

SAJJAD ZAHIR

A Selection from
Landan ki Ek Raat

[*Translator's note:* I generally note the date and place when I acquire a new book, and my copy of *Landankī Ēk Rāt* tells me I got it “by post from Bombay, 18 October 1947.” I must have read it, and liked it, very soon after that. My appetite was doubtless whetted because it was the work of a fellow Communist.

The impulse to translate parts of it—I had no time then to translate it all—came primarily after 1950, when I began teaching at SOAS. At that time students were required to cover a formidable amount of Urdu literature in just three years, and the scope of the syllabus extended little beyond 1900. (Believe it or not, no Iqbāl, for instance.) I wanted to enable my students to get some idea of twentieth-century literature and knew that they had no time to read any of it in Urdu, or, if they did, only if it then had a parallel English translation to help them out. For those who could look at the Urdu, I wanted also for them to acquire some of the vocabulary relevant to their own lives in London.

Having said that, I should add that I still think the book is a good book viewed simply as literature, with realistic characterization, convincing dialogue, and vivid descriptive power.

When I first read it I had not yet met Sajjad Zahir. I first met him in 1949 or 1950 and was distinctly unimpressed. I felt already that his caliber as a communist leader left much to be desired, and that his claim in his preface, “I have been ... taking part in the revolutionary movement of the workers and peasants, drawing my breath in unison with millions of mankind and hearing the beating of their hearts” reflected an ideological identification with what he expected workers and peasants to be rather than a physical closeness to what they actually were. Of his magnificent exploits as a communist leader, the less said the better.

But his writings are another matter; and in matters relating to literature, well worth reading. In an article (doubtless of more interest to Marxists than to others) entitled “Ēk Ghalaṭī kā Izāla,” he attacked the ultra—so-called—Marxist stand of some idiot who had contended that classical Urdu literature was feudal and useless, and classified *Zahr-e ‘Ishq* as just a little better than the rest because, if you please, its heroine was the daughter of a merchant, a historically progressive class, and not of a landlord. His account of the development of the Progressive Writers’ Association, *Raushnā’ī*, is a well-written book, and is very valuable despite its undoubted bias, less marked than the deeply hostile counter-bias of Ahmad Ali’s accounts of the early years of the Progressive Writers’ Association. He should have stuck to literature and never set himself up as a political leader.]

Foreword

THIS book can hardly be called a novel or a story. If you wish to see one aspect of the life of Indian students in Europe you may read it.

The greater part of it was written in London and Paris, and on the ship returning to India. That was more than two years ago. Now when I read through the manuscript I hesitate to send it to the printer.

Then I had lived several years as a student in Europe; I had finished my studies and was on the point of leaving; I sat down in Paris, and, under the stress of private emotional conflict, wrote a book of a hundred to a hundred and fifty pages.

Now, for two and a half years I have been back in India, taking part in the revolutionary movement of the workers and peasants, drawing my breath in unison with millions of mankind and hearing the beating of their hearts.

Today I could not write a book of this kind; nor should I consider it necessary to write it.

Sajjād Zāhīr

Vazīr Manzil, Lucknow, 15 Sept. 1938

Chapter II

RAO and Azam entered the pub and went up to the bar. Some workers were sitting on the benches with a glass of beer each on the table in front

of them; a few were standing by the tables. The landlord had just brought beer for some of them and the froth was still rising to the top. Some were sitting with half-emptied glasses, quietly smoking their pipes; some had just finished their glasses and were asking for more. The room was full of tobacco smoke.

“Good evening, sir,” said the landlord, catching sight of Rao. Rao often came to this pub, and the landlord was beginning to recognize him.

“What rotten weather!” he went on, as soon as he had greeted them.

In England everyone considers himself duty-bound to express his opinion about the weather. Instead of asking after each other’s health, as we do, it has become a sort of custom with them for the first speaker to remark how good or how bad the weather is, to which the other will reply that he quite agrees; and if he has nothing else of importance to say and yet does not want to say nothing, he will start a regular conversation about the weather. Everybody recounts his experiences—last year the weather wasn’t too bad ... do you remember five years ago, how in the summer it rained and rained the whole time, and then in the winter we had nothing but sunshine? ... three years ago it was so cold that the water froze in the pipes and there was skating on the Thames, etc., etc. ... and so the conversation runs on endlessly. The English people probably introduced this custom in order to safeguard their individual freedom. By talking about the weather they can avoid having to discuss their private affairs with other people. The weather is a subject upon which everyone can express an opinion freely—and without having to disclose what his name is, where he lives, what he does for his living, how much he earns, what his religion is, and what caste he belongs to, as is the case in our country.

“Good evening,” Rao replied. “Yes, it isn’t too good. God knows when this fog will lift.” Then, turning to Azam, he asked, “What will you have?”

“Brandy,” said Azam. He felt he wanted something strong.

Chapter III

(I)

NAIM-UD-DIN was one of those students who go to England for a course of study lasting two or three years, and having got there stay for five or six—not from any desire, whether conscious or unconscious, to hurt their parents or burden them with the expense of an unreasonably long stay in

England, nor yet because they are too dull-witted to pass their examinations, but because they become infected with the disease of laziness. The very same people who at first give every proof of their mental and physical alertness, after twelve to eighteen months in England gradually begin to get lazy. They seem to get stuck there. Students come to London from India, and students return to India from London, but Naim-ud-Din showed no signs of moving.

“Well, Naim, when are you going to finish your thesis?” people would ask him.

“I’m writing the fifth chapter. I shall finish it in two or three weeks, and after that there’s only one more chapter to be written. I shall submit it in about a month or two month’s time.” That would be his invariable reply; and then, for fear someone might point out that he had given the same reply six months ago, he would at once attempt to change the subject by offering his questioner a cigarette. “Have a cigarette,” he would say, and if he was afraid that his friend did not intend to let the matter rest until he had got to the bottom of it, he would say, “Excuse me a moment,” get up from his easy chair, and, bending his head over his pipe and puffing out clouds of smoke like a steam engine, get out of the room as fast as his fat body would let him and escape by taking refuge in the toilet. His friends were thoroughly acquainted with all these moves and used to take a rise out of him whenever they could. In the middle of a conversation, or in the company of strangers, when Naim was laying down the law in his best style, someone would be sure to ask him when he was going to submit his thesis. He would stop short in his flow at once, and glaring angrily at his questioner would say, “My thesis isn’t of any interest to anyone here,” and then try to continue his conversation as unconcernedly as before. Whereupon all his friends would burst out laughing.

Everybody liked Naim. He was always ready to help anybody at any time.

(3)

“I just can’t understand you,” said Rao to Ahsan. “One moment you make out these Indian students’ goings on to be such vices that one would think they were the most contemptible creatures on earth; the next moment you expect them to come round to your way of thinking, set aside all personal interest and understand the problems which face their

country and the world at large, and throw themselves into great revolutionary movements. In my opinion that is sheer stupidity. Yes, I know we people are useless; we haven't the strength to take on anything new; we get into a groove and then pride ourselves on keeping in it; in other words, intellectually and spiritually we are dead. If you're looking among such people for the kind of fresh mentality which is strong enough to take on the burden of facing the truth then you'll look in vain."

They had left Naim-ud-Din's house and were making their way home on foot. Both of them lived in the same house.

"Your logic always leads you safely to the conclusion that to sit by uselessly with folded hands is just what is required," Ahsan replied. "Indian students in this country all come from the wealthy classes; and you can certainly say of these classes, collectively, that there is no longer any good left in them. Big princes, nawabs, and lords—what good are their kind to anyone? These parasites haven't even got the ability to spend their money properly even on themselves. They use no discretion even in their debauchery. Their idle existence has turned their brains to cowdung. There's only one thing they're good at, and that's selling their country; in *that* blessed work they are prepared even to make considerable sacrifices. As for the middle-classes, many of them depend on these lords for their existence—I mean lawyers, barristers, people like government servants, merchants, moneylenders, capitalists, and so on. These people have some ability, I grant you; but according to their idea its only use is to pile up money for them; they sell their intellectual abilities for money just as a woman of the streets sells her body for money. Yes, they have many accomplishments, but in my opinion their hallmark is their cowardice. They are like the ignorant savages of former times who saw terrible demons hidden in every tree and every stone; they see themselves enclosed on all sides in a ring of enemies. Fear of the Government, fear of the Rajahs and Maharajahs, fear of their religion, fear of the mullah, fear of the Brahmin. ... Look at your government servants: before their superiors they are as meek and submissive as a dog crawling to its master with its tail between its legs, but they treat their inferiors as though they had not a grain of humanity in them; they can't so much as say a word to them without brow-beating and threatening and snarling at them. Lawyers, moneylenders, merchants, capitalists—the cherished desire of every one of them is to find a way of ruining all his fellows and getting all their wealth into his own hands. And on the other hand all of them are afraid of the classes beneath them—afraid that the worker may someday refuse to work for them any longer ... afraid that the peasant may someday take

it into his head that the land should belong to him that tills it ... afraid that someday there may be a complete change. These people are always trying to comfort themselves by telling themselves that India is not Russia, but nowadays the advance of socialism gives them not a moment's peace. They see the specter of socialism in every progressive movement. It's these people's sons who come to England to study; a fat lot you can expect of them!"

"Isn't that just what I'm saying?" asked Rao. "Why get so annoyed?"

Chapter VI

(I)

IT would be about one o'clock in the morning when there came a knock at Naim-ud-Din's door and a woman entered the room. All eyes turned in her direction. It was the landlady, an old woman, thin and rather tall, with white hair, and dressed in black.

"Mr. Naim," she said, looking about her, "I should like to speak to you in private a moment."

Naim stopped the music, and the hubbub in the room died down. The resentment and anger which they all felt at having their entertainment interrupted by the intrusion of this old woman was plain to see on everyone's face. Naim, as host, felt the awkwardness of the situation. "Everyone carry on dancing and talking as usual," he called out. "I'll be back right away." And he went over to the door where his landlady was standing.

"Who's this old devil?" shouted Khan Sahib. "What's she doing barging in here?"

"Don't shout, Khan; it's the landlady," said Singh threateningly. "She'll put you outside, and that'll be the end of your swagger."

But Khan was so drunk that he was no longer in his proper senses.

"No bugger's going to put *me* outside," he said, swearing in English, and swaying as he spoke the words.

At that moment someone turned the lights full on, and the landlady, her nose in the air, surveyed the whole room with her glance: people were dotted all over the room, some lying on the floor snoring, some sitting near the fire with their arm round their girlfriend's waist, some standing hidden behind the curtains. The old woman gave one glare in Khan Sahib's direction and then went straight to the door, opened it, and left the room. Naim went out after her.

“That took your breath away!” said Singh to Khan tauntingly. “One glance from the old woman and the words froze in your mouth!”

Khan Sahib flew into a rage. He got up and lurched into the middle of the room, and, shaking his fist all round, and swaying as he spoke, said, “Singh Sahib has been pleased to say that I shut up because I was frightened. That’s a lie, an absolute lie. Nobody can shut *me* up. I challenge you—everybody here. I shall stand here and start talking. Someone with a watch sit here and time me. If any gentleman here can go on talking longer than I do, I’ll give him a pound; and if I beat him, he must give *me* a pound.”

Everyone in the room, boys and girls alike, started laughing. They all forgot the landlady’s visitation, and a round of applause greeted Khan’s proposal.

“Anyone going to accept Khan’s challenge?” called out Rao. “Singh, you keep on taunting him; you ought to take on his wager.”

“Alright,” said Singh, “—on condition that Khan Sahib takes first turn and that he doesn’t stop talking until he’s tired out, and for no other reason.”

“Quite right! Fire away, Khan Sahib, your challenge is accepted. It is now exactly twelve and a half minutes past one. Are you ready? One ... two ... three ... Start!” Rao, watch in hand, took his stand next to Khan.

Everyone came over to where he was standing and stood in a circle around him. Khan began his story: “One of them wasn’t too bad, but the other was a decrepit old hag. ...”

“Hey! you’ve already told us that one!” someone said. “Tell us something else.”

To all intents and purposes Khan might never have heard him. He went on with his story.

“I was in a corner, a tight corner. ... In the end I had to take them both out to a meal. I thought that after that I should at any rate get rid of the old one; but, believe me, she didn’t even hint at making a move. ... I didn’t know what to say to the other one either. I thought to myself. ...”

“What restaurant did you take them to?” put in Singh quietly.

Khan Sahib stopped short. He turned on Singh angrily and shouted at him, “I know this loses me my bet, but by God, if ever I speak to you again after today I’m no son of a Pathan. What’s your idea in asking that? Do you think I’ve not got enough money to treat two girls to a meal? Who are you to question me about what restaurant I took them to? What’s it got to do with you?”

“Khan Sahib, the bet’s nothing to get annoyed about,” said Rao. “After all, you’re a rich man. *Ten* pounds would be nothing to you, let alone *one*. If you want to make him a present of a pound, just stop talking. It’s entirely up to you.”

“I’ll be damned if I stop talking,” roared Khan Sahib. But by now he was in such a state that he could hardly stand; he hardly knew what he was doing. He began to screech out a song in a strange, cracked, dismal sort of voice ... and, still singing, he crashed to the floor. Everyone burst out laughing, but Khan Sahib, from where he lay, went on with his battle cries against the infidel.

Meanwhile someone put the gramophone on. Laughter ... yelling voices ... noisy conversation ... people dancing ... cigarette smoke ... the odd one or two sitting in a corner, looking on in silence at the confused spectacle ... this girl’s disheveled hair and frightened-looking eyes, the insistent tone in this boy’s entreaties, the anger in his words ... the spontaneous gaiety with which the party had begun was played out. The night was now far advanced; everyone seemed to be making a conscious effort to enjoy himself.

Naim-ud-Din returned and at once stopped the gramophone. Then he said, “My landlady says there must be no more noise from now on. If there is, she will turn me out of here tomorrow.”

“That means we’ve all got to go home,” said Rao.

“You live quite near me; come on, let’s go along together.” ... “Can I give you a lift in my car?” ... “Thanks, you certainly can!” ... voices could be heard saying on all sides.

Naim went across to Sheila; she too was putting on her coat.

“Are you going too?” he asked.

She turned and looked at him, but did not answer.

“Stay just a little longer,” he said.

“Alright,” she replied. She went and stood by herself over by the window.

Naim turned to see his guests out.

(2)

ARIF and the girl with whom he had been dancing left the house together. The fog had lifted, and the electric lights shone brightly in the cold winter air. The trees, their branches bare of leaves, stood in a silent line along the side of the road.

Arif felt cold. He was afraid he might catch a chill. It was not wise to come straight out into the cold like that from the confinement of a warm room. He thought of the Indian boy who only a few days ago had gone down with pneumonia, and thought how if *he* should get it his whole career would be finished.

“Mr. Arif! Where are we going?” the pretty, petite girl was looking smiling in his direction.

As soon as he heard her question Arif was convinced that she felt attracted to him. He looked at her with a triumphant smile, and he replied, “Let’s go somewhere for a cup of coffee; after that we can talk about where to go.”

“It’s very late,” she said; but it was clear from her tone that she was already half-persuaded.

“Lyons’ Corner House is only ten to fifteen minutes’ walk from here,” he said. “Now that it’s so late, a few minutes more won’t matter. Come on, let’s go.” And with that they both set off.

Arif now began to form all sorts of schemes in his mind. “After coffee,” he thought, “I’ll take her home with me. But how? How can I broach the subject? That’s the whole difficulty in matters like this. Once you get started the rest is easy. But how to start? That’s the important thing.”

“We’ve been together for an hour now, and you still haven’t told me what you do,” Arif said.

“Who? Me? What I do?” The girl laughed out loud. “I usually starve, though to look at me you wouldn’t think so.”

“What does she mean?” Arif thought. “Such fine clothes, and so smartly turned out. To look at her you’d think she was quite well off. And yet she says she starves!”

Arif tried to sympathize with her. “I’m extremely sorry to hear it,” he said. “But why don’t you get a job of some kind?”

“There’s none to be had,” she said, and laughed again. “I want to be an actress, a film actress. I’ve been at it for three or four years now, but I don’t get work for more than four or five days a month, and even then I only get small, completely ordinary parts. How on earth can I show my talent in them? I think film acting must be the most difficult profession in the world. Still, I don’t mind. In spite of everything I have quite a good time. And I always say what’s the good of worrying? I have plenty of friends, people just like me who don’t worry, although they’re out of a job. When we’ve spent our last penny we spend the night in our rooms

dancing, I'm very fond of dancing, especially the rumba. I think I dance the rumba pretty well. ... Do you like dancing?" she suddenly asked Arif.

"Yes, I like it very much ... but I don't get much time for it," Arif replied. He wasn't getting any pleasure out of talking to this girl. He couldn't make out what sort of girl she was, and couldn't make out how he should talk to her. She was poor, and yet she was quite happy. How could that be? When she was hungry she could dance. What did that mean?

"You seem to be one of those people who are always busy studying. Don't you get fed up? How do you spend your holidays? What do you do in your spare time?" the girl asked. You could see by her expression that she was genuinely surprised. It seemed she'd never met a young man like this before.

"I'm working for a very difficult examination—the I.C.S. examination. Probably you've heard of it. It's an examination for the best jobs in India. But still, I'll certainly go dancing with you once a week." Arif tried to please the girl by changing the subject.

But she didn't take any notice. "I.C.S.? What's that? ... Oh, I see. ... Civil service! A job in a government office. When I was little there used to be an old civil servant who lived quite near us—a dried-up, shriveled sort of man who always had indigestion. Why do you want to go into the Civil Service? It must be a boring, useless sort of job, I'm sure."

Arif tried to explain to her. The Indian Civil Service, he said, was quite different. But the little film actress couldn't grasp it. She expressed polite agreement every now and then, but in a tone which showed that her interest in Arif was waning. And Arif felt annoyed and ill at ease. He was tired from staying up so long, and the conversation had begun to irritate him. He was annoyed, partly by the girl's stupidity and partly by his own lack of success with her. Yet she was a pretty girl, and her closeness to him all this time had influenced his passions. The delicate perfume which came from her, her swelling bosom beneath her tightly-fitting coat, her lips—rather full, but still attractive, like juicy grapes, and her big, dark eyes, which in the darkness looked even darker—these were the only things that Arif was conscious of. Their conversation, the street down which they were walking, in fact everything except the girl's young body, seemed of no significance.

The had reached the back of the British Museum. On one side of the road the new buildings of London University were going up. Half-completed walls and staircases, scaffolding and cranes could be seen rising above the walls of the wooden enclosure. And on the other side of the

broad road were the tall columns of the Museum, and on a raised platform beneath them, in the center, two large stone lions lying facing each other. The place was completely deserted. Arif thought, "In a few minutes we shall reach the Corner House and shan't be alone anymore." He plucked up his courage, and took the girl's hand in his and gave it a squeeze. She squeezed his hand in return, and Arif reflected with pleasure that if she didn't like him she would not have let him take her hand. And not only that; she had squeezed his hand too. Arif felt that victory was assured.

But then he thought, "Perhaps she's doing it because she wants my money." From her conversation she hadn't seemed to like him much, so why else would she squeeze his hand. Then he took pity on her poverty. "Oh, well, what does it matter if she does get some financial help from me?" he said to himself. You have to spend money on women anyway, whether it's your wife, or a prostitute, or a girl like this. Arif's courage rose a little. He turned and looked at the girl and said lovingly, "How beautiful you are!"

"*Am I?*" she said, and laughed, as though to show that his flattery had absolutely no effect upon her. And then before he could say anything else she pointed at the Museum's lions and said, "Look at the lions. Has it ever struck you how old they look, as though they'd lost all their teeth? And they've only been here eight to ten years. I have a friend—you must meet him—who says that they look like British imperialism in decline, in its old age. The savage pride has gone from their faces, and they have more of the look of a venomous snake. I agree with him. *I* don't like them either. What do *you* think about them?"

"I've never looked at them closely," Arif replied in some alarm. Her words had made him worried. Politics, politics. Wherever you go that's all people talk about. Her friend must be some communist. *He* must have filled her head with all this stuff. What had *she* got to do with British imperialism? Arif felt full of anger against these people. "Everywhere they go they cause trouble," he thought. "Look at Ahsan Sahib, who won't leave any Indian student here in peace. If anyone contemplates going into government service, he regards him as a traitor. Gandhiji, according to him, is the slave of the capitalists. These people even think Jawaharlal a weakling because at critical moments he follows Gandhiji's lead. And as for England, they haven't got a good word for anyone. Baldwin, Lloyd George, Macdonald—they're all the bought slaves of the capitalists. And how arrogant these people are! Once they've read the "Communist Manifesto" they think they know more than anyone else. They sneer at every-

thing, condemn everyone, pick holes in everything. And that's all they do. What's wrong with the lions?" But Arif hadn't the courage to say out loud what he was thinking. He didn't want to say anything that the girl might not like.

The girl gave a gentle sigh, and the conversation ceased again. "I must do something to make her feel pleased," Arif thought. The way she had sighed seemed to indicate that she was tired of his company.

"How nice your hair looks," said Arif, smiling at her.

"Do you really think so?" the girl answered dryly. Silence again. And Arif again felt alarmed. He felt like grabbing hold of her on the spot and hugging her to him, and kissing her on the lips. What nice lips she had! And wasn't her body just *made* to be hugged? "Probably that's what she wants herself," he thought, and he made up his mind that when they got to the restaurant he would ask her over their coffee to come home with him. He began to feel sure that she would agree. "After all she's an actress," he thought. "Presumably that's the sort of life she leads."

Meanwhile they had reached Tottenham Court Road. Late at night though it was, there was still plenty of activity. The cinema, the big shops with their bright lights, policemen in their long dark coats, a dance hall, one or two drunkards walking unsteadily by, some people standing waiting for the bus at the bus stop, and one or two news vendors standing at the street corner. The pedestrians were walking quickly, for it was very cold.

Arif and the girl had practically reached the Coffee House. They were about to go in when she suddenly caught sight of a rather short man selling papers, standing on the other side of the road.

"I want to buy a *Daily Worker* for my friend. Excuse me a minute." And so saying she ran across the road.

Arif remained standing where he was. He was convinced now that this girl had been spoiled by constant association with communists. It was their paper she had gone to buy. The seller had put up his placards on the wall. "Hunger Marchers' Great Demonstration," they read; and the sign of the hammer and sickle in red.

Arif was annoyed with the girl for suddenly leaving him like this; but in two minutes she was back. She sensed that Arif was annoyed.

"Excuse me," she said. "But I have a very great friend who likes this paper very much. I'm not much interested in politics myself."

"It's alright," Arif said; and he resolved in his heart that come what may he'd rescue her from the clutches of these evil people. He had already begun to look upon her as his personal property.

Meanwhile a bus drew up just where they were standing. As soon as she saw it the girl said with a start, "That's my bus. It will take me right to my door. You won't mind if I go now? It's the last bus. You would have had to take me home by taxi. It'll save your fare. ..." All this was spoken in one breath, and before Arif could reply she jumped on the bus. "Goodbye," she called out, smiling as she climbed the stairs.

"Goodbye," mumbled Arif, and the bus moved off, leaving him standing, his whole body afire with regret, helplessness, and anger. A sense of his misery and loneliness came over him. The girl's laughing face swam before his eyes. He could no longer think of other women, and yet he could not see any prospect of seeing this girl again. He didn't even know where she lived, and besides it was as plain as daylight now that she didn't care for him in the slightest. For a little while he remained standing motionless where he was. Then he called a taxi and went off home.

Chapter VII

SHEILA and Naim were left alone in the room. Everywhere were dirty glasses, empty bottles, ashtrays full of cigarette ash and cigarette ends, and plates, some empty, and some with crusts of bread and pieces of biscuit on them. The gramophone was no longer playing, but it was still open on the table, and records were lying around it and on the chairs nearby. The fire in the grate had practically gone out. The atmosphere in the room was heavy with cigarette smoke.

"Won't you sit down?" Naim said. Sheila was standing by the window, where Naim now joined her.

"I feel suffocated," she said. "Do you mind if we have the curtains drawn back and the window open? We need some fresh air in the room."

Naim opened the windows and glanced at the street below. It was completely deserted. He leaned out of the window, and Sheila too came and stood by him. The sky had cleared, and above the roofs of the houses opposite they could see a yellow half-moon whose light seemed to vanish before it could reach the earth.

"How dull the moon always seems in London!" Sheila said. "You can see it, but you never have real moonlight."

Naim did not reply. In the street below a taxi passed, and then drew up at one of the houses opposite. A man and a woman got out. They embraced and kissed. Then the woman ran into the house and the man got into the taxi, which drove off. Silence again descended on the street.

Sheila and Naim left the window and went over to the fireplace. Naim sat down. Sheila remained standing near him.

"I ought to go home now," she said.

"Sit down; stay just a little longer," Naim half commanded, half implored her.

Sheila did not speak. She looked tired. She sat down, and after a moment said: "What a queer party it was tonight!"

"I hope you weren't bored. It was an odd collection of people."

"No, I wasn't bored at all. And I was very glad I met you. But now I feel tired. After all, it's very late."

"You must be wondering why I was so insistent that you should stay behind. Everyone else has gone, and you must be tired too. But somehow I don't feel tired at all. I feel as though a storm were raging inside me—like the storms we get in India during the rains, when the black clouds gather and make the darkness of the night more intense, and lightning flashes again and again in the darkness and the sky trembles from end to end. ..."

Naim stopped speaking and looked up at Sheila.

"Naim," she said, "please don't talk like that." Her face was the picture of grief.

"Why not?"

"Because I like you very much, but I am in love with someone else." In a soft, gentle voice she continued: "He was an Indian student too, and we were in love with each other."

Her words threw Naim's heart into turmoil. Assailed by love, and sympathy and jealousy all at once, he felt as though stupefied. He wanted somehow to escape from himself, to find some shelter from the storm of his desires and disappointments and sorrows.

"Who was he? When did you meet? Where is he now?" The questions came involuntarily, one after the other.

Sheila glanced at him and then lay back in her chair. "O God, I think I shall go mad! It's eighteen months now. At first, I used to get letters from him, but now they've stopped coming too. And I have nobody in the world I can talk to about it. You want to know who he was? Listen then. I'll tell you.

"It happened several years ago, in the mountains of Switzerland. There was a little village there, by the side of a blue lake. There can't have been more than twenty-five to thirty houses all told. I shall never forget it. It was summer—July—and the weather was lovely. The sunshine was bright, but cool, like moonlight, and little white fragments of cloud moved slowly across the deep blue sky, like pieces of cotton wool. Far

away were the mountains, their snowy peaks shining white as milk; here and there they were hidden by small white clouds, like little white flowers clinging to their skirts. And beneath these lofty peaks lay the valleys, deep in shadow.

“I was sitting by myself under the sun-blind of a restaurant, having tea. Nearby an Indian boy was sitting. I glanced at him, and then turned to look at the patterns of light and shade on the mountains. Two minutes later he got up and went. He glanced at me as he left, but I looked the other way. This was our first meeting. How do these things come about? Things which are destined to change the whole course and direction of our lives.

“After this two days passed without my seeing him anywhere. But I would sometimes recall his thick black hair, his large eyes, his thin lips and little nose, and his skin, burned to the color of copper by the sun. Just an occasional, fleeting recollection; nothing more than that. On the third day I was walking by the side of the lake when I suddenly saw him coming towards me. When he saw me the hint of a smile came to his lips and he nodded his head. Was it intended as a greeting? I felt embarrassed and did not respond, and he passed me, walking quickly. Then I began to feel that I had been intolerably rude. This is why Indians dislike us so, I thought. He had greeted me, and instead of replying I had turned the other way. I began to think how I could make amends for my rudeness. It was a little thing, and if I apologized to him next time we met that wouldn't seem right either. What stupid things you do when you feel embarrassed! And now this trivial incident would make him dislike me.

That same evening I saw him again. I had had my dinner, and come out of the hotel, and was standing by myself looking towards the snow-capped mountains. The sun had set, and the whole sky was steeped in light of a myriad different colors, and the white snow was tinged with red. I sensed that someone else had come out and was standing by me. I turned and glanced at him. It was the same boy. I wondered whether he was still annoyed with me.

“After a while I said: ‘What a beautiful sight!’

“‘Yes,’ he said, ‘What a beautiful sight!’

“I didn't know what to make of his reply. Was he making fun of me? Why had he repeated my sentence word for word? Was he being sarcastic? Perhaps not. Perhaps the words expressed what he really felt. Perhaps he wasn't annoyed with me. Perhaps he'd forgotten yesterday's incident.

“‘You're staying in this hotel, aren't you?’ he said, ‘I've seen you about for several days now.’

“I felt pleased, and at the same time a little amused at his Indian accent. ‘Yes,’ I said, ‘I’ve been here three days. I’ve noticed you several times too.’

“After that we got into conversation, and we were soon talking as though we had known each other for years. He told me that he was reading medicine in London and was now in his final year. Next year he would be going back home. He had come here to this little Swiss village for a month’s holiday. He was a Bengali, and his name was Pal—Hiren Pal. I told him my name too, and that I too had come to Switzerland on holiday.

“That same night I was sitting in the village coffee house, which served as coffee house, restaurant and dance hall all in one. It was a single long, low room, with a wooden roof and floor from which a pleasant fragrance came. All round it tables were set out, each with three or four chairs around it, and at one end, on a stage slightly raised above the level of the floor, stood a piano, and a drum, and a violinist. The music was playing, and groups of people were sitting talking together in all the languages of Europe. The place was quite crowded, and almost all the seats were taken. There was a vacant table in one corner, and I went and sat down there, and ordered coffee.

“Soon after, I saw Hiren come in. He looked round the room trying to find somewhere to sit, and soon caught sight of me. I was looking at him, and our eyes met. He at once came over to my table, and without asking my permission, drew up a chair and sat down beside me. I still don’t know whether I resented the liberty or not; but when he looked at me and I saw him so near to me, all such fine points of etiquette seemed unimportant. We sat there talking for hours, and the time passed by quickly—all too quickly. Sitting not far from our table was a red-faced Englishman with a small, well-trimmed moustache. Judging by his appearance, he was furious at seeing me sitting there with an Indian boy. But I didn’t care, and Hiren too paid no attention to him.

“I don’t remember at all clearly all the things we talked about that night, but we must have discussed almost every subject under the sun. What I do remember is that I said some things of which later on I myself felt ashamed. But I was speaking absolutely freely and spontaneously without thinking what I ought and ought not to say. Hiren kept asking me questions, making his own rejoinders to my answers, and correcting me where I was wrong. Sometimes even when I agreed with him I would interrupt him with objections or try to refute his arguments. Then the expression of his face would change at once. He would frown, his eyes

would flash, his voice would take on a sharp tone, and he would speak with great warmth, completely engrossed in what he was saying. At such times it was only with the greatest difficulty that I could concentrate on what he was saying. I would watch him, fascinated, and he would pause now and then to look at me and smile.

“In bed that night I lay awake savoring that long conversation. Hiren’s voice and Hiren’s laughter were in my ears, and his smile and his flashing black eyes were before my eyes. My heart was full of a strange joy.

“After that we used to go for long walks together, bathe in the lake together, and take our meals together. Neither of us knew anyone else in the village, and from being constantly in each other’s company we got to know each other as well in a few days as most people do in as many months. I began to like everything about him, and to think that I had never met a nicer man. In my eyes there could be no other human being so interesting, so attractive, so likeable. I remember writing all this in a letter to my friend Doris at the time, and she had written back: ‘Sheila, you are in love! Be careful! It is summer, when young people’s blood goes to their head and drives them mad. I don’t want to stop you going “mad.” You have a perfect right to. But remember that the “madness” may last, and may make or mar your whole life.’

“After I got that letter I would often ask myself: ‘Is it true that I have fallen in love with this boy? I like him; he makes me want to talk to him; I like to be with him. But is that love? ...’ What wonderful days they were! I hadn’t a care in the world, for I lived in a little world of my own and never even thought of stepping outside its enchanted circle.

“And then that night that I sat in his room talking to him. It was quite hot, and Hiren went and opened the window. Outside everything was still. Here and there you could see a street light shining through the leaves, and trace the faint outlines of the trees on the mountains, and the mountains themselves looking like great mounds of darkness. But the sky was cloudless and on it thousands and thousands of stars were shining brightly.”

Sheila stopped speaking, and Naim too did not speak. “What is there for me to say?” he was thinking. “Why is man fated to undergo torture and heartbreak like this? What can I do? How helpless we are! There is no trial so hard to bear as that spiritual agony which leaves us with nowhere to turn, and shuts all the gates on us so that no plan, no effort can open a road to us—that agony which twists and weaves our emotions into such a knot that to untie it is not just difficult; it is impossible.

Sheila was lying back in her chair as though she were asleep. Naim involuntarily left his chair and went across to hers. He bent over and looked at her. She lay there quite still. Quickly he came away and stood by the fireplace with his back towards her.

“No, Naim,” she said. “You and I can’t untie this knot. I think that joy has its stages as well as sorrow, stages when all possibility of our own personal happiness is lost to us and our hearts are laid desolate, and in that desolation nothing remains but the ghosts of memories. When that happens we have to turn our back on the ruins and come away. Life goes on, and comes before us in ever-changing forms, and its demand of us now is that we should ascend to a higher plane and there seek for a more general happiness, a more all-embracing joy, in which not only we, but all mankind will share.”

But Sheila was feeling that tonight those ruins were not desolate, but peopled once again. She knew that this was a story which must come to an end. She understood that the real world was a different one. But at this moment it was Naim, this room, her present life, which seemed superficial and unreal. She was thinking that only that night was real. ...

“We both went and stood at the window. Hiren put out the light. Perhaps it was the beauty of the scene from the windows, or the darkness in the room, or the sense of Hiren’s presence close beside me, or all of these things, but I felt a sense of intoxication come over me. Hiren gently put his arm round my waist and drew me to him and embraced me. I felt afraid, but I could not utter a word. I struggled feebly against him, but he held me in his embrace and kissed me again and again with savage passion, and the only words he spoke were: ‘My darling! My darling Sheila!’ But how full of meaning those words were! At last, with one final effort, I wrenched myself free. He reached out for me again, but I got to the door and ran all the way to my own room. Once there, I began to cry, and try as I would, I could not stop. A strange sensation possessed my heart, my brain, my whole body. I dropped off to sleep, and slept as perhaps I had never slept before.

“After that we were inseparable—two bodies with a single soul, as it were. Whether it was the beauty of the mountain country, or the pleasant summer weather, or some hidden springs of eternal happiness welling up from within us both, I lived in those days in a strangely enchanted atmosphere which enveloped me on all sides.”

She paused, and then went on: “Have you ever walked in the mountains, climbing mile after mile through the pine trees and the waterfalls and the deep valleys?” She paused a moment, and Naim turned and

looked at her. But he did not answer, for Sheila seemed to be talking to herself rather than to him. "From the side of the lake a little road, perhaps not six feet wide, led up the mountainside. Great pine trees growing on either side cast their shade over it, and the sunlight, sifted through their foliage, fell dappled on the road and on the hillside. The road climbed steadily, so much so that in this weather, by the time you had been climbing half an hour, you were all in a sweat. But it took you to a height from which, as you looked down on them, the people walking by the shore of the lake seemed tiny and the houses were like dolls' houses. A light breeze was blowing, and the rustling of the fine, pointed needles of the pines made a soft, low sound which emphasized one's sense of the majesty of the mountains and one's loneliness and remoteness from the trials and struggles of the world.

"The road clung to the skirt of the mountainside like a thin white thread. To one side the ground fell steeply away, and on the other rose the mountain, like a great wall of stone built up by giants in an attempt to reach the sky. Here and there in the wall were cracks and crevices and caves, with great boulders lodged in them or resting on the few level places. Some of these boulders were covered in reddish moss, but others were absolutely smooth and bare, just like a bald man's shining pate. Round about them, sometimes growing up in crevices between them, round the roots of the great trees, were little flowers, white and blue and pink, like little children who had strayed into a gathering of old men, and, feeling suddenly abashed, had lowered their eyes and were blushing.

"I can remember it well. It was about one o'clock, and Hiren and I were climbing the path together. We were leaning forward a little, taking our longest stride, as we slowly made our way forward up the incline. Our breathing was deep and labored, and you could tell that we had been climbing for some time. We had sticks in our hands and were wearing stout boots. Neither of us spoke, and apart from the sound of our sticks and of our heavy boots on the road, there was complete silence. After a while we came to a part of the road which was quite open. There were no trees along the outside edge, and we could see the whole valley below stretched out before our eyes. The sun beat down with full force here, and we both stopped and stood looking down over the edge. It was a wonderful scene that met our eyes. Hundreds of feet below lay the valley, enclosed on all sides by the green mountains, and right in the center lay the lake from whose shore we had climbed. Only a part of it now lay in the sun, and its deep blue water was gleaming like mercury. The part that lay in the shade was now a dark blue-black. At the sunny end we could

see crowds of bathers, looking from this height like little ants creeping about. Under the big multicolored umbrellas planted in the ground people were lying sunbathing. We could see a few of the hotels, looking like dovecotes. The mountains which rose at the other side of the valley were a strange sight. Their lower slopes were clad in trees, but as the height increased the trees thinned out and gave place to scattered bushes growing here and there, while towards the summit there was nothing but the bare crags of brown rock, in a serrated line like a huge comb, with sharp peaks rising up like needles above them. Behind them, as far as the eye could reach, were more mountains, line upon line, their heads seeming to touch the sky, and far away on the horizon, in a sort of fine blue cloud, you could just see the snowcapped peaks, on which the play of sunlight and shadow seemed to mingle with the white of the snow and the blue of the sky in a perfect picture; a picture in which color and light and darkness combined to produce an indescribable impression of majesty.

“We stood silent for some moments, both engrossed in the scene before us, and a strange quietness came over us as we stood as though absorbed into the trees and rocks and hills around us and the sky and clouds above us, and felt our own complete aloneness.

“‘We must hurry,’ said Hiren, turning to me, ‘or we shall be late.’

“‘Yes, we must hurry,’ I repeated quietly, and we again set off.

“More than anything else about him I liked his eyes, his Indian eyes, their shining blackness, and at the same time their gentleness. ... I sometimes wondered whether perhaps they did not show weakness; but when he talked to me about India and spoke of all he was going to do there when he got back, their gentleness would vanish and those same eyes would express sorrow or else flash with fire.

“We were walking at a brisk pace and climbing steadily, and our boots rang on the stony path. Suddenly I felt my heart sink. What would be the outcome of our love? The question began to revolve in my mind, and I felt afraid, just as in the dark a child feels afraid of ghosts. That does happen sometimes, doesn’t it—as though the light of your happiness suddenly goes out.

“‘Hiren, do you really love me?’

“He stopped suddenly and began to laugh, and without answering me took hold of my hand, pulled me towards him and hugged me. Then he said: ‘Certainly not! How could I? What have you and I got in common? I am black; you are white. I am Indian; you are English. I am an idolater; you are a Christian. And, most important of all, my heart is

filled with hatred not only of you but of the whole English nation—burning, seething hatred! And so, my dear, you can judge for yourself. How can I love you?’

“We both laughed, and for a while no more was said. We went on walking. After a little while Hiren said: ‘But I tell you truly that I never dreamed when I came to Europe that I should fall so hopelessly in love there. Yet now wherever I turn it is as though I see you before my eyes.’

“I was overjoyed, but I said: ‘It’s not true, and I don’t believe you. You have chosen your goal in life and that is more dear to you than I am.’

“‘Shall we never agree on this point?’ said Hiren despondently. ‘How many times do you want me to tell you that the scope of man’s life can’t be confined to loving? Aren’t there other problems and other things besides—both interesting and uninteresting things—in which we are involved? We can’t withdraw from them into a vacuum and devote ourselves to love. Just as you cannot live without air, so also, as I believe, your love and mine depends, at least for me, on the striving to attain those objects which you say are dearer to me than you are. My dear, between those objects and you there can be no contradiction of any kind. Your love gives me greater courage to attain them. Even now I think that life is hard, but with you by my side all the difficulties of the way will seem easy. I can promise you only one thing; that as far as it lies in my power, in my journey along that road I shall never forsake you. ... But what about you? Are you sure that you are ready to go with me?’

“I can remember every word he said; his voice still echoes in my ears. I burst out: ‘With you I am prepared to go anywhere. Whatever the road, however difficult it may be, if you are with me I shall keep on without fear—just like we are doing now!’ But the joy I felt was mingled with a strange sort of sorrow which I could not understand.

“We walked on in silence. A small cloud drifted in front of the sun, and the sunshine vanished. On both sides of us were thick forests of tall pine trees. On the road their brown, pointed, dry needles, lying layer upon layer, were slippery underfoot. A pleasant smell rose from them as we walked over them. Now that the sun was behind the clouds it seemed quite dark.

“As we neared a bend in the road we met an old Swiss guide coming the other way. He was wearing a little green hat, and his complexion was that swarthy red which all people have who spend their lives in the open air, in storm and sunshine alike. His cheeks and forehead were seamed with deep lines, but in spite of that the old man looked strong. On his back he carried a bundle and a climbing rope, and he held a staff in his

hand—about four feet long, with stout iron nails sticking out at either end—straight at the bottom and hooked at the top.

“As he drew near he smiled at us and greeted us ‘Gut Tag’ in his Swiss-German accent.

“‘Good day,’ we both replied together. He stopped for a moment and asked whether we were making for Zeiler. ‘If so, you had better hurry, or you will be caught in the storm,’ he said. ‘I don’t like the color of the sky.’ We too stopped, and Hiren asked him in broken German how long it would take us to get there. ‘About two hours if you walk at a good pace. There is nowhere you can shelter anywhere on the way, so if the rain starts you will be caught in it.’

“‘We will try to quicken our pace. Thank you very much for warning us,’ I said.

“We said goodbye to him and resumed the climb at a quicker pace. Hiren gave a deep sigh and said: ‘I wish I could have been a guide in Switzerland.’

“‘Why?’ I asked.

“‘To be so close to the blind forces of nature! To understand the storm, the rain, the snow, the swift winds, the cold, and to fight against them and master them! What higher object in life could a man have?’

“‘But spending your whole life in the mountains isn’t the only way to master the forces of nature.’

“‘Quite true. A scientist sitting in his laboratory is doing the same thing. But I have no taste for that kind of life. I want to feel the buffeting of the stormy winds and hear their shrieking as they race through the mountain valleys. The great tall trees swaying like drunken men, and the leaves helplessly clashing together—these are the things I like! ... But I like *you* better than all of them!’

“I laughed and said: ‘Well then, why not *be* a guide? It wouldn’t be difficult.’

“‘Perhaps that’s why—that it wouldn’t be difficult. The time for me to be a guide hasn’t yet come. So far man is still the prey of blind forces in his everyday activity, and we still have to fight the battle against these human forces. Only when that battle is won shall we be able to devote all our time, according to our individual capacities and inclinations, to grappling with the blind forces of nature.’

“I went on teasing him. ‘You talk as though the whole weight of mankind’s troubles and difficulties lay upon your shoulders alone.’

“His tone was sharp as he replied: ‘No, I don’t think that. But a *part* of it certainly does, and I want to do my best to lighten it. And if we were

all conscious of this task then more than half the battle would be won. But let's forget it for now. Just now I only want to think of you.'

"As we talked we went on climbing. The farther we went, the narrower the path became, and there were places where there was scarcely room for two people to walk side by side. The ascent was steep. Pieces of rock lay here and there on the path. Above us in some places great rocks jutted out over it, so that it was half roofed over. In spite of our exertions, the height and the steepness of the path were slowing us down. And my heart was heavy, burdened with a heaviness which seemed to be mingled with my love as inseparably as the air mingles with the clouds. How far away that day seems now!

"I had everything I desired, and yet I felt that my happiness was not what it had been before. I kept on asking myself whether my love for him had begun to grow less, and each time I answered that it had not. But what was the matter then? I kept on wondering what would be the outcome of this boundless love I felt for him. Hiren wanted to take me back to India with him. Suppose that for some reason he couldn't? What then? 'Hiren isn't a rich man,' I thought. 'He'll have to get a job and save some money. Otherwise, how can I join him in India? Because I'm not rich either.' I kept saying to myself: 'If only I had plenty of money!' Then I would think: 'I haven't any confidence in this love which means so much to me. I haven't any confidence in Hiren. O God, what a mistrustful person I am! How can I doubt a man who is ready to sacrifice everything—his life, even, if need be—for my sake? ...' I said to myself: 'All I know is that I love this boy, and love him dearly.' I felt as though I just couldn't go on thinking anymore. ...

"Naim, have you ever felt the silent majesty of the mountains? It fills you with a strange sense of awe. How quiet it was! Absolute quiet, except for the sound of our footsteps as our boots struck the stones on the path. The wind had dropped now, and the clouds were still gathering. I turned to Hiren and said: 'Hiren.'

"What is it, Sheila?"

"Talk to me. I want to hear your voice."

"He looked at me lovingly and took my hand in his. 'Tell me what to talk about, and I'll talk about it,' he said.

"Talk about anything you like. Talk to me about India. Tell me about your country.' Hiren had often talked to me about India's social and political problems. Now he said: 'What shall I tell you about it? In India you will find everything good and everything bad in the world, each in its most extreme form. No, I'm wrong. What I *should* say is that in

India every good thing in the world can be brought to its greatest height, and that every bad thing has already reached it. You must have heard what some people say about India's love of idealism—how idealism is everywhere prevalent there. That is absolutely untrue. Idealism can mean two different things. First, it can mean the opposite of materialism, that is, an indifference to material things, the religious life, devotion to God, giving precedence over the things of this world to the things of the world to come.'

"And what's the other meaning?' I asked.

"Idealism can also mean the fight here in this world against greed and lust and the power to oppress and tyrannize over others, the fight against ignorance and stupidity and deceit, the fight to awaken the sleeping melodies which a man cannot hear unless he has a generous heart and an alert mind and a healthy body. In our country you won't find a trace of idealism of either kind.'

"To provoke him I said: 'You're always pretending to be a great materialist. Why this sudden enthusiasm for idealism?'

"I am a materialist just because I want to help to make possible man's intellectual and spiritual advance. People who talk about idealism today haven't the remotest idea of what idealism really is. It is a mind steeped in culture. You'll read in the papers that in India Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs fight each other over religious questions. Does that mean that they are inspired by idealism or religion? Not at all! It means that a few religious leaders, who have never in their lives given even a moment's thought to God, are out to get positions in the government, and in their own purely selfish interests use the most trivial incidents to stir up poor and innocent people to fight one another in religion's name. What are religion and idealism to them? And as for idealism in the other sense, when a nation is enslaved, when eighty percent of its people cannot get enough to eat, when sickness and disease and epidemic are so rife that a really healthy man is hard to find, where education is confined to a handful of people, where even the children look like faded flowers, where in most faces you can read hunger, starvation, poverty, distress, idleness, stupidity, ignorance—and in the rest a repulsive sort of prosperity—in such a country to look for idealism would be the height of stupidity.'

"You're exaggerating,' I said, 'there must be others besides these—others who are conscious of these things and want to change them.'

"Hiren laughed. 'I expect it seems exaggerated to you because you can't place me in either of these categories. There is a third class of people

in our country, a class of talkers. These people understand things. The world holds no problem which they cannot fathom. They have the ability to distinguish between good and bad. They understand the realities behind things and know the reason for everything. But beyond that point they cannot go. They have the capacity to understand life, but not the capacity to change it. They have not joined in the life-giving revolutionary struggle of India's toiling millions, and their state is more pitiable than anyone else's. Cowardly, comfort-loving, lazy, a prey to confused ideas, these people come to be indistinguishable from the impotent and the good-for-nothings.'

"You're in a pessimistic mood today,' I said. 'That's why you're talking like this.'

"And so as we talked we at last came to Zeiler. There was only one hotel there—a five- or six-roomed building up on a high mountain. All along the front of the building, overlooking the road by which we had come, was a veranda twenty to thirty feet long, and ten to twelve feet deep, with glass windows on three sides. It was about six o'clock. Black clouds were still gathering and it was getting dark. But in spite of this the place was so beautiful that we forgot the fatigue of the three hours' and more hard climbing which had brought us here. A valley shaped like a huge cistern, its bottom covered in lush greenery, with a small, swift-flowing stream running through it. Mountains formed its four sides, and though from this altitude they did not seem very high, their peaks were hidden in snow, and from the snow line itself fell noisy, rushing waterfalls, making the whole valley re-echo with their sound. The center one was the biggest, falling from a height of about a hundred feet to where its waters dashed against the rocks and flowed in a turbulent stream to disappear among the valleys.

"We were alone in the hotel at the time, and we went and sat down at a table from where we could get a good view of the whole scene outside. Our long walk had made us hungry, and the hotel maid, a plump young Swiss country girl, brought us tea and bread and butter and jam. We were still having our tea when it began to rain and to get darker.

"We'd better stay here overnight,' Hiren said. 'We could never get back in all this rain.'"

Sheila broke off. "But why am I telling you all this? What's the matter with me? My tongue just won't be still. ... Naim, give me a cigarette."

Naim reached across and handed her a cigarette, which she lit and began to smoke. A film of blue smoke obscured her face. She again relapsed into her own thoughts.

“Sheila,” Naim said, “is there any way out for us? What a cruel irony! Here we are, both in the same plight, both of us tossed helplessly in the storm of our emotions, buffeted about like ships whose sails have been swept away; and we cannot help each other. Poor Sheila!”

But Sheila lay back in her chair as though she were asleep. She was thinking of that night of the storm at Zeiler, that night of love and of sorrow, when she had awakened from her sleep and in a small, weak voice called: “Hiren! Hiren, darling!”

“Yes? What’s the matter?”

“Hiren, hold me tight. I feel frightened.”

Hiren had hugged her with all his might, and kissed her again and again on the eyes and lips. “My dear, my dearest Sheila!” Then he had raised his head to look at her face. Her hair lay disheveled on her face and over the pillow. Hiren took it up and began gently running his fingers through its soft tresses. In the darkness he could only see the outline of her face, and her eyes, and the black lines of her eyebrows, and where her nose and lips stood out from the rest of her face.

“What are you frightened of, Sheila?”

“I don’t know. It’s so quiet here. The incessant noise of the waterfalls woke me up, and then I couldn’t go off to sleep again. ... Hiren, what will happen to us? What will happen to our love?”

“What will happen?” He paused a moment. “Listen, Sheila darling. Yesterday during the day, when I was talking to you about my country, it was only the bitter things I told you about. But there is another side as well. There are lots of good things there too. The evenings in the rains, when the sun sets and the whole sky seems to be on fire. And the moonlit nights. And the green fields of our country, and the rivers flowing like shimmering, gleaming lines of molten silver through the fertile plains, and the millions of hardworking people, striving to break the chains of poverty and slavery. All these things are precious beyond measure. I too want to fit somehow into this picture, in whose beauty so much pathos and tenderness are mingled, and to me the constant desire and the constant striving to do so is life itself. *That* is what living means. For us no other kind of life is possible. Any other road will lead us to die a spiritual death in the dry deserts from which there is no way back. We shall both walk together along this road, which is not an easy one, but which, even so, abounds in those joys which come only as the reward of a life spent in struggle. My darling, our love should itself be an example of those joys, and if it is not that, it will be like a lamp which goes out because its oil has run dry, and is overwhelmed by the darkness. But we won’t let it go

out, Sheila. By the sweat of our common striving we shall keep it burning bright.”

And she had asked: “And if the cruel hand of fate should force us apart? If the gods of race and nation and country and creed should intervene without pity and prevent us coming to each other’s support? If poverty and distance become fetters to our feet? What then? What shall we do then?”

“Sheila, don’t frighten me,” he had answered. “I haven’t any answer to your question except hope and striving. Close by every possibility hovers the terrible specter of impossibility, and if we once let it into our minds our present and our future life will both be joyless and insupportable.”

“Hiren, my dear love. Hiren, my darling,” she had said in a broken voice, and the tears trickled from the corners of her eyes and down her cheeks. “Forgive me. I don’t know anything. I don’t understand anything. Except that I love you very, very much.”

“And I love you too, Sheila, very, very much,” he had softly replied, and they had clasped each other tightly until they could hear nothing of the noise and tumult of the world’s struggle and conflict, but only the beating of each other’s hearts.

“Naim, it is eighteen months now since he went back to India. For the last six months I haven’t heard from him, and I don’t get any answers to my letters. He lives in Bengal, and in Bengal young people who want freedom don’t stay free very long. I sometimes wonder if he’s been arrested. But then I think: No! My Hiren could never commit a crime!”

She spoke the last words with great emphasis. Naim said: “In India you don’t have to commit a crime in order to go to jail. For that it’s quite enough that you want your country to be free. But, Sheila, don’t give up hope. When he loves you so much he is sure to write to you. Something must have happened to prevent him.”

There was a rueful smile on Sheila’s lips. “Thank you for consoling me, Naim,” she said. She went over to the window and looked out. At one corner of the sky daylight had lifted the curtain of the darkness and was peeping through.

“It’s already morning. Forgive me for sitting here talking so long. But I couldn’t help it Naim. You do understand, don’t you? Well, I’m going.”

She quickly put on her hat and coat, shook hands with Naim, and went towards the door. Naim followed behind her.

“Shall we meet again someday?” he asked.

“I don’t know. Goodbye, Naim.” She opened the door quietly and went out.

Naim returned to his armchair in silence and for a long time sat there motionless. The fire had gone right out, and the room was getting colder and colder. The watery light of morning like a thief on tiptoe, began to steal in through the window. □

—*Translated by Ralph Russell*