards her hut

§

Granny had slept fitfully She had gone up to Kannı's shop five times during the evening to enquire if anyone had seen Sriram, and sent a boy who had come to make a purchase there to look for Sriram everywhere At last the schoolmaster who lived up the street told her as he passed her house,

Your pet is in Mahatma's camp I saw him.'

'Ah! What was he doing there? asked Granny alarmed For her the Mahatma was one who preached dangerously, who tried to bring untouchables into the temples, and who involved people in difficulties with the police She didn t like the idea She wailed, 'Oh, master, why did you allow him to stay on there? You should have brought him away It is so late and he has not come home As his old teacher you should have weaned him away from there'

'Don t worry, madam, he is perfectly safe How many of us could have the privilege of being so near the Mahatma? You must be happy that he is doing so well! Our country needs more young men like him'

Granny replied, 'It is teachers like you who have ruined our boys and this country,' and turned in, slamming the door

When Sriram arrived and knocked she was half asleep and in the worst possible mood She opened the door, let him in, bolted the door again, and went back to her bed saying, I have kept some rice in that bowl mixed with curd and the other one is without curd Put out the lamp after you have eaten' Lying in bed, she listened to the sound of Sriram putting away his plate and leaving the kitchen And then she turned her face to the wall and pretended to be asleep She hoped that her grandson would understand her mood, come over, and assure her that he would not get into bad ways but the young man was otherwise engaged. He was in a state of semi-enchantment Bharati s presence and talk still echoed in his mind, and he recollected the thrill of her touch He liked to think that when he was not noticing she had touched his arm and patted his shoulder He thought how he would prefer the rest of his life listening to her banter, but that meant—here was the conflict—he would have to go into the Presence All else seemed to him insignificant beside this great worry If it had been any other day he would have pulled his Granny out of her sleep and narrated to her all the day s events If she happened to be in a bad mood he would have pulled her

out of it He knew now that she was not in a proper temper he could sense it the moment he stepped on the threshold but he preferred to leave her alone he felt he had a far greater problem to tackle than appeasing the mood of a mere Granny

He went to bed and slept in all less than an hour Bharati wanted him there at three a m and he needed an hour to reach the place He got up before one washed and bathed and put on special clothes bent over his granny s bed to whisper I have to be going now bolt the door

She essayed to ask What! At this hour what has come over you? but he was gone on soft footsteps closing the door behind him

§

He stood at the entrance to Mahatmaji s hut holding his breath It was very difficult to decide what he should do now She had asked him to be present at the portals of the Great Presence but perhaps she had been fooling him He feared that any sound that he made might rouse the Mahatma and bring the entire camp about his ears He stood ruefully looking at the camp Street dogs were barking somewhere Occasionally the branches of trees over the river rustled and creaked He stood looking ruefully towards the women s quarters There a lantern was burning people seemed to be awake and moving about He thought What if the lantern is burning? They may be sleeping with lights on Women are cowardly anyway The stirring he heard might be their rolling in their beds noisy creatures! Unaccountably he was feeling irritated at the thought of women the species to which Bharathi belonged He saw a light in Mahatmaji s camp The door was shut He heard soft footsteps moving in there Long ago the Taluk Office gong had struck some small hour He could hardly believe he had actually sacrificed his sleep and was standing here in the cold wind at an unearthly hour Even the scavengers the earliest to rise in the town were still asleep He felt suddenly afraid that he might be attacked by thieves or ghosts Or if a policeman saw him and took him to be a prowler how should he explain himself? He couldn t very well say Bharathi asked me to wait at Mahat maji s hut at about thr e a m He wanted to turn and go away he could at least go home and make up to his grandmother instead of hanging around here and wondering what to do He could tell her I went to see the Mahatma but changed my mind and

came away Why should I get to know him and then into all sorts of difficulties? Don't you think so, Granny?' And she was sure to revive and look happy again

He gave one forlorn look at the women's quarters and turned away, his mind completely made up to earn the concrete goodwill of a Granny rather than the doubtful and strange favours of bigwigs like the Mahatma and snobs like Bharati Heaven knew who else would be there But still the pull of Bharati was strong and he could not get away from the place so easily as he had imagined He wanted to make just one more attempt to see her and bid her good-bye Perhaps she was in a situation in which he could help her people might have tied her up to her cot and gagged her mouth Anything might happen to a beautiful girl like her Otherwise there could be no explanation for her absence Anyway, he felt it would be his duty to go and find out what was wrong and where He d have willingly gone near the women s quarters, but he lacked the necessary courage and did the next best thing once again repeating a rash act he tip-toed towards Mahatmaji s hut his idea was to peep in unobtrusively, and see if Bharati was there or anywhere else safe and sound and then move off But in his befuddled state it did not occur to him that possibly he might be seen before he saw anyone And it happened so The door of Mahatmaji s hut was half open Light streamed out through the gap Sriram went towards it like a charmed moth If he had paused to reflect he would not have believed himself to be capable of repeating a foolhardy act a second time But through lack of sleep, and tension of nerves, a general recklessness had come over him, the same innocent charge that had taken him tumbling into the hut the previous evening took him there again now He peeped in like a clown The door was half open he had over-estimated its width from a distance, for he could not peep in without thrusting his head through

Oh, there he is! cried Bharati, with laughter in her voice 'You may open the door if you wish to come in,' she said Sriram felt again that the girl was making fun of him Even in the great presence, she didn t seem to care Here at least Sriram had hoped she would speak without the undertone of mischief He felt so irritated at the thought that he replied with all the pungency he could muster in his tone 'You have——I waited for you there——

'Come in, come in,' said the Mahatma Why should you be standing there? You could have come straight in'

But she asked m to wait outside said Sriram stepping in gingerly From the door to where the Mahatma sat the distance was less than ten feet but he felt he was taking hours to cover it His legs felt weak and seemed to intertwine he seemed to be walking like a drunkard a particularly dangerous impression to create in the Mahatma who was out to persuade even the scavengers to give up drinking In a flash it occurred to him that he ought to have a sensible answer ready if the Mahatma should suddenly turn round and ask Have you been drinking toddy or whisky?

But his trial came to an end when Gandhi said Bharati has just been mentioning you He spoke while his hands were busy turning a spinning wheel drawing out a fine thread A man sitting in a corner with a pad resting on his knee was writing Mahatmaji himself as always was doing several things at the same time While his hands were spinning his eyes perused a letter held before him by another and he found it possible too to put in a word of welcome to Sriram Through the back door of the hut many others were coming in and passing out For each one of them Mahatmaji had something to say

He looked up at Sriram and said Sit down young man Come and sit as near me as you like There was so much unaffected graciousness in his one that Sriram lost all fear and hesitation. He moved briskly up He sat on the floor near Mahatmaji and watched with fascination the smooth turning of the spinning wheel Bharati went to an inner part of the hut threw a swift look at Sriram which he understood to mean Remember not to make a fool of yourself

The Mahatma said Nowadays I generally get up an hour earlier in order to be able to do this spinning a certain length is my most important work even my prayer comes only after that I d very much like you to take a vow to wear only cloth made out of your own hands each day

Yes I will do so promised Sriram.

When the gong in the Taluk Office struck four the Mahatma invited Sriram to go out with him for a walk He seized his staff in one hand and with the other supported himself on the shoulder of Bharati and strode out of the hut—a tall figure in white He had tucked his watch at his waist into a fold of his white *dhoti* He pulled it out and said Half an hour I have to walk, come with me Sriram. You can talk to me undisturbed. A few others joined them Sriram felt he was walking through som

unreal dream world. The Mahatma was in between him and Bharati, and it was difficult to snatch a look at her as often as he wanted. He had to step back a quarter of an inch now and then, in order to catch a glimpse of her laughing face They walked along the river bank. The sky was rosy in the east Gandhi turned and spoke some business to those behind him. He suddenly addressed himself to Sriram 'Your town is very beautiful Have you ever noticed it before?' Sriram felt unhappy and gasped for breath. The morning air blew on his face, birds were chirping, the city was quiet it was all well known, but why did the Mahatma mention it especially now? Should he say 'Yes or 'No'? If he said 'Yes' he would be lying, which would be detected at once, if he said 'No', God knew what the Mahatma would think of him. He looked about A couple of scavengers of the colony who had joined the group were waiting eagerly to know what he would say they were evidently enjoying his predicament, and he dared not look in the direction of Bharati The Mahatma said 'God is everywhere, and if you want to feel his presence you will see him in a place like this with a beautiful river flowing, the sunrise with all its colours, and the air so fresh Feeling a beautiful hour of a beautiful scene or a beautiful object is itself a form of prayer' Sriram listened in reverential silence, glad to be let off so lightly When Gandhiji spoke of beauty, it sounded unreal as applied to the sun and the air, but the word acquired a practical significance, when he thought of it in terms of Bharati Gandhi said 'By the time we meet again next, you must give me a very good account of yourself'

He laughed in a kindly manner, and Sriram said, 'Yes, Bapuji, I will be a different man'

'Why do you say "different"? Yoo will be all right if you are fully yourself'

'I don't think that is enough, Bapu,' said Bharati, 'He should change from being himself, if he is to come to any good. I think he is very lazy He gets up at eight o clock, and idles away the day'

'How do you know? Sriram asked indignantly

'It's only a guess,' said the girl Sriram felt angry with her for her irresponsible talk. Everyone laughed

The Mahatma said 'You must not say such things, Bharati, unless you mean to take charge of him and help him.'

During the last fifteen minutes of this walk the Mahatma said nothing, he walked in silence, looking at the ground before

him. When the Mahatma was silent the others were even more so the only movement they performed was putting one foot before another on the sand, keeping pace with him some were panting hard and trying hard to suppress the sound The Mahatma s silence was heavy and pervasive, and Sriram was afraid even to gulp or cough, although he very much wanted to clear his throat cough sneeze swing his arms about The only sound at the moment was the flowing of the river and the twitter of birds Somewhere a cow was mooing Even Bharati the embodiment of frivolity seemed to have become sombre The Mahatma pulled out his watch looked at it briefly and said We will go back that is all the walk I can afford today Sriram wanted to ask Why? but he held his tongue, The Mahatma turned to him as they were walking back You have a grandmother I hear but no parents

Yes My grandmother is very old

Yes she must be otherwise how can you call her a grand mother?' People laughed Sriram too joined in this laughter out of politeness

Does she not miss you very much when you are way from her so long?'

Yes very much She gets very angry with me I don t know what to do about it, said Sriram courageously rushing ahead He felt pleased at having said something of his own accord but his only fear was that Bharati might step in and say something nasty and embarrassing but he was happy to note that Bharati held her peace

Mahatmaji said 'You must look after your granny too she must have devoted herself to bringing you up

Yes but when I am away like this she is very much upset.

Is it necessary for you to be away from her so much?'

Yes, Bapu otherwise how can I do anything in this world?'

'What exactly do you want to do?'

It was now that Sriram became incoherent. He was seized with a rush of ideas and with all the confusion that too many ideas create He said something and the Mahatma watched him patiently the others too held their breath and watched, and after a few moments of struggle for self-expression, Sriram was able to form a cogent sentence. It was the unrelenting pressure of his subconscious desires that jerked the sentence out of his lips and he said I like to be where Bharati is The Mahatma said Oh is that so! He patted Bharati s back and said 'What a fine

friend you have! You must be pleased to have such a devoted friend How long have you known him?

Bharati said like a shot, 'Since yesterday I saw him for the first time sitting in your hut and I asked him who he was'

Sriram interposed and added, But I knew her before, although I spoke to her only yesterday'

The Mahatma passed into his hut, and went on to attend to other things Many people were waiting for him Bharati disappeared into the Mahatma's hut the moment they arrived Sriram fell back and got mixed up with a crowd waiting outside He felt jealous of Bharati s position She sought him out later and said, 'You are probably unused to it, but in Bapu's presence we speak only the absolute truth and nothing less than that, and nothing more than that either

He took her to task 'What will he think of me now when he knows that I have not known you long enough and yet——'

'Well, what? she twitted him

'And yet I wish to be with you and so on'

'Why don't you go in and tell him you have been speaking nonsense and that you were blurting out things without forethought or self-control? Why couldn t you have told him that you want to serve the country, that you are a patriot, that you want to shed your blood in order to see that the British leave the country? That is what most people say when they come near the Mahatma I have seen hundreds of people come to him, and say the same thing'

'And he believes all that?' asked Sriram

'Perhaps not, but he thinks it is not right to disbelieve anyone'

But you say we must only speak the truth in his presence'

If you can, of course, but if you can't, the best thing to do is to maintain silence'

Why are you so angry with me, is it not a part of your duty not to be angry with others? asked Sriram pathetically

'I don't care,' said Bharati, this is enough to irritate even the Mahatma Now what will he think of me if he realizes I am encouraging a fellow like you to hang about the place, a fellow whom I have not known even for a full day yet!'

Sriram became reckless, and said breezily, What does it matter how long I have known you? Did you think I was going to lie to him if you had not spoken before I spoke?'

These bickerings were brought to an end by someone calling Bharati from another hut Bharati abandoned him and disappeared from the spot

Bharati's words gave him an idea He realized his own omission and proposed to remedy it next time he walked with the Mahatma Sriram's anxiety lest he fall asleep when the Mahatma was up kept him awake the whole night He shared the space on the floor with one of the men in the camp It was a strange feeling to lie down in a hut and he felt he was becoming a citizen of an entirely new world He missed the cosy room of his house in Kabir Lane he missed the two pillows and the soft mattress and the carpet under it even the street noises of Kabir Street added much to the domestic quality of life and he missed it badly now He had to adopt an entirely new trend of life He had to live of his own choice in a narrow hut with thatch above with a dingy sooty smell hanging about every thing The floor had been swept with cow dung and covered with a thin layer of sand He had to snuggle his head on the crook of his arm for a pillow He had to share this place with another volunteer in the camp a cadaverous serious young man wearing khadi shorts a khadi vest and a white cap on his closely shaved head He had a fiery look and an unsmiling face He was from North India he could only speak broken English and he was totally ignorant of Tamil words This man had already stretched himself on the floor with a small bag stuffed with clothes under his head

Bharati had told Sriram You had better stick on here around the camp if you want to be with Mahatmaji You won't have any comforts here remember We are all trained to live like this

Sriram sniffed and said Oh who wants any comforts? I don't care for them myself You think I am a fellow who cares for luxuries in life?

There was a class of society where luxuries gave one a status and now here was the opposite The more one asserted one cared for no luxury the more one showed an inclination for hardship and discomfort the greater was one's chance of being admitted into the fold Sriram had understood it the moment he stepped into the camp Here the currency was suffering and self mortification Everyone seemed to excel his neighbour in managing in uncomfortable situations and Sriram caught the spirit, though it took him time to grasp the detail and get accustomed to it.

There had been a meeting in the evening and after that the Mahatma retired at his usual hour of seven thirty, and it was a signal for the entire camp to retire Bharati sought out Sriram and gave him a plateful of rice and butter milk and an orange, and she also held out to him a small jasmine out of a bouquet which had earlier been presented to the Mahatma by some children s deputation He received the flower gratefully, smelt it, and asked, How did you know I like jasmine?

'It is not so difficult a thing to know, she said and dismissed the subject immediately

She said, I have found a place for you to sleep, with a volunteer named Gorpad'

Gorpad was half asleep when Sriram had entered his hut Bharati peeped and said, *Bhai* ' and something in Hindi and turned and disappeared from the spot The other lifted his head slightly and said, 'You can come in and sleep

'Only on the floor?' Sriram asked

Of course, of course,' said the other

'Why? asked Sriram

'Why? Because Mahatmaji says so'

Oh, said Sriram, feeling that he was treading on dangerous ground 'I see that otherwise there is no reason why we should sleep on the floor'

What do you mean by otherwise? said the other argumentatively

Sriram settled himself beside the other, and said, I didn't mean it'

'Mean what?' said the other He seemed to be a pugnacious fellow Sriram felt afraid of him What did the girl mean by putting him in with this fighter? Could it be that she disliked him, and wanted him to be beaten? If she disliked him, she would not have given him a jasmine flower It was well known that jasmine was exchanged only between persons who liked each other, and yet the girl gave him a jasmine with one hand and with the other led him into the company of this terrible man The other might sit on his chest while he slept and try to choke him

Gorpad said, You are new, I suppose?

'Yes,' said Sriram I am new to this place It is through Mahatmaji s kindness I am now here, otherwise I should have gone home and slept'

'Yes, Gorpad said seeming to understand the situation in a fresh light You are welcome here We are all persons

have to live like soldiers in a camp We are indeed soldiers in our fight to eject the British from our land We are all prepared to sacrifice our lives for the task We sleep here on the bare floor because the major part of our lives we shall have to spend in jail where we won t be given such a comfortable bed unless we are A or B class prisoners We are not important enough to be classified as A or B and you had better get used to it all and we are always prepared to be beaten by the police lathi charged dragged to the jail or even shot my father died ten years ago facing a policeman s gun

Sriram said not to be outdone in the matter of political reminiscences I know Bharati s father also died in the same way when he was beaten by the police

That was during the first non co operation days in 1920 her father led the first batch of *Satyagrahis* who were going to take down the Union Jack from the Secretariat at Madras He was beaten with a police lathi and a blow fell on his chest and he dropped dead but my father was shot Do you know he was actually shot by a policeman s rifle? I was also in the crowd watching him He was picketting a shop where they were selling toddy and other alcoholic drinks and a police company came and asked him to go away but he refused A crowd gathered and there was a lot of mess and in the end the police shot him point blank He wiped away tears at the memory of it I will not rest till the British are sent out of India his voice was thick with sorrow My brother became a terrorist and shot dead many English officials nobody knows his whereabouts I should also have joined him and shot many more Englishmen but our Mahatma will not let me be violent even in thought he said ruefully

Sriram wishing to sound very sympathetic said All Englishmen deserve to be shot They have been very cruel

'You should not even think on those lines if you are going to be a true *Satyagrahi* said the other

No no I am not really thinking on those lines Sriram amended immediately I was only feeling so sorry Of course we should not talk of shooting anyone and where is the gun? We have no guns My grandmother used to say that there was a gun in our house belonging to my father Do you know that he died in Mesapotamia? He was also shot point blank

He died in the war the last war?

'Yes said Sriram

'Then he must have been a soldier in the British Army', Gorpad said with a touch of contempt in his voice

Sriram noted it, but accepted it with resignation. He added as a sort of compensation, 'They say he was a great soldier

Possibly, possibly, said the other with patronage in his voice Sriram bore it as a trial.

That night he picked up a great deal of political knowledge. Gorpad went on speaking till two a.m. and afterwards both of them left for the river, performed their ablutions there, and by the time, the camp was awake Sriram had returned fresh and tidy, so that Bharati said, 'You are coming through your first day with us quite well.' Through diligently listening to Gorpad he had picked up many political idioms, and felt himself equipped to walk with the Mahatma without embarrassment.

He told the Mahatma, 'It is my greatest desire in life to take a vow to oust the British from India'

The Mahatma looked at him with a smile and asked, 'How do you propose to do it?'

Sriram could not find a ready answer, it was one of the many occasions when he felt that he had spoken unnecessarily He caught a glimpse of Bharati on the other side, her mischievous face sparkled with delight at his confusion. He felt piqued by her look He said haughtily, 'With your blessing, sir, I shall make myself good enough for the task. I shall be with you as long as possible, and if you will kindly guide me you can make me a soldier fit to take up the fight to make the British leave our country'

The Mahatma took this resolve with every sign of pleasure. He remained silent for a while as his footsteps pit-patted on the sands, a sombre silence fell on the gathering Well, young friend, if God wills it, you will do great things, trust in him and you will be all right.'

To Sriram this seemed a rather tame preparation for a soldierly existence, If it had been possible, he would have strutted before Bharati in khaki and a decorated chest, though the world was having a surfeit of decorations just then

Presently the Mahatma himself spoke dispelling his notions 'Before you aspire to drive the British from this country, you must drive every vestige of violence from your system Remember that it is not going to be a fight with sticks and knives or guns but only with love. Until you are sure you have an overpowering love at heart for your enemy, don't think of driving

him out. You must gradually forget the term 'Enemy' You must think of him as a friend who must leave you You must train yourself to become a hundred per cent *ahimsa* soldier You must become so sensitive that it is not possible for you to wear sandals made of the hide of slaughtered animals you should prefer to go bare-foot rather than wear the hide of an animal killed for your sake that is if you are unable to secure the skin of an animal that has died a natural death

Sriram said, Yes I promise but while saying it his eyes were fixed on Mahatmaji s feet he struggled to suppress the questions that were welling up in his mind

The Mahatma read his thoughts and said Yes these are sandals made of just such leather In our tannery at Wardha we specialize in it No one in our Ashram wears anything else

Sriram wanted to ask How do you know when an animal is dying and how do you watch for it? but ruthlessly put down the question as an unworthy one which might betray him.

Sriram was told that he could accompany Mahatmaji in his tour of the villages on condition that he went home and secured Granny's approval Sriram tried to slur the matter over he said it would not be necessary he hinted he was an independent man used to such outings from home. The Mahatma s memory was better than that. He said with a smile I remember you said that she didn t like to see you mixing with us

Sriram thought it over and said, Yes master but how can I for ever remain tied to her? It is not possible

Are you quite sure that you want to change your style of life? asked the Mahatma.

I can think of nothing else Sriram said, How can I live as I have lived all these years? He threw a quick glance at Bharati as she came in with some letters for the Mahatma Her look prevented him from completing the sentence, which would have run, And I always wish to be with Bharati and not with my grandmother

The Mahatma said I shall be happy to have you with us as long as you like, but you must first go home and tell your grand mother and receive her blessing You must tell her frankly what you wish to do but you must cause her no pain

Sriram hesitated The prospect of facing Granny was unnerv ing The thought of her was like the thought of an unreal troublesome world one which he hoped he had left behind for

ever the real world for him now was the one of Bharati, Gorpad, unslaughtered naturally dying animals, the Mahatma, spinning wheels He wanted to be here all the time it seemed impossible for him to go back to Kabir Street, that *pyol*, and that shop, and those people there who treated him as if he were only eight years old He stood before the Mahatma as if to appeal to him not to press him to go and face his grandmother, but the master was unrelenting 'Go and speak to her I don't think she is so unreasonable as to deny you your ambitions Tell her that I like to have you with me If you tour with me the next two weeks, you will observe and learn much that may be useful to you later in life Tell her she will feel glad that she let you go Assure her that I will look after you sefely' Every word filled him with dread when he remembered the terms in which Granny referred to the Manatma He dared not even give the slightest indication as to how she would react He felt a great pity for the Mahatma, so innocent that he could not dream of anyone talking ill of him He felt angry at the thought of Granny, such an ill-informed, ignorant and bigotted personality! What business had she to complicate his existence in this way? If he could have had his will he would have ignored his grandmother, but he had to obey the Mahatma now

He said, All right, sir I will go and get my granny's blessing I ll be back early tomorrow'

Half a dozen times on the way he resolved to turn back and tell Mahatma Gandhi that he had seen Granny How could he find out the truth, anyway? But he dismissed the thought as unpractical, though perhaps not so unworthy under the circumstances Suppose Granny created a row, went into a faint or threatened to kill herself, and made enough noise to attract the neighbours who might come and lock him up in his house, refusing to let him out? Should he face this risk in order to tell Gandhiji that he had seen the obstinate old lady as ordered? Would it not be prudent like a sensible man to tell the old gentleman that it had been done? But probably Granny would guess about Bharati behind all this and disbelieve anything he might say about Mahatmaji Or if she spoke insultingly about Mahatmaji, he couldn't trust himself to listen patiently He might do something for which he might feel sorry afterwards He visualized himself suppressing his Granny s words with force and violence, but he remembered that it would not be right where the Mahatma was concerned He would be upset to hear about it

The thing to do was to turn the jutka back and tell the Mahatma that he had Granny s blessings But then being a Mahatma he might read his thoughts and send him back to Granny or he might cancel all his programme until he was assured that Granny had been seen or begin a fast until it was done What made the Mahatma attach so much importance to Granny when he had so many things to mind? When he had the all important task of driving the British out he ought to leave simple matters like Granny to be handled by himself His thoughts were in a welter of confusion while he was in the jutka but soon the horse turned into Kabir Street He paid the fare without haggling and sent away the jutka quietly He didn t want his movements to become noticeable in the neighbourhood

He found his granny in a semi agreeable frame of mind His prolonged absence seemed to have made her nervous and she tried to be nice to him She probably feared he would flounce out of the house if she attempted to talk to him in the manner of yesterday

She merely said What a long time you have been away my boy? attempting to keep out all trace of reproach from her tone He pretended to settle down He drew up the canvas chair he had bought for her and sat down under the hall lamp His granny fussed about as if she had recovered someone long lost She set before him a plateful of stuff fried in ghee saying They sent this down from the lawyer s house the first birthday of his eighth son They don t seem to miss anything for any child

Sriram put a piece into his mouth munched it nodded his approval and said Yes they have made it of pure ghee Good people He crunched it noisily

Granny said I kept it for you I knew you would like it I was wondering how long I should keep it You know I have no teeth Who would want stuff like that when you are not here? Don t eat all of it you will not be able to eat your dinner

Oh dinner! I ve had my dinner Granny

So soon!

Yes in the Ashram camp we have to dine before seven usually It s the rule

What sort of a d nner can it be at seven! she cried in dis appointment Come and eat again you ought to be fit for a real dinner now

No Granny It is all regulated very strictly We can t

do anything as we like We have got to observe the rules in all matters We get quite good stuff there

'Have you got to pay for it? asked Granny

'Of course not,' said Sriram 'What do you think, do you think Mahatmaji is running a hotel?

'Then why should they feed you?'

'It's because we belong there

'Do they provide a lot of public feeding?

Sriram lost his temper at this He was appalled at Granny s denseness 'I said they feed all of us who belong there, don t you follow?

'Why should they feed you?'

'It is because we are volunteers '

Nice volunteers!' cried Granny, threatening to return to her yesterday s mood any second And what do they give you to eat?'

'*Chappatis*, curd, and buttermilk and vegetables

'I'm glad I was afraid they might force you to eat egg and fowl '

Sriram was horrified 'What do you take the Mahatma for! Do you know, he won't even wear sandals made of the hide of slaughtered animals!'

Granny was seized with a fit of laughter Tears rolled down her cheeks Won't wear sandals!' she cried in uncontrollable laughter 'Never heard of such a thing before! How do they manage it? By peeling off the skin of animals before they are slaughtered, is that it?

'Shut up, Granny! cried Sriram in a great rage What an irresponsible gossip you are! I never thought you could be so bad!

Granny for the first time noticed a fiery earnestness in her grandson, and gathered herself up She said Oh! He is your God, is he?

'Yes, he is, and I won't hear anyone speak lightly of him

What else can I know, a poor ignorant hag like me! Do I read the newspapers? Do I listen to lectures? Am I told what is what by anyone? How should I know anything about that man Gandhi?

'He is not a man, he is a Mahatma!' cried Sriram

'What do you know about any Mahatma, anyway? asked Granny

Sriram fidgetted and rocked himself in his chair in great anger He had not come prepared to face a situation of this kind He had been only prepared to face a granny who might show sullenness at this absence create difficulties for him when he wanted to go away and exhibit more sorrow and rage than levity But here she was absolutely reckless frivolous and with out the slightest sense of responsibility or respect This was a situation which he had not anticipated and he had no technique to meet it It was no use he realized showing righteous indig nation that would only tickle the old lady more and more and when the time came for him to take her permission and go out she might become too intractable She might call in the neigh bours and make fun of him He decided that he must change his tactics Suddenly springing up he asked Granny have you had your food? I am keeping you away from it talking like this!

It doesn t matter she said almost on the point of giggling How many years it is since I had a mouthful of food at night— must be nearly twenty years You couldn t have seen me in your lifetime eating at night

There was such a ring of pride in her voice that Sriram felt impelled to say There is nothing extra-ordinary in it Anybody might be without food He wanted to add The Mahatma fasted for so many days at an end and so often but suppressed it The old lady however had no need of being told anything She added at once No! When Mahatma Gandhi fasts everybody talks about it

And when you fast at nights only nobody notices it and that is all the difference between you and Gandhiji? She was struck by the sharp manner in which he spoke

She asked Do you want your dinner?

Yes just to please you that is all I am not hungry I told you that. And this stuff is good made of good ghee You may tell them so I ve eaten a great quantity of it and I m not hungry

Granny came back to her original mood after all these un expected transitions She said You must eat your dinner my boy very earnestly She bustled about again as if for a distin guished visitor She pulled a dining leaf out of a bundle in the kitchen rack spread it on the floor sprinkled a little water on it and drew the bronze rice pot nearer and sat down in order to be able to serve him without getting up again The little lamp

wavered in its holder He ate in silence, took a drink of water out of the good old brass tumbler that was by his side, he cast a glance at the old bronze vessel out of which rice had been served to him for years He suddenly felt depressed at the sight of it all He was oppressed with the thought that he was leaving these old associations, that this was really a farewell party He was going into an unknown life right from here God knew what was in store for him He felt very gloomy at the thought of it all He knew it would be no good ever talking to his granny about his plans, or the Mahatma or Bharati All that was completely beyond her comprehension She would understand only edibles and dinner and fasting at night in order to impress a neighbour with her austerity No use talking to her about anything Best to leave in the morning without any fuss He had obeyed Mahatmaji's mandate to the extent of seeing her and speaking to her The Mahatma should be satisfied and not expect him to be able to bring about a conversion in the old lady's outlook, enough to earn her blessing

Granny was very old, probably eighty, ninety, or a hundred He had never tried to ascertain her age correctly And she would not understand new things At dead of night, after assuring himself that Granny was fast asleep, he got up, scribbled a note to her by the night lamp, and placed it under the brass pot containing water on the window sill, which she was bound to lift first thing in the morning She could carry it to a neighbour and have it read to her if she had any difficulty in finding her glasses Perhaps she might not like to have it read by the neighbours She would always cry 'Sriram, my glasses, where are the wretched glasses gone?' whenever anything came to her hand for reading, and it would be his duty to go to the cupboard, and fetch them Now he performed the same duty in anticipation He tip-toed to the almirah, took the glasses out of their case silently, and returned to the hall, leaving the spectacle case open, because it had a tendency to close with a loud clap He placed the glasses beside his letter of farewell, silently opened the door, and stepped into the night

PART TWO

He was an accredited member of the group and in many villages he was glad to find himself fussed over and treated with respect by the villagers They looked on him with wonder He formed a trio with Bharati and Gorpad and whenever the villagers wanted to know anything about the Mahatma they came and spoke to him reverentially and that gave him an opportunity to work off all the knowledge he had gathered in his contacts with Gorpad and Bharati It was a way of learning the job while being on it Till then he had no notion of village life He had been born and bred in the township of Malgudi and even there his idea of the bounds of the universe were confined to Kabir Street Market Road one or two other spots Whenever he heard the word villages his mental picture was always one of green coconut groves long and numerous steps leading down to the large tank with elegant village women coming up bearing pitchers and the temple spire showing beyond the tank bund low roofed houses with broad *pyols* and mat covered waggons moving about dragged by bulls with tinkling bells around their necks the cart men singing all the time He owed his idea to all the various Tamil films which he had frequently seen at The Regal But he saw nothing of the kind here Reality was something different Some villages were hardly a cluster of huts This was the first time he was seeing an actual village and on the first day at a village ten miles from Malgudi he felt so bewildered that he asked Bharati secretly Where is the village?

Which village?

Why any village he said

Doesn t this look like a village to you? she asked

No he replied They had found time for a little chat after the Mahatma had retired for the evening

What a pity' she said that it s so But learn young man this is really a village I m not lying There are seven hundred thousand other villages more or less like this in our country

How do you know? he asked to prolong the conversation

I learn from wise men she said

How wise? he asked

She ignored his frivolity and started talking of their mission They weer out to survey the villages which had recently been affected by famine It was a mission of mercy, Mahatmaji had set out to study the famine conditions at first hand, and to put courage and hope into the sufferers It was a grim, melancholy undertaking The Mahatma attached so much value to this tour that he had set aside all his other engagements A distant war being fought in Europe, and probably about to start in the far East, had its repercussions here Though not bombed, they still suffered from the war, one did not see A R P signs or even a war poster, but small wayside stations acted as a vital link, a feeding channel, to a vast war reservoir in Western Europe The waggons at the sidings carried away night and day timber cut in the Mempi forests, the corn grown here, and the able-bodied men who might have been working on their land

However grim the surroundings might be, Sriram and Bharati seemed to notice nothing They had a delight in each other's company which mitigated the gloom of the surroundings Gorpad alone looked oppressed with a sense of tragedy He spoke less, retired early, mortified himself more and more He said 'See what the British have done to our country this famine is their manoeuvring to keep us in enslavement They are plundering the forests and fields to keep their war machinery going, and the actual sufferer is this child, pointing at any village child who might chance to come that way, showing its ribs, naked and pot-bellied

'There is no food left in these villages,' he cried passionately 'There is no one to look after them, who cares for them? Who is there to help them out of their difficulties? Everyone is engaged in this war The profiteer has hoarded all the grain beyond the reach of these growers The war machine buys it at any price It s too big a competitor for these poor folk

'Why does he say all that to me? Sriram reflected while impatiently waiting to be left alone with Bharati 'I'm not responsible for it' Gorpad was an iron man and could be trusted to leave them alone because he had something else to do, and when his back was turned, their eyes met and they giggled at the memory of all the sad, bad matters they had just heard or noticed

Sriram's vision of a village was nowhere to be seen Hungry, parched men and women with skin stretched over their bones, bare earth, dry ponds and miserable tattered thatched roofing over crumbling mud walls, streets full of pits and loose sand

The Mahatma said You may attend to your work in your cabin, don t bother about us

May I?' he asked desperately I ve to write the fare records sir and prepare the line to receive the train.

Certainly go on said the Mahatma.

For the first time during all these weeks Sriram felt depressed and unhappy The thought of having to live a mundane existence without Mahatmaji appalled him. Not even the proximity of Bharati seemed to mitigate his misery As the sound of the approaching train was heard he looked so stunned that Mahatmaji said Be happy Bharati will look after you Sriram looked at Bharati hopefully Mahatmaji added Remember that she is your Guru and think of her with reverence and respect and you will be all right and she will be all right Sriram took time to digest this sentence The train steamed in. Mahatmaji entered a third-class compartment.

Gorpad a cold headed stoic whom no parting moved told Sriram 'Now you know what your duties are and how to do them Sister you will receive our instructions *Namaste* and climbed into Gandhiji s compartment. His party followed him in.

The first bell rang and then the second The stationmaster came out and said 'The seven down generally halts here only two minutes but today we have detained it for three and a half minutes sir He looked despairingly at the crowd of passengers from other carriages gathered before Mahatmaji s window The engine was humming The engine driver from one end and the guard from the other had left their stations in order to see the Mahatma who returned their greetings and asked How can the train move sir when its heart and soul are here?' The engine driver withdrew with a grin on his face. The Mahatma said to the other people, Now you will all have to go back to your places The crowd dispersed and the stationmaster waved his flag

Gandhiji told Sriram 'Write to me often. I'll also promise you a fairly regular correspondence. In the future you know where lies your work. Become a master-spinner soon. Don t be despondent.

'Yes, master said Sriram the parting

Bharati merely said in a clear voice

Bapu smiled and put out his hand and pa
will of

'Yes of course, Bapu

'Be prepared for any sacrifice'
'Yes, Bapu,' she said earnestly
'Let nothing worry you'
'Yes, Bapu'
The sky became redder and darker, and the seven down moved away, taking the Mahatma to Trichy, and then to Madras, Bombay, Delhi and out into the universe Night fell on the small station, and the little stationmaster proceeded to light his gas lamps and signals

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Though the Mahatma's physical presence was no longer with him, Sriram had a feeling that his movements were being guided His home now was a deserted shrine on a slope of the Mempi Hill, overlooking the valley Down below, the road zigzagged and joined the highway which ended a mile off at Koppal Station He often saw the mail runner trudging up a curve, with a bag on his shoulder, a staff on one arm (the staff had little bells tied to its end, heralding his arrival even a mile away) Sriram expected no mail but he loved to watch the runner till he stepped on a rock, and took a diverging crosscut, leading him to various estates and villages on the higher reaches of the Mempi Hills

This place seemed to have been destined for him, built thousands and thousands of years ago by someone who must have anticipated that Sriram would have a use for an abandoned building The place was a ruin, a few sculptures showed along the wall, the masonry was crumbling here and there There was an image of some god with four hands in an inner sanctum overgrown with weed But it was the most comfortable ruin a man could possess There were stately pillars in a central hall, with bricks showing, there were walls without a ceiling, but from which exotic creepers streamed down, one of the stubborn, undisturbed pieces of sculpture was a Bull-and-Peacock over the large portal, which had very large knobbed wooden doors that could not be moved at all on their immense hinges This was no great disadvantage for Sriram since no one came this way, and even if they did, he did not have anything to lock up If he wished to be out of sight, he had only to slip away beyond a curtain of weeds, into a cellar He could hear the train arrive and depart far away He could hear the voices of villagers as they moved up in groups from the villages down below to the estates above

His possessions were a spinning wheel, a blanket on which to sleep and a couple of vessels some foodstuff and a box of matches He lit the wick of a small lantern whenever he wanted to work at night He had set duties to perform every day when he woke up with the cries of birds Oh God it s much better in Kabir Street *he used to think The birds make so much uproar here* that they won t allow a man to sleep in peace In spite of this he got up from bed He was going through a process of self tempering a rather hard task for he often found on checking his thoughts that they were still as undesirable as ever He had thought that by practising all the austerities that he had picked up in Gorpad s company he could become suddenly different Mahatmaji had blessed his idea of self development He had said Spin and read Bhagavad Gita and utter *Ram Nam* continuously and then you will know what to do in life

Sriram carried a change of dress and went downhill to a brook and bathed *He felt so invigorated after the cold bath that he* sang aloud all alone in his wilderness He went on repeating *Raghupathi Raghava Raja Ram Pathitha Pavana Seetha Ram*,— Mahatmaji s litany When he sang it he had a feeling of being near him and doing something on his orders He was overcome with such a sense of holiness that he nearly danced in joy when he went back to his retreat He carried the two pieces of dress he had washed in the brook and put them out to dry on the green fence surrounding the shrine He was very proud of wearing cloth made with his own hand Bharati had taught him how to insert the cotton thread how to turn the wheel and how to spin Gandhiji had presented him with a spinning wheel in one of the villages with the explanation 'This is the key to your future Sriram had felt too respectful to ask what he meant But he took the wheel with proper reverence and literally put it close to his heart although it was a heavy cumbrous apparatus

Bharati tried to teach him how to use it during their sojourn in one of the *villages He tried his hand* at spinning and made countless blunders while learning He never managed to produce more than a couple of inches of yarn at a time without snapping —it looked more like bits of twisted cotton wool than yarn Bharati could not restrain her laughter when she saw his handi work. She remarked You will waste all the cotton in India and Egypt before you make yourself a yard of yarn After this she held his fingers down at the correct pressure at the spinning point but when she took away her hand Sriram let go his fingers

too, and the cotton fell down and became worthless for any purpose

All through the tour he had worked at it, his lessons starting the moment they came to a halt for the day Every day Mahatmaji enquired Well, what is the progress ?"

And before he could answer Bharati generally broke in and said Two more inches Bapuji, in all he has produced six inches today, but the count must be specially measured It must be a five count yarn, probably the same count as a lamp-wick!

The Mahatma said 'Well, there will be a time soon when he will give you a hundred count, don't be too proud, little daughter'

'I'm not,' Bharati said 'I'm merely mentioning the facts'

How proud she is! Do you know she won her prize in a Khadi competition some years ago? Her yarn is kept in an exhibition'

'She scores one over me in everything,' Sriram reflected 'It's because of the excessive support she gets She is being spoilt That is what is wrong with her She thinks no end of herself'

I'm sure Bharati will teach you how to excel her,' said the Mahatma, and Bharati lived up to this promise She allowed Sriram no rest, night or day Whenever there was the slightest respite from travel, she came up with, Now, what is the programme of the great pupil?' And Sriram dragged the wheel out, took the little packets of cotton, and started nervously He dreaded making a mistake and provoking the girl's mirth He hated her for her levity, and for making him feel like a fool so often But he kept up a desperate effort He slipped, he made her laugh, he struggled in the grips of unholy thoughts when she stooped over him, held his hand, and taught him the tricks He concentrated until his mind was benumbed with the half whispering movement of the spinning wheel His fingers ached with holding a vibrant ever growing thread, and his eyes smarted

Finally he did emerge a victor, nearly twelve weeks after Mahatmaji had left Sriram had stationed himself for his noviciate at one of the spinning centres, about fifty miles from Malgudi Bharati was perfectly at home there and proved herself to be a task mistress of no mean order, she did not let go her grip on Sriram until he had spun enough yarn free from entanglement for a dhoti and a short shirt It was a result of continuous work over weeks But it was worth it She became very excited at the success of his efforts She tore off the blank edge of a news-

paper and wrote on it in minute letters This is to say that Sriram is henceforth to be called a master spinner and he must be respected wherever he goes She helped him to bundle off the yarn to a central depot at Madras and secure in exchange woven cloth of the same count Sriram suddenly felt that he was the inhabitant of a magic world where you created all the things you needed with your own hands His regret was that he still could not make the 100 count and that his yarn was somewhat rugged But Bharati said The 40 count is the real cloth that can be used 100s are merely for show and prizes don t worry about it

On the day he got his khadi clothes a simple *dhoti* and a *jibba* (cut and stitched on the spot by the village tailor) he took off the clothes he had been wearing (mill manufactured) heaped them in the middle of the street poured half a bottle of kerosine over the lot and applied a match his old clothes caught fire and burned brightly A few members of the spinning centre stood around the fir and watched Some of the villagers looked on with interest

Sriram explained to the gathering fascinated by the leaping flames I will never again wear clothes spun by machinery The *dhoti* and *jibba* were heavy it was as if a piece of lead were interwoven with the texture But he felt it was something to be proud of He felt he had seen and reached a new plane of exist ence He sat down and wrote to the Mahatma Burnt my old clothes today Spun 40 count Bharati satisfied

Mahatmaji immediately wrote back to him Very pleased Keep it up God bless you

§

Bharati came uphill at dusk. Sriram became fussy How can you walk barefoot in all these places?

Why not? We are not born with sandals on our feet I have not yet got the leather from Wardha and I shall have to manage with this until we get it But—— she said with a sigh there is probably no one there who can attend to our wants We don t even know how many of them are in prison The government have stopped giving even that information

They were sitting on the cool mud floor with a lamp between them. Sriram studied her face so full of lines nowadays as if the burden of the country were on her back, with Mahatmaji in prison since the August of 1942 Bharati (of course along with

Sriram) was a little cog in a vast complicated machinery that was working, in spite of the police hunting down politics everywhere, to eject the British from the land.

Sriram said again 'You should not walk barefoot.'

'Why not? India's three hundred and sixty million walk barefoot'

Her national statistics bored him He said sharply 'They may, but it doesn't mean you should also walk barefoot There may be cobras about, this place is full of such things'

Bah, as if cobras would not bite if trodden upon with sandalled feet!'

'You are too argumentative

'I tell you I am not able to get the usual leather from Wardha,' she complained, and then added I am not afraid of you, and I don't have to explain to you why I am like this or like that. I am not afraid of cobras either, or the lonely road. Otherwise I should not be here'

'Of course, you need not be afraid of me,' said Sriram. 'Only you expect others to be afraid of you'

'Yes, because I am your Guru'

Sriram felt, 'The whole thing is extremely false. She ought to be my wife and come to my arms' He wondered for a moment, 'What is it that prevents me from touching her? What can she do? She is all alone in this place. Even if she shouts nobody will hear her for ten miles around' He revelled in the picture of this terrific possibility But it was only a dream.

She explained her mission 'I am leaving for Madras tomorrow, and you won't see me for some time.'

'When? Where are you going'

I have been summoned for instructions The police are watchful, no doubt, but I can manage to go up and return without any trouble' She started to go

He wondered, 'Why has she come to tell me this? What is the matter? Could I interpret it as her love for me? No one would come two miles barefoot just to say there would be nothing to do for the next three days She must have come with some other motive Probably she likes me very much, waits for me to take her hand and tell her what I have in mind', and then she would yield to him Absurd to think that she was just his 'Guru', Guru indeed! Absurd that a comely young woman should be set to educate a man! Educate him in what? He chuckled at the thought. And she said 'You have

suddenly very thoughtful. Why?' He touched her arm the lonely atmosphere was very encouraging but she pushed his hand down gently remarking You rest here till I am back with instructions and she turned and was off down the road saying Don t show yourself too much outside

He said I will escort you half way

It's not necessary she said and was off

Sriram watched her go down hill. Some day someone is going to abduct her she doesn t seem to feel she is a woman he thought and turned in He stood brooding over the ruins around him. Far away a train halted and proceeded on its journey its shaded A R.P lights crawling along the landscape He hoped that the girl would reach her village safely without any mishap

Three days later she turned up bringing instructions and from that moment Sriram s activities took a new turn Bharati came to him bearing a can of paint and a brush She handed them over to him with the air of an ordnance chief distributing weapons from the armoury She said 'They have assigned to you all the plantations above It means a lot of walking You must not miss any of the dozen villages on the way The villagers will help you everywhere. We shall be at work in Malgudi and the surroundings Be careful I will see you again sometime With Mahatmaji in prison, we have to carry on the work in our own manner We must spread his message everywhere

The Mahatma had in his famous resolution of August 1942 said 'Britain must quit India and the phrase had the potency of a mantra or a magic formula. Throughout the length and breadth of the land, people cried Quit India The Home Secretary grew uneasy at the sound of it. It became a prohibited phrase in polite society After the Mahatma uttered the phrase, he was put in prison but the phrase took life and flourished and did ultimately produce enough power to send the British out There was not a blank wall in the whole country which did not carry the message Wherever one turned one saw Quit India

On the following day Sriram trudged up the mountain path carrying his little tin can brush, and a rag in a satchel slung over his shoulder He stopped at the first village on the way selected the most suitable wall which happened to be the outer wall of a new house, on whose pyol the village children were learning the alphabet. Their lips had been reciting the letters of the alphabet in a chorus, which incidentally lulled their teacher

into a slight doze, but their eyes were following the bullock carts rattling down the road in a caravan, buses flying past and disappearing in a cloud of churned up dust, and people passing to and fro The day was bright and the glare on green trees and boughs and hedge creepers, was enticing, their eyes wandered, their minds wandered And so when Sriram came up to write on the wall they slipped out of their class with a feeling of profound relief The elders of the village too suspended their normal occupations and stood around to watch

Sriram dipped the brush in paint and fashioned carefully, 'Quit India' on the wall He wished that he didn't have to write the letter 'Q', which consumed a lot of black paint It was no use wasting all the available paint on a single letter He wondered if, for economy s sake, he could manage without drawing its tail They were launching on a war with a first-rate, war-equipped nation like England, all their armament being this brush and black paint and blank walls They could not afford to squander their war-resources in writing just a single letter It also seemed to him possible that Britain had imported the letter 'Q' into India so that there might be a national drain on black paint He was so much obsessed with this thought that he began to write a modified Q', expending the very minimum of paint on its tail so that it read, until one scrutinized it closely, 'Ouit India The villagers asked How long ought this to be on our wall, sir?

Till it takes effect?'

What does it say, sir?

'It is "Quit —meaning that the British must leave our country

'What will happen, sir, if they leave? Who will rule the country?'

'We will rule it ourselves'

'Will Mahatmaji become our Emperor, sir?'

'Why not?' he said, shaping the letters, with his back turned to them He taught the school children to cry, 'Quit India, in a chorus They gleefully obeyed him Their teacher came and expostulated What is this you are doing, sir, you are spoiling them!'

'How ?'

'By teaching them seditious behaviour The police will be after us soon Do you want us to end in Jail?

Yes, why not? When more important persons than you are already there' The crowd jeered at the teacher The boys

were ever ready to seize an opportunity to jeer at the old man The old man was more tough than he looked He put on his spectacles and looked Sriram up and down

The boys cried Oh the master is looking through his specta cles oh! oh! They laughed and cried Quit India

The teacher pushed his way through and cried Add if possible one e before t what we need in this country is not a Quit' programme but a Quiet India Why don t you write that?

Sriram finished his job of writing He had borrowed a ladder from someone He turned round and said to the teacher Please do something more useful than standing there and talking master Please see that this ladder is returned to its owner I forget his name and you will have done your bit to free our country

The teacher relented a little He came forward and said It s not that I don t want to see our country freed I am as much a patriot as you but honestly do you think we are ready to rule ourselves? We aren t Don t delude yourself We are not ready yet for anything Let this war be over and you will find me the first to fight for *Swaraj* Patriotism is not your monopoly The boys stood around and cried slogans

Sriram said Be careful you will be beheaded when Britain leaves India. We have a list of everybody who has to be be-headed

The teacher lost his temper completely and said How dare you say that! I don t want to see Britain go I am not one of those who think that we ll be happier when Hitler comes perhaps with the help of people like you Let me tell you you will be the first to be shot then

Part of the crowd was appreciative of the teacher's point of view and said The master is right why should we irritate the *sircar*?

Sriram turned on them with rage and said You will not only irritate you must not recognize the government You don t have to pay taxes to it at all They are ten thousand miles away from us why do you give them your tax?

Fellows like this should not be allowed to go about as they like that's why I ve always asked for a police outpost here If there had been policeman here would he have dared to come and lecture like this?

How far away is the police station? asked Sriram

The Circle Station is beyond ten stones replied someone

'See that,' said Sriram, 'your *sircar* have not given you even a police station! Is it because it is unnecessary when there is a person like this master in your midst?'

The boys raised a shout of appreciation and cried, 'Quit India', in a sing song manner It was a vociferous, happy gathering Their shouts and the general riotous behaviour frightened a pair of bullocks drawing a load of hay down the road The bullocks lowered their heads and pulled the cart into a ditch, and it created a general *mêlée*, people running hither and thither, and shouting directions to each other The carter, while pulling the animals back to the road, swore at them and at the disturbance These politicians, Gandhi folk, they won't leave anyone in peace Why do you come and trouble us here?'

Sriram said 'Hey, pull up your cart and listen Don't talk like a baby You are old enough to know what you are talking about? What's your age?'

The carter pulled up his reins and said over the jingle of the bells round the necks of his animals, 'I think I'm twenty!'

'Twenty! More likely you are fifty'

'May be, sir, a little this way and that I used to be twenty'

'How many children have you?

'Five sons, sir, and a grandson'

'You are fifty, my dear fellow, and you look it Don't talk irresponsibly Do you know Mahatma Gandhi is in jail?'

Yes, master'

'You know why he is there?' The man shook his head 'So that you may be a free man in this country You are not a free man in this country now'

§

Sriram's orbit of operations lay in the mountain villages scattered here and there, connected by more or less self formed roads, which wound their way through thick wooded vegetation and forests Their connection with the outside world was through a postal runner, who passed through some of the better villages once or twice a week, bringing in the mails dumped at the railway station at Koppal There were a few police outposts scattered over the whole area, with a petty officer and a handful of men in each, who kept in touch with their headquarters through the telephone lines passing overhead and often vanishing into vegetation on the mountain slope One would hardly

I m merely carrying out an order and I cannot afford to stop and listen to too much wisdom

There was a plantation 4 000 feet above sea level whither Sriram carried his pot of paint and his brush It meant nearly half a day's job for him He arrived at the estate late one after noon He saw a picturesque gate-post with the sign *Mathieson* Estates over it There wasn t a single human being to be seen for miles around Sriram wondered for a moment Is it worth writing any message here? He looked about and hesitated but dismissed the doubt as unworthy He briskly dusted a portion of the gate-post and wrote in a beautiful round handwriting Quit India and turned to go

An estate labourer who was passing stopped to look at the message and asked Are you writing a board?

Sriram explained at length the import of the message The man listened for a while and said Go away That *Dorai* is a bad fellow Always with a gun He may shoot you

Sriram hesitated for a moment wondering whether it would be more worthwhile to get shot or to go away peacefully He suddenly felt he need not have come up so far if it were only to go back safely He hadn t climbed 4 000 feet above sea level for nothing The labourer with the pick axe went away after uttering his warning Sriram went forward towards an ancient bungalow that he saw ahead Hope he doesn t have bull dogs he reflected He pictured the scene ahead in a somewhat gory way He had only to approach the steps and the *Dorai* would level his double-barrelled and click, and Sriram would go up in smoke and blood Probably that would fill Bharati with remorse She would tell herself I wish I had shown my love more definitely when he was alive Anyway why was he doing this? The High Command had not instructed him to go and bare his chest before a gunman

A seven foot figure with a red face and sandy hair accosted him by the porch He was smoking a pipe and had one hand comfortably tucked in his trouser pocket For a second Sriram felt a little reluctant to go forward

Hullo! Who may you be?

Sriram felt dwarfed by his side He went up and said in a shrill voice I have brought a message

Oh, good. From where?'

From Mahatmaji

The man took out his pipe and said Oh! What?

'From Mahatma Gandhi'

'Well, What is it?'

'That you must quit India'

The other looked abashed for a second But he recovered his composure in a moment He said 'Why do you say that?'

'I'm not saying I'm merely giving you the message'

'Oh! Oh! Come in and have a drink won't you?'

'No I never drink'

'Oh, yes, yes I didn't mean spirits, but you can have anything you want, sherbet, or coffee or tea'

'Oh, I need nothing'

'You look tired, come in, let us have a chat anyway Boy!' he shouted and his bearer appeared 'Two glasses of orange juice,' he ordered 'Look sharp'

Yes, sir,' said the Boy, turning and going away

The servant wore a white uniform with a lot of buttons Sriram reflected, 'This man wants even a particular kind of dress for Indians who act as his servants,' and felt an inexplicable rage The other watched his face for a while, then said, Come along, let us go to the veranda' He conducted him up the steps to the veranda, which had been furnished with wicker chairs covered with beautiful chintz cloth there were also a few decorative plants in large pots here and there Sriram contrasted it with his own surroundings, a ruined building built thousands of years ago, full of snakes and scorpions and with only a mat to sleep on He could not help asking, How do you manage to do all this? May I know?

'Do what? asked Mathieson

'Manage so much decoration and luxury so far away? said Sriram and pointed at all the things around

Mathieson laughed gently and said, 'I wouldn t call this luxury, my friend'

And all this while millions of people here are going without food or shelter!' he said in a general way, the statistics he had picked up from Bharati deserting him for the moment

'It is our prayer,' said Mathieson, 'that all of them may have not only enough to eat soon but also beautiful houses to live in, something, I hope, better than this, which is only a make-shift.'

Sriram put down this explanation to racial arrogance 'It is his prosperity and the feeling of owning this country that makes him talk like this,' he reflected, and wanted to shout at the top of his voice, 'Quit, quit, we shall look after ourselves, we don t

care for wicker furniture and gaudy coverings for them we don t care even for food what we care for—— He was not clear how to end his sentence He merely said aloud What we most care for is to do what Mahatmaji tells us to do

And what has he advised you to do?

We will spin the *charka* wear Khadi live without luxury and we shall have India ruled by Indians

But you have rejected the opportunity to try it Don t you think it is a pity you should have turned down Cripps s offer?

Sriram did not reply for a while It seemed to him a technical point with which he was not concerned Such intricate academic technicalities refused to enter his head and so he merely said Mahatmaji does not think so and there was an end to the discussion He had a jumble of phrases Dominion Status Reservation for Muslims and this and that although he had gathered all these from the newspapers they seemed to him beside the point the only thing that mattered being that Mahatmaji did not think the proposals had anything to do with the independence of India It is just an eyewash he said remembering a news paper comment We don t want all that We have no use for such proposals We don t want charity

This last thought so worked him up that presently when the butler came bearing a tray with two glasses of orange juice he wanted to knock the tray down dramatically and say I don t want it but it was a beautiful liquid yellow and fresh in a long and almost invisible tumbler and the climb and exertion had parched his throat He hesitated

Mathieson handed him a glass and raising his own, said Here s to your health and luck

Sriram could merely mumble Thanks and drained off his drink The passage of the juice down his throat was so pleasant that he felt he could not interrupt it under any circumstance He shut his eyes in ecstasy For a moment he forgot politics Quit Bharat strife, and even Mahatmaji Just for a second the bliss lasted He put down his glass and sighed The other had taken an invisible infinitesimal layer off the top level in his glass and was saying Care to have another?

'No said Sriram and started to leave The other walked with him half way down the drive Sriram said Don t rub off the message I have painted on your doorway

Oh no I shan t. It is a souvenir and I shall keep it proudly

'But won't you be leaving this country, quitting, I mean?' asked Sriram

'I don't think so Do you wish to quit this country?'

'Why should I? I was born here,' said Sriram indignantly

'I was unfortunately not born here, but I have been here very much longer than you How old are you?

'Twenty-seven, or thirty What does it matter?'

'Well, I was your age when I came here and I am sixty-two today You see, it is just possible I am as much attached to this country as you are'

But I am an Indian,' Sriram persisted

'So am I', said the other, 'and perhaps I am of some use to the people of this country seeing that I employ five thousand field labourers and about two hundred factory hands and office workers'

'You are doing it for your own profit. You think we can only be your servants and nothing else,' said Sriram, not being able to think out anything better, and then he asked, 'Aren t you afraid? You are all alone, if the Indians decide to throw you out, it may not be safe for you'

Mathieson remained thoughtful for a moment and said, 'Well, I suppose I shall take my chance, that is all, but of one thing I feel pretty sure—I am not afraid of anything'

'It is because Mahatmaji is your best friend He wants this struggle to be conducted on perfectly non-violent lines'

'Of course that is also a point Well, it was nice meeting you,' he said, extending his hand 'Good bye'

Sriram went down the pathway, overhung with coffee shrubs, hedge plants, bamboo clusters, and pepper vine winding over everything else, with very dark green grass covering the ditches on the sides He felt so tired that he wondered why he did not lay himself down on the velvet turf and sleep, but he had other things to do He had unremitting duties to perform.

§

It was the village named Solur three miles away that was his next destination. The place consisted of about fifty houses on a hill slope Valleys and meadows stretched away before it. It was seven o clock when Sriram reached it. The village was astir with activity Men, women, and children were enthusiastically gathered under the banyan tree of the village, in bright chattering groups A gas light had been hung from the tree, and

one or two people were arranging a couple of iron chairs brought in from one of the richer house-holds in the village The two iron chairs were meant for some distinguished men who were expected Sriram went to the only shop in the village purchased a couple of plantains and washed them down with a bottle of soda water He felt refreshed He asked the shopman What time does the meeting begin?'

Very soon they are bringing someone to entertain us It is going to be a nice function Can t you stay on for it?

Yes I will.

'Where are you coming from?

From far away said Sriram

Where are you going? the other asked

Far away again said Sriram attempting to be as evasive as possible The other laughed treating it as a nice joke The man supported himself by clutching with one hand a rope dangling from the ceiling It was a box like little shop made entirely of old packing cases with a seat cushioned with gunny sacks for the proprietor to sit on Bottles containing aerated water in rainbow colours adorned his top shelf bunches of green bananas hung down by nails in front of his shop almost hitting one in the face and he had several little boxes and shallow tins filled with parched rice fried gram, peppermints sugar candy and so forth He enjoyed Sriram s joke so much that he asked I have some nice biscuits won t you try them?

Are they English biscuits? Sriram asked

The best English biscuits

'How can you be sure?'

I got them through a friend in the army They are supplied only to the Army now Purely English biscuits which you cannot get for miles around. In these days no one else can get them

Have you no sense of shame?' Sriram asked

'Why why what is the matter? the other said taken aback and then said Hey give me the money for what you took and get out of here You are a fellow in Khadi are you? Oh! Oh! I didn t notice And so you think you can do what you like talk as you like, and behave like a rowdy

'You may say anything about me, but don t talk ill of this dress It is—it is—too sacred to be spoken about in that manner

The shopman felt cowed by his manner and said, All right, sir

please leave us alone and go your way I don't want you lecturing here Your bill is two annas and six pies two bananas one anna each, and soda six pies '

'Here it is,' Sriram said, taking out of his tiny purse two small coins and a six pie coin and passing them on to him

'You see,' the other said, softening, 'this is not the season for bananas and so they are not as cheap as they might be '

'I am not questioning your price, but I want you to understand that you should not be selling foreign stuff You should not sell English biscuits '

All right, sir, hereafter I will be careful, after I dispose of the present stock '

'If you have any pride as an Indian you will throw the entire stock in the gutter and won't let even a crow peck at it Do you understand?

Yes, sir,' said the shopman, not liking the little circle of watchful people who were gathering At the end of the street the lecture platform was being set up with groups of people standing around watching The shopman saw an old enemy of his who liked to see him in trouble standing on the edge of the crowd with a grin on his face As if to satisfy him, the gods had brought this man in Khadi here, a born troublemaker He appealed to Sriram, 'Now sir, please go away a little I must close the shop '

'You may close the shop if you like but I want you to destroy those biscuits,' said Sriram firmly

What biscuits?' asked the shopman alarmed Please leave me alone, sir '

'You have those English biscuits, you said '

'I have no English biscuits, where should I get them? Even in the black market they are not available '

'If they are not English biscuits, so much the better My esteem for you goes up, but may I have a look at one of them?'

I have no biscuits at all,' pleaded the shopman The crowd guffawed Somebody shouted to someone else, 'Hey, here is Ranga in the soup, come on '

'You have got them in that box,' Sriram said, pointing to one of the tin boxes The shopman immediately lifted its lid and displayed its contents, white flour, luckily for him

'But did you not say that you had biscuits a moment ago?

Who? I? I was merely joking I am a poor shopkeeper how could I afford to pay black market rates for biscuits and keep them for sale?

He has got them inside sir Let him show us the inside of his shop said one of the wags

Shut up and go your way shouted the shopman

The situation was getting more complicated every moment

I am very sorry to note that you are a liar in addition to being a seller of foreign black market stuff I am prepared to lay my life at your threshold if it will only make you truthful and patriotic I will not leave this place until I see you empty all your stock in that drain and give me an undertaking that you will never utter a falsehood again in your life I am going to stay here till I drop dead at your door

You are picking an unnecessary fight with me wailed the man

I am only fighting the evil in you it is a non violent fight

A woman came to buy half an anna worth of salt Sriram interposed and said Please don t buy anything here When the woman tried to get past him he threw himself before her on the muddy ground You can walk over me if you like but I will not allow you to buy anything in his shop

The shopman looked miserable What an evil day! What an evil face did he open his eyes on when he awoke that morning! He pleaded Sir I will do anything you say please don t create trouble for me

Sriram said You are completely mistaking me my friend It's not my intention to create trouble for you I only wish to help you

The woman who came to buy salt said The sauce on the oven will evaporate if I wait for your argument to conclude and looking at the figure lying prone on the ground she pleaded May I buy my salt at the other shop over there sir?

Sriram with his head down could not help laughing He said 'Why should you not buy your salt wherever you like?'

She didn t understand his point of view and explained I buy salt once a month sir After all we are poor people. We cannot afford luxuries in life Salt used to cost——

Sriram still lay on his belly and raised his head and said It's for people like you that Mahatma Gandhi has been fighting Do you know that he will not rest till the Salt Tax is repealed?'

'Why sir?' she asked innocently

'For every pinch of salt you consume, you have to pay a tax to the English government That's why you have to pay so much for salt.'

Someone interposed to explain 'And when the Tax goes, you will get so much salt for an anna,' he indicated a large quantity with his hands

The woman was properly impressed and said, opening her eyes wide 'It used to be so cheap,' and added, throwing a hostile glance at the shopman standing on his toes, supporting himself by the dangling rope, with tears in his eyes, 'Our shopmen are putting up the prices of everything nowadays They have become very avaricious,' a sentiment with which most people were in agreement A general murmur of approval went round the gathering

The shopman standing on his toes said, 'What can we do, we sell the salt at the price the government have fixed'

'You might support those of us who are fighting the government on these questions,' said Sriram, 'if you cannot do anything else Do you remember Mahatma's march to Dandi Beach in 1930? He walked three hundred miles across the country, in order to boil the salt-water on the beach of Dandi and help anyone to boil salt water and make his own salt'

The shopman was the very picture of misery He said in an undertone, I'll do anything you want me to do, please get up and go away Your clothes are getting so dirty lying in the dirt'

'Don't bother about my clothes I can look after them, I can wash them'

'But this mud is clayey, sir, it is not easily removed,' said the shopman

Someone in the crowd cried, 'What do you care? He will probably give it to a good *dhobi*'

'If you can't find a *dhobi*, you can give it to our *dhobi* Shama, he will remove any stain Even Europeans in those estates above call him for washing their clothes, sir'

Someone else nudged him and murmured, Don't mention Europeans now, he doesn't like them'

It seemed to Sriram that the people here liked to see him lying there on the ground, and were doing everything to keep him down When this struck him, he raised himself on his hands and sat up There was a smear of mud on his nose and forehead and sand on his hair A little boy, wearing a short vest and a pair of trousers twice his size, came running,

tightly a six pie coin in his hand He shouted Give me good snuff for my grandfather three pies and coconut *bharfi* for three He dashed past Sriram to the shop and held out his coin The shopman snatched the coin from his hand in the twinkling of an eye Sriram touched the feet of the young boy and importuned him Don t buy anything in this shop

Why not?

Sriram started to explain You see our country— when two of three people in the crowd pulled the young boy by the scruff saying Why do you ask questions? Why don t you just do what you are asked to do? They tried to pull him away but he clung to a short wooden railing and cried He has taken my money My money my money

People shouted angrily at the shopman Give the boy his money

The shopman cried How can I? This is a Friday and would it not be inauspicious to give back a coin? I ll be ruined for the rest of my life I am prepared to give him what he wants for the coin even a little more if he wants but no I can t give back the cash Have pity on me friends I am a man with seven children

The little boy cried My grandfather will beat me if I don t take him the snuff His box is empty He is waiting for me

Go and buy in that other shop someone said

The boy answered He ll throw it away if it is from any other shop

The shopman added with untimely pride He has been my customer for the last ten years He can't get this snuff from any other place I challenge anyone

The boy clung to the railing and cried I must have the snuff packet otherwise——

Someone from the crowd pounced upon him muttering imprecations and tore him away from the railing The boy set up a howl The crowd guffawed The shopman wrung his hands in despair Sriram sat on the dust like a statue solemnly gazing on the ground before him. Someone pacified the boy murmuring in his ears Come and take your snuff after that fellow leaves

When will he go? whispered the boy

He will go away soon He is not a man of this place whisper ed another man

But my grandfather's snuff box must be filled at once.

I ll come and speak to your grandfather don t worry

Sriram sat listening to everything, but he said nothing, without moving

The crowd at the shop gradually melted away as the gathering at the other end started forming A second lantern was being taken up the tree The crowd looked up and said, 'Ramu is climbing the tree with the lantern' They pointed at a youth wearing a stripped banian over his bare body and khaki shorts His mother watching from below cried, Hey, Ramu, don't go up the tree, won t someone pull that boy down, he s always climbing trees'

'Why do you bother, what if boys do climb trees?' asked someone A quarrel started, the mother retorting, 'You wouldn't talk like this if you had a son always endangering himself'

The boy shouted from the tree-top, 'if you are going to quarrel, I will jump down and make you all scream' The crowd enjoyed the situation For a moment the shopman lost sight of his own troubles, gazed at the tree-top, and remarked, 'That's a terrible boy, always worrying his mother with his desperate antics She knows no peace with him about.'

Well, he looks old enough to look after himself,' said Sriram.

'Yes, but he has been spoilt by his mother, he is always climbing trees, or swimming or teasing people, a rowdy, said the shopman

'You people trouble him too much He will not bother anyone if he is left alone, I think,' said Sriram 'Everyone is advising and worrying him.'

Now came a shout from the tree-top 'I have fixed the lantern Who else could have done it?' The lantern swung in the air and threw moving shadows on the rocky hill slope behind. The crowd jeered and laughed at him. If anyone jeers at me, I'll cut the rope and throw the lamp on you all,' he challenged

'Devil of a boy,' shouted his mother It was pointless banter, it seemed to Sriram He felt angry at the thought of all these aimless, light hearted folk in this place. The shopman added, 'There is no peace in this village—those two are always bothering everyone in some way or other'

'You are no better,' said Sriram angrily The country was engaged in a struggle for survival, in a flash there passed before his mind Gandhi, his spinning wheel, the hours he spent in walking thinking and mortifying himself in various ways, his imprisonment, all this seemed suddenly pointless, seeing the kind of people for whom it was all intended. He suddenly felt unhappy All his own activity seemed to him meaningless He might as

well return to the cosy isolation of Kabir Lane—that would at least make one old soul happy What did it matter whether the shopman sold British biscuits or Scandinavian ones or Chinese crackers or French butter? It was only a matter of commerce between a conscienceless tradesman and a thick-skinned public All this sitting in the mud and bothering and fighting was uncalled for He felt suddenly weary He asked the shopman Can you give me a piece of paper and a pen and an envelope? I will pay for it

No sir said the shopman There is no demand for paper and such things at this shop People who come here are all simple folk who want something to eat or drink.

And who ask only for English biscuits I suppose? said Sriram cynically

Forget it sir I ll never do it again assured the shopman. If you will only get up from that spot and forget me

Sriram felt pleased at this compliment and at the great importance his personality had acquired It was very gratifying You are not lying I hope, about the paper and envelope? he asked 'Possibly you have only the costliest English paper and ink?

No sir I swear by the Goddess in that temple I have no stock, and I swear by all that is holy I will hereafter avoid all English goods I will fling into the gutter any biscuit that I may ever see anywhere I will kick anyone who asks for an English biscuit. At least in this village there will be no more English biscuits Meanwhile, may I go to the schoolmaster and fetch you a sheet of paper and a pen? He is the only one who ever writes anything in this place The shopman added Please move up a little I can t leave the shop open there are too many thieves about.

Sriram said I ll look after your shop while you are away and then in a sinister manner 'You know how well I can keep off people. He seemed to enjoy it as a joke

The shopman thought it best to join in and laughed nervously preparing to close the doors of his shop His nerves were taut lest Sriram should suddenly change his mind He added in order to safeguard himself against this possibility You must write your letters sir without fail, however busy you may be I ll be back in a moment. He felt happy when he gave a tug to his brass lock and jumped down. He felt like a free man This was his first taste of absolute freedom in all his life I will be back, sir I will be back sir he cried running away jingling his

bunch of keys It was an amusing sight to watch the portly man run

Sriram enjoyed it for a while, leaned back on the door of the shop decorated with enamel plates advertising soaps and hair-oil, and composed in his mind the letter he would write when the paper arrived His eyes were watching the swaying lanterns dangling from the tree branch over the shrine, and the people assembled for the meeting under it. His mind was busy with the letter 'Revered Mahatmaji, I don't know why we should bother about these folk They don't seem to deserve anything we may do for them They sell and eat foreign biscuits They are all frivolous-minded, always bothering too much about a young scamp who has climbed a tree I don t know if he has come down, I don't care if he falls down, it'll be a good riddance for all concerned They will thank us for leaving them alone, rather than for telling them how to win *Swaraj* They simply don t care At this very moment I find them engrossed in preparing for a Loyalists' Meeting What I want to know, my revered Mahatmaji, is—' He wondered what it was that he wanted to tell the Mahatmaji What was really the problem?

He lost sight of the problem He felt suddenly that he was too tired and unhappy He was hungry and homesick. He wanted to go back to his Kabir Lane home, preferably with Bharati, and forget all this The banana and soda-water were hardly adequate for the strain he was undergoing He wished he could ask the man for more if he came back and opened the shop door He was seized with such inertia that he watched without stirring the proceedings of the meeting ahead of him His conscience pricked him all the time Something told him 'You are here to counteract this meeting, but you are doing nothing about it.' He merely told himself, 'I can't do anything I want to suspend everything till I have guidance from my leader There is no use rushing along without a point.' He saw without emotion a set of people arrive in a jeep A gramophone ground away, with amplifiers, producing some film songs to which the public marked time And then someone came up with a harmonium, and accompanied it in a loud voice Sriram shut his ears at the sound of the harmonium Damned instrument,' he muttered to himself His nerves were ajangle with its raucous cry 'I hope when Mahatma Gandhi becomes the Emperor of India, he will make it a penal offence to make or play this instrument This is also a British gift, I suppose,' he told himself

After the music someone presented a scene from Ramayana with music and narration The public enjoyed the show Right in the midst of it all the two officers occupying the iron chairs suddenly got up and delivered a speech in very bad Tamil They explained the importance of the War how Britain was winning how it was India s duty to help and how India should protect herself from enemies within and without There were policemen in plain clothes made less plain by their broad belts and khaki shirts civil officers in tweed and bush coats with sleek hair somebody was distributing toffee out of a tin to all the children in the assembly Sriram said to himself I m here to stop it but—but—let me first write to the Mahatma and get his advice— He looked about He had an excuse to wait He had to wait for the promised letter paper But he spotted the shopman in the crowd Oh liar! Sriram commented He is probably going to pretend that he is a child ask for toffee and sell it at black market rates tomorrow at his shop

§

As if in answer to his unwritten letter he received a communication from Mahatmaji It was enclosed in a note to Bharati and said Your work should be a matter of inner faith It cannot depend upon what you see or understand Your conscience should be your guide in every action Consult it and you won t go wrong Don t guide yourself by what you see You should do your duty because your inner voice drives you to do it Well look after Bharati as well as she looks after you that s all God bless you both in your endeavours

The message had given Bharati an occasion to come up and see him. It was one of his off-days a day of soldier s leave as he thought. He had sat at the portal of his ruined temple resigning himself to doing nothing for the day going through an old issue of a paper he had picked up It was full of dead news—of the Maginot Line and the like But that was enough for him The mail carrier had stepped off the boulder down below long ago on his return journey and had gone back to the plains The evening train had crawled in and out of the landscape long ago The sun stood poised over the Western horizon

Sriram brought out his rush mat spread it out and threw himself on it, and was presently absorbed not only in reading all the stale news in the paper but also in all those jokes tit bits and syndicated cartoons which filled the bottom of its columns He had

picked up the paper on the highway, when returning from his expedition at Solur village It had blown across the highway and hugged a tree trunk. He unwound the sheet from the tree-trunk, flashed his torch on it and saw that it was an up-country paper which was well known for its reactionary views and carping references to Gandhiji, but still it contained some interesting Sunday reading He felt irritated for a second at the thought that someone should have been scattering such an Imperialistic paper in these parts, but he carefully folded it and put it into his bag He had been the victim of certain moments of extreme boredom, when he felt that the huge teak trees and bamboo clumps and the estate trees covering slope upon slope would destroy his mind They got on his nerves and made him want to shout aloud in protest He once tried talking aloud to himself in order to get over the tedium He asked himself, 'Hallo, what are you doing here?' and told himself, I am fighting for my country'

'What sort of fight is it? You look like a vagabond, with no uniform, no weapon, and no enemy in sight, what sort of fight is this? Are you joking?' and he laughed aloud, Oh, oh, oh!" He spoke at the top of his voice till the hills echoed with his voice, and one or two birds sitting on a tree nearby took off in fright This exuberance had greatly relieved his mind Now he hoped to be provided against boredom with this sheet of newspaper Here at least was something to read instead of watching endlessly those tree-tops and valleys It was his lot to be here He could not kick against it

He stretched himself on his mat He had rolled over a block of stone to serve as a back-support for his couch He had found it a couple of days before lying about in the grass and weeds, and had moved it up with difficulty It had been a job of nearly an hour There were smoothed out lettering and ornamental carvings on the stone He had speculated what they might signify, but they were circular letters which looked familiar but eluded study, a message carved probably thousands of years ago by some king or emperor or tyrant one found pictured in history books History books were full of ruffianly-looking characters, according to Sriram He had often wondered what earthly purpose was served in reading and allowing oneself to be questioned about side-whiskered *goondas*? Reclining against this tablet he thought that if he had at least passed his examinations normally, he needn t have got into his present life He might have settled as a good-

natured clerk in an office as his friend Prasanna had done It was only yesterday he had been a champion street footballer but already he was in harness slaving at the Treasury desk several hours a day

Sriram reclined comfortably against the ancient tablet and read a joke in which a He and a She indulged in a four line dialogue When am I going to get my tie pressed? To which she gave the smart reply Exactly an hour after I get that gown Sriram read it over again and again and felt irritated What was the joke? Where lay its humour? He looked it over and examined it minutely but failed to spot any sense in it It was accompanied by a grotesque-looking couple fat about the waist Sriram thought We can t know what humour Englishmen will enjoy! He put away the paper and its corners rustled in the wind Now it was as if he heard the anklet-sound of his beloved and there she was down below Bharati was coming up the road half a mile away She had never been more welcome He got up and ran to her with a wild cry of joy He saw her as an angel come to relieve him of his tedium She carried a bag in her hand as usual and she strode on with such assurance and happiness She was taken aback when turning a bend she was accosted by Sriram

Hallo! he cried at the top of his voice Here is my *Devata* come!

She slowed down her pace and said What has come over you? What will anyone seeing us think!

'Who is there to see and think?' he asked haughtily As if a big crowd were milling about! he said putting into it all the venom he felt at his lonely existence She detected his tone of bitterness but preferred to overlook it.

What do you want? A b g fair around you all the time? she asked light heartedly walking on

He asked Where are you going?'

I m going to meet you

Here I am

I won t take official notice of your presence here but if you want me to state my business I will say it and go back I have come to you with excellent news

What is it? he cried anxiously following her

She went on saying Come and hear it at your own place

At hi. place he ceremoniously showed her the mat and begged her to recline with ease against the tablet. She obeyed him. She stretched her legs leaned back on the tablet, and while

her figure was rousing wild emotions in Sriram, she picked up the letter from her little bag and gave it to him. 'Here is a letter from Bapu for you How do you like it? He read it and remained thoughtful Owls were hooting, the sky had darkened, crickets were making a noise in the dark bushes He sat beside her on the mat. He could see her heart palpitating her left breast under her white khaddar sari She seemed to be unaware of the feelings she was rousing in him

She said, Do you know what it means? Bapu wants you to stay on and do your work here He feels your work here is worthwhile and that you will have to go on with it.'

'How do you know he means that and not something else?'

'I know it because I can read what he writes and understand it.'

'I can also read what he writes,' said Sriram with pointless haughtiness

'Did you write anything to him?' she asked.

He didn't like the cross-examination 'I might or I might not,' he said with anger in his voice

'Why should you be angry? I'll write to Bapu next time that you are a very angry man'

In answer he suddenly threw himself on her, muttering, 'You will only write to him that we are married' It was an assault conducted without any premeditation, and it nearly overwhelmed her

He gave her no opportunity to struggle or free herself He held her in an iron embrace in his madness He lost sight of her features The hour was dark He felt her breath against his face when she said, 'No, this can't be, Sriram'

Sriram muttered, 'Yes, this can be No one can stop me and you from marrying now This is how gods marry'

Her braid laid its plesant weight on his forearm. Her cheeks smelt of sandalwood soap He kissed the pit of her throat. He revelled in the scent of sandalwood that her body exuded 'You are sweet-smelling, he said 'I will be your slave I will do anything you ask me to do for you I will buy you all the things in the world' He behaved like an idiot She wriggled in his grasp for a moment and at the same time seemed to respond to his caresses He rested his head on her bosom and remained silent. He felt that any speech at this moment would be a sacrilege It was a night of absolute darkness The trees rustled, crickets and night insects carried on their unremitting drone. He wanted to say something about the stars and moonlight, but

he felt tongue tied The only thing that seemed to be of any consequence now was her warm breathing body close to his

He murmured I always knew it You are my wife

She gently released herself from his hold and said Not yet I must wait for Bapu s sanction

How will you get it?

I shall write to him tomorrow

If he doesn t sanction it?'

You will marry someone else

Don t you like me? Tell me—tell me—— he said in a fevered manner

She felt the trembling of his body and said I shouldn t be coming here or meeting you if I didn t

Wouldn t Mahatmaji have known?

No His mind is too pure to think anything wrong——

What is wrong with what?

This is very wrong—we—we should not have—I—I—— she sobbed I don t know what Bapu will think of me now I—must—write to him what has happened

He had never seen her so girlish and weak He felt a momentary satisfaction that he had quashed her pride quelled her turbulence He said aggressively Bapuji will say nothing He will understand He knows human feelings and so don t worry There is nothing wrong in loving You and I are married

When?

On the very first day I saw you

That's not enough I can t marry without Bapu s sanction

He became positive and dynamic He swore We shall marry this very moment He dragged her by the hand into the inner sanctum He ran hither and thither feverishly doing various things He lit the lamp and placed it before the image whose nose and arms were broken but whose eyes still shed grace He ran out and came back with a few leaves and flowers and placed them at the foot of the pedestal He took out a thread from his spinning wheel saying, You cannot have a *thali* more sacred than this nor a priest more holy than this god When he attempted to place the thread round her neck, she gently drew herself away from him.

A sudden firmness came in her voice as she said Know this Sriram If I had not trusted you I d not have come here again and again. He did not understand why she was saying it He felt rather bewildered. Why was she talking like this? Perhaps

she suddenly remembered that she ought to marry Gorpad or someone else Yes, now it flashed across his mind there used to be some significant exchange of looks between her and Gorpad What a fellow to marry, rough as emery paper! A stab of jealousy shook him for a moment and he said, 'Will you swear before this god that you will marry only me'

'Yes, if I marry at all, and mark this, if Bapu agrees to it'

'Bapu! Bapu!' It filled him with despair He wailed 'He is too big to bother about us Don't trouble him with out affairs

She said, 'I won't marry if he doesn't sanction it I can't do it'

'If he asks you to marry someone else,' he asked pathetically, checking at the last second the word 'Gorpad'

'Bapu has better things to do than finding a husband for me,' she said clearly, unequivocally

He blinked for a moment The excitement made his throat parched He wanted to ask something again But even in his confused state, he was aware that he was saying the same thing over and over He blinked pathetically The broken armed god looked on Sriram had never bargained for such an inconclusive love-making It had begun with such spirit that he had felt he would be shot into elysium next moment, but here he was, standing before a god immobilized and listening to an obscure speech The girl would probably take him for a fool to leave so much space between them He tried to remedy it by approaching her again and attempting to storm her as he did a moment ago The first time he had the advantage of a sudden impulse But now it didn't work She just beat down his outstretched arm No You will not touch me again' She said it with such authority that he felt foolish

'I didn't intend to if you don't want it I know you hate me,' he said childishly

She simply said, 'Why should I hate you?'

'Because I am bothering you'

'How?' she asked

'By, by—asking you to marry me It's wrong, perhaps wrong'

'It wouldn't be if Bapu agreed to it'

He resigned himself 'All right,' he said 'As you please——'

'We shall marry,' she said, 'the very minute Bapu agrees' She was very considerate

He felt it was time for him to ask again 'Do you—like me?'

'Yes, when you don't misbehave'

How can I say? she replied. Are you coming too?

He said Not now I want to think it over But I will readily come if they will keep me in the same prison preferably in the same cell.

It won t be possible, the government won t keep us together she said

This enraged Sriram The whole universe seemed to be organized to defeat his purpose even the government which differed from the Mahatma on most matters seemed to be in accord with him where it concerned him and Bharati. The worst of it was that Bharati herself seemed to rejoice in the arrangement He became wild at the thought and said Why is everyone opposed to my loving you?

She took pity on him and said tenderly 'Poor fool You have lost your wits completely

How dare you say that? he shouted.

There is no point in your shouting she said Don t let us quarrel. I will be gone in a moment. I want to report myself before it strikes four If they want to send me to The Central or some other jail they must have time to catch the evening train

What shall I do without you? he wailed

That is why Bapu has asked you to report too

He shook his head. I have a lot of things to do outside Bapu has given everyone freedom to carry on the Satyagraha in his own manner He doesn t really mean me, he said dolefully

In answer Bharati seized the letter and held it open under his nose 'This applies to your disciple also he says

But that doesn t mean me It may mean anyone, said Sriram.

I thought he always understood whom he meant by disciple she said grimly Anyway the choice is yours You may do what you think best. I am doing what seems to me the right thing to do

How do you know it is the right thing to do?'

I need not answer that question she said irritated If I had known that you would treat Bapuji s word so lightly——

Sriram felt crushed by her tone Oh Bharati don t add to my troubles by mistaking me so completely I revere the Mahatma you know I do Why do you suspect me? Have I not followed every word of what he has been saying? Otherwise I should not have been here. I should not have left the comfort of my house All that I want is some more time to think

it over I am ' he brought out his masterpiece on an inspiration. 'I am only thinking of my grandmother I want to see her before I am finally jailed That is why I asked you how long we should be in prison She is very old, you know I will surrender myself after I have seen her once I must manage to see her

This idea seemed to soften the girl She thought it over, leaning back on the tablet She seemed to appreciate his tender feelings for his grandmother

That is all right, Sriram I am sorry I mistook you He wanted to touch her arm, but he felt afraid to do so She would surely say, 'Keep off, not until,' and that would irritate him again and make him speak nonsense

She got up He asked, Must you go?

'Yes, it is late for me'

He followed her sheepishly, When we meet again after the jail, and wherever we may meet will you not forget me?'

'I will not forget you,' she said, catching her breath ever so lightly

He loved her as she drew herself up, more than at any other time in his life, but he also felt afraid of her more than at any other time He simply said, 'If you will not be angry with me, Bharati, I wish to ask one thing'

Yes? she said, stopping and looking at him He noticed beads of perspiration on her upper lip and wanted to wipe them off with his fingers He was seized with desolation at the thought that he would not see her any more coming round the bend of the road He wanted to seize her in his arms and take a stormy leave of her, but he had to content himself with asking, 'Will you marry me after we are out of all this, will you promise, if Bapuji permits?

Yes, I promise ' she said and hurried off before he could talk to her or follow her He stood where he was and saw her raising her hands to her eyes once or twice in order to wipe off the tears gathering there.

PART THREE

A PERSON called Jagadish dropped in one day very casually and introduced himself as a national worker He said he was a photographer in Malgudi by profession and claimed he had a formula for paralysing Britain in India His studio in Malgudi with its dark interior served as a meeting ground for a group who were bent upon achieving immediate independence for the coun try Jagadish came because he was in need of an out-of town lair for his activities and he was looking for a place where he could instal a small radio set which could also transmit code messages

He came trudging uphill while Sriram was reclining against his stone tablet. He came with a haversack on his back and wore a Khadi dress Sriram had been reading his old newspaper Bharati s exit from his life had created a vacuum which he found it hard to fill He felt somewhat confused as to what he should do with himself now

Jagadish set down his haversack sat beside Sriram and asked 'You are Sriram?'

Yes

I am Jagadish. I used to know Bharati also We are all doing more or less the same work.

This was enough to stir Sriram out of his lethargy He sat up and welcomed the other profusely with a great deal of warmth and asked Where where is she?

In detention We don t know where, but one of our boys met her just before she surrendered herself to the police

Sriram asked 'Where is this man?

He too has surrendered to the police before that he came and saw me

Are you going to court imprisonment?'

'No I have other things to do That is why I have come here

Sriram was happy to find a kindred soul and at once poured into his ears his own feelings I told Bharati not to be a fool

Don t say that In this matter we all judge and act indivi dually Those who cannot follow Mahatmaji s orders are free to act as they think best.

How right you are, Sriram cried feeling he had blundered into the right set

The other said, 'This is a war in which we are engaged, we are passing through abnormal times, and we do what we think best.'

He began to unpack his haversack Sriram, always hungry and rather tired of the monotonous food he was eating, hoped childishly that something nice to eat would come out of it. He hoped it would be chocolate or fruit or biscuits Oh, how long it was since he had eaten anything like *idli*, those white sensitive things made by his granny on most Sundays Why Sunday and not on any other day, he had often asked Now Jagadish took from his bag a small box, unwrapped the paper around it and brought out a tiny radio set

'You will have to keep this,' he said 'It can transmit as well as receive I had it in my studio all these days but the police have become very watchful nowadays' He installed it behind the god's image, and camouflaged it with some bamboo leaves

From then on the god with the eyeless sockets saw a great deal of Jagadish. He was of short stature with a brown wrap around his shoulders He had a shaggy crop of minute, springy curls, which spread out parallel to the earth, projecting several inches beyond his ears He parted his shaggy crop in the middle and applied a vast quantity of oil over his curls so that the top of his skull was always resplendent, and often Sriram saw the midday sun shining back from his head in a thousand colours He was a very dark man with a large bulbous nose, but there was a fire in him that consumed everything before it, and Sriram felt afraid to oppose him It seemed incredible that an elegant slender creature like Bharati should ever have spoken to this bear-like personality

A stab of jealousy passed through him. Could it be that she had ever toyed with the notion of marrying him? God knew what he did with himself when he was out of sight. How did he make a living out of photography? Sometimes he didn't appear for days, and when he turned up he explained, The wedding season, you know More fools getting married, and they drop in to get themselves photographed I can't afford to waive all the business' Or he explained, The jasmine season, and this is a heavy time for a photographer What a lot of young girls come with jasmine buds knitted in their braids—the problem for the photographer is to photograph a girl's face and the back of her jasmine-covered head simultaneously, which is what they demand Poor things, they sit up all night when they have

jasmine in their hair for fear of crushing it on the pillows They arrive at the rate of two a minute When they are in the darkness of the studio I try to find out their politics and give them our cyclostyled circulars and the latest news The studio is a help for us in this job When anyone comes there he is more respon sive than he is anywhere else People generally come to a studio with a cheerful mind ready to oblige the photographer by being agreeable and responsive and by listening to all he has to say the same as being with a barber They have a feeling that they are obliged to the photographer in some vague way and readily listen to his talk and I make use of this for our national cause That s why I keep the studio going although it s so difficult without a proper supply of materials When our country gets independence if I have anything to do with things you will see what I shall do to the beggars who are black marketing spools now! He ground his teeth at the thought of them

He was soon converting the temple into a fortress He explained The advantage of this place do you know what it is? Except for a few antiquarians no one knows of its existence And it is not visible from outside I ve observed it from various points It cannot be seen from the road down below I wonder why anyone built a temple here at all I believe it must have been used as a place for conspirators a thousand years ago and he laughed grimly Sriram laughed He began to like him

Don t think this is always going to be safe said the other Sooner or later they will find it

There is an underground chamber began Sriram

Yes where I know aged cobras live, if you prefer them to the police But we have to manage somehow between the cobras and the police

Yes yes with so much to do——

Jagadish handed him a small axe and told him to cut the bamboo foliage, large branches of it and drag them up Sriram went at it till the skin on his palm smarted and peeled off Jagadish induced Sriram to climb the rampart of the old temple and stick the folia,e here and there according to his directions He was shoutin, energetically Standing in the sun all day his face shone like mahogany with sweat. He said I can screen this whole mountain if it comes to that. Sriram felt tired and indignant He wondered, Why should I let this fellow order me about when he does nothing but stand around and instruct? Probably it would have been more pleasant to have gone to jail

But Jagadish never gave him much opportunity to dwell on such thoughts He said 'We are waging a war, remember Mahatmaji in his own way and we in our own. All our aims are the same'

'But I thought we were all working out the Mahatma's orders'

We are, we are,' he said vaguely 'I used to be a devoted follower too I'm still one, but he is no longer there to guide us What can we do? He permits us all to carry on our work to the best of our abilities'

'But strictly non-violently,' said Sriram.

Of course, this camouflaging is not violence It doesn't hurt anybody It's done only that we may be left alone to work out our plans without interference I don t want even that postman to see too much of this place After all, he is a member of the Imperial Government.'

Sriram s next assignment was more complicated. He found he had become a blind slave of Jagadish, and a word of encouragement from him pleased him to the depths of his soul. He felt proud of his position. He thought that perhaps the other associates hardly ever got a good word from him. All day long, he sat up with the radio behind the god, with a writing pad on his lap, and a pencil between his fingers, taking down the news and messages coming from Rangoon, Singapore and Germany, which purported to give the hour-to-hour progress of the war in Europe and the Far East. Sriram worked far into the night. His pencil wore out every three days He had never worked so hard in his life. The only reward he got was Jagadish s 'Very good! Excellent job More of our troops have joined the Indian National Army, they will soon be marching into India' He sat by the lamp and went over the reports with concentration as Sriram sat chasing out the gnats and beetles that were trooping in towards the light. Jagadish made several markings on the messages, and carried them off to be cyclostyled and distributed from his studio at Malgudi

The radio said This is Tokyo calling Here is Subhas Chandra Bose, your own leader at the mike, addressing you on a special occasion' A few seconds later the message said, This is Subhas Chandra Bose speaking Sriram sat up respectfully 'What good fortune that I should hear his voice! At the sound of it, Sriram felt reverence for this man who had abandoned his home, comfort, and security, and was going from country to country, seeking some means of liberating his

Motherland With what skill he had managed to slip away from his home in Calcutta in spite of police vigilance, disguising himself as a Sadhu! Sriram felt he was peculiarly fortunate to be hearing the hero s voice.

Subhas Chandra Bose s voice said, Men of the Indian Army be patriots Help us free our dear Motherland. Many of your friends are here, having joined the Indian National Army which is poised for attack on your borders We are ready We shall soon be across and then you can join the fight on our side Till then don t aim your guns at us, but only at the heart of our enemy And then followed a ten point programme of National Service that the men of the Indian Army should undertake Sriram wrote at break neck speed He felt as if the commanding presence of Subhas Chandra Bose itself was at his elbow dictating He filled up several sheets of the pad in respectful silence He was overawed by the look of the radio now as its lamps burned red Outside crickets chirped a train rattled away somewhere and the bamboo clumps rustled. The radio went on and on Its red eyes glowed, and threw a red glare on the ankle of the god on the pedestal. Sriram lost count of time He had never written so much in his life. That the broadcast came through in English was a great trial, for his spelling was none too good.

Subhas Chandra Bose was saying And now stand by for a most important message Be attentive Sriram wanted to catch it without fail, without any possibility of a mistake, but just at that moment a contrary noise began to emanate from the radio It was as if a bee had started buzzing in time with the Great Message Sriram felt distressed. If the thing went on undisturbed for a few seconds more, the message would be over He strained his ears, but the other noise was becoming too loud He ground his teeth His left hand strayed towards the knob of the radio and turned it. It only seemed to irritate the radio further He lifted his eyes from the paper and glared at the radio He saw on the dial on the outside of the glass sheet, illuminated by a small light inside, a very small cockroach its pale body quivered with the battery of noise from the radio Sriram felt revulsion at the sight of its white belly pressed against the glass dial He could see but not reach it. He felt sick and angry He cried, "You cursed creature, how dare you come and interfere with this most important message! Get away He tapped the glass with his finger He felt indignant. Am I here to wear out my pencil, taking down your stupid loathsome noises!

His tapping was so furious that whether it affected the insect or not, he tapped the light away, and all noise from the machine ceased The radio was dead Sriram laid aside his pad and pencil and shook the radio, but nothing happened He turned the knobs, shook his fist at it, and cursed and cried, but nothing happened He asked pathetically, Couldn t you have waited for five minutes more! Why should this have happened just when the most serious part of the message was coming through? What would Jagadish say about him now? Sriram looked at the radio and realized his utter helplessness He had seen youngsters who could take any mechanism to pieces and assemble them again He wasn't fit to turn even a screw His own limitations came back to him with a good deal of force, and he said, I am a fool, I have been brought up as a fool by that Granny of mine It is a wonder that a girl like Bharati cares for me at all!

This note of self-reproach was fully endorsed when Jagadish turned up at two a m After putting the radio out of commission, Sriram sat for a while wondering what to do, blew out the lamp, kicked open his mat and lay down on it When Jagadish arrived and struck a match to look for the lamp, Sriram woke up and cried excitedly, 'Who are you?' A sleepy vision of the very dark man illumined by a match-flare was unnerving

'Hush, it is myself, get up'

Sriram sat up, rubbing his eyes The lamp was lit Jagadish gave him a slight shake in order to wake him fully, he sat beside him and asked, 'What is special today?

Sriram triumphantly held out his pad to him He snatched it, crying excitedly 'Ah, a message from Subhas Babu! How lucky you are to have heard him Good boy! Good boy! You shall be a big man when our country becomes free and independent' He ran his eyes down it, muttering, 'These are men who are gods on earth, whose deeds must be recited in odes to posterity I'll have a *lavani* compo ed of Subhas Babu's life, his sacrifice, patriotism, courage, and make it compulsory to sing it every day in every school in this country' He went on reading aloud, '"My countrymen, heroes of our Indian Army ——' in a singsong manner, interlarding it with appreciative comments of his own, such as, 'Very good!' Precisely,' 'It is a great mind speaking! Listen and learn, all ye good folk,' and so on and so forth Till he came down to 'Now be attentive In the first place all of you who' ——' He turned the paper over in his hand and 'Where is the continuation?

There is no continuation the message stopped there Someone has been tampering with the broadcast

What do you mean? Let us see He dashed to where the radio was and turned the knob There was no sign of life He shook it and cried What has happened to this blessed radio?

How can I say? Am I a radio engineer?

Don t get into an argument with me about it It ll not take us anywhere Subhas Babu must have said some very vital things and you have chosen to choke the radio

No You are wrong It choked itself Probably a cockroach I saw there must have done it

Jagadish clenched his great fist and remained silent Sriram feared he would hit him If he did he wouldn t go down without a fight He looked at a corner where he kept a bamboo staff for cobras and scorpions He wondered for a moment whether he should make an immediate dash to it Would the other give him the necessary time?

After many moments of grim silence the man said Well let us not bother about it any more As soldiers we must learn not to brood over what is definitely past, mind you what is definitely past He said Give me that pencil Sriram passed the pencil to him Jagadish adjusted the lamp read the message carefully and after spending one minute thinking filled in the rest of the sheet briskly You must you must and you must He wrote with inspiration. It took him nearly an hour to complete the writing of the message he looked over it and shook his head with satisfaction He gave the pad to Sriram and commanded *Now read it, young man this is exactly how he would have* gone on if the cockroach had not stood there acting like a censor After this triumph a sudden sorrow assailed him He was reminded of the radio The last battery set—you could have spoken back to Subhas Babu if you had only been careful It was a two-way radio I suppose I d better take it back with m and repair it As a soldier I will not cry over split milk.

Is it split milk?' Sriram asked nervously

Of course it is asserted Jagadish when milk goes bad it splits into water and solid you know It s no use crying over split milk he repeated

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Next afternoon, a little while after the train blew its whistle, Jagadish arrived with a bundle of papers hidden under his shirt For the purpose of carrying that quantity of paper he wore an inner shirt with an enormous pocket and over it another large cloak-like shirt, and looked so big with all this literature hidden about his person that Sriram sometimes wondered if the impressiveness of his personality might not be due to excessive padding

Jagadish unwound his robes and took out a bundle of papers, and once again Sriram childishly as ever expected him to produce some nice eatables 'Come on, sit down, said Jagadish Jagadish first went to look up and down and assure himself that no one was watching He dramatically attempted to close the large door which creaked on its mighty hinges, but could be moved only half an inch forward Sriram watched him without a word After these preparations, he pulled Sriram to a seat beside him on the mat He pressed a sheet of cyclostyled messages into his hand, and said, Read it' Sriram read aloud, Men of the Indian Army, etc , etc , ' all that he had monitored on the previous day, but it continued for several paragraphs more "First, don't co-operate with our enemy Government Lay down your arms and lay down your lives, if necessary You will be the heroes of the day when the Indian National Army marches into Delhi and flies its flag on the Red Fort, the very place where our men are now imprisoned.' And it went on and on, giving precise directions to the army as to what it should do, for the liberation of the country Sriram felt a profound admiration for the man How did you manage to get the rest of the message? he asked innocently

Don't bother how,' replied Jagadish, where there is a will there is a way *All out of this,' he said proudly touching his* forehead 'I could easily guess how the rest of the message would have run It is just a matter of thought-reading, more or less,' he declared proudly 'It is an extremely important message for our army at this moment It is very vital to us And it is to your honour that you got it first, although (never mind, let us not think of what is past) you couldn't get the full message, nothing is lost, and so don t bother about it Furthermore, it should be your honour to see that the message reaches those for whom it is intended'

Sriram was somewhat confounded He asked, 'What should I do?'

Listen to me carefully I will give you fifty copies of this and you will take them to the army camp at Belliali The poor fellows there cannot have any notion of what is happening in the world since they are not allowed to listen in to truth but only to the cock and bull stories that the British War Department issues Our boys must know the truth They must know where Subhas Babu is where the Indian National Army is stationed and what is to be done It is our duty to propagate truth wherever it may be Has not Mahatmaji told us so?

Yes yes agreed Sriram to whom this argument appealed What will you do with the rest of the copies? Why don t you let me carry some more?

No I can spare only fifty I have made one hundred and fifty copies in all These are days of paper shortage remember I am going to send fifty copies to Lakshi camp and take fifty myself to the third one at—— You will have to go up tonight and complete the task alloted to you

Agreed said Sriram

Before parting Jagadish said We shall probably all three of us get shot in this enterprise But don t bother Our lives are not very important Our work is more important

I don t care whether I live or die said Sriram remembering the frustrations he had experienced with Bharati What was the use of dragging on one s existence with this girl always inaccessible? Probably this national fight would never be over and if over might probably involve her in further activities She was bound to be pursuing something else all her life This thought caused him so much weariness that he declared with all sincerity his readiness to die He added If I fail to return will you tell Bharati what I think of her?

What do you think of her? asked the other with amusement

That if she had married me I should probably not have died or something like that

Well I will tell her that If I am shot, you can take charge of my studio It is yours for the asking

Sriram felt too moved to speak You are kind, he murmured. How good you are

The other just twirled the end of his fancy scarf But I am afraid you will find it hard to run it with the position of chemicals being wha it is! Anyway I wish you luck.

§

The pamphlets were written on a convenient size which could easily be carried concealed on one's person. Sriram placed them neatly in a small bundle in a long strip of a towel, brought together its corners and tied them, put the towel around his waist and knotted it, over it he put on his khadi vest, and over it his *jibba* The messages pressed his stomach uncomfortably, but he bore this with fortitude He went down hill at nightfall. Jagadish had given him precise directions

Sriram walked down the road and waited under a tree for a bus There were one or two villagers sitting under the tree, waiting too It was dark, and beyond the horizon there was the glow of Malgudi town He sighed like an outcast. 'What a wretched hour it was when I set out to face life! Granny!' he addressed her mentally, I want to be back but I can't be, don t worry All troubles must end I wish they would release Mahatmaji As long as he is in prison we will fight this devilish government How dare they lay their hands on him? If they hadn't done that, Bharati would be out and happy, and Mahatmaji would have given his consent to her marriage'

'Eh? What do you say, sir? asked one of the villagers, peering at him curiously

Sriram became cautious and asked, Who is there? He looked closer, and asked, 'What are you waiting for?'

The bus is late today', they said by way of conversation, and Sriram agreed, It should have been here long ago, isn t that so?

'How is the war going, sir?' asked one of them, the usual question that any villager would put to any man who looked informed

Sriram suddenly became very cautious He asked, 'Why?'

The other said, 'Because if it is over soon, we shall all be free from troubles'

'I don't know,' Sriram drawled In the darkness he could not make out the features of the man to whom he was talking It might be a police spy or a constable himself

'How is the war going, sir?' persisted the man

'Well, the papers say this and that, and that is all I know,' replied Sriram

'But someone says that it is all false! My brother knows lot of people and he said that the English are being everywhere He said that the Germans are already in . If they come, will they release our Mahatmaji from

Sriram wished to divert the question and asked Have you seen Mahatma Gandhi?

Yes sir he passed through our village began the man and the headlights of the bus became visible far off The man picked up his bundle ran to the middle of the road crying Unless we stop the bus he won t stop By the time the bus arrived he stood right in the middle of the road gesticulating wildly

You will be run over! cried Sriram

The driver jammed on his brakes and cursed What are you doing? Do you want to kill yourself? Why don t you join the army and die if you want to die? he asked and laughter came from the bus

The villager cried I wish to go to——

Clear off and don t stand there talking There s no place even for an ant in this chariot

Let him in cried the conductor to whom this meant extra income Such passengers were unaccounted for at the end of the day

I will sit on the floor pleaded the villager

Five annas cried the conductor

Three annas cried the passenger Last week you took me for three annas

Last week is not this week cried the conductor

Sriram who had watched the proceedings with detachment till now suddenly came forward Take them in for three annas if you did so last week.

Yes sir said the conductor awed by Sriram s manner

And drop me at—— How much?

Three annas sir

I will stand on the footboard if there is no space inside said Sriram.

The conductor became officious He said You may come in sir I ll make room.

All the passengers craned their necks out of the bus the engine was hissing like a serpent 'No I will stand on the footboard said Sriram and clutched the handrail when the bus moved He probably thinks I am a bu. inspector off duty' reflected Sriram clutching the cold handrail as the night breeze blew on his face Within the bus someone was snoring someone was explaining the war and its progress on all fronts someone was talking about God and Fate, a child was crying a woman was

yawning, the driver and conductor exchanged private jokes and giggled 'They are probably enjoying the thought of their ill-gotten money,' thought Sriram The bus ached and groaned under its load He feared that its bottom might fall out Unfortunately, he was not a bus inspector

All the same, he assumed a voice of authority and asked, Conductor, what is your limit of loading?

The conductor replied with humility, 'The Government have set aside the rule, sir We may take in as many as we can hold This is wartime, sir, otherwise how many poor folk would get stranded on the highway'

Many murmurs of approval came from the passengers What with these air raids and troubles, it would be most dangerous to get stranded on the road,' someone ventured

The bus rocked past sleeping villages The lights were shaded according to the wartime rule, and the headlights threw a faint patch of light ahead Someone was humming a tune, all these human sounds were welcome to Sriram's ears, which had grown atrophied through his lonely existence He revelled in the music of human voices

The bus slowed down and he jumped off at a village called Sangram The time was about eleven at night and the entire village was asleep He waited on the road till the bus was out of sight, and then patted his person to see if his material was intact, a wire-cutter in his inner pocket, and the precious message at his waist When he stooped, a lump pained him at the belly 'If only to be relieved of this pain, I must scatter the message,' he reflected Turning down a road on his left, he walked on the extreme side of the road since one or two military lorries were passing, and he did not want to be noticed He came up against a vast jungle of barbed wire entanglements, enclosing a group of bamboo and mud huts, with a private road winding through The main entrance was on the other side This was a military depot and training centre, and from here all day the rattle of convoys agitated the silence

Presently he found himself cutting a portion of the barbed wire fence. The snap resounded through the place, he feared somebody might machine-gun him He heard the footsteps of the patrol sentry, and lay low He thought, 'Well, this is my last moment Suppose I am sent to hell?' He remembered all the details of hell that his grandmother had given him in childhood and shuddered 'There is no sense in getting shot by an

sentry he reflected One unknown man shooting another unknown man a ridiculous thing to happen On the strength of this he put away the cutter He took out a little glue, sat down and applied it neatly to the back of a few sheets pasted the notices on the pillars supporting the wire and facing the inner barracks The barb scratched the skin of his forearm Blood is drawn and this is th utmost I m prepared to shed on Jagadish s orders After this he rolled up his sheets into one m..ss and flung them into the enclosure He saw under the star lit heaven the notices fluttering down The boys may pick up and read the messages at their leisure tomorrow morning, he reflected and turned back.

§

Jagadish said Why that lack lustre and far away look in your eyes young man? You do a lot of service to the great cause But without your heart really in it May I know why? Sriram had nothing definite to reply I should have said Look pleasant please or Smile please as becomes a photographer You must put your heart into your job my dear young man otherwise you will not help our country We are passing through crucial times as our statesmen say and we have to do something I have a suspicion that you let your thoughts play too much around a certain person Am I right?

Yes

Well that's a futile occupation since it s the government who think it would be in your best interests to keep you two apart. You don t even know where they are keeping her

That's true said Sriram dolefully

But I know where she is said Jagadish I ve my own agents She is not actually in any regular prison all jails being full now She is in a hurriedly made up one You know the Old Slaughter House? She is in it, along with a number of other women prisoners

How do you know?'

I know a guard who works there. He likes me because he is an old customer whose old photograph in my stock helped him in some family litigation. He will help you to meet your friend if you are inclined that way

Sriram s heart palpitated. This was as if the dead had come to life or at least were promising to come to life.

'A nice fellow, he will help you, at the risk of his own life, to meet and talk to Bharati for about half an hour'

'When? When?' Sriram asked anxiously

'As soon as you have done your job smartly. Some business about chrome ore, and I need your assistance'

'You mean I shall be rewarded for my services'

'Yes, that's what I mean. One good turn deserves another'

'Who is going to be benefited by my good turn?' Sriram asked

'Well, the country. A train load of chrome ore is leaving at a certain railway station for England. It should not reach the port. If it reaches the port, it will return to us in the form of triggers and what not and plague us. I can't think of anyone but you to assist me in this job'

It was inevitable that soon the police should publish Sriram's photograph and announce a reward for anyone giving information of his whereabouts.

§

Sriram had a racking fear that Jagadish might be playing a practical joke. 'If he is playing a joke, heaven help him,' he told himself. 'I will crush his skull with a big stone,' and he revelled in visions of extraordinary violence. He pulled his mind back sharply when he realized how Bharati would react. The thought of Bharati softened him. He told himself he would not hesitate to fall at the feet of any villain if Bharati desired him to do so. Anything to please her and earn her approval. His whole being acquired a meaning only when he was doing something in relation to Bharati. He wondered how he should conduct himself when she came out and the photographer too was there. He hoped that his jealousy would not drive him to do wild things. Anyway, he hoped that the photographer would mind his business and leave him alone in order to pursue his life as he liked, he hoped the fight with the British Government would end soon. He hoped Britain would leave India, so that he might return to Kabir Lane and live in peace with Bharati and Granny! Ah, that was the trouble. What would Granny do about it? She would probably nag Bharati night and day and compare her with her brother's granddaughter in looks and competence in household duties, but he hoped Bharati would turn round and challenge her to say whether that village niece of hers would have faced a charging police force or spoken to Mahatmaji. As he reclined on

his couch at the entrance to his cave and looked at the top of the blue gum trees his mind roamed unchecked.

In a moment Jagadish had come up and was standing by his side He said Very unsafe young man If it had been a policeman instead of myself you would still have been sitting there, day-dreaming and he d have put a nice collar round your neck and led you along to the jail

Sriram rather irritated, asked What s wrong with day dreaming?'

There is much that is not right You must be more watchful Our cave is probably not visible from outside but someone may think of exploring these parts You are probably not seen but don t imagine that can last for ever You should always watch even through the camouflage Be careful.

All right, Sriram said cowed by the other s manner very much like a tiger in the circus ring which subsides on the spot indicated by the ring master with a rolling growl

Jagadish took his seat beside him with the remark And if you imagine that it s better the police come after you so that they may detain you at the Old Slaughter House, you are mistaken They will do nothing of the kind it s reserved for women prisoners

At the mention of the Old Slaughter House, Sriram softened The associations of the Old Slaughter House might not be pleasant for everyone, but for Sriram the name produced the happiest associations and a very profound sense of peace

Old Slaughter House? Old Slaughter House? Sriram said adopting a playful attitude for the first time these many days Old Slaughter the sound is familiar! What has that to do with us?'

It's virtue is that it is an Old Slaughter House, and not a new one said Jagadish, Many a goat trembles when it passes that building but it makes you smile and joke All the slaughter of the place is forgotten Yet it's still a place that attacks the heart doesn t it?' he said

Sriram felt completely happy He would have gone on talking of the Slaughter House for the rest of his days it was an opiate which made him forget politics history police, and his own loneliness

If you wish to visit the place, you will have to make certain alterations to your good self Jagadish said. He explained First you must look unlike the photo the police have published

If someone wants to make money by informing, you should not help him to do so I fear the police have published your photo far and wide, and any street urchin may denounce you It shows the evil of leaving one's photos about I have an advantage in this respect—there is no photo of me and they have only described me having been so busy photographing others, that is the chief advantage You have been scattering your portraits about like a film star

Yes, yes,' Sriram had to agree dolefully He recollected the cheap four-for-one-rupee quick photos that he had indulged in some time after he came into his wealth Often Sriram had seen his pictures displayed on the advertisement boards of the photographers, and the walls of his house were full of his own pictures He remembered his grandmother saying In our days people hung portraits of gods and ancestors, you have nothing but your own! I wonder why you do it?

Does it mean the police have taken the photos from our house in Kabir Street?' Sriram asked, assailed by a sudden thought

Definitely That s the first thing they will have done

I wonder what Granny said'

She will repeat it all when she sees you next Don't worry, he replied He studied Sriram closely and said You will have to change your appearance You will have to undertake some drastic changes First and foremost grow a nice small moustache, a little one that droops at the ends will make you look slightly like a mongol, but don t let that weigh on your mind, they are looking for you, not for a mongol And then, do you think you could shave off your crop in order to complete the picture?

Sriram s heart quailed at the suggestion, remembering all the heartaches he had undergone in order to get rid of his old tuft and grow his present crop His Granny would not hear of it at first She was certain that it would spoil his appearance, but one day he had just slipped away to the temple-tank on whose steps barbers sat and shaved their customers He induced an old barber to cut off his tuft and run the machine over his ears, and on his lap he emptied all the pocket money he had purloined from his own sealed money box He had widened the slit of the money box and shaken out the coins, when his Granny was in the kitchen To disguise the rattling the had muffled it with a piece of cloth and carried the operation on till it shed eight annas in small coppers His Granny kept shouting from the kitchen, 'What is that noise? 'Which noise?' shouted back

and had gone on with his job He had had no clear idea how much a barber would demand for a crop-cut He put it down at six annas and two annas extra for any unlooked for expense But the barber at the tank had demanded a rupee to cut off the thick curly tuft Sriram had possessed. By haggling Sriram brought it down to six annas and the barber went on muttering disappointed remarks to the tune of snapping scissors Sriram saw himself in a small mirror produced out of the barber s tin box and was delighted He felt he had rid himself of a couple of pounds of tuft it lay on the stone-steps of the tank and Sriram remembered how he shivered at the sight of the appendage for no known reason They were long and curly tresses and he said Sell it and you will get ten rupees for it The barber lost his temper at the suggestion You take me for a hawker of hair Mind how you speak young gentleman I should have cut your throat if it hadn t been yourself but someone else Look I don t want anything but give me the *dhoti* you are wearing that s the usual custom under these circumstances

Sriram was aghast And how shall I reach home?

Bathe in this tank and run before anyone notices Anyway haven t you got your piece cloth under your *dhoti*? That ll do for a young man of your age So saying he almost tugged the ends of Śriram s *dhoti* and Śriram had to dodge him desperately Oh! cried the barber in great surprise He made queer faces to indicate his feelings Do you mean to say that you go about with —— He described vividly the underclothes of respectable and honest citizens and the habits of the modern generation The topic was so below the-waist that Sriram blushed and finally wrenching himself free ran off

All this flashed across his mind now He put his hand to the top of his head, ran his fingers over it and said to Jagadish I can t sacrifice this crop I like it.

Sriram spent a sleepless night wondering how he could change his appearance. He even thought that he might disguise himself as a purdah lady and not show his face at all Jagadish laughed all his propositions away He seemed intent on disfiguring him in his own manner bent upon shaving him like an egg and making him as ridiculous as possible Perhaps he wanted to make him the laughing stock of the world and ruin his chance once for all with Bharati She would refuse to take a second look at his face for the rest of his life He wondered why he should not refuse to do anything that Jagadish suggested. Even the

Slaughter House might be a huge practical joke or turn out to be a real slaughtering place after all! But his fears had no value Whatever he might feel or fear the fact was always there that Jagadish was inescapable, and one had to do what he ordered

Jagadish granted a period of three weeks for a respectable moustache to develop on Sriram's upper lip He bought him a small bottle of coconut oil for massage to help a quick growth 'How many things I have to do before I can see Bharati!' Sriram reflected Jagadish checked the growth on the other's upper lip day after day He nodded his head discouragingly each time 'Very slow, very slow, too slow,' he said as if Sriram himself were responsible Sriram clicked his tongue apologetically

The period of three weeks was by no means wasted In association with Jagadish and under his expert guidance, Sriram did a variety of jobs which he hoped would help the country in its struggle for freedom he set fire to the records in half a dozen law courts in different villages, he derailed a couple of trains and paralysed the work in various schools, he exploded a crude bomb which tore off the main door of an agricultural research station, tarred out 'V' for Victory and wrote over the emblem 'Quit India' He became so seasoned in this activity that a certain recklessness was developing in him He had no fear of the police they seemed to him a remote, theoretical body, unconnected with his affairs He knew he could always slip through They were looking for him everywhere, except where they could find him Jagadish kept repeating 'Britain will leave India with a *salam*, if we crush the backbone of her administration He was always talking in terms of backbone Sometimes he said 'Britain's backbone is, you know where?

On her back, I suppose? said Sriram facetiously

'Do you know where that back is?

'Behind her front, I suppose,' said Sriram, still facetiously He was beginning to enjoy these bouts, which were a relief in his lonely, drab life, isolated from all human association

Jagadish forgave him his tricks He explained 'The prospect of the Slaughter House makes you sharp-witted, doesn't it? He explained with a good deal of tolerance, 'Britain's backbone must be smashed, and it lies in the courts and schools and offices and railway lines, from these she draws the strength for her survival'

It was an intricate logic which Sriram could not easily grasp He asked pathetically, Why don't we smash her front also?

Because it's far away and we can t reach so far

Jagadish dragged him about and made him his instrument and agent. Sriram was actually beginning to enjoy the excite ment and novelty and above all the game of hide and seek with the police It gave him a feeling of romantic importance He felt that he was a character out of an epic and on his activities depended future history But now and then some kind of mis giving assailed his mind when sitting concealed in a ditch in Jagadish s company he saw the flames rising from a railway station or a government building and lighting up the night once he whispered Do you think Britain will be affected by this fire ?'

Jagadish declared unequivocally Churchill will already have known of it It will make him groan It will make him sit up It must go on and on every hour of the day all over the country until Britain tells us We are bundling ourselves out tomorrow do what you like with your country

Sriram asked next, I wonder what Mahatmaji will say about all this'

I don t know replied Jagadish It is not his line But when the results turn out satisfactorily I am sure he ll say You did well my boy'

Sriram felt doubtful He shook his head I m not sure Only Bharati knows exactly what Mahatmaji will say or think. And then his thoughts went off to the Slaughter House

Jagadish seemed to weaken slightly at this point We have not wilfully caused anybody's death I m always careful to see that no life is lost but if in spite of our precautions some people are accidentally caught in a mess and killed we can t help it

A lot of people are also shot down by the police when they disperse the mobs that gather to help us said Sriram.

But that is none of our concern said Jagadish and add-d In a war lives are bound to be lost However the job of the moment is more important than any amount of theoretical specu lation. Mahatmaji taught me this philosophy when I was with him at Wardha Anyway don t bother too much about these questions He has asked us to work for the movement according to our individual capacities

§

On a certain day Jagadish examined Sriram s face and declared 'The most satisfactory moustache that I ever saw in my life With a razor and scissors he helped Sriram to give its end a

downward turn. He produced also some old silver-rimmed spectacles, and mounted them on his nose. He provided him too with an ill-fitting, close-buttoned coat, and a white turban for covering his head He ordered him to tie up his *dhoti* bifurcated, like all respectable men. After all this, Sriram looked into a mirror, the very tiny one which he used for his shaving, it did not reveal a full picture but it showed enough for him to remark 'I look like a wholesale rice merchant'

Jagadish nodded appreciatively and said with considerable delight in his tone, 'True, true If I could only put a dark caste-mark on your forehead, that'd indeed complete the picture

Sriram as he sallied forth at about seven, after sunset, felt so different that he wondered why he should expect Bharati to admit him at all. He chuckled at the thought, 'Bharati may wonder why a rice merchant has taken a fancy to call on her, all of a sudden' The spectacles gave him a dull ache on the bridge of his nose, and kept constantly slipping down, pestering him with a dull, misty vision This is what comes of not surrendering oneself to the police when Bharati advises one to do so!' he reflected. At the little station he climbed into the train going towards Malgudi There were a few sleepy passengers in his compartment. He ignored the whole lot 'It's no business of a self-respecting rice merchant to speak to these folk,' he reflected and sat looking at his fellow-passengers with indifference Jagadish had proved himself a genius the moustache was a tremendous asset, it was as if Sriram had worn a mask over his face, the transformation was so complete.

From Malgudi station it was an hour's walk southward through Market Road to the Slaughter House As he passed along the familiar roads, Sriram felt sentimental and unhappy It seemed as if he had left this world ages ago Beyond those rows of silent and darkened shops was the house of his grandmother

Jagadish had given precise instructions The rice merchant crouched behind the Eastern wall of the old Slaughter House. Bharati would come to the lavatory at that corner, stand up on a large stone, rolled into position for the purpose, look down and talk to him Sriram was wondering if Bharati would notice his moustache in the darkness, he wondered if he could reach up and touch her hand He patiently waited. The Taluk Office gong sounded two in the morning He felt sleepy He remembered Bharati asking him to meet her at three a.m , when the Mahatma came to Malgudi She seems fond of spoiling other peoples

sleep he reflected. He sat there on the ground. The Taluk Office gong struck the next hour How long am I to stay here? he reflected. Has someone been playing a prank? Angry thoughts were rising in his heart

Hey cried a voice

He looked up hopefully Over the wall a head appeared, but it was not Bharati s It was one of the wardresses

'Where is ? Sriram began stretching himself up on his toes

Hush listen She won t come

Is she not coming?'

No Catch this She dropped a letter Read it, said the head and be off

The rice merchant moved away clutching the piece of paper in his hand his head buzzing with a thousand speculations

Under the first street lamp he spread out the note It was a piece torn out of a memo pad On it wa. a hurried pencil scribbling I cannot bring myself to see you today It seems degrading to have a meeting under these conditions Bapu has always said that it is dishonourable to assume subterfuges In a jail we must observe the rules or change them by *Satyagraha* openly if possible Forgive me We shall meet again But before that please go and see your granny A detenue who came in here told me that she was very ill. It is your duty to risk your life to see her Go before it is too late

§

Not many people were able to recognize him when he ascended the steps of 14 Kabir Lane He saw Kanni the shopman coming out of the house He was softly closing the door behind him He didn t recognize Sriram who for a moment forgot that he could not be recognized and cried, Kanni! almost involuntarily His voice betrayed him Kanni halted and suddenly cried Oh! it's our young master O Ram, what is it you have been doing to yourself deserting your house and the old lady who was your father mother and cousin and everything Have you no heart? Thank God you have come now anyway But you are too late

'Why? Why? screamed Sriram What has happened?

She is dead She died at ten o clock last night

Sriram ran past him into the house There in the old familiar place under the good old hall lamp lay the old lady A white

sheet was drawn over her A couple of women from the neighbouring houses were sitting beside her, keeping vigil

Sriram was sorrow-stricken, the familiar household, the old almanac still there under the roof tile the copper vessel in which she kept drinking water still on the window sill The easy chair which he had bought for her with his first money was still where he had put it He had a glimpse of a past life He went up to the corner of the house which used to be his and examined his books, pens, clothes, he opened the lid and looked into his old tin trunk All the articles with which he had grown up were there, kept safe and intact The vigil-keepers followed his movements with dull, sleep-filled eyes Sriram wept. But he could not wipe away his tears, he realized that his spectacles were a nuisance he suddenly plucked them off and flung them down, feeling 'I'm answerable to Jagadish for this I'm betraying myself'

Kanni stood in the doorway, respectfully watching 'How imperious she looks! Even now!' he cried 'A great Soul'

'I can t believe she is dead She looks asleep! How do you know that she is dead?' Sriram asked

Kanni merely laughed grimly 'You had better telegraph to all your relatives I'm sure many would want to have a last look at her face'

Sriram sat down on the floor beside the old lady, quietly sobbing The women looked at him for a moment, and silently lapsed into mournful silence They turned to Kanni and asked, 'Is he the only relative to arrive or should we wait for some more? Kanni preferred to ignore their question The night was absolutely still and silent Even the street dogs were asleep Except the low voices conversing under the dim light, the entire world was asleep, following the example of Granny herself Sriram suddenly rose to his feet, went to Kanni, put his arm round his shoulder, and whispered, 'Kanni, I am very hungry Can t you open your shop and give me something to eat? There is nothing in the kitchen

'How can there be anything? She was ill so long, those ladies were bringing her milk and gruel.'

'I'm very hungry, Kanni,' Sriram said again pathetically

Kanni jingled his keys and said, Come with me'

They crossed the street. Kanni unlocked the door of his shop and lit a lamp Sriram climbed the platform and went in, then bolted the door again from inside The shop was hot and stuff

bananas hung down in bunches buns and biscuits filled various glass containers all of course were presided over by the European queen with apple cheeks Sriram complained that it was stuffy Kannu explained I don t want anyone to suspect your presence Though handing you over and collecting the reward might prove a better proposition than running a business in these difficult days!

Sriram had not realized how hungry he was He demanded and ate everything that he saw Kannu took out a paper and calculated That would be two rupees and four annas I will put it down on your account

Now he was no longer hungry Sriram said Tell me about my granny What was wrong with her?

Kannu paused for a while before answering Ever since the police came asking for you in this house she lost—if I may say so her original spirit She was always feeling that you had betrayed her You may know all about Mahatma and so on but all she knew was what people told her that you had run after a girl The old lady was much hurt She hardly ever came out after that and when the police came to take away your photograph she was very much upset She felt that she could not hold up her head in public again She was always saying that you had betrayed her The police came and questioned me too about you I said You are merely wasting my shop time I am not to be bothered about every scapegrace in the town because I have the ill luck to have a shop opposite his house and that satisfied them. I wish you had not gone away without telling her It worried her too much She kept saying What can a little cobra do even if you have brought it up on cow's milk? It can only do what its breeding tells it to do

Sriram was visibly annoyed at this comparison She was a very bitter tongued person that's why I preferred to go away without telling her at all What chance did one have of talking to such an unreasonable character? He forgot for a moment that he was talking about someone dead

People came and told her hair raising tales about you She was alarmed by your activities What was the matter with you? I never thought the young master I had known so long ago could ever grow up into a Zigomar

Sriram felt hurt by this comparison with an old classical bandit. He said with a lot of self pity I wouldn t have come if I wasn t eager to see my granny

'That's true,' said Kannı 'The Market Road doctor attended her often, even last evening he was there with his tube and needle and stayed till she passed away

'Was she talking all the time? asked Sriram

'She wasn't, but she might have been Why think of all that now?' Kannı said Let us think of what we should do next'

Yes, what is to be done?

'The funeral Get through it quickly Are you going to wait for relatives?'

These were tough and complex domestic questions to which he was unaccustomed He brooded over them The word 'relative, brought to his mind only his grand-uncle whose dark descendant he was expected to marry, and plenty of others, a batch of miscellaneous folk who dropped in for a meal or two occasionally from their village, and always spoke of lands and litigation Granny used to find their talk fascinating and forgot to notice Sriram's arrivals and departures, while he generally sneaked out to a nearby cycle-shop and learnt to balance himself on the pedal of a bicycle taken on hire Sriram had a sudden vision of being responsible for gathering that entire crowd again they might stand around the corpse and lament over their lands and litigation He was aghast at the thought He said 'I don't care for anyone

Yes, I know I too think you should not keep the body too long Better hurry through the funeral But at least let the lady have the satisfaction of having her pyre lit by her grandson That may assuage her spirit'

'I don't know what to do about such things, Sriram wailed

'I will help you,' said Kannı

One thing I can't go with the funeral procession,' said Sriram 'I will manage to come at the end if you will manage the other things'

'Even the police may not interfere now After all, they are also human, said Kannı

Sriram went back into his house and took another look at his granny The two vigil-keepers were asleep They sat hunched up with their heads on the floor, curled beside the body They look more dead than Granny,' thought Sriram A cock crowed somewhere Sriram went out, softly closing the door behind him Meanwhile Kannı had locked the shop, and had returned 'She is in your charge,' said Sriram Will you be there at eight? Do everything nicely Don't bother about expense'

Yes I know I can always get my debts I have kept your account in full detail You should have no misgiving even about an anna I have even put into the account what I have been paying the doctor from time to time Are you sure her relatives will not be angry with us later?

What do you care whether they are angry or pleased? What have we to do with them? A set of useless rustics said Sriram with a certain amount of unnecessary bitterness in his voice

At about eight Sriram was on the cremation ground beyond the Sarayu river A couple of pyres which had been lit on the previous day were still smouldering Bamboo and discarded pieces of shroud were scattered here and there A funeral procession was crossing Nallappa s Grove The bier was decorated with flowers and some men wearing white shirts and rings on their fingers were shouldering the corpse Must be devoted relatives he thought They are bearing the burden But poor Granny has no one to carry her Once again he felt angry at the thought of those village relatives The heat was intense although it was not even eight in the morning This is a very hot place he reflected Bullock carts were crossing the river villagers on their way into the town with baskets on their heads chattered incessantly He noticed people coming to the river for a wash His mind made a dull note of all that his eyes saw His main job now was to await the arrival of Granny Why were they taking all this time? Probably priests were holding up the body so that they might get a higher fee fo funeral citations Or could the police have held up the procession? For a moment a fantastic fear seized his mind lest the police should have suspected foul play and held up the body for a post mortem. The other pampered body carried by the devoted relatives was now brought in through the gate and laid down on the ground. They were going through a lot of ceremonial activity Granny's pyre was also being built up with dried cow dung cakes on a small platform all the arrangements were supervised by Kannu s shop assistant who was haggling with fu l suppliers and ordering the graveyard assistants about. They obeyed him cheerfully which made Sriram wonder why they obeyed him at all. It is in some people s blood to be respected by all kinds of people Sriram reflected watching with a certain amount of envy all the fuss that the rich were making v ith the body in their hands

Led by Kannı, who bore ın hıs hand a pot of fire, a couple of neighbours, the manager of the Fund-Office, and two priests, Granny arrived on a bier made of bamboo, carried by four grim sub-human professional carriers Sriram rushed to the small wooden doorway to meet the procession Kannı was the first to step through He held the pot of fire to Sriram saying, 'Really ıt ıs your duty to carry ıt Sriram took charge

Granny's face was uncovered and faced the sun Sriram felt a pang of fresh sorrow at the sight The bier was laid on the ground 'Sriram, bathe ın the river and come back soon with wet clothes on you She is at least entitled to so much consideration' The words came from the old family priest Sriram realized that he was still ın the garb of a wholesale rice merchant, and felt ridiculous The old priest had officiated at festivals and domestic ceremonies ever since Sriram could remember, including the grand ceremony of his first birthday The old man was several years Granny's senior, but remarkably wiry and alert, with his greenish eyes and hook nose, and greed for ceremonial fees

He asked Sriram, 'Have you two rupees ın coins?'

While Sriram fumbled for an answer, the ever watchful Kannı descended on him wrathfully, 'Why do you ask that? Haven t we agreed on a lump sum for everything?

The priest who was squatting beside the body turned and said, 'Whoever said the lump sum included this? This can never go into that This is a separate account. Our elders have decreed that the Dear Departed should have two silver coins on his or her chest from the hand of the nearest and dearest It is said to smooth out the passage of the soul into further regions I am only repeating what the *shastras* say, our ancestors knew what was best for us I am merely a mouthpiece'

'And what happens to the coins? asked the Fund-Office Manager The priest pretended to ignore the question, but Kannı said, 'It goes the way of other coins, that is into a priest s money-box'

'Yes, ıt does Do you expect the soul to carry the silver with ıt? You must view ıt all ın the proper light, you must take only its philosophical meaning We carry nothing from this earth, said the priest and quoted a Sanskrit verse He suddenly looked across at the other part of the ground where the rich men were conducting their ceremonies, 'See there They are devoted and very correct They are not omitting a single rite'

'We are not omitting anything either,' said Kannı angrily

His tone cowed the priest who mumbled Don t think I am after money I only do things in order to satisfy a great soul known to me for several decades now He looked up at Sriram and said Now go and bathe quickly Nothing can begin until after that He paused and added You will find a barber there You will have to shave off your moustache and the top of your head Otherwise it would be very irregular The *shastras* say

I will not shave my moustache nor my head said Sriram emphatically

All right said the priest It is my duty to suggest what the *shastras* say and it is left to you to follow it or modify it in any manner Of course modern life makes it difficult to follow all the rules and people have to adjust themselves There are even people who like to perform their funerals with European hats on these days What can one do about them? It is wisdom to accept what has come to pass say the *shastras* and we bow our heads to that injunction

Sriram presently returned from his bathe in the river dripping wet with his hair sticking on his head and his clothes stuck to his body They had now laid the cropse on the pyre The pyre beyond was already aflame and the party was leaving the ground They are very businesslike said the priest. He seemed to admire everything they did Sriram felt piqued and Kanni said Don t go on talking unnecessarily

All the rites before the lighting of the pyre started The old lady lay stretched out on the cow dung fuel The priest placed a small vessel in Sriram s hand and asked him to pour the milk in it over the lips of the dead Sriram poured the milk chanted some *mantras* and finally dropped the fire over Granny's heart which was actually below a layer of fuel The fire smouldered and crackled Now it is all over with her Sriram said

The Fund Office Manager suddenly cried See there see there He was excited They looked where he pointed The big toe on the left foot of the lady was seen to move Pull out the fire pull out the fire Someone thrust his hand in and snatched off the burning piece The old lady s *sari* was already burning at one end. Sriram flung a pail of water on it and put it out. Now with the fire out they stood around and watched The toe was wagging

She is not dead take her out cried Sriram.

I ve never heard of such a thing you can t do that, the priest cried People seemed to have suddenly lost all commonsense

'You want us to burn Granny alive, do you? Get out of our way, priest,' cried Sriram He kicked away the pile of fuel, lifted the body and placed it down again on the ground I knew something was wrong I knew Granny wouldn t die,' said Sriram He sprinkled water on her face, forced some milk down her throat, and fanned her face The priest stood aside with a doleful expression Kannı seemed too stunned to speak The shop-assistant was running in circles announcing the glad tidings and collecting a crowd

The Fund-Office Manager cried, 'Let us not waste time I will fetch the doctor' He started running towards the city

Kannı cried, 'Oh, what doctors, these days! They don't even know whether a person is alive or dead! If we had failed to notice in time oh, what doctors'

Under their nursing, the movement in the toe gradually spread All the toes showed signs of revival, then her leg, then her arms The old lady seemed to be coming back to life, inch by inch Her eyes were still shut Sriram murmured Granny, Granny, open your eyes I am here' At this moment all politics were forgotten, all disputes and wars, Britain, even Bharat 'Get up Granny, you are all right' Now her heart began to throb, her breathing returned, ever so faintly Sriram let out a cry of tremendous relief He called the shop assistant, My Granny will not die, she is not dead God bless her' He dragged Kannı by his hand and said, Kannı, Granny is alive' He nursed his granny with one hand and put the other around Kannı's shoulder and sobbed His face was wet with tears

Kannı patted his back and said, Don't, don't, be brave You must not breal down She may open her eyes and she must see a happy face'

The rattle of an old car was heard far off Everyone cried, 'Doctor's car' Presently a little car with a flapping hood was struggling over the sand and pebbles at the Nallappa's Grove crossing, and on through the rough sandy track leading to the southern door of the crematorium The doctor was a puny man wearing an enormous white overall, with a straggling crop of hair resembling Einstein s, a small man above whom everyone seemed to tower He jumped out of his car, followed by the Fund Office Manager 'Is this true, is this true? cried the doctor running forward He stopped suddenly and said, 'Someone go and fetch that bag from the car Presently he knelt above the old lady, took her wrist in his hand, pulled out his

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They nursed and fed the old lady as she lay on a bed in the old building The doctor's little car drove up half a dozen times a day and Kanni practically abandoned his shop in order to conduct the operations A vast concourse began to arrive in order to witness the miracle Some close relatives of Granny who had not seen her for years came and cried, 'Oh, sister, how good to see you No one sent word to us that you were dead'

'Word was not sent because there was nothing to send.'

'But when a close relation is dead, is it not '?

'But she was not dead, so why send word?'

'How did you know that she was not dead?' asked the relatives, and the conversation flowed on in rather bewildering channels Sriram feared all along that this crowding and publicity would ultimately lead to trouble He tried to keep himself aloof from the crowd When too many people arrived he went away to the back of the building, while Kanni and the others managed the visitors He overheard people ask, Where is that grandson of hers?'

'Oh, that ne'er-do-well adventurer is probably in Burma,' said Kanni

But none of this helped A police inspector in plain clothes and two constables arrived on the third afternoon as Sriram, having fed his granny and eaten a meal brought in a vessel by the Fund-Office Manager, was enjoying a siesta in the shade of a tree the toll-gate building Granny and her attendants were peacefully sleeping The inspector looked down at Sriram and said, 'Get up'

'Why?' asked Sriram, rising What do you want?'

'You are under arrest,' said the inspector 'We have been looking for you for a long time now'

'Who gets the reward? asked Sriram with heavy cynicism

The inspector did not reply He said, 'We know the special occasion which has brought you here, and we don't want to make any fuss, provided you make none. This is why we have stationed our jeep over there I have some more men in it. You may come with us as soon as you are ready Don't be too long'

Sriram said, 'Yes, give me a little time.'

'I am armed and will shoot if you try to escape,' the inspector said

Sriram went to take a look at Granny He found her sitting up and conversing with the two people near her The she saw Sriram she cried, 'Oh, boy, when did you come

They told me that you were here, but with a moustache What ever made you grow one, my boy? Take it off don t come before me with that, whatever else you may do

Yes Granny he said obediently He was so happy to find her old spirit revived. One need have no doubt that it was she who was speaking There was the genuine ring in her tone Her personality seemed to have returned from the other world unscathed by the contacts there He sat down on the edge of her bed took her arm into his hands, and stroked it. She looked at him closely and said 'You are down and out, no doubt about it. She shook her head dolefully 'Whatever induced you to get mixed up with all those people, I can t say I tried to bring you up as a respectable citizen. If you didn t go up for your B.A it wasn t my fault. No one can blame me for it. But it is all true all the things people say about you?'

Sriram thought and replied slowly Don t believe a word of anything you hear People talk falsehoods remember

Granny's face puckered in a happy smile 'Vile-tongued folk she cried, May all those that talk ill, think ill slander you or mislead you or tempt you out of your way

At this point Sriram had a slight misgiving that the old lady might mean Bharati. He tried to divert her attention Don t exert yourself Granny lie down.

Why should I? There is nothing wrong with me You believe that doctor! Let him come before me. I will tell him what I think of him. He would have burnt me alive if he had had his way! She laughed grimly Presently she recollected the interrupted curse she had intended to hurl on someone 'Whoever has been responsible for taking you out, whether it be man woman, or whatever may they perish and suffer in the worst hell! After uttering her imprecation she felt both relieved and happy Sriram thought of the police waiting outside, and said, Don t exert yourself Granny you must not talk too much.

Why not? And who says that?' she asked. I will speak as much as I like and no one shall stop me.

At this point one of the policemen peeped in at the doorway and Granny asked, Who are you?' so authoritatively that he withdrew his head immediately

'Who is he?' asked Granny

Some one to see me, said Sriram.

He went on stroking her arm so soothingly that she presently felt drowsy He gave her a few ounces of milk. She said

'I am glad to see you Good boy, don't let people tempt you out of your way Be with me Don't leave me again Sriram helped her to stretch herself on her bed, and she was soon asleep He walked over to the police officer and said, 'Let us go' Kanni followed him to the jeep Sriram said, Kanni, look after Granny till I am back I don't know how long they will keep me Try to see me and tell me how she is I think the Collector will let you see us in jail I don't know what you are going to do about her' He stood with bowed head for a moment, and then as though the problem was beyond any solution, he stepped into the jeep

Kanni said, 'Don't be anxious She is like a mother to us We shall take care of her'

PART FOUR

He was in detention at the Central Jail He occupied a cell with a few others and slept on the hard cement floor They woke him up at five in the morning This irked him most He sometimes wished that they wouldn t pull him out of his retreat in a soft dream into the harsh reality of the prison world And then they hurried getting up and washing at the dribbling watertap and the public toilet this sickened him at first He prayed that they might let him wait at least till the others had gone but that could not be the warder stood over him and the others and hustled them

Sriram once attempted to approach the Most High of this world in regard to this when he came to inspect the prison The superintendent of the prison lagged behind the Most High respectfully with all the other officials trooping after them Sriram had been in a file awaiting inspection at the central yard which was surrounded by the horrible slate coloured barracks the great man was marching by throwing a haughty glance at the file The prisoners had been advised to stand stock still and not to utter a word or move a muscle when the man passed they were not to speak unless spoken to But when Sriram saw the great god approach his part of the file he could not resist the impulse to step forward and begin I have a complaint and a request to make sir At once several people seized him and pulled him out of the way and the great man passed on pretending not to have noticed anything After he was gone Sriram was summoned to the superintendent s office The guards held his biceps and kept him standing at attention before the superinten dent's table The superintendent looked up and said You have violated jail discipline and you are liable to receive punishment

'What punishment? Sriram asked

The man who had trailed like a meek puppy behind the visitor an hour ago stamped his foot under the table and shouted I will not have you talk to me in that manner understand?

Sriram felt cowed. He feared the other might go mad and kick him he was the overlord here and was entitled to kill people if he chose. People might talk of monarchy being abolished but here was absolute monarchy This was his world ruled by his authority and no one could do anything about it, so Sriram said

meekly, 'Yes, sir,' the very first time in his life he had adopted a tone of meekness

The other was pleased with his submission and asked, 'Why did you step out of the line? What did you want to say?'

Sriram felt it would be better to speak plainly 'I wanted to ask if something might not be done to provide us some privacy for our toilet'

The superintendent sniggered, So you thought you might get things done over my head? Eh?'

Not that, sir, but it hadn't occurred to me earlier, that's all' Sriram said

The other said, 'You saved yourself by not talking more, understand? If you had spoken to him, you would have been put in chains Remember, we don t want indiscipline in this prison, understand?

Yes, sir,' Sriram said, completely crushed by his manner

The other softened a little at this and said, 'Ask me for anything you may want'

'Yes sir,' Sriram found that this was the best way of talking to the man, the only idiom that didn t upset him

The superintendent asked, 'What did you say you wanted to tell the I G ?'

'I wanted to ask about the privy arrangements', he said, feeling tired of all the repetition and publicity

'Oh, is that so?' the other asked, and added, 'Here is the reply to your representation'

'What, sir?

'You will not be getting any arrangements other than what you have already got, understand?'

'Yes, sir,' said Sriram, uttering the soothing word, 'But may I know why?'

The guards pinched his biceps, alarmed at his impudence But the superintendent did not seem to mind He merely replied, 'If it had been any other time you would have been shot without a word, remember You are not our guest, but our prisoner You are not a classified prisoner, but one in custody under the Defence of India Rules, remember'

'But there has been no trial How long am I to be here?'

'There is no need for a trial in cases such as yours The whole world knows why you are here'

'I was only trying to do my duty,' Sriram said

The superintendent kicked the table and said I ll not have you fellows talking politics here The word politics seemed to sting him.

Yes sir Sriram said and this again soothed the man s temper

He said as a concession You are neither Gandhi s man nor an ordinary criminal but more dangerous than either

Sriram could express no opinion in the matter himself The word Gandhi brought to his mind the memory of Bharati and he heartily wished that he had surrendered himself to the police with her They would probably have treated him as an honourable political prisoner Where is Bharati? Is she by any chance in this jail? If so won t you let me see her? Is she keeping well? Questions by the score buzzed in his head as he stood staring at the wall

The superintendent said I m glad you are paying close attention to my words But let me say at once it won t pay you to be troublesome within these walls What are you thinking? he demanded suddenly

I was only wondering how long I shall be kept here It s already several months I have lost count of the months

It is unnecessary for you to keep count of anything it's not going to be of any use to you Your stay here will be as long as His Majesty wishes you to be here that is all We re instructed to keep you not very differently from your other friends here under sentence of various terms of rigorous imprisonment. That's all dismiss

The guards clicked their heels saluted and turned Sriram round. As he was going the superintendent threw after him the remark, You will ask me for anything you want

Yes sir

That's all dismiss And the guards marched him off

The days weeks and months that followed were similar one day following another without much distinction Sriram began to feel at home he looked forward to the little excitements that came to him in the course of his existence When he was taken to break stones in the quarry behind the jail he welcomed it as a change the rocks that he hewed were hot under his seat the sun scorched his body the iron hammer with which he broke the stones peeled his skin but still he liked the job because it took him though under surveillance outside the jail He was with a gang of men miscellaneous criminals who were there for anything from murder down to confirmed pocket picking Most

of them were planning what they would do at the end of their term. Some of them were planning to return again and again, and spend the rest of their lives here Sriram felt uneasy in this rough company, who laughed at the soft-handed, soft-headed man They simply could not make out why he should have courted all this trouble from the police because someone wanted him to do something, and not because such exploits as derailing a train brought him a share of profit. This was a fresh outlook that had not occurred to Sriram in his self-centred political existence He had a feeling that he was running up against a new species of human being, speaking like monsters, but yet displaying sudden human qualities, they were solicitous that he should not undernourish himself, they pitied him for his inability to relish the food a tough ball of boiled millet with very watery buttermilk. (The buttermilk was a recent addition because somebody had agitated for it in the Press and in the assemblies, and the buttermilk content was just enough to satisfy the technical needs of all agitators in general) While he ate he thought of all the good things that his granny had made for him and remembered how even during his very last visit to her, at their house, she had offered him something that a neighbour had sent. He felt agony at the memory of the crunchy, ghee-flavoured rice, he could almost hear the music of his bite, while he held up his aluminium platter to receive his quota The very manner in which he munched made his fellow-prisoners comment

'You still think of *Badam Halwa*?' asked the Culpable Homicide Not Amounting To Murder They were sitting side by side during the break for food at midday

'If ever I leave this place, I am going to spend a hundred rupees on *Badam Halwa* at the corner shop, you know Krishna Vilas, the shop is small but it is a wonderful place, he serves on clean banana leaves and not on plates You know his *idlies* are almost as if made of the lightest ' Sriram was at a loss for a comparison, and his companion helped him with similes of jasmine, rose-petals, soft butter, and so forth Sriram added passionately, 'And you know he gives free *chutney* to go with it, you can t see the like of it anywhere else on the globe. You must have known the corner hotel?'

No, his companion shook his head 'I am from Bellary, I am not familiar with the town'

'I know that hotel,' the guard added, joining in their conversation, 'It's a good place, but I go there rarely I haven t much chance of getting out of this place'

'You are like us? said one of the prisoners and all of them laughed happily at the joke

Meal times were the best. Sriram s neighbour a veteran forger whispered to him Don t tell anyone I am getting some good things to eat and drink next Thursday I will give you some when I get them.

'What are you getting? asked Sriram unable to control his curiosity

Some *vadai* and the nicest chicken *pulav*

Sriram retched at the mention of the chicken He made a wry face Chicken! Chicken! Oh! I can t stand the thought of it! he said his face twisting with disgust. I don t eat those things! he cried I have not even eaten cakes because they contain eggs

The forger was amused. He rolled with laughter till the guard who had been friendly hitherto objected Stop that where do you think you are!

The central tower threw a welcome shade The afternoon was languid though warm The superintendent would be snoring in his quarters enjoying his afternoon siesta there was really no one to object to anything and this was the only hour when the prison ceased to be a prison for a while and gained a human and habitable atmosphere the warders themselves acquir ed a friendly mellowness and all conversation flowed on the human level This was the hour at which it was impossible to continue the rigours of the jail atmosphere—it was almost like the midday recess at Albert Mission School of Sriram s younger days

The forger pleaded with the warder Don t bother us for a while please A man needs some rest after all the labour of the day Please leave us alone for a while And then he turned his attention to Sriram I know they will use the purest ghee and nutmeg leaf and cinnamon bark for the *pulav* If you scoop a handful of it, ghee will drip down your fingers it's so rich Don t say that you won t have it. You must accept it It will do you good. Once you taste it you will keep demanding it every day That's the worst of it. It'll be impossible to get it into the place everyday though once in a way we can do anything Our friend here and his friends will not mind what we do He knows he will get his share

A gong struck the hour The warder jumped to his feet and said Get up and march, and he led them back to their quarrying at the back of the jail.

At night, Sriram had companions in his cell Before lying down on their cement beds, wrapped in their blankets, they sat up talking The sentry at the corridor cried, Hush! Don't talk' One fellow, the one who had committed house breaking and murder, took it into his head to sing a hymn and insisted upon all the others joining him *Rama Rama, Sita Rama,* he sang musically, and urged all the others to follow the chorus He said, This is the only thing which is real,' in a very philosophical manner 'You must know what is real and what is unreal You must know the nature of the world in which we live You must repeat the name of the Lord ceaselessly' And he began a sing-song devotional recitation of the Lord's name Others followed If they stopped, he shouted in the dark, 'What Satan's offspring is in this room with me I will cast him out'

Sriram could not help asking, If you were so religious, why couldn't you have remained outside and led your followers?

'It's because the police would not let me be, that's all,' he said

'Of course, but for the police we would all be happier men,' someone said

After this they all started their chant again The sentry came and peeped at them They guffawed He muttered something and went away The leader said in the dark, 'I am not afraid of anyone, I am not afraid of any jailer'

'It's because you are so experienced,' said another admiringly

'I would have been swinging in that shed long ago, but the judge understood I didn't kill because I wanted to I only wanted to break the bones of that ill-fated fool'

'Which ill-fated fool?' asked Sriram, unable to check his curiosity Here was a collection of men who formed a new species He might have to spend the rest of his life as a member of this family

The other answered 'I only wanted him to give me the keys, as so many others had done, but he suddenly ran to the window, shouted for the police, and when I tried to run away he jumped on me and held me down What could I do? I had to do something I thought I might crack his legs and—but he pushed me, and that didn t work These people force us to do unhappy, unpleasant things' He ruminated for a while and sighed, No use thinking of it, but the magistrate understood, and when I leave the jail I shall take him some fruits, oranges, p' things like that Let us not waste our time' And he began

chant with the others joining in Sriram wanted to speak to them about politics Mahatmaji and non violence and the British rule He began to speak but he was cut short by the man saying Who cares who rules? We don t belong to that world I ve seen all those Gandhi followers in prison and they think they are honoured guests! If you had been careful you could have enjoyed that too They'd have put you in a bungalow with a cook and pocket money and they would have given you books to read and sherbet to drink

Sriram s blood boiled at his words How dare you speak like that of those who are suffering for the country s cause? You are mistaken. You are completely mistaken He wanted to get up and hit him but he remembered that Bharati would have labelled him a traitor to the non violence creed of Mahatmaji Perhaps she would have said I don t want to look at your face again Get out of here And so he merely mumbled Don t talk in that utterly ignorant manner of our patriots

The other growled Who are you to talk to me in that tone?

There was a pause The forger at his side nudged and said Say you regret it. Don t rouse him He is very strong

Sriram heard heavy steps approaching him from the other end of the cell The man stood over Sriram and growled I insist upon saying that your political prisoners are no true prisoners do you understand? I ve been in ten jails so far I have seen a lot of them. They feel they are in their father in law's house visiting for *Deepavali* I know what I m talking about. I won t have you correcting me do you hear?'

I don t agree with you said Sriram. 'They are great patriots They put themselves through much suffering

I will knock your teeth out if you contradict me Am I clear?

I will say what I please said Sriram defiantly Even the British Government could not make me do what I didn t like to do!

The other sneered H'm, this is what comes of reading and writing You don t know obedience of any sort, let me tell you People should never go to school They talk too much

If I had been out I d have made you prostrate yourself before Mahatmaji and confess your crimes said Sriram with passion

At the mention of the Mahatma the other brought his palms together and said Don t drag his name in here that great saint.

He is also in prison I suppose you know that said Sriram

'He may be, but what is that to you? Do you think you are also Mahatmaji because you are here?'

'Go back to your bed, man,' commanded Sriram 'You don't know what you are talking about'

'You call yourself the Mahatma's disciple, and you have derived no good from it What business have you to come in our midst?'

Sriram said in disgust, 'Go back to your bed, man, I won't talk to you'

The gangster swung his arm to hit Sriram Sriram felt the rush of air in the dark, and ducked his head, and the other went back to his bed Sriram felt happy and relieved only after he heard him stretch himself out and utter a long noisy yawn, which he prolonged into a song, till the sentry cried through the bars, 'Hush! Silence No more talk

§

During the day the various duties he had to perform and the variety of derelict humanity he watched in the prison kept his mind away from too much gloom But when the last of the prisoners in his cell fell asleep and snored, his loneliness came down on him and he became a prey to introspection He was seized with a desire to meet and talk to Bharati Where was she? Dead? Married to someone else? Or hanged in the prison? There was no way of knowing He was amazed at the isolation that had been devised—inhabiting the same planet people were completely cut off from one another States and their police minions seemed capable of devising any torture for human beings Bharati had probably married Gorpad and gone to North India It was months and years since they had met He had lost count of time The only reckoning they had was morning, midday and night punctuated by meal hours, drudgery, and occasional excitements such as that caused by the bully in his cell He wondered if Bharati would ask, 'Who are you?' if he appeared before her He was seized with the obsession that day by day he was deteriorating so much that he wouldn't be fit to be seen by her He was losing his identity He had lost his patriotic aim He wondered what he had done to warrant anyone calling him a political sufferer But for Jagadish he would not have done things that he wouldn't wish to enumerate before any decent person now If it had not been for Jagadish he would probably have gone on living in his ruined temple until the police fo t

him And then he might have been worthy of associating with Bharati

The thought of her produced in him a certain uneasiness he heartily wished that she had not been such an uncompromising zealot Everything that she thought or said or expected was set in grooves and hard to practise To all practical purposes he was a back number now nothing better than the associate of forgers and homicides their world was his world Why should he be thought of differently? The longer he stayed here the more likely he was to drift away from Bharati It was imperative that he should get away How? He revolved in his mind all the things he had read in story books—of files and hack-saws being smuggled into prisons and people working their way out. The more he thought of it the more unhappy he became The sheer helplessness of the whole business weighed him down He became silent and glum All night he was racked with dreams of being caught while escaping taken out and shot the shooting party being directed by Bharati He woke up in a cold sweat and was greatly relieved to find that after all he was still in the solid and homely prison Why was Bharati causing him worry even in his dreams? Why couldn t she make herself agreeable and amenable like any other normal sweetheart?

§

The Fund Office Manager sought special permission to meet him.

The call came to him when he was at work in the weaving shed A warder came to say 'You are allowed to see a visitor today between three and four in the afternoon

Sriram felt excited What visitor?' he cried. Man or woman? he had a wild hope that his visitor might be Bharati Could it be? What would he say to her? How was he going to talk to her? How could he tell her all that he wanted to within the time? Perhaps she would spurn him when she saw him. Better not see her Could he send word back that he would not see anyone All this passed through his mind in a flash. He asked What sort of a person?'

But the warder said See for yourself The interview is in the Chief's room If you don t waste too much time asking questions you can have a few minutes with the visitor

Sriram followed the other meekly dropping his job His

neighbours muttered 'Your mother-in-law has probably come to see you with sweets!'

At the entrance to the Chief's office, the warder halted for just a second to look him up and down, flick off a cake of dirt on his jacket, and pull up his dress in general he murmured Remember how you should behave before the Chief If you make any trouble, he will have you whipped'

Sriram answered, 'I don't like whipping,' to which the other retorted, 'Don't talk back It is enough if you do what you are told'

It was only after Sriram had mumbled an unqualified affirmative that he would behave properly that the warder pushed him in He saw the Fund-Office Manager waiting for him He looked intimidated by his surroundings, he sat on a stool, his legs dangling, afraid to cross them

The Chief looked up briefly and said, 'Prisoner, you have special permission to meet a visitor today'

Sriram felt abashed to stand there in that uniform and face the Fund-Office Manager He stared at the manager, who stared back at him The Chief was busy looking through the papers on his table

'You may speak,' he ordered 'I can't allow this interview to be prolonged beyond four p m If you have anything to say to each other, go ahead, and don't waste time'

Sriram felt like a fool He had a feeling that the manager would break the ice and begin a conversation But the man seemed bereft of speech

The Chief tried to ease the situation again by interrupting his study of the papers to order, 'Guards wait outside'

Two men who had mounted guard over Sriram, saluted, clicked their heels, and went out This brought a slight improvement, but still the interview did not proceed beyond the stage of mutual staring The Fund Office man seemed to be stunned by the sight of the Sriram he saw before him now He seemed to doubt whether this lank, sallow, close-cropped man in striped knickers and jacket could be the one he had come to see Sriram noted his surprise and hesitation and said to himself When even the manager is so reluctant to admit my identity, what will Bharati do? Perhaps she will say, 'Get out, you *budmash* Who do you think you are?'

The Chief looked at his watch and fretted He said 'You may talk about anything except politics and other banned subjects'

Sriram suddenly found his voice to say How is everybody Manager?

Very well very well the man said swinging his short legs still afraid to cross them

Tell me about Granny said Sriram

That is why I have come here, said the manager We had a communication from her today

Communication! Where from?

Don t you know? She is in Benares now?

'When did she go there?

Oh you don t know all the story? When she revived at the cremation ground some orthodox people said that she could not come back into the town because it was inauspicious and might blight the city She respected their wishes and stayed in the toll gate house for some days and then said she would go to Benares We helped her to take the train at Talapur

Benares! What is she doing at Benares?'

She is with a number of others who spend their last years there old persons who are waiting to die They cheerfully await their death and look forward to the final fire and the final ablution in the sacred Ganges

Did she ask for me?

Oh she was so—— the manager began and at this point the Chief said, without looking up from his papers Not allowed. Talk of something else

But it is not politics began Sriram

Don t argue Talk of something else ordered the Chief

Sriram helplessly glared at him and said to the manager And then what happened?

She is quite well in Benares There is a whole street of them old people who have retired there to the banks of the great Ganges awaiting their end Some have been there for years That's as it is enjoined upon old people in the *shastras* No one could wait for a happier end

The man from the Fund Office seemed to be so impressed with this that he became very eloquent and Sriram could not help asking You too want to retire there?'

Yes in good time If God wills it Everyone can t be as fortunate as your Granny! He paused to reflect gently swinging his short legs He had respectfully left his sandals outside the office and Sriram noted how dirty his feet were and blackened with dust and wear When he came back to the sordid world

again, the manager said, 'She has given instructions regarding the disposal of the rent of her house She wants the amount to be sent to her'

'Is someone living in the house?

'Of course, of course Didn't you know?'

Sriram seemed to be hopelessly out of date, he knew nothing of what had happened anywhere 'It was her instruction that a tenant should be found for the house, and accordingly we found one to pay a rent of forty rupees only, which they are crediting to the old lady's account in the bank.'

It was an appalling thought for Sriram that someone else should be living in the old house, shutting and opening its doors

'Who are they?'

'Some yarn merchant'

'Yarn merchant! I never thought we would have to surrender our old house to a yarn merchant!' he said with disgust

It's no surrender, they will vacate at a month's notice.'

This information filled Sriram with uneasiness 'Where am I to live? he thought 'Where am I to accommodate Bharati, when I marry her?'

Although he had lived away from the old house for so many years, he still had a feeling that everything was all right so long as Grandmother lived there and so long as he could think of it as a home He was filled with nostalgia Its brass bonded, slender pillars, the *pyol* over the gutter, and the coconut-tree tops beyond the row of buildings

'This is the point,' said the manager 'She wanted me to tell you about it, and if you didn't want this money—it's been accumulating, as I have already told you, into a considerable amount—she said it might be sent to her She seems to have exhausted all the cash she had taken with her This can be done, I suppose?'

'Of course, why not?

'I am merely carrying out her instructions She wants me to consult your wishes in the matter'

'Do anything she asks you to do If she needs more money, don't hesitate to take it out of my funds Poor Granny! I wish I had more time to give to her affairs She has done so much for me How is she? Does she feel very lonely?

'Far from it A friend came from Benares today She is keeping very well, bathes thrice in the Ganges, and prays in the temple, cooks her food, has good company A sublime it's this friend who has brought the letter'

Sriram thought of his house again and felt unhappy

They are probably driving nails in all the walls and what has happened to all my books and other things?' He gave a list of articles he possessed and the manager said soothingly Don t worry about all that They are all safely kept In that end room which we have reserved for your own use

What other news? How is the war?

Don t talk of that said the Chief

How is everything else?

The man got up to say something but Sriram interrupted with I don t even know what year or month it is

Nothing on those lines said the Chief No politics no war

§

Sriram in the solitude of midnight in his cell developed the notion of escape He revolved in his mind all the techniques of escape that he had read or heard about Smuggled files and rope formed of course the staple points in the whole business Scal ing the walls and crawling through ventilators were an inevitable feature He dwelt on reminiscences of Monte Cristo s escapades it was all very interesting and kept his mind busy planning His admiration for the old prisoners became genuine his sympathies were really widening He realized how impossible it was to do anything within the walls of a prison except what the jailer permitted The warders seemed to take a personal pleasure in carrying out their duties they were incorruptible and could not in any manner be influenced. And yet how did people smuggle in hack-saws and things like that? While his hands were busy digging the earth or turning a wheel his mind revelled in dreams of filed bars and nimble ascents up dangling ropes escapes which story and film writers presented so slickly This dream became so troublesome that he could not contain himself any longer Lying on his cement bed at night he was busy weav ing a rope that would go up to the ventilator in the ceiling through which the night sky was visible, the only glimpse of a shining free world.

His only consoling thought perversely enough was that perhaps Bharati herself was languishing similarly within the bounds of the Old Slaughter House It was not that he wanted to see her suffer but the idea of her suffering established a com munity of interest. If he succeeded in escaping from the jail he would smuggle the tip to Bharati wherever she might be so

that she might climb out of her prison, meet him outside its formidable walls, and hug him as her hero But she might insist upon going back to her cell, refusing to walk out of it unless they opened the gates for her in a right royal manner She might spurn him for his labour She was incalculable in her behaviour She would want the sanction of Bapuji, perhaps Bapuji would probably applaud the proposal, if it could be proved that Sriram's technique would enable all prisoners to climb out of jails, they would at once understand its national implications how the British could be driven to despair if they were made to realize that their prisons could hold no one. It might drive them mad and make them swear, 'Well, we will quit. We can't hold India any longer'

It was wishful thinking on a very big scale, but that could not be helped It was the only excitement that he could ever conjure up In his desperation he consulted the bully in his cell when an opportunity occurred One evening he was unusually friendly, and Sriram slipped over to his cement bed and sat there. He whispered 'Why don't we all escape from this hell?'

The other laid a clammy sympathetic hand on Sriram and said, 'It's usual to get that feeling But nowadays I don't get it. I just do my *Bhajan* and feel all right. You must also join us in our *Bhajan*'

'Well, we will speak about that later But now let us discuss how we should escape.'

'How? asked the other

'You must help us You are experienced Have you never escaped from a prison?

'Yes, twice, that's why I'm doing my seven years now'

'You should not have allowed yourself to be caught.'

'Well, these things just happen, we can t help it, said the other philosophically

Sriram was interested in the method and asked, How did you escape?

'Easy,' said the other, looking up at the ventilator 'We were just six in a cell We spun out the blanket strands, raised ourselves on each other's shoulders, tied up the rope, and climbed out it didn t take much time. We were crossing the *cholam* fields in about an hour No one would have found us again, but a fellow who had come out with us broke the lock of a house on the way and was caught.'

'Shall we do something like that and get out of here?'

The other thought it over and said, 'Why should I? What have I to do outside?'

But I wish to get out. I can't stand this place any more said Sriram.

If you didn't like this place, you should not have done things to bring you here that's all said the other Even if you manage to get out, they will bring you back in no time, it's not worth all the trouble. You can't hide your face.

I will grow a beard.

They will pluck out your beard just to see how you look. This is how you bring dishonour on even holy *sadhus* who have beards

I promise I will keep out of the way of the police

The other shook his head. What is the use of going out if you can't move about freely? He seemed to take pleasure in teasing him and to disapprove of people who didn't appreciate their life in Jail

Finally Sriram took out his trump card and said I want to escape because a girl I want to marry is out there

Where? asked the man ruthlessly

Sriram was afraid to give the reply but he blurted it out before he could hold it back. She is in jail too

Oh! Oh! the other cried amused. Do you mean to say you are going to slip into her jail and ask the jailer to officiate at your nuptials? he asked coarsely

Sriram felt angry and regretted that he had ever mentioned his angel to this coarse man God knew what terrible things he would say now He remained silent, afraid to open his mouth And the other said If she is the kind to go to jail listen to my advice, leave her alone. You can't bring up your children in jail There must be someone to look after the house. It's not at all right that both a man and his wife should be the jail-going sort

How is it with you?' Sriram asked.

I have three wives here and there, and they run the homes in my absence if they didn't I wouldn't hesitate to put sense into them. That's the way You are not going to be here all your life When you are let out go and marry a good girl, I tell you This jail bird will be no good for you.

She is not a criminal she has gone to prison on Mahatmaji's command.

Oh! Oh! Oh! the other sneered. Why do you drag in that great man's name here?'

Sriram grew annoyed Somehow the mention of Bharatu seemed to rouse in the other the worst ideas Sriram abruptly rose to his feet and went to his bed muttering, 'Go on and sleep Let us not talk any more'

'You are afraid I shall tell the Chief, aren't you?' the other sneered 'If you don't join me with gusto in our *Bhajans*, I will report you to the Chief'

I m not afraid,' said Sriram defiantly

'Well, we will see, don't be surprised if they lock you up in a solitary cell You will have only the walls to talk to,' said the other He took a fiendish pleasure in promising hell for Sriram

Sriram paused for a moment and said, I have not wronged you Why do you hate me?'

The other said sulkily, 'I have no sympathy for those who don't believe in God I don't like fellows who speak ill of God'

I have not said a word against God' Sriram said, wondering at the turn the subject was taking What have I said?

I won't repeat it,' the other replied If you don t respect God, you will be whipped in jail, remember That s my experience You should listen to a man with experience, that s all'

'I am in need of no advice from anyone, said Sriram haughtily

The forger turned in his sleep and swore, Are you going to sleep or keep on talking all night? A wretched place, it's become worse than the market place No peace for a man who wants to sleep I will call the guard if you fellows don t shut up at once.

In answer the bully let out a loud, challenging song in a stentorian voice, enough to wake the whole town There was a sound of running feet outside. Sriram sneaked back to his bed The guard asked through the bars, 'What s going on here?'

People are chattering and chattering This has become worse than the market place,' said the bully from his bed

§

A friendly warder brought them the news of the outside world 'Mahatma Gandhi is becoming the Emperor of India,' he said one day 'I heard it just today from a person who knows these things Some men have come by plane from England with the proposal'

Don't be silly How can they want the Mahatma to become the King of India when they have put him in prison for fear he may become one?'

Didn t you know? It seems he is out of prison

I don t believe it

I swear he is They released him long ago because he was ill and his wife died A woman who comes here to cut grass told me so

It is not safe to have any transaction with grass-cutting women They will get you into trouble said a veteran prisoner

How do you know?

It is because I have suffered They are sirens They will seduce you before you know where you are And then you will have trouble everywhere They don t like such goings-on in a jail

But this is an old woman who cannot seduce anyone She is a grandmother so don t fear

Then it is all right Go on

Her son is in the army Her grandson sells newspapers in the market and he tells her what goes on in the world

Every one of the prisoners and their guards as well eagerly crowded round him to ask What is happening? What is happening? Tell us

It seems that some men have come from England and they want to make Mahatma a King

They clapped their hands in glee Oh how good to hear this!

Why does it make you so happy?

Because if Mahatmaji becomes the king of our country he will not allow anyone to be kept in prison He doesn t like it It's because he is a very good man. It seems the British don t like him because he says such things

'They like him now all right.

The indulgent warder looked on as the prisoners discussed these matters among themselves while going through their various duties The warder didn t however like the idea of a prisonless state He said How can there be no prisons? There will always be prisons whoever may become the king This was a ticklish technical point The best thing was to consult the political expert in their midst. They turned to Sriram for guidance

Sriram was breaking the stones unmindful of what they were saying He was listening to their discussions but he chose not to display any enthusiasm. He said, I don t know anything about anything

They plied him with questions 'Is it a fact or is it not a fact?'

'How should I know? I am in your midst'

'Will they release us all from prison?

'All? I don't think so, they are likely to release only political prisoners'

The warder seemed relieved to hear it 'Ah, you say so Political prisoners are different There are some in the other block I have heard that some of them are leaving every day That is a different thing altogether But you are not all political prisoners'

They all said, 'What if we aren't? We are also human beings Why should we not be treated well too? Whatever you may say, Mahatma Gandhi will help us Do you mean to say that Mahatmaji will not care for us? He is a kind man'

Their curiosity could not be contained Night and day they worried about it, until one day a newspaper was smuggled in through the good offices of the friendly warder, and put into Sriram's hand for perusal and explanation While his audience sat round him, and the guard watched over them, at the quarry outside the jail, Sriram read out to them the *Daily News* from the first line to the last It was as if he had been given a sudden vision of a broad and active world He read of the impending political changes, of the proposed division of India into Hindustan and Pakistan, of Mahatmaji's firm refusal to countenance the proposal, of the Cabinet Mission, and the endless amount of talking that was going on at Delhi, of death, disaster, and convulsive changes The greatest triumph for Sriram was that the British were definitely quitting India He said proudly, 'I myself wrote on all the walls "Quit India", and you see it has taken effect'

People looked at him with wonder He became a hero in their midst 'Will they give you some reward for all your work now?'

He read, and this was heartening, of the release of political prisoners from all the jails in the country, but he could not hope to come under this category He was not classified as a political prisoner

§

The Chief sent for Sriram His tone was suddenly friendly 'I don't know what the Government order will be about you But we have received a number of names for release

I am glad to do it because it will reduce our pressure of work However he said looking through the list your name is not on it

Sriram s heart sank He had a feeling that he was being kept in a cage when all the others were roaming the wide earth freely He thought unhappily that someone was discriminating against him It was a cruel and sadistic world The Chief noted the pain in his face and said Evidently you have not been classified as a political prisoner All those who have done what you have done are under the consideration of the government If you like you may send in a representation with an undertaking and I will forward it

What representation and what undertaking? asked Sriram

You will have to give an undertaking to report your movements to the police for some time till all the papers are scrutinized and your classification is settled

Sriram thought it over Is this a New India or are the British still here?

The Chief answered I cannot tell you anything about it That is politics I am merely carrying on as per the rules

In a moment it flashed across Sriram s mind that all the difficult hazardous things he had done would be set at naught by this undertaking If he met Bharati she d probably say You sneak out of prison do you? You have degraded yourself beyond description Get out of my sight He told the Chief No I can t give any such undertaking

All right please yourself Right dismiss The warders tugged his biceps and he turned and walked out of the room depressed more than ever

§

After all there came a day when he went into the office adjoining his Chief's room a spacious office in which there were a number of racks He was l d in there by his usual warders without much ado he handed a slip of paper to a uniformed man sitting at the table there were a number of others standing around him to each of whom he was passing bundles of cloth Sriram waited patiently till his turn came the man took the slip from his hand looked him up and down and cried Number six seven at which on of the attendants ran up a ladder and brought out a bundle and placed it on the table The man scrutinized the bundle looked at Sriram and asked Are these yours? Sriram looked

at the clothes, he had been made to take them off long, long ago and change into jail uniform. He was thrilled at the sight. He hugged them close to his breast and said, 'Yes, these are mine'

'Wait,' said the other, snatching them back from his hand, Sign here' He held a sheet of paper, there were numerous sheets of papers to be signed Sriram was irked by the number of hurdles he had to cross before going out of this hateful place At last the man was satisfied He handed him the bundle, his old close-collared coat, shirt, and dhoti, in which he had been arrested ages ago at the cremation ground

'Change into your own clothes now You are no longer a prisoner

Sriram proceeded to strip his jail dress before everybody Life here had toughened him The man said, 'You can go behind that shelf and undress'

When Sriram emerged from behind a shelf loaded with old discoloured bundles of papers and documents, he felt he was back in his old shape He rolled up his striped shorts and jacket, and shoved them into a corner The man said, 'You are free, you are discharged' Sriram stood still unable to decide which direction to take. Go this way, the door opens out,' said the man Sriram saluted him vaguely, and muttered, 'I am going,' and opened the door, it gave on to a small yard which was closed with a barred gate at the other end, an armed sentry paced in front of it Sriram s first instinct was to turn back at the sight of him, but he told himself, 'I am no longer a prisoner,' and walked on haughtily The man opened the door at his approach He said as Sriram passed, 'Going out' Very good, try not to come back, unless you like this place very much

'I hate it,' said Sriram with feeling 'I never wish to see a prison again'

That is the right spirit,' said the man, keep it up He was evidently used to uttering this formula to every outgoing prisoner It was a sort of convocation address

When the barred gate closed behind him Sriram could hardly believe that he was free He felt weak and faint, and inexplicably unhappy The memory of his cellmates who had become sullen and gloomy when it became known that he would be leaving was painful

The bully had said, 'You are a selfish sort. I don't like your type'

The forger said, If you can be released why not we? Tell Mahatmaji that we want to come out.

Another one said If you become a big minister or some such thing don t forget me.

The bully had added When I am released I will break into your house some night and teach you good sense I don t like selfish fellows like you.

The warders had trooped behind him for tips There was a little money that had accumulated as his wages which the Jail Accountant had handed over to him and his old warders followed him muttering We have been together so long I would like you to remember us This is my child s birthday Give me something to remember you by We cannot come beyond this block and please give anything you like. 'We have looked after you all these months

Sriram gave a rupee to each of the crowd that followed him importuning and that took away fifty per cent of his earnings

He walked on as in a dream It was difficult for him to move about without a guard following him, and without being told where he should go He found the evening light dazzled his eyes, the wide open spaces were oppressive He turned back to cast a look at the building which he had occupied for years now It looked in its slate-grey colour an innocent enough building, but what a tyrannical world it had contained a fellow could not do anything he wanted, even the calls of nature had to be answered as per regulations! The jail was outside the town limits at the Trunk Road end He had never gone so far before, he had been living all along on the Trichy Trunk Road, not knowing where he was

He walked down the road towards the town, wondering where he should go now A few buses passed him He hoped people would not recognize him There was a policeman sitting in one of the buses and Sriram turned instinctively away from the direct line of his vision He walked on along the edge of the road 'This is an independent India into which I am walking now, he reflected What was the sign that it was independent? He looked about him The trees were as usual, the road was not in the least improved, and policeman still rode on the footboard of highway buses He felt tired and hungry He had not more than a few rupees left after the warders had had their claim He wished that some sort of transport was provided for prisoners let out of jail it was very inconsiderate, even in a free India to have to face this! He hoped that some day they would make him a minister and then he would open a canteen, and place station-waggons at the disposal of prisoners at the jail gate so that those that came out might not feel so lost

It was dusk when he got into the Market Road Nobody seemed to notice him Here and there he saw buildings hung with the Tri-colour flags, the *charka* in the middle He saw that there was less traffic than formerly Shops were lit and crowded as ever He felt a pang of disappointment He had a gnawing hunger inside him There were still a few rupees in his pocket, hard-earned, literally earned by the sweat of his brow He put his hand into his pocket and jingled the coins, and remembered the axe he had wielded, and all the undreamt of tasks that he had performed He had a feeling of pride at the thought of all he had earned by his hard labour no one could say that he was one

who lived on the fat of the land Even his granny could feel proud of his achievement and ability He sat on the bench of a small park that had been formed at the traffic junction of New Extension and the Market Road He sat there in order to think clearly how he ought to manage There was no use trying to settle things while walking This was a free country and no one was going to demand why he sat there and not somewhere else It was difficult to get used to the idea it was a luxurious idea worth brooding over But he felt startled again and again as he realized in a habitual way that he was exposing himself to the public gaze too much and that he might have to slip into his hiding swiftly Sitting there on the cement bench beside a potted fern he told himself I m free No one can come after me now No one will bother whether I have a clean shaven face or a hairy one He felt hurt at first that the pedestrians went by without noticing him and the traffic without pausing to say Hallo hero! But he soon realized the blessedness of being left alone after all the years of being hunted and looked for everywhere

He realized that his first business was to eat something He could do the clear thinking while sitting on a hotel chair instead of a park bench He got up and moved briskly off down the road the first hotel that showed itself in sparkling bulbs was Sri Krishna Vilas He turned in Most of the tables were empty It was long past the rush hour He sat at a marbel topped table and waited for someone to come and ask what he wanted A man sat at the exit on a raised seat with a cash box The waiting boys were all in a group chattering among themselves They don t care Sriram told himself I suppose I look like a gutter rat They will drive me out He looked around him. He recognized one of the waiters he used to come here often in other days

Hey Mani! he called and the waiter turned. Come here he commanded

The other came up He recognized Sriram and cried 'Why it s you! Where have you been all these years sir? It s a long time since we saw you.

I was away on business Give me something good to eat

At the word *good*' the boy puckered his face in worry

There is nothing very good now sir what with the present difficulty of g tting rice and any pure food Our government do not do anything about it yet. Do you know how ha.d it is to get any fryi. g oil? Most of it s adulterated stuff I tell you

He started on a long narrative about the food situation in the country, the food shortage, the post-war confusion, and the various difficulties and hardships that people experienced All this was a revelation it was the first report that Sriram was getting of the contemporary world But he had no patience to listen to too much of it

'What have you?'

The boy cast a brief look at the shelf on which trays of edibles were on display and started, '*Kara sev*, *vadai*, and *potato bonda*'

Sriram said sharply, 'I can see all that from here I want to know if you have anything fresh inside, on the oven, something more solid' The thought of *idli*, soft and light, and of *dosai*, was alluring It seemed as if he had tasted them in a previous birth While he spoke he was racked with the thought that he had probably lost the necessary idiom to get on with ordinary folk Perhaps he only had the ability to talk to jailmates He said, 'Something very g——' he avoided the word *good* lest it should start the other off analysing the world situation He said, I want something heavy, just made, I am very hungry'

'There s nothing inside, sir This is closing hour, and the kitchen department is the first to shut up While our proprietor wants *us* to work till ten, those who sit at the fireside——

Sriram lost his patience He didn't want to spend the rest of the evening listening to shop-talk He said sharply, 'All right, all right, get me something, anything to eat, now run and get me coffee, *good* coffee,' and he felt sorry that he had again blundered into the word, for the boy began to say something about the difficulties of making good coffee milk-supply difficulties, the sugar racket, and the general avarice of black marketeers of various kinds Sriram didn t know what to do He lost his patience completely, Why do you tell me all that?

Because it is so

'All right,' he said callously, 'I m hungry, if you are going to give me anything look sharp If you stand here and talk, I shall get up and go away'

'What shall I give you, sir?' the bo asked officially for the first time giving an impression that he was on duty

Two sweets, one savoury and a large quantity of hot coffee,' commanded Sriram This was the first time in many months he was able to order anyone about He was surprised at his own voice, almost fearing that someone would say that he was to be

put into solitary confinement But it worked The boy ran off with alacrity and interest

He felt elated after his tiffin and after chewing a betel leaf and nut he felt as if he were back in the times when there was no war no political struggle of any kind He was himself grandson of a grand old lady with no worries in life shuttling between a free reading room the market place and Kanni s shop living in a world with well defined boundaries with set activities no surprises or worries everything calculable and capable of anticipation

He hurried on to Kabir Street It was a fine home-coming It was even o clock but as usual children were playing in the streets and the space in front of every house was washed and decorated with white flour Why could he not have lived like these folk without worries of any kind or any extra adventures there seemed to be a quiet charm in a life verging on stagnation and no change of any kind The lights were on in most of the houses He ran down the street with his eyes wide open He stopped in front of his house He looked through the doorway Some strangers were moving about He felt angry and cheated What right had they to usurp his place? Some unknown children were chasing each other in the front hall under the lamp—that old lamp where the old lady had taught him so many things in life! He wanted to run up and steps the tell the children You can t run around here I can stop you If I want to They were probably knocking holes in the wall banging the doors and shutters leaving wreckage behind for him to occupy when the time came

He turned round to see Kanni and talk to him But the shop had gone the portrait of Maria Theresa was no longer there to brighten up the surroundings In Kanni s place a new cement structure rose without windows probably a godown. He felt pained and cheated again He walked up and down the road None of his neighbours saw him He saw a few of them in their houses sitting by the window reading an evening paper—comfortable folk. He felt like going up and talking to them but they'd probably reprimand him for various lapses and he also felt diffident about his ability to talk to anyone! He was obsessed with the thought that h had lost the idiom of communication with these people The street remained very much unchanged since he saw it last—only Kanni s shop was gone and there was no one of whom he could enquire

Suddenly he felt that he had nowhere to go that night In the prison at least, one had been assured of a place of retirement for the night

§

The photographer's establishment was brightly lit, and threw on the road all the illumination the place had It was a lowroofed shop with the usual glass front stuck with a variety of enlarged portraits of children, pretty girls and important men

There was no one in the front parlour with its coir carpet and a small stool with a decorative potted plant on it There was no sign of any one living there Sriram stepped into the next room, which was also empty He cleared his throat and made sounds with his feet in order to indicate his presence

'Who is there?' came the call It was the photographer's voice

Sriram replied 'A jail bird'

He felt happy that after all there was someone known to him to meet in this world The other came out of the innermost chamber and advanced, trying to find out the identity of the visitor He had evidently been working close to a light and could not see clearly When he came near enough, he cried, 'You! When were you released? What a pity I didn't know I was wondering what you had done with yourself Where were you? They would not tell us where you were If I had known you were coming out today, I'd have arranged a grand reception for you at the jail gate with flowers and garlands The trouble is that things are still disorganized But I blame no one Ours is an infant state, still a baby, many things are still to be done, we must be happy that we are our own rulers and no foreign nation rules over us We must be happy that things are being done and not spend the time finding fault with anyone'

'Rather, we must rejoice that it's our own people that are blundering, isn't that so?' Sriram asked, some of his irresponsible spirit returning

'Fancy Nehru and Patel and the rest sitting there where there were haughty Viceroys before Didn't Churchill call Mahatmaji "The Naked Fakir"? The 'Naked Fakir' is everything now, think of it' He was excited 'There are bound to be mistakes, bound to be blunders everywhere, but we must not make much of them' He was widely incoherent and happy 'If you had been out of jail, you would have been garlanded and carried in a

procession on Independence Day What a pity you missed it It was a grand affair

Jagadish seated Sriram on a large sofa put a mighty album on his lap took a seat by his side and turned its leaves He remarked As a photographer I am proud of this Future generations can never blame me for being neglectful I have done my best Here is a complete history of our struggle and the final Independence Day Celebration He had put various pictures of himself into the album subscribing himself as a humble soldier There were even photographs of the ruined temple where Sriram had lived and worked The photographer had entitled it One of the secret headquarters of the Independence Army Sriram looked through the album which in effect was a documentary of the independence movement

Jagadish had even stuck in photographs of jails and their exteriors He had pictures of barbed wire entanglements It was a completely romantic picture Nor could he be said to suffer from modesty in any way He was the chief architect of Independent India the chief operator in ejecting the British He had included several pictures of Malgudi street scenes Flags flew from every doorway and shop crowds were moving procession with people singing and playing musical instruments Flowers everywhere Great masses of men moving down the roads Jagadish looked at the scenes with great pride He felt he had striven to give people a good time and had succeeded. He said After all what do I get for all the trouble I took and the risks I ran? Are they going to make me the Minister of this and that? Not a chance sir there are others waiting for the privilege Even if I stand for an election who will know who I am? Will the parliamentary board choose me as their candidate? Not a chance sir that is the reason why I have held fast to my camera and studio all through my various activities Nobody can take it away There was a tone of regret in his voice which Sriram did not understand

After all as you said now we are an infant nation The word was very convincing it had a homely and agreeable sound nobody need worry what it meant or why it was mentioned

'True true said the photographer I m not complaining or grumbling What I have done I have done with the utmost satisfaction I am not worried about it at all What I say is I hav got these photographs to record all that we have done that s all

There were hundreds of pictures to wade through Sriram began to turn the leaves fast He felt bored They were monotonous to see More and more processions More and more people Flags Pictures carried in the procession of national leaders and others, and more and more people There was a sameness about the whole thing he simply could not stand any more He briskly turned the leaves of the album and came to the last page of the sequence in which Jagadish was seen hoisting the flag at some public gathering Sriram put away the album and asked, 'How did you manage to photograph yourself?

'Ah, a pertinent question, who could photograph the photographer? Guess how it was done Do you imagine I attached a camera to my back to follow me and take the pictures?'

'Possibly, possibly,' said Sriram, losing interest in the whole question He didn t want to look at any more pictures or hear about them The sight of the Independence Day Celebrations irritated him He almost said, 'If only I had known that people would reduce it all to this I didn t go about inscribing "Quit" and overturning trains just to provide a photographer with material for his album' He decided that he wouldn t look at any more pictures

The photographer said, 'I have three more albums They present another phase of our struggle' He attempted to reach them down from a shelf

Sriram held his hand, saying, No, not now I have a headache I won t look at any more pictures' He was terrified at the prospect of having to look through more crowds, flags, and assemblies

The photographer said Good photographs are a sure remedy for headache That s what an American scientist has recently found out'

Sriram said defensively, I will examine them again tomorrow'

Very well You know what my greatest regret is?' He paused to give him time to guess, and added, That I haven t a cine camera If only I had had one I d have shown you all the scenes you have missed as if you were seeing them before your eyes That s the stuff If I had charged as much as other photographers, I d have had the biggest movie camera there is But oh, this troublesome conscience with which some of us are burdened!

Sriram felt disappointed with the man he had looked so imposing as an underground worker so precise and clear headed and purposeful Now he seemed woolly headed and vague The

atmosphere of peace did not suit his nature Sriram wondered for a moment why he had ever carried out his orders at all He was disappointed that the other showed so little interest in his own jail existence Sriram asked Did the police get you?

Me! Oh no! How could they? They didn t know my whereabouts It was possible for me to evade them completely I lived after you left in that temple didn t you see it in the first picture? Didn t you notice how I labelled it? He again tried to reach out for the album

Sriram said hastily Yes yes quite right It was very apt although he could not clearly recollect what it was

Moreover concluded the photographer there was no occasion for the police to get me My grandmother did not start dying at a wrong moment If it hadn t been for your grand mother you would not have gone to jail at all

Sriram said nothing in reply This was a subject which he did not wish to brood over He had a hope they might have something to talk about it common some diversion from the photographs He asked point blank Where is Bharati? Did she come out of jail?

Oh yes I was wondering why you hadn t asked anything about her I thought perhaps you had forgotten her!

No never! Not even for a moment! cried Sriram passionately Have you seen her?

Of course, said the photographer in a tone which made Sriram anxious and jealous While he had been having social intercourse with homicides she seemed to have come out of prison been received and garlanded by the photographer and his friends and probably they had all had a good time She must have wondered why he was not there! He hoped that the others had had at least the goodness to remind her that he was still in jail

Did you receive her at the prison? he asked suddenly

We should have but it was impossible to meet her She was in one of the earliest batches to be released and she immediately took the train that very evening for Noakhali.

Noakhali what is her business there? Where is it? His geography was poor

The photographer ignored the geographical question and said Are you aware of what has been going on in East Bengal? Hindus versus Muslims They are killing each other Are you not aware of anything?

'Now How could I be?' said Sriram 'I was not kept in a municipal reading room or the public library I m not aware of anything or of what you are talking about

'Whole villages have been burnt in inter-communal fights Thousands of people have been killed, bereaved, dispossessed, demented, crushed'

'Who is doing what and why?

'Don't ask all that I am a man without any communal notions and I don't like to talk about it Somebody is killing somebody else That is all I care to know Life is at a standstill and Mahatmaji is there on a mission of peace He is walking through villages, telling people not to run away, to be brave, to do this and that He is actually making the lion and the lamb eat off the same plate And Bharati seems to have had a call'

Sriram was seized with cold fear This was a new turn of events for which he had not bargained at all Noakhali, Calcutta, Bengal, what was the meaning of it? What did she mean by going so far away from him? Did she do it by design? Did she try to make good her escape before he could come out of prison?

What did she mean by going away?

The photographer simply laughed at the question

'Couldn't she have come and seen me in prison? She must have known I was in prison?

'How? asked the photographer

'By enquiring, that is all, it is simple,' said Sriram with feeling He said, 'Probably she has no thought of me Perhaps she has forgotten me completely!

Jagadish became serious on seeing his gloom Don t let all that disturb you so much Were you thinking of her often?'

Sriram began to say something in reply, but could not find the words, spluttered, remained silent and began to sob The photographer patted his back and said, What has happened now that you feel so bad about it? Sriram had nothing much to say in reply He merely kept on sobbing The photographer said, You are a fool! What have you done to keep in touch with her?

'What do you mean? What could I do, chained and caged?

'Now, I mean What are you going to do about it now? Now you are not chained or caged What are you going to do about it?

'She is so far away, thousands of miles from me, Sriram wailed The thought of Noakhali was very distressing

But there is such a thing as a postal service You don t have to employ a special runner to carry your mails Why don t you write to her?

Will you see the letter addressed and despatched properly?

I promise Give it to me I will send it off

This brought a ray of hope to Sriram He suddenly asked What should I write to her?

H m that is a thing I can t tell you Each man has his own style in these matters

It was clear that his mind was in a complete fog To think or plan clearly was beyond him Prison life showed its damage only now

The photographer took pity on him He said Please rest a while Close your eyes and relax He went to a small table and took out a pen and a sheet of paper and started writing The traffic on the road outside had ceased

Don t you wish to close your shop? Sriram asked

Don t let that bother you I can look after myself I m not much good at writing this sort of stuff Anyway I will try Meanwhile shut your eyes and switch off your thoughts if you can

He sat and faithfully wrote a long letter which began

MY DARLING —Who keeps slipping away like this! I might as well be in jail. But in jail or out of it—there is only one thought in my mind that s you I have been thinking of you night and day and not all the jail regulations could prevent me from thinking of you And today I came out of the prison and my good friend Jagadish (he is a very fine man let me say) told me about you The prison bars kept me away from you so long and now all the miles between here and there but that is of no consequence This distance is no distance for me May I come and join you because I will gasp and die like a stranded fish unless I see you and talk to you? Give me your answer in the quickest time possible

Jagadish got so lost in writing the letter that he forgot what time he was taking and Sriram began dozing in his seat and snoring gently Jagadish looked at him and hesitated for a moment He put the letter under a paper weight and wrote a covering note 'If approved this letter may be signed and sent first thing in the morning though preferably it should be copied in your own hand He got up and shut the front door of the shop He switched off

the light, and went into his living apartments, softly closing the door behind him

Ten days of anxious, desperate waiting, and then Sriram received a letter

'Happy to hear from you Come to Delhi Birla House at New Delhi, if you can Our programme is unsettled We are going to Bihar with Bapu, where there is trouble. There is much to tell you We shall be in Delhi on 14th January After that come any time you like We shall be happy to meet you

§ BHARATI'

The Grand Trunk Express in the end arrived at New Delhi station Sriram struggled to reach a window in order to have the first glimpse of Bharati The men near the window would not let him near it It was no use speaking to them they seemed to live in a different world He spoke Tamil and English, and they understood Hindi, Hindustani, Urdu or whatever it might be He could now realize the significance of Bharati s insistence that he should learn Hindi Just to please her he had looked through readers and primers, but that took him nowhere He had been isolated for the last thirty-six hours He had sat brooding, jail life had trained him to keep his own company His greatest trial had been when two men appeared suddenly from somewhere when the train was in motion, and scrutinized all the people in the compartment, when they came to him, they stopped in front of him and asked him a question He could catch only the words Mister' and 'Hindu' with a lot of other things thrown in They were rowdy-looking men. He said something in his broken Hindi, and Tamil and English, which seemed to make no impression on them. They came menacingly close to him peering at his face, Sriram was getting ready to fight in self-defence He sprang up and demanded in the language that came uppermost, What do you mean, all of you staring at me like this? As he rose, one of the two pulled his ear lobe for a close scrutiny, saw the puncture in it made in childhood and let go, muttering Hindu' They lost interest and moved off After they were gone a great tension relaxed in the compartment Someone started explaining, and after a good deal of effort in a variety of languages, Sriram understood that the intruders were men looking for Muslims in the compartment if Muslims were found they would be thrown

out of the moving train an echo of the fighting going on in other parts of the country Sriram lapsed into silence for the rest of the journey

It was a most uncomfortable journey he was crushed could not find the space even to stretch his length or swing his arm people came crowding in and sat on him Sometimes he could not even extricate his legs When he felt sleepy he leaned his head back on the window or on the shoulder of a total stranger When he felt hungry he called to someone selling tea outside and drank it He could not get coffee The people here seemed strange men who could swallow the very sweet *jilebi* and wash it down with bitter tea the very first thing in the day this only confirmed his feeling that he was in a strange fantastic world He yearned for coffee his favourite like a true South Indian but coffee could not be had here He had to content himself by dreaming of it as he used to do in jail In fact this seemed only an extension of prison life this life in a crowded conjested compartment with a lot of strangers He felt more uncomfortable here than he had felt in the prison There at least he could say something or hear something from others lip but here the human voice conveyed nothing but jabber The compartment was full of people who smoked *beedi* and filled the air with it spat on the floor without a second thought and the closet was nearly always inaccessible He managed by jumping out of the train when the train halted and rushing back to the train when it whistled

At ten-thirty or eleven on some day or other the train came to New Delhi. *Nai Dhehli* people in the compartment cried and bustled about. He tried to run to the window or door to catch a glimpse of Bharati She had written promising to meet him at the station He felt ashamed of his appearance he combed back his hair with his fingers it was dishevelled and standing on end He knew he was grimy grisly and unsightly He wished he could tidy himself up before Bharati set eyes on him after all these years He caught a glimpse of her through a number of heads and shoulders jammed at the window and in his anxiety he pushed and bumped into people rudely and the train moved past before coming to a halt. He saw her standing gazing earnestly at the window For a brief second he caught a glimpse of her figure and his heart sank. He wished he could improve his appearance before facing her He wished he could skulk away with the crowd and see her later He had great misgivings as to what she might think of him if she saw him in his

present state But even in that desperate state, he knew, by his experience in the train itself, that he could never ask his way again and go in search of her She might be lost to him for ever

When he got down from the train, carrying a roll of bedding and a trunk, Bharati s searching eye picked him out in the crowd She waved her arms and came running to him She gripped his hands and said, Oh, how good to see you again!' and in that tone of spontaneous affection Sriram lost himself, forgot his own appearance and griminess, and acquired self-confidence He looked her up and down, and cried, 'You look like a North Indian, yourself You look like a Punjabi I hope you understand our language'

She took charge of him immediately She picked up his bedding and said, 'You carry your trunk' He snatched the bedding from her hand, and took the load on his own shoulder She said, Don't be silly You haven t four arms, remember' And she snatched back the bed from his hands Sriram lost his bewilderment The proximity of Bharati gave him a sense of homeliness It was as if he were back in Malgudi with her He didn't notice the strange surroundings, the strange avenues, and buildings, the too broad roads, the exotic men and women, and the strange shops they were passing He had no time to notice anything His attention was concentrated on Bharati She looked darker, and more tired, but her tresses were as black as ever She looked tired, as if she had undernourished herself He could not get over the novelty of meeting her again He was always on the point of disbelieving what he saw and felt Perhaps, he was going through a fantastic dream Perhaps he was dead Or dreaming from his confinement For the first time these many months and years he had a free and happy mind, a mind without friction and sorrow of any kind No hankering for a future or regret for a past This was the first time in his life that he was completely at peace with himself, satisfied profoundly with existence itself The very fact that one was breathing, feeling, and seeing, seemed sufficient matter for satisfaction now She kept looking at him and asked, When did they release you?

He gave a summary of his jail existence and a resume of all that had happened to him since she saw him last The *tonga* ran smoothly The extreme sympathy with which she listened to his story pleased him greatly It gave it a touch of importance As he spoke, he was impressed with his own doings He was on the point of asking himself Am I the one who has done

this or is it someone else? He was filled with a sense of extreme heroism. I never thought I could put up with all this sort of trouble I was very keen that the man in the street—— he began and puffed with his own importance The listener Bharati gave his whole life a new meaning and a new dimension When they arrived at a colony of huts somewhere in New Delhi he was completely satisfied with all the things he had done in his life

This is my present headquarters Bharati explained She had taken him to her own hut Yes this is my home There was a spinning wheel at one corner and her clothes hung on a rope tied across the doorway

After all she is going to be my wife that s why she doesn t mind my staying with her he reflected

She said You will have your room ready in about an hour till then you may rest here There is another block where you may wash yourself Make yourself comfortable As she was speaking a group of children came running in crying *Mon Mon*—— and they said something that Sriram could not make out They came and surrounded Bharati and dragged her by her hand She stopped and said something to them in their own language They left her and went away

Who are they? asked Sriram with a touch of jealousy

Children that s all we know about them she said

Where do they belong?

Here at the moment she said and added They are refugee children we don t know anything more about them I will be back in about an hour Make yourself comfortable And she went away

She was gone a long while By the time she returned he had explored the surroundings He had discovered the bathroom and the tap and washed and tidied himself He went back to her hut and spent a long time combing back his hair and studying himself in the mirror in order to decide whether he was worthy of Bharati Bharati s kindness had restored his confidence in himself He had never hoped that she would treat him with such warmth and kindness The years that had separated them did not seem to make the slightest difference It was as if they had separated only an hour ago all the moments of loneliness and hankering and boredom that had made life a hell for him within the last few years were gone as if they had not existed

He saw one of her *saris* hanging up a white one with yellow spots It was of course made of khadi hand spun the rope

sank under its weight He pulled it down to take it in his hands and gauge its weight, reflecting, 'She ought to wear finery, poor girl I will give her everything He took it in his hand and weighed it, it seems to weigh twenty pounds He stretched it and held it before his eyes, 'It's like a metal sheet She must feel stuffy under it I can't see any light through it' He rolled it up and pressed it to his breast It had a faint aroma of sandalwood which pleased him It has the fragrance of her own body,' he reflected, closing his eyes As he sat there the door opened and Bharati stood before him

'What are you doing with my sari?' she asked in surprise 'One would think that you were trying to wear it, she said with a laugh Sriram reddened, and put it hastily away

'It does not try to ward me off,' he said, when I take it to my heart'

'Hush! she cried Don't try to be silly We are all very serious people here, remember I see you have tidied yourself up If you have any clothes for washing, give them to me'

Sriram handed her a small roll that he had brought back from his bathroom 'They are terribly soiled,' he murmured apologetically

She snatched the bundle from his hands and went out He reflected, 'She is almost my wife, she is doing what a wife would do, good girl! God bless her If I tie a *thali* around her neck somehow, when she is asleep, things will be all right'

She returned in a moment saying, 'Your clothes will come to you in the evening Here in this camp everyone is expected to wash his or her own clothes and not employ others to do the job, but you are new and I have got a *dhobi* to wash for you as an exception Are you hungry?

Extremely,' he said I am longing for something to eat'

I don t know what you mean by something' she said You can t expect all our South Indian stuff It is months and months since I tasted anything like that You will have to learn to eat *chappati*, and vegetable and curd and fruit and not ask for rice or *sambar* She led him to a shack where some people were eating and children were sitting with plates before them There were two platters laid for her and Sriram side by side This is how husbands and wives sit together,' Sriram reflected as he sat beside her and tried to work his way through wheat *chappatis* He longed for the taste of the pungent South Indian food and its sauces and vegetables, but he suppressed the thought Jail life

had trained him to eat anything offered him I am really still in a jail he reflected

She was extremely busy all through the day She seemed to have numerous things to do She was always attending on children changing one s dress combing another s hair engaging another group in dance or play and continuously talking to them besides this she had a great deal to say to a lot of miscellaneous men and women who came in search of her Hers was a full time occupation She gave the children a wash fed them put them to sleep on mats in various shed drew their blankets over them said something to each one of them and finally came back to her own room sat down on her cot and stretched her arms Sriram followed her about for hours but could not get in a word of his own He tried to smile at the children thinking that that might please Bharati but she hardly noticed his presence when she was with them It infuriated him After a time he turned on his heels and went back to his hut It was furnished with a rope cot and a mat and had no door There was a common bath at the end of the alley which he shared with a number of others He had felt indignant when he was transferred here It seemed to dash his hopes to the ground Did she put me in here in order to get rid of me? he reflected Was it because I picked up her spotted *sari*? If I had not done so she would probably have let me sleep in the same room I have probably destroyed her trust He reflected ruefully Trust! Who wants her trust! I only want her

He had switched on the light and was sitting on his bed The entrance darkened The low roof of the hut made it stuffy although it kept the place warm in winter She came in bearing his clothes which he had given her for washing Sitting in his hut Sriram had been seized again with the feeling that he was still cooped up in a cell My jail seems to be on my back all the time he reflected The fatigue of the journey had begun to affect him, the intense cold air and the gloomy and novel surroundings depressed him and made him feel unhappy—a gloom and unhappiness without any cause The brief spurt of happiness he had experienced seemed chimerical

Bharati put his clothes on his bed and said Are you comfortable?

Yes and no I feel happy when you are with me and miserable when you go away She looked at him startled He continued Won t you sit down here? and he made a space

for her She sat down He moved close to her, and laid his arm on her shoulder

She said, Not yet,' and gently pushed away his arm 'What a strange man!' she cried You have not changed at all.'

He sat away from her and asked, 'Am I still an untouchable?'

She said, 'Bapuji alone can decide.'

Have you spoken to him about it?'

Yes, more than once, but he has not given an answer yet.' She sat with bowed head when she said it, her voice was low She looked subdued

There was an uneasy silence for a while, then he asked, 'Why? Doesn't he want us to marry?

It may not be that,' she said 'But he really did not have the time to give it a thought, there were other things to do'

It was a relief for him to know that Bapuji was not against the notion of their marrying, but it was not enough He held his breath and listened without speaking He had a fear that his slightest word might spoil everything This was an occasion for speech in the most delicate of whispers Anything more harsh might destroy the whole fabric. He wanted to be on his guard. He wanted to do nothing that might scare her and take her away from him, nothing that might make fruitless all the thousands of miles he had come So he refrained from speaking He wanted to shout at her and demand if it was only for this that she had wanted him to come all that way, he wanted to tell her that he regretted ever having set eyes on her He wanted to threaten her that he would seize her by force and carry her back to South India

'More than anything else,' she said, 'the thing that pains Mahatmaji now is the suffering of women. So many of them have been ruined, so many of them have lost their honour, their home, their children, and the number of women who are missing cannot be counted They have been abducted carried away by ruffians, ravished or killed or perhaps have even destroyed themselves' She appeared to be on the point of breaking down at the thought.

Sriram felt he must say something in sympathy 'Why do these things happen? And he felt ashamed of the utter inanity of his question She didn't notice his question, but just went on speaking

'On the 15th of August when the whole country was jubilant and gathered here to take part in the Independence Day

do you know where Bapu was? In Calcutta where fresh riots had started Bapu said his place was where people were suffering and not where they were celebrating He said that if a country cannot give security to women and children it's not worth living in. He said it would be worth dying if that would make his philosophy better understood He walked through villages barefoot on his mission We followed him Each day we walked five miles through floods and fields silently He walked with bowed head all through those swamps of East Bengal We stopped for a day or two in each village and he spoke to those who had lost their homes property wives and children He spoke kindly to those who had perpetrated crimes—he wept for them and they swore never to do such things again I have seen with my own eyes aggressive rowdy looking men taking a vow of non violence and a vow to protect the opposite faction—don t ask what community they were what one community did in one part of the country brought suffering on the same community in another part of the country I have seen what has happened both at Noakhali and Bihar and then at Delhi How can one choose? Human beings have done impossible things to other human beings It s no use discussing whether this community committed greater horrors or the other one Bapuji forbade us to refer to anyone in terms of religion as Muslims Hindu or Sikh but just as human beings He said one day that he sometimes pitied those who committed acts of violence—he advised some women in a village that they should sooner take their lives with their own hands than surrender their honour

You must have gone to many places said Sriram, not having anything else to say

Yes for about a year I have been with Mahatmaji He was at first unwilling to take me to all those places but I bothered him again and again after I was released from jail I don t know how many villages I have seen. We followed the Master through burning villages Of course, anything might have happened to us anywhere There were a few places where they showed their anger even against Mahatmaji They held up placards threatening Bapu s life unless he turned back and left them But in such places he stayed longer than in other places And ultimately he held his ground

Were you at any time in danger?

Of what? Of being assaulted? Yes sometimes but Mahatmaji had advised women as a last resort to take their lives with

their own hands rather than surrender their honour There was no sense of fear where Mahatmaji was But if any unexpected thing happened, I was always prepared to end my life'

No, no,' said Sriram horrified

It seemed quite a natural thing to do in those places, where one saw burning homes, children orphaned, men killed, and women carried away I felt we were in some other country My special charge were children wherever I saw them I gathered them and brought them here All those children you saw here, we don t know anything about them They escaped death, somehow, that's where providence has shown its presence They are all gathered from various villages in Bengal and Bihar We had more, but some were re claimed in Calcutta itself But the ones we have now with us, we don t know anything about them If their parents are alive, they will know they are here and come for them otherwise we will bring them up We have collected toys and clothes for them Don t ask whether they are Muslim children or Hindu children or who they are It is no use asking that, we don t know We have given them only the names of flowers and birds Bapuji said once that even a number would be better than a name, if a name meant branding a man as of this religion or that You see one child was called Malkus, that s a melody a girl is known as Gulab, that is a rose These children must grow up only as human beings'

Sriram shivered a little, and Bharati said, I ll give you some warm clothes and blankets out of what we have collected for refugees For this purpose, we ll count you as a refugee, no harm in that' She laughed slightly He was frightened of her She seemed too magnificent to be his wife. You now understand why I could not talk to Mahatmaji about our own affairs It would have been sacrilegious Even so, I mentioned you to him one day in a village in Bengal He was about to say something when someone dashed in crying that he had been stabbed, and then another time in Calcutta I was telling him about you, and he asked when you were coming out of jail, it was late at night I had waited for an opportunity when there would be no one about, and suddenly some big men, ministers of the place and others, arrived for urgent consultations I never got a chance again

Will he remember me?

'He never forgets anyone I felt that the time was

Tomorrow let us go together and see him at Birla House and if there is an opportunity we shall ask him together

If he says no? asked the anxious lover with a shudder

Bharati rose saying I will send you the blankets in a minute

§

Next afternoon Sriram before setting out for Birla House tidied himself looked into a mirror and suddenly decided that he was probably looking too smart for the occasion He rumpled his hair a little His mind was buzzing with numerous doubts Bharati had gone ahead to arrange an interview with the Mahatma She had left a guide behind to conduct him to Birla House He picked out a khaddar shirt and vest wrapped a shawl round his shoulder and satisfied himself that he looked unostentatious His greatest fear was that Mahatmaji would be reduced to saying Marry you? Bharati marrying you! Begone you presumptuous worm!

Bharati took charge of him at the gate of Birla House She said He is terribly busy but he will see us both for a moment He knows we wish to see him urgently A lot of people were going in and out people in khadi and white cap foreign correspondents in European dress and motor-cars were passing on the drive Sriram was blind to his surroundings He asked Bharati If he asks me about anything what shall I say?

Say anything he will not mind it as long as you speak the truth

Sriram was amazed at the ease with which she moved about the place He was confirmed in his view that she was too good for him that he was not right to expect her to become his wife All kinds of people stopped to have a word with her She spoke English Tamil Hindi Urdu and God knew what else She spoke with great ease to men women young boys and old men of all nationalities She had a smile or a word for everyone

What a lot of people you know! Sriram said with admiration She acknowledged the compliment with a smile that charmed him.

Yes but I don't know the names of most of them she said. They went through the drive and the garden

What a mansion! he cried They had to speak mechanical trifles both of them were preoccupied with one thought the impending interview with the Mahatma If he said Yes what should they do next? To Sriram it was entirely un

believable It meant that he needn't dwell in a separate hut, that he could touch her, take her, he would have rights over her person, and he could always be with her He took her aside on the lawn

Just a moment, Bharati,' he whispered, if Bapu permits us to marry, shall we go through it immediately

Her breath blew on him warmly as she whispered Yes, without doubt.'

'How could we do it immediately ? How could we make the necessary arrangements ? he asked

What arrangements ? Are we going to have pipes and drums and a dowry and feasts ? she asked

'Don't we have to buy flowers at least ? Where am I to buy them in this place ? I don t know anyone I don t know my way about How can I ask the bride to undertake all this for me ? If only it were Malgudi, instead of Delhi, you would have seen what I would do'

Don't worry about all that Bapu himself will tell us what to do'

They crossed a small stretch of ground on which already some people were sitting There was a dais at one end

This is where Bapu holds his evening prayers every day,' she said

She entered the main building through the back They reached a small veranda, crossed a passage and stopped just ten yards from a window She hushed her voice and pointed through the window 'There he is' There he sat with spectacles on his nose, with his legs folded under him He was earnestly listening to the talk of two people sitting with him That s Nehru, that s Patel,' the girl whispered There were a number of others also in the room—very busy men We must not disturb them,' she whispered, and flattened herself against the wall Sriram followed her example The men inside were talking in low whispers Someone came out of the room and smiled at Bharati Bharati told her something in Hindi

'She is Bapu's grand niece, she looks after him'

'Won t they mind our being here? Sriram asked They seem to be talking over important things'

'But Bapu has asked me to wait here for him and take a chance I'll peep in at the right moment and show my face at the window He will call me in, or he may come out for a moment'

'I tremble at the thought of his coming out' Sriram to her

This is the only way we can have a word with Bapu He is always busy and surrounded by people

He is looking somewhat weak Sriram ventured peeping through the window for a moment

Yes his last fast has completely fatigued him Sometimes he lay there without moving unconscious She stopped talking as a couple of girls passed Someone with a shorthand notebook and pencil hurried off A liveried government house servant went in bearing a glass of water

Seeing all this Sriram wanted to postpone his meeting with Gandhi Should we disturb him today? He may not be free

He is always busy This is the way He has told me to wait for him and meet him today I just told him that you were here and he said Bring him along *today* Sometime tomorrow Bapuji you are busy today' I said knowing that he was going to have important conferences with the Prime Minister and others I *mean* today he emphasized He even indicated the spot where we should wait He said when he had a moment to spare he would see us

I know you are waiting there come in come in with your friend came Mahatmaji's voice You may come now all the dreadfully serious business in life is over Come come my daughter

That is Bapu said Bharati clutching Sriram's hand and leading him His heart palpitated Just before stepping into the room she whispered Be natural and truthful And tell him about the marriage

Yes yes Sriram gulped They stepped in

The Mahatma was seated on the floor He looked up from a paper Bharati brought her palms together and saluted Sriram said *Namaste* Oh Revered Master! The Mahatma returned their salutations with a smile He indicated a place near him and said Come and be seated here I have postponed meeting you too long Now tell me about yourself Bharati I hope your children are flourishing you are a mother to thirty already what a blessing!

Yes Bapu she said They are all fine There was a little one who was down with a cold that little girl whom you named Anar

Oh yes I remember her you know what *Anar* means pomegranate bud what a beauty! God reveals himself to us in the shape of children I have collected a lot of fruit today

you know the fuss people make when I fast they always seem to think that it must always be followed by a feast! Well, I have kept them for you take them to the little ones and let them enjoy the feast' He indicated in a corner a heap of bright oranges and apples

'Yes, Bapu'

'And don't forget to take them the flowers too' The Mahatma now turned to Sriram Now tell me about yourself' Sriram hesitated for a moment 'What have you been doing in your part of the world?'

'They kept me in prison till a week ago,' he said

'Why, didn t they release you earlier?' Gandhi said

'I was awarded an ordinary sentence,' he replied, putting into it all the poignancy he felt at the thought

'That's very good What did you do?

Sriram hesitated for a moment and remembered Bharati's injunction to be truthful He said, 'For some time I preached "Quit India , but later I was over turning trains and——'

Mahatmaji looked grave 'You have done many wrong things It's no comfort to think that worse things have happened since'

'Bharati went away to jail, and there was no one who could tell me what to do no one who could show me the right way'

'That is an excellent confession,' Mahatmaji said with a smile 'Yes, the mistake was hers in leaving you behind'

No , said Sriram The mistake was mine I refused to go with her to the jail, when she told me about it'

'Indeed, is that so, Bharati?

'Yes, Bapu, he said he was——

'Very well, when all this stress is over, you will tell me in detail all you have done as a political worker and we will decide what we should do' He laughed We will hear if there has been anything so serious as to warrant my going on a fast again Do you know how well a fast can purify?

'I will fast if you order me to,' Sriram said

'I hope you have done no hing to warrant it We will go into the question later

If it is decided, I ll be prepared to go through a fa t myself' Bharati added her face all flushed and red

You' said Mahatmaji for your friend'

At this point at the farthest end of the hall someone moving The Mahatma said There is my conscience ,

dangling a watch telling me it is time to get up He held five fingers and said Give us five minutes more He turned his visitors I m sorry I have to leave you in five minutes A people must have assembled on the prayer ground D you hear their voices? Sriram was seized with anxiety at thought of time running out Every minute counted A even as he was thinking he was losing precious moments C three and a half minutes more He must speak before the was dangled again He threw a side-glance at Bharati in hope that she might at least seize the precious hour But turned on him what seemed to him a look of silent appeal Mahatma kept looking at them with an amused look C suddenly heard himself saying We are waiting for your permission to marry

Mahatmaji looked from one to the other with joy Do like each other so much?

Sriram burst out I ve waited for five years thinking else

What about you Bharati you are saying nothing

Bharati bowed her head and flushed and fidgeted

Ah that is a sign of a dutiful bride said the Mahatma asked Does this silence mean yes? Sriram looked at her bated breath Mahatmaji observed her for a moment and She d be a very unbecoming bride who spoke her mind al Good good God bless you When is the happy tomorrow?

Yes if you bless us so

Very well Tomorrow morning the first thing I will do that I will be your priest if you don t mind I ve been a neglectful father I ll come and present the bride T the very first thing other engagements only after that already have here all the fruits and flowers ready and so all you can t say I have been very neglectful.

When the man with the watch appeared again the said I m ready for you He rose to his feet Sriram Bharati also got up The Mahatma said You have already hom- with thirty children May you be their father

He went into an ante-chamber and came out after a Bharati waited at the door for him He passed her with h on the floor Bharati followed him out with Sriram behind her

Mahatmaji suddenly stopped turned round and said D

I have a feeling that I may not attend your wedding tomorrow morning'

Why? Why, Bapu?' she asked

'I don't know His voice trailed away I seem to have been too rash in promising to officiate as your priest'

Bapu, without you——

'Tut, tut,' said Gandhi 'You don't have to say all that I want to be there very much, but I don't know If God wills it I shall come Otherwise, know my blessing is always on you both Anyway you are not to put off your marriage for any reason, remember,' he said, with a new command in his voice, and Bharati replied, 'Yes, Bapu'

The Mahatma patted her back, threw a smile at Sriram, and hurried down the passage He walked leaning on the shoulder of his granddaughter Sriram and Bharati followed, their heads full of their plans Mahatmaji took out his watch and said, I hate to be late

As they stepped on to the lawn, Bharati said to Sriram, Let us attend the prayer today There is a place for two of us' They stepped aside

As the Mahatmaji approached the dais, the entire assembly got up At this moment a man pushed himself ahead of the assembly, brushing against Bharati, and Sriram cried petulantly, 'Why do you push like that? Unheeding, the man went forward

'I'm sorry to be late today,' murmured the Mahatma The man stood before the Mahatma and brought his palms together in a reverential salute Mahatma Gandhi returned it The man tried to step forward again Mahatmaji's granddaughter said, Take your seat,' and tried to push him into line The man nearly knocked the girl down, and took a revolver out of his pocket As the Mahatma was about to step on the dais, the man took aim and fired Two more shots rang out The Mahatma fell on the dais He was dead in a few seconds

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