

ROYAL BLOOD

R E S T L E S S S P I R I T S

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Disclaimer

This novelette is a work of fiction inspired by oral traditions, hearsay, and anecdotes handed down through the generations. The characters and settings are entirely products of the author's imagination; based on the above factors, any resemblance to actual persons, places, or historical events is purely coincidental. Furthermore, the narrative is intended as a creative work and carries no specific political or religious message.

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1

The Haunted Hunting Lodge

One spring evening, when the sun was setting fast behind the blue range of mountains in the distance, we arrived at this hunting lodge to fulfill the task of exploration assigned by the ruler of the princely state of Shridham Garh, only to find the chowkidar leaving for the night. He was not pleased to see us arrive so late in the day. He asked to confirm that we were the guests of the Raja Sahib and would be staying in the lodge for a few days.

The *chowkidar* did not stay in the lodge at night, though he had quarter to stay 24/7 in the premises. His irrefutable explanation was that the lodge was haunted and visited by many spirits, including a family of spirits, most of the nights. The group of spirits consists of a tribal father, a mother with a child, and surprisingly, a village dog. The family had died centuries ago due to a landslide at the spot where the building was built about a hundred years ago by the great-grandfather of the present ruler, Aditya Narayan Singh. The remnants of their skeletons had been discovered during the laying of the foundation and were disrespectfully thrown into a nearby river without the performance of their last rites.

The spirits were benevolent and shy, meaning no harm to anyone. The group disappeared at the slightest possibility of living beings coming to the lodge. All they did during their stay was loiter in the building—sleeping on the beds,

while the child played with the dog on the ground in front of the building.

In contrast to this, there was a malevolent spirit on the nearby *peepal tree*; he died in a cruel fight with his adversaries after the lodge had been built. His body was thrown in the jungle only to be eaten by vultures, other scavengers, and decay; his last rites too were not performed, and his desire to avenge his death has not been fulfilled till today; hence, he has become an ill-tempered, malevolent spirit and harmed people whenever he got a chance. Most of his victims were the temporary residents of the lodge who, unaware of his presence, ventured under the tree to relieve themselves; they consisted mostly of hunters on *shikar* expeditions. Most of them sustained common injuries like fractured bones. A few unfortunate people lost their lives due to severe head injuries. On one occasion he was so infuriated at the stubbornness of one European that he smashed his head to pulp. The lodge was almost in the center of a dense jungle inhabited by wild animals, both carnivorous and herbivorous, hence a popular destination for hunters and nature lovers to stay.

The most sought-after *shikar* was the elusive black panther, though there was unconfirmed hearsay that the forest was also home to a group of white tigers. In spite of extensive forests of various grades, no elephant has ever been seen in the area. The jungle hosted many common animals whose distribution depended on the vegetation. Smaller creatures included rabbits, porcupines, antelopes, and deer, such as the chital and barking deer. Peacocks and pheasants not only frequented the grasslands but also laid their eggs in

shallow nests on the forest floor; some peacocks were even bold enough to raid the lodge for leftovers. These eggs were eagerly sought by small carnivores like wolves, jackals, and mongooses. Although the mother birds would try to scare away these predators, their efforts were often in vain.

Snakes and other reptiles, such as lizards, were frequent invaders that ate eggs laid on the ground. From the eggs that escaped this onslaught, hatchlings emerged to grow into adult birds. While they were still chicks, they lived under the strict surveillance of their parents; if they wandered away, they were always at risk from predators in the sky, such as hawks, kites, and eagles.

Large animals like bears, tigers, and panthers lived in the mixed shrubs. In the morning, the jungle was awakened by the calls of peacocks, wild hens, and crows, reverberating with the melodious song of the koel. At noon, the birds and animals would seek the shade of the trees—mostly dozing, yet alert enough to sense lurking danger. The peacocks and monkeys were the most vigilant guards, raising the alarm at any sign of approaching threats.

A common sound at midday was the melancholic coo of doves. While the tribals had free access to the jungle and there were no reports of them being attacked by tigers or panthers, the bears—which were abundant—were unpredictable. Being short-sighted and perpetually insecure, they would attack anything that moved without provocation, including humans. It was not uncommon to see villagers with scarred faces who had survived bear attacks, as the bears raided human habitations as frequently as they did the farms.

Wild boars posed another menace to the fields, digging up bulbs and roots at night; they were courageous enough to ward off even a tiger if it dared approach their young. Surprisingly, there were no wild elephants; all the elephants in the state belonged to the king.

The extensive jungle was reserved for the royal family or their guests to hunt. The guests included members of other royal families and British dignitaries. The tribals were permitted to gather forest products for their daily life and sell the excess in the market to earn a few rupees to supplement their restricted income, which came from semi-arid unirrigated land that mostly produced millets and coarse grains. The most valuable products were mahua fruits and tendu leaves. The first was used to distill country liqueur, and the second to make bidis, respectively. Which yielded a large sum to the state exchequer.

The other forest products collected were *honey*, *amla*, *harra*, *baheda*, and *chironji*. The villagers were permitted to cut and carry home as much as one headload of dry wood per day for cooking purposes.

Villagers enjoyed unrestricted rights to fish and hunt small game using primitive tools such as homemade snares, bows, and arrows. There were no prohibitions against culling agricultural pests like wild boars, blue bulls, and occasionally sloth bears. The most prevalent method of extermination involved scattering homemade explosives across the fields; these devices detonated when bitten, killing the animals instantly. While wealthy tribal chieftains had access to crude, short-range muzzle-loading guns, others relied on luring animals into baited traps to be dispatched with spears.

Additionally, villagers frequently raided nests to collect eggs and chicks—particularly parrots and mynas—for sale in urban markets.

As if the horror stories told by the chowkidar were not sufficient reasons for his not staying away from the lodge. The most irrefutable reason was that he has to pass through a patch of jungle inhabited by wild animals like tigers, panthers, and bears. That was positively a threat to his life. On close questioning, he confessed, however, that he himself has never come across such a situation.

The other more scarring reason was beyond the jungle, where he had to pass under a *peepul* tree on which lived yet another docile spirit that did not directly harm anybody unless provoked. The commonest offense that provoked him was passersby not alighting from their vehicles while passing under his abode, be they bicycles, horses, or bullock carts. The persons on foot just had to pause for a moment. Those ignoring these dictums were sure to meet with accident. The other frightening stories concerned wild animals visiting the surrounding compound, which was encircled by a pretty high wall.

The compound had become a sanctuary for the wild. A full-grown tiger was often spotted lounging on the withered grass—the remnants of a once-lush lawn—while a family of bears frolicked on the same grounds. Above them, a leopard frequently prowled along the top of the boundary wall, using it as a convenient thoroughfare.

For the above reasons, all he wanted from us was to refrain from staying in the lodge. However, we were not

intimidated by his stories and told him that whatever may come, we were definitely staying in the lodge not just for the night but also for days to come unless we had finished our job. We have become immune to such stories regarding other forest lodges and government rest houses in the past few years. Despite the locals' strong conviction in the presence of these apparitions. Our decision was not liked by him. He grudgingly opened two rooms and a dining room for us. As he was aware of our arrival in advance, he had placed enough drinking water in each room, sufficient water in the bathrooms, and sufficient numbers of kerosene lamps in each room.

He cautioned us about mountain scorpions and the occasional snakes that might creep into the rooms.

Moreover, he informed us that we have to arrange our food ourselves; there was no provision for food in the guesthouse, but he would be happy to bring milk, eggs, and vegetables the next morning if I give him a rupee. Which I did gladly.

The building was an example of British colonial architecture, built on a high platform just at the face of a steep mountain that almost reached the extended courtyard of the main building; in between the building and the cliff was the *chowkidar's* dwelling. The single-story building had four independent suites with a common dining room. There was neither electricity nor running water; water was fetched from the spring that descended from the mountain behind to be stored in a tank.

The rooms were surrounded by a wide, covered verandah, fringed by equally wide open space. The building was fortified by a six-foot-high stone wall with a huge wrought iron gate about fifty yards from the end of a flight of eight steps coming down from the main building, ending in the space that surrounded the building. The gate and the flight of steps were joined by a path paved by cobblestone. The rest of the land around must have had a lawn with flower beds in the bygone years of glory.

The rectangular room I chose was oriented on an east-west axis, featuring a western wall made of a single sheet of transparent glass. After dark, this glass wall unveiled a breathtaking nocturnal panorama: a star-dusted blue sky arching over the forest treetops, with the silhouette of the Blue Mountains resting on the distant horizon.

The main room was followed by a general utility space, well-furnished with sofas, chairs, a small table, settees, and a dressing table with a huge Belgian mirror. The utility room opened into a bathroom large enough to be the bedroom of a modern-day flat. The other door of the bathroom opened to the exterior to act as a service door for the water-carriers and other servants. The chowkidar who had shown me the rooms had warned me to be sure that the service door was always kept securely bolted to prevent wild animals and reptiles from getting into the bathroom.

He narrated an anecdote in which a lady occupant, opening the bathroom door one morning, shrieked upon finding a full-grown bear lying belly-up in the bathtub. The animal was not amused by the intruder; he got up with a disdainful look at the lady for encroaching upon his privacy

and walked out with a bored expression. The lady kept shivering until her husband returned from his morning stroll, only to say that he had just seen a bear drenched in water leaving the premises.

The building was surrounded by shrub forest that gradually got converted into a green jungle of evergreen and deciduous trees. When we arrived, it was time for the birds to return to their places to rest for the night. They chirped till they fell asleep, except the nocturnal owls, bats, and flying foxes that were preparing for their nightly foray on insects, small ground animals, fruits, and flowers. We could hear the chirrup of the crickets and cicadas; the jungle was sprinkled with the small lights of the glowworms. I relaxed on the inclined huge easy chair and enjoyed the scene and sound of the gradual transformation of day into night, which held a frightening experience of my life.

2

The Cabin on Wheels, Me and My Man Friday

I had traveled from Shridham, the capital of the princely state of Shridham Garh, the state of the king who built this lodge. It took me four hours by a graveled path fancied as a road; at places it was nothing but a furrow made by bullock carts, and the passage was wide enough for a single automobile to pass. The road was traversed by many unbridged creeks and a few wider rivulets spanned by solid submersible causeways that got flooded with slight rainfall in their catchments in the monsoon and remained under four to six feet of water, cutting off all the routes to the capital, Shridham, during rains.

With the monsoon's end, the floodwaters receded, uncovering the low-lying causeways for traffic. These bridges also trapped the remaining water, creating vital pools that nourished aquatic life and served as a water source for villagers and wildlife. For a time, villagers fished in these pools, but as the temperature rose, the water evaporated, leaving the riverbeds nearly dry. This led to a stark test of survival: less hardy creatures perished from the scorching heat and starvation, while the most resilient fish and organisms survived by hibernating in the cool, damp sand beneath large rocks. When the next monsoon replenished the rivers, these dormant survivors would re-emerge to breed and continue their life cycle.

My first realization, after a few months as a consultant in geology and hydrology, was that I needed a robust vehicle for the job. I found the solution in a 40 hp military surplus truck, which was perfect for the terrain and the workload. I then understood that I required more than just the truck; I needed a multi-talented assistant. This person had to be skilled as an expert driver of heavy vehicles, function as a mechanic, be able to cook when needed, and be educated enough to read, write, and manage routine correspondence. Unfortunately this was more or less a utopia, and it was difficult to have such a multifaceted driver.

The vehicle I drove was perfect for my needs. Unlike typical civilian models, it had left-hand drive and a four-wheel-drive system. Running on petrol—as all vehicles did before diesel became available—it was rugged enough to handle mud, sand, two feet of water, large gravel, and steep gradients that would stop ordinary trucks. I often had to use it to rescue stuck buses or trucks, for which I always carried a heavy-duty Manila rope.

The rear part of the modified truck was converted into a double-walled, double-roofed rectangular room. The double walls kept the room cool during the scorching summer and warm during the chilling winter. In spite of being double-layered, the roof still required an extra tarpaulin during rains. The roof also served as storage for large items, such as an extra folding bed, a small tent with its usual paraphernalia, and a gunny bag containing a pickaxe, a shovel, a crowbar, various knives, hatchets, axes, and a sledgehammer. A spare tire was firmly secured to the two-foot-high railing encircling this luggage carrier, and two

bicycles were secured to the outer walls of the truck on either side.

The interior consisted of a foldable bunk for the driver and three jerrycans: one each for drinking water, kerosene, and petrol. We filled the petrol tank and the jerrycans to full capacity at every petrol pump we came across, as the next pump could be up to two hundred miles away. This particular heavy vehicle consumed more petrol than its civilian counterpart of the same horsepower.

The room contained a small kerosene-powered refrigerator and a backup generator that could power two bulbs in an emergency when kerosene was not available; otherwise, the interior was lit by a hurricane lamp. We cooked on a Primus stove when dry wood was not readily available. Our practice was to carry food supplies for no more than a week, replenishing our rations at village grocery shops along the way.

A small wooden box functioned as a makeshift chemical lab for testing soil samples. If we found useful minerals, the results were noted in a register and the location marked on our detailed Survey of India map. This map was comprehensive, showing not only roads and waterways but also village markets and the days they were held—even down to the locations of temples and wells.

The front part of the vehicle was meant for the driver and a passenger; I and my driver alternate our seats on long drives to give much-needed rest to the driver. It also had a foldable bunk for a person to sleep when no room was available for the night, a very frequent situation.

There was a small first aid box that, besides containing the usual bottles of tincture of iodine, surgical spirit, cotton, gauze pieces, and bandages, also had packets of antimalarials, antidiarrheals, analgesics, and chlorine tablets because the area was endemic for malaria and waterborne diseases. It also had a bottle of sodamint tablets for indigestion.

My driver, Sunny, on his part, had a bag full of herbs, barks, and roots as per the Santhal pharmacopeia. He relied more on them than my allopathic medicine. While traveling on cycle or foot, it was not uncommon for Sunny to stop on the way to pluck leaves, flowers, fruits, and branches from wayside plants or dig roots, tubers, and bulbs that he considered to be of medicinal value. He would dry them in the sun or grind them for future use, but he agreed to be vaccinated every six months against tetanus, cholera, typhoid, and plague because this was a compulsory practice in the army, to which he belonged before joining me, and he followed it religiously even after retirement from the army and advised the same to anybody who cared to listen to him.

The army taught Sunny to always use a mosquito net, a habit he followed so strictly that he couldn't sleep without it. He slept outside during the summer and in the cabin the rest of the year. The cabin had a secure, three-part door. The inside layer was wood, the middle was an iron grill, and the outside was a strong iron mesh. The mesh let him see out, but no one could see in. Normally, he kept the wooden door open and locked the grill for air circulation. He only shut the wooden door when it was very cold or raining heavily.

My driver, who was my constant companion until his retirement at the age of sixty, was a Tudu Santhal man I

called Sunny. I gave him this name—a reference to the sunny Sunday on which we met—as his native name was unpronounceable for me. He was a discharged driver from the Indian Army's armored division, and his military background provided him with exceptional skills in operating and maintaining heavy vehicles. This expertise proved to be a considerable financial advantage for me over the years. He maintained strict military discipline, including punctuality and perfection in his work.

He dutifully sent his paltry army pension every month to his family in the remote Chhota Nagpur region; it was scarcely enough to sustain a family of a wife, two children, and his parents. Their existence was tied to the unforgiving earth; they were reliant on the coarse grains they could cultivate on marginal, unirrigated land. Their diet was a testament to their resourcefulness—a blend of farmed millet, wild vegetables, and tubers foraged from the jungle, along with any small creatures they could hunt or trap. To supplement this, they gathered forest products; the surplus left after their own consumption was sold in the weekly market to meet their financial needs. In their world, rice and lentils were rare luxuries, obtainable only by bartering their humble grains and forest finds. Even essential salt was acquired this way. For sweetness, they relied on honey gathered from the wild; jaggery was a remote aspiration, and refined sugar was entirely beyond their knowledge.

The family was consistently on the losing side of their business dealings because purchasers cheated them relentlessly. To supplement their income, they also worked as laborers on the land of wealthy farmers.

Sunny retired from the army and returned to his family, anticipating that his pension would significantly boost their finances and provide extra monetary support. However, he soon realized the pension was insufficient to alleviate their economic difficulties, prompting him to move to the city to seek employment as a driver. Thus, he came to see me one morning seeking employment. After reviewing his credentials, I decided to offer him a position, which he accepted gladly. The offer, which was quite generous for the time, consisted of a princely salary of 30 rupees per month in addition to free food and a makeshift dwelling.

Sunny was truly a 'Man Friday' to me. He was an efficient mechanic, a good driver, and an excellent cook. In addition to being my gun-bearer, he looked after my laundry as well. While walking in the jungle, he carried an axe on his back, hanging from his left shoulder, and a hatchet at his waistband. He could climb trees like a leopard and swim like an otter, remaining submerged in deep water longer than any professional diver. He jumped from boulder to boulder with the agility of a monkey.

Sunny was semi-literate; all he could do was sign his name and fill out a money order form. In the army, he had picked up some English slang alongside the usual Hindustani and Santhali slang, which he used nonchalantly. He only worshipped Marang Buru, the supreme Santhal deity. His ambition in life was to see one of his sons join the Indian Army as a commissioned officer.

He was a guide and guard to me, often acting like my guardian; as he was a few years older than me, he would occasionally threaten to report me to my grandmother back

home if I did not eat well or if I consumed more alcohol than he considered permissible. He himself preferred home-brewed alcohol distilled from mahua over *angreji sharab*. I suspect that he, too, had a swig from my bottle after he had served me my regular evening drink.

My possession of firearms included a double-barrel twelve-bore BSA gun I inherited from my father, a .355 Mauser rifle, and a Colt revolver. I also carried a good pair of binoculars. The rifle was used only once, at the request of villagers, to kill a predator from a makeshift *machan* that had been preying on their livestock across a fifty-mile radius. Additionally, I had an attachable telescope for my camera, which I used to photograph elusive birds and animals. These photos were later published abroad to great acclaim.

I kept my firearms—a loaded revolver under my pillow and a shotgun beneath the mattress, along with a powerful five-celled torch—ready for immediate use. The guns and cartridges were stored in an elegant rosewood box. However, I was not a trophy hunter; I only shot animals or birds when necessary for food.

My time in the jungle brought me into contact with many magnificent creatures. I frequently observed large herds of deer and antelopes crossing the road, always stopping to let them pass undisturbed. It wasn't uncommon to encounter a grand sambar, a nilgai, or a massive bison standing in the road, completely unfazed by my presence until they decided to move off gracefully. One particularly cool morning, I watched a massive python—nearly twenty feet long—slowly slide across the road.

On another occasion, deep in the forest, I encountered a spectacular sight: a majestic tigress stretched out in the morning sun, basking across the road while her two playful cubs leaped and tumbled over her tail and body. I stopped my truck and quietly watched for thirty minutes. Suddenly, the tranquility was broken by a kite's shrill alarm call, signaling the tiger's presence. This warning was instantly relayed by a peacock, which in turn alerted a group of chitals half a mile away and then a group of sambars even further off, causing all the animals to seek cover. Recognizing it was time to move to a more secluded spot, the tigress led her cubs into the jungle, effectively granting me permission to proceed.

However, I had to cull wild boars and blue bulls when they destroyed the precious crops of poor farmers. This was done at their request. The farmers then feasted on the killed animals as an additional bounty. My essential gear for the jungle included a leather suitcase with khaki, full-sleeved clothes for camouflage. I wore tall canvas boots for their superior grip and a sola hat for protection from the intense sun.

The remote area was dense with hazards, including numerous venomous and non-venomous snakes, along with scorpions, all of which often breached the security of my tent when proper lodging was unavailable. One evening, I returned to an unwelcome surprise: a cold, leathery presence across my bed. My flashlight beam cut through the darkness, illuminating a large, lethargic snake coiled up, heavy and slow after a recent meal. I called Sunny, who quickly

identified the intruder as non-poisonous and safely relocated it using a simple stick.

Other constant nuisances were leeches. They would attach to the skin and suck blood unnoticed, only revealing their presence by the painless, bleeding wound they left behind after dropping off. Fortunately, leech bites rarely lead to serious complications; the infections they might spread are generally of low virulence. Leech infestations only occur when one wades through infested water, such as once when I was crossing a rivulet.

I had an encounter with a snake while crossing a stream when one wrapped itself around my leg; I again relied on Sunny, who expertly caught it by the head and unwound it. Thorn injuries were also a daily problem. Hooked thorns were particularly tricky to remove, but Sunny was skilled at handling them.

Furthermore, it was common for one or both of us to be sick with malaria. The illness would put us out of commission for three to four days, despite taking Paludrine and antipyretic mixtures, and resting. While I stuck to the standard treatment, Sunny had his own method: he believed that fasting and drinking some foreign liquor (Vilayati Sharab) would speed up his recovery. It was not unusual for villagers to seek medicine from us for many ailments that they could not treat with their usual home remedies.

3

The Unexpected Guest

The stress of the drive and the watchman's intimidation melted away as I finally relaxed. After a refreshing bath, I settled comfortably on the veranda, enjoying the evening's acoustic transition: the cheerful songs of day birds giving way to the nocturnal orchestra of nightjars, owls, and the soft flutter of bats. Only the unsettling, distant cries of vultures—a sound eerily like distressed human children—intruded on the calm, enough to genuinely alarm an unfamiliar listener. It was spring, the mating season for the wildlife. I could hear a lonely tiger's distant call, a leopard's rasping cry, and a male sambar's bellow claiming his territory and summoning his harem. The sky, illuminated by a rising full moon, was bright enough to reveal the mountains in the distance.

Soon Sunny brought my usual evening drink and some snacks. He informed me that the dinner was ready, so I should finish my drink without delay, as he wanted to go to sleep early following the hectic day.

After dinner, I went to bed, only after carefully securing all the doors and windows and checking under the bed for anything hidden.

Finally, I checked for my revolver and the torch; one under the pillow and the other under the mattress. I don't know when I fell asleep, but I was eventually awakened at what I thought was midnight. I was mistaken; my radium

wristwatch showed it was already 3 o'clock in the morning. Looking through the large window on the western wall, I saw a full, circular moon gracefully descending toward the horizon behind the distant mountain range. From afar, I could hear the monotonous beat of drums and the shrill cry of a trumpet, accompanied by the melancholic tune of a flute and the chime of cymbals. The villagers were celebrating some occasion.

I rechecked all the doors and windows to ensure they were secure and returned to bed. However, sleep evaded me; I had an uncanny feeling that I was being observed. I got up and scanned the walls, which were well-illuminated by the moonlight flooding the room. My eyes fell on the glass pane of the main door leading to the verandah; I saw what looked like a human face pressed against the transparent glass. I shone my light on the figure, only to find that it was indeed a human face—one that made neither movement nor sound.

Two thoughts came to my mind; the first was, "Is it a miscreant trying to break into my room or just trying to frighten me?" This, however, did not scare me, as I was well endowed with the skill to meet such events. I thumped the glass to scare the person without any effect.

The second thought sent a chill up my spine, and I felt goose bumps developing on my arms. Was it one of the spirits mentioned by the chowkidar in the evening? Anyhow, I gathered enough courage to investigate the matter personally and deal with it accordingly.

I picked up my revolver and unbolted the doors, only to be met by the foul stench of a decaying body. It was a smell

similar to the one I first encountered during my student days, when I had to fetch the body of a friend who had died in a road accident from the mortuary.

The instant I opened the door, the figure turned his back and began to move away. It was a man, stark naked and easily towering over my six-foot frame. I yelled a warning for him to stop, threatening to shoot, but my challenge was utterly ignored. I was twenty feet behind him and sprinted into a chase, straining to close the distance. Yet, the gap remained perfectly constant. I soon understood why: he was not walking, but hovering silently six inches above the floor, making his already immense height seem impossibly greater. He paused at the head of the stairs and slowly pivoted. The sight of his face stopped me cold. It was pale and hideously bloated, dominated by a fixed, unblinking stare and bulging red eyes. Blood trickled from his flared nostrils and the corners of his swollen lips, from which a tongue unnaturally protruded. His face and chest were marred by multiple dark bruises.

Startled, I froze a few feet away and watched him glide down the stairs. As he moved out from under the veranda roof, the local wildlife reacted in terror: an owl hooted and took flight, flying foxes squawked and scattered, and vultures flapped their wings as if to ward off an approaching threat. I watched him move toward the gate and disappear without ever opening it. The moment he vanished from the compound, the two jackals scavenging on Sunny's leftovers shrieked and fled. Their panic was instantly echoed by the distant crashing of sambar and chital bolting through the forest. Then, a profound, eerie silence fell, shattered only by

a final, heavy plunge into the river, mere yards from the path in front of the lodge.

I went downstairs to the gate and was surprised to find it still bolted from the inside. When I opened it, I saw the jackals had returned and were feeding. The owl, flying foxes, and vultures were all settled in their usual spots. I closed the gate and checked the surrounding area, only to find Sunny asleep in his bed with the exit grill locked from within.

This door featured a unique three-layer construction: a solid wooden door, an iron grill, and an outer layer of thin iron mesh. The design was versatile, allowing for any combination of layers to be closed. With the wooden door open, the mesh allowed a person inside to see out without being visible from the exterior.

Finding no explanation for the night's events, I returned to my room, bolted the door, and eventually fell asleep after two hours. A knock woke me; it was Sunny with my morning tea. Before entering, he sniffed the air, declared that a rat had probably died on the roof, and promised to remove the source of the foul stink. Soon after, the chowkidar arrived with the milk, eggs, and vegetables. He also sniffed the air, looked around, and peered into my room before making his own declaration.

"Oh, he has come again," the chowkidar said.

"Who?" I asked.

"The Sahab," he replied gravely.

"The Englishman's spirit."

As a part of the explanation, he narrated a sad and chilling story: about a hundred years ago, an Englishman was murdered in this very room, and his body was thrown in the river on a night just like the last one—the full moon a month after Holi, when villagers celebrate arrival of new crops. The music heard last night was the sound of their instruments played during the celebration that would generally start at the rise of the moon and last till the dawn, about a mile away. He said, Every year on this night, the spirit visits the place he was killed. Without meaning any harm to anybody, including one residing in the room like I did. He only wanders in the whole building, as if looking for something or someone, and then leaves disappointed without any trace except a bad odor.

Only a few guests like me have had similar experiences in the past, and all were scared enough to leave the lodge at the first opportunity, only to spread the story that the building was haunted. He insisted we listen to his advice and leave the lodge the same day before sunset to save our lives. Which I ignored with a smile. Saying that the Sahib was not expected till the next year.

The chowkidar explained that he always advises guests not to stay in the lodge on this specific full moon night. He admitted that he had never witnessed anything himself; all his information comes from stories told to him in pieces by his maternal grandfather over the years. His grandfather, in turn, heard the tale of the ghastly murder from his own father, Suhel Singh, who was a personal valet and close confidant of the then ruler of Shridham Garh state.

Neither the body of the victim nor the identity of the perpetrators was ever found—except for the body of the chowkidar on duty that night, which was discovered in the garden two days later with no detectable cause of death.

Over the decades, many foreign and Indian scholars have visited on that specific day following Holi, staying overnight to unravel the mystery. Though they met with little success, their efforts inspired numerous fictional stories. Some of these have become celebrated ghost stories; one was even adapted into a film. These works have only deepened the public's curiosity, drawing visitors who come to explore the mystery alongside their usual hunting expeditions, yet none have ever reached a definite conclusion.

4

The Story Told by Ramsingh

The only person with truly reliable information was the *chowkidar's* maternal grandfather, Ramsingh. Though he was over eighty years old, he remained incredibly active. He stood as straight as a palm tree and took a ten-mile stroll every day to supervise his fields, farms, dairy, and poultry. He always carried a *lathi*—a staff slightly taller than himself—which made him a formidable figure to anyone daring to threaten him or his property.

Legend has it that his youthful strength was so immense that he once killed an attacking bear by splitting its skull with a single blow of his axe. Another tale recounts a time he was accosted by ten miscreants attempting to rob him. Despite his warnings to let him pass, the thieves underestimated his prowess; the encounter left three of them with broken limbs and two permanently lame. Since then, his legendary skill with the stick has ensured that no one dares to cross his path.

The main challenge was persuading the old man to visit the lodge. I offered to go to his home, but the *chowkidar* advised against it, explaining that his grandfather was due to visit him in a few days anyway. Since I was staying for two weeks, he was certain that such an opportunity would arise, though he couldn't guarantee his grandfather would agree to come to the lodge.

To motivate the chowkidar, I offered an incentive to ensure he would bring his grandfather over. This worked. Two days later, the chowkidar brought Ram Singh to the lodge just as I was finishing my breakfast. Ram Singh was a tall, ramrod-straight man whom I initially presumed to be in his sixties, but that was an underestimate. He told me he had seen eighty summers, having spent most of them in his village in the state of Shridham Garh.

His attire was simple: a multi-pocketed jacket of coarse cotton, an equally coarse *dhoti* that barely reached his knees, and a pair of locally made leather shoes. As the chowkidar had mentioned, he carried a stout bamboo staff as tall as he was. A full head of well-oiled, salt-and-pepper hair was neatly combed back, making him appear younger than his eighty years. He spoke in a loud, clear, almost booming voice—mostly in the local dialect.

I was immediately impressed by his presence and greeted him in his own tongue, offering him a chair. He politely refused, so I told him that if he would not sit in the chair, I would join him on the floor. At this, he reluctantly agreed and settled into the seat. He gently declined my offer of breakfast, explaining that his granddaughter-in-law had already fed him well. When I offered him a cigarette, he simply drew out a bundle of *bidis* and a matchbox, informing me that he preferred them to "those foreign white sticks."

Having introduced his grandfather, the chowkidar went about his duties, but not before reminding the old man to tell me everything he knew about the white ghost and to address any doubts I was bound to have.

Finishing the last pull of his *bidi*, Ram Singh leaned back, ready to begin. He started with a disclaimer: his tale would be long and should not be taken as pure fact. The account, he explained, was a patchwork—sewn together from stories heard from his father and grandfather, interwoven with local hearsay that had been reshaped with every telling. He urged me to withhold full trust, noting that the narrative had been bent over the decades to suit the needs of various storytellers, scholars, and even filmmakers.

He began his story by outlining the history of the state of Shridham Garh. He explained that it was originally part of the Mughal Empire. The state had been granted as a *jagirdari* (a land grant) to his ancestor, Gaj Singh, by the then-emperor as a reward for his valor in a successful war. For his bravery, Gaj Singh was also awarded the title of 'Das Hazari' and permission to maintain a cavalry of ten thousand men.

As the Mughal Empire weakened over time, the local *jagirdars* became powerful enough to break away from its failing control and declare themselves independent. The ruler of Shridham Garh followed suit, declaring his territory a sovereign state. To mark this newfound independence, he changed his name from Gaj Singh to Maharaj Mahendra Singh. This Maharaj was a distant ancestor of Veer Bahadur Singh, whose personal valet, Suhel Singh, was the great-grandfather of Ram Singh—the man telling me this story.

During the British Raj that followed, the state was larger than many European countries. It was surrounded by British-ruled provinces in a horseshoe pattern, leaving only a strip of coastline open to the sea, complete with a beautiful

beach. At the southern end of that beach lay a flourishing fishing port that added significantly to the state's revenue.

The British implemented a policy of indirect rule, preferring not to interfere in the internal governance of the existing rulers. A British agent was appointed to mediate disputes between the states and ensure the rulers' compliance. While the rulers retained significant internal autonomy, including independent police and judicial systems, the British administration retained control over defense and foreign policy. In return, the rulers paid a substantial tribute to the British government. Consequently, these kingdoms, though called 'princely states', functioned as de facto vassal states, compelled to extract the necessary funds from their poor subjects to meet their obligations.

The readers have noted that Ram Singh's great-grandfather, Suhel Singh, was personal valet to one of the descendants of the first ruler of the state; he was called Maharaja Veer Bahadur Singh. The story goes that Veer Bahadur Singh and Suhel Singh were born on the same day and almost at the same time. Suhel Singh's mother was a maid to the ailing mother of Veer Bahadur Singh.

Veer Bahadur Singh's mother became paralyzed from below the waist following the birth of Veer Bahadur Singh. She could not be cured either at Calcutta, which was the best place for treatment in those days, or in England. There were many relatives too eager to raise the child, knowing well that child Veer Bahadur Singh was the future ruler of the state. The history takes a turn here when Suhel Singh's mother, who herself had a breastfed infant, acted as foster mother to the child, Kumar Veer Bahadur Singh, the future

heir to the throne. To the chagrin of many of the near relatives of the ailing mother.

Kumar Veer Bahadur Singh spent most of the day with his foster family. While in the house of the maid, the prince, Kumar Veer Bahadur Singh, even slept in the same bed with Suhel's mother in their modest dwelling, with Kumar Veer Bahadur Singh and Suhel Singh on either side fighting to select who would sleep on the right and who on the left. The mother solved the problem by alternately changing sides while sleeping. The two were like twins, eating the same food, snatching food and toys from each other, and fighting like any other child of a poor family.

It was only when the prince was ten years old that he was asked to sleep separately from his foster brother, Suhel Singh, in the palace in a large, exclusively separate room for him on a four-post bed, which he did not like. He would often abandon his princely bed and quietly sneak to Suhel Singh's bed in the hut nearby that was not compatible with the status of a prince; hence, a *via media* was found that allowed Suhel Singh to sleep on the floor of the bedroom of prince Kumar Veer Bahadur Singh. It was not uncommon for the early risers, to their dismay, to find the prince sleeping with the servant's son on the floor, hugging him like his brother.

During this time, the prince learned his "three Rs". Elementary vernacular languages, English, Urdu, and Farsi. The last was the court language all over India along with English; compulsory for every educated person to be well versed in. If they wanted to work for the state or become teachers, it was not uncommon for them to act as translators

in various courts. Some of them became so expert in the legal matters that they started working as pleaders themselves in various courts.

Suhel Singh, a constant companion of the prince, would sit near the prince while the prince was being taught by his special teachers; Suhel Singh was an auditory learner who picked up the same lessons by listening. He would go through the pages of the books by himself when the prince was not using them. The prince himself did not like being taught and proved to be a poor student in contrast to Suhel Singh, who, without former tuition, happened to know as much as the prince; he even excelled the prince as a pupil. The prince would rather prefer using a gun over a pen and going hunting with his father than being tutored.

Suhel Singh had an inborn gift of writing poetry. His poetic skill was honed by his reading of Ramcharitmanas and sayings of Kabir, Surdas, and Rahim. He would jot down his poetry on scraps of paper. He had a good ear for music and a good voice, which he kept hidden from others except his foster brother.

After two years of home tutoring, the Maharaja thought it to be the right time to send the prince to a school glorified as a college meant for the children of royal families only. The British wanted to create an unseen wall between the general population and the members of the royal families even in education.

When the time of departure of the prince Veer Bahadur Singh came, the prince was surprised to find that his foster brother would not accompany him and started

crying bitterly, even refusing to go to the college far from the palace. His pleas and tantrums went unheeded.

The prince studied at the special college for five years, returning home at the slightest pretext. Whenever Prince Veer Bahadur Singh arrived, he would go straight to Suhel Singh's house and embrace him like a long-separated twin. Following the custom of royal families, Kumar Veer Bahadur Singh was eventually sent to England to study statecraft, basic law, and natural science, along with modern Western etiquette.

Throughout his years abroad, he maintained constant contact with Suhel. This was viewed with distaste by many members of the royal family and the court. Consequently, many of the letters written by the prince never reached Suhel Singh; they were intercepted and destroyed by individuals in the court who had their own agendas.

Prince Veer Bahadur Singh returned to Shridham Garh after a five-year stint in England. On return from abroad, the prince was surprised to see Suhel completely changed, a grown-up man already married to a girl from his caste after he had passed middle school with credit but could not afford higher education outside the state and joined the palace as an assistant to a senior servant.

The prince was surprised to find Suhel aloof, keeping a respectable distance from him. With all his efforts, he failed to bring his foster brother close to him; after all, Suhel did not belong to the royal family but to a family of servants in the palace. Suhel was very much aware of his status in the royal echelon. Suhel made it a point not to start a

conversation with Veer Bahadur Singh and spoke only when spoken to. The prince would have liked him to be as free as in their childhood, including arguing with the prince and even being disobedient occasionally.

The prince, Veer Bahadur Singh, was aghast at his behavior and tried to re-establish the old relationship to make things easy. To overcome this discrepancy, he managed to get Suhel appointed as his chief valet, which will keep Suhel in constant contact with the prince. In fact, Suhel was given all the work of a private secretary to the prince. Thus, he would look after not only his daily requirements but also his guns and fishing equipment, as well as his papers; he even selected the clothes and shoes that the prince would wear.

Despite his reserved demeanor, Suhel vigilantly watched over his friend, who had become his master, ensuring that he did not run into avoidable trouble. On many occasions, Suhel skillfully intervened to guide him away from difficult predicaments, always careful not to damage their friendship. Over time, their bond grew warmer, rekindling the closeness of their childhood.

This camaraderie continued even after Prince Veer Bahadur Singh ascended the throne to become Raja. In his later years, Suhel Singh was valet to the king only for namesake; he chose persons of his liking to look after the personal requirements of Veer Bahadur, he himself keeping a sharp watch on the activity of the person concerned. During the period and that followed, Suhel Singh was highly esteemed within the court and administration. He held a position of ministerial rank for all purposes, enjoying all the

privileges of a minister, which included a personal horse and a large house with sufficient servants and guards.

Veer Bahadur Singh married the daughter of a neighboring ruler and, following the death of his father, ascended the throne as Maharaja Veer Bahadur Singh Dev Ji. The Maharaja's family expanded with the birth of a son, Shaurya Bhan Singh, and five years later, a daughter, Durgeshnandini. While the princess was known simply as Durga, the prince, Shaurya, was often called 'Suraj' by his inner circle—many of whom would later prove to be his accomplices in nefarious deeds.

From the tender age of one, Shaurya was a force of nature, possessing a restless energy that far exceeded that of his peers. It took a team of three nannies just to contain him. Sleeping little and destroying much, he treated priceless artifacts like toys and made a sport of hurling objects at his attendants. Initially, dismissed as merely the overactive, spoiled son of a doting father, everyone assumed he would eventually settle down as a normal child. But destiny mocked the King's hopeful assumptions. As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that the King's dream of a 'normal' son was never meant to be.

By five years he was an enfant terrible; he took pleasure in killing insects, pulling their wings, and enjoying them crawling to death. Hitting the passing animals with an iron rod was yet another pleasurable activity of his. He would pick up a quarrel with other boys, even if they were older than him; that included both his cousins and other members of the royal family, not to speak of lesser mortals. He

spanked little children for pleasure. This behavior was tolerated, as he was the only son of a doting father.

The king, Veer Bahadur Singh, appointed usual pundits, maulvis, and english teachers to teach him hindi, sanskrit, farsi, and english. The result of the tuition became obvious within a month when all the teachers left the jobs one by one. This forced the king to send him to the school specially meant for the children of royal families, where Veer Bahadur Singh himself was educated and was admired for his politeness, diligence and perseverance. In the school, Prince Shaurya became the leader of the much-disliked notorious gang of unruly princes, making so much ruckus that the school authorities decided to send him back home lock, stock, and barrel with a request not to send him back again. Thus, Prince Shaurya was deprived of usual higher teaching and statecraft; all he turned out to be was a good shot with a variety of guns, which proved to be a bane to him later in life.

This had begun with his acquiring an airgun at the age of fifteen years, which he mastered well in a short time, with the result that he would shoot anything that moved within the range of the gun. He once shot a servant of the palace in one eye, blinding the injured eye. This enraged the otherwise tolerant king so much that he caught hold of Shaurya by the collar, whipped him ten times with a whip, and threw him out of the room.

The boy made neither any sound nor shriek, and there was no sign of pain or grief on his face during whipping; all that was visible was a rage building up, without a drop of a tear in his eyes. He went straight to the royal armory and

picked up a gun, to the horror of every onlooker, none of whom had the courage to restrain him lest he kill them as well. They were expecting something terrible to happen; some even thought that the prince, out of remorse, might shoot himself. Fortunately, nothing so terrible happened; all that the prince did was to shoot the first four pedigreed dogs that were prized possessions of the maharaja. Imported from abroad as puppies with separate attendants for each. The incident so terrified the remaining dogs of the royal kennel that the dogs will run away at the very sight of the prince even when he is bare-handed.

The injured servant was well compensated. The king paying a huge amount as compensation to the injured servant, besides giving him a large tract of cultivable land near his village, enough to support him and his family for generations to come. The subsequent generations, inspite of being well compensated, never pardoned prince Shaurya for his heinous act, and some members of the family even formed a secret group that always wished harm to all the members of the royal family, so much so that when the state was annexed and a general election was held years later, the members of this particular family always set up a candidate against any member of the former royal family inspite of being sure to lose and forfeiting their mandatory deposits.

The prince's cruel streak grew in his teenage years, as he began to kill large animals and birds for no reason. While he was a masterful horseman, capable of taming even the most spirited steed from the king's stables, his skill was overshadowed by his volatile temper.

The king maintained a collection of elite, pedigreed horses for a selective breeding program. One day, after being thrown from the back of one of these priceless animals during a fast ride, the prince flew into a rage. Even though the horse was not at fault, he shot the animal dead on the spot. This impulsive act destroyed a costly steed worth thousands of rupees, whose value lay not just in its performance but in its crucial role in a prestigious breeding line.

The news of the violent, unmanageable behavior of the prince in due time reached the viceroy, who chastened the king with the threat that he would dethrone him and appoint his brother as future ruler. This terrified the king. On return from an audience with the viceroy, he consulted not only his family but also his ministers as well, and came to the conclusion that the only way to calm down the unmanageable prince was to get him married. That was arranged in a hurry, and prince Shaurya was duly married to one of the daughters of a neighboring state with pomp and show befitting both the royal families, with the hope that the prince would calm down following marriage and settle down like any other prince.

The loving parents' hopes were soon dashed. After a brief period of normalcy lasting only a few months, their son, Prince Shaurya, reverted to his former self. He lost interest in his new wife and subjected her to such torment that she ultimately left him, causing a bitter rift between the two royal families that endured for generations. The animosity finally began to thaw years later when a Prince of Shridham Garh and a Princess from the estranged wife's

dynasty met while studying for the ICS in England. They fell in love and decided to marry. Facing vehement opposition from both families, the couple issued an ultimatum: they would convert to Christianity and sever all ties to settle in England as commoners if they were not permitted to wed. Reluctantly, both families consented. While the marriage brought a truce, the relationship between the two dynasties remains strained and fragile to this day.

The failed marriage of the prince did not deter the parents from getting him married a second time, hoping that this would succeed. Prince Shaurya's second marriage to a woman from a less prominent family also ended tragically with her sudden, unexplained death. Prince Shaurya never formally married again, though he had many sexual partners. He developed a habit of teasing and molesting women of any age whenever he had the chance. Over time, he surrounded himself with a gang of henchmen, flatterers, and sycophants, becoming a widely hated and feared figure. His expensive addictions to alcohol and drugs, along with several unnamed diseases, caused his health to decline rapidly.

This left the royal parents in utter agony; the king even once thought of disinheriting Shaurya in favor of his daughter Durgeshnandini. When this news reached the spoilt prince he threatened to assassinate both the king and his daughter to make his way clear to ascend the throne; hence, the king kept on tolerating his activities as far as feasible.

In the era when the phrase "the sun never sets on the British Empire" became common, Britain's expanding control over the Indian subcontinent opened up numerous

opportunities. This prompted a wave of English entrepreneurs, including individuals from diverse professions like the military, law, medicine, engineering, and trade, to try their luck in India. Among them was a notable, small, group of artists who specialized in painting portraits.

At that time, photography was not yet popular even in Europe because the process was clumsy, complicated, and expensive. Instead, wealthy Europeans got their pictures painted mostly in oil, which was considerably expensive as compared to photographs that could not be as huge as an oil-painted picture with a long life.

The photographs were always in black and white, which lacked depth; they were just two-dimensional. This gave way to the appointment of court painters by royal families, nobles, and rich commoners.

These artists depended on patronage of them. Naturally all artists could not have the equal privilege. Many had to struggle to make a living out of it. While some gave up art for other jobs, others sought opportunities in the colonies, with India being the most popular destination. Even in India, success wasn't guaranteed. The lucky few found work with major princely states, while the rest had to seek commissions from smaller rulers, landlords, and the nouveau riche class who were mushrooming across the country.

Amidst this uncertainty, a talented but less fortunate family of artists, the Edwards, arrived in Shridham Garh to try their luck. The family was led by the father, John Edward—later known to the locals as "Johnny Sahib"—who

was a skilled oil portrait painter. His wife, Immaculata Isabella John, was an experienced governess who had taught Western etiquette to young noble women in other royal courts.

They were accompanied by their only son, Harry Edward John, a gifted young man of about twenty who looked considerably younger. Harry was a proficient violinist, an expert marksman, and a capable watercolor artist specializing in nature and birds. Standing just under six feet with a lean but muscular build, he had inherited his father's blond hair and blue eyes. Most notably, he bore a distinctive pink, rupee-sized birthmark on the left side of his forehead that would glow brightly whenever he was angry or laughing.

Impressed by John Edward's portfolio, which included endorsements from nobles. The painter, to prove his ability, presented miniatures of many of the portraits of various rulers that he had painted in the past; the king decided to test him and his wife. He offered John the position of royal painter and his wife, Immaculata, Immaculata the role of governess, pending a trial.

John was given three days to paint a uniformed bodyguard. He began by meticulously sketching the guard and noting details of the uniform. Meanwhile, Immaculata met the queen, who was so charmed by her appearance that she was immediately hired to tutor the princess, Durgeshnandini. Their son, Harry, was appointed as John's assistant. Exceeding expectations, John finished the stunningly lifelike portrait in just two days and was confirmed as court artist.

Over the next four years, the artist became a fixture at court, painting portraits of the king, his family, and numerous courtiers until he was practically a courtier himself. During this time, his wife, Immaculata, tutored Princess Durga and other young women of the royal house. Her lessons on the piano and Western manners became so popular that some married women of the court also joined, paying extra for her services, which significantly boosted the family's finances. Under her guidance, Durga grew proficient in English, learned to sing English songs, and became a competent piano player.

Meanwhile, their handsome son Harry, who had unrestricted access to the palace as his father's assistant, captivated many of the young royal women. They would stare at him, some boldly and others secretly, and sought his company. Harry obliged them whenever possible, taking care to remain discreet and avoid causing trouble. He by now has picked up sufficient Hindustani to communicate with them and a few Hindi songs to impress them.

Durga was openly captivated by Harry, fascinated by his physique and the way his birthmark seemed to change color with his mood. His diverse talents as a painter, a violinist, and a skilled marksman only deepened her admiration. She was especially enchanted by his music and his vibrant watercolor paintings. Once Harry painted a dancing peacock for her, she was so enchanted that she had it framed and hung in her bedroom.

As their mutual interest grew, they overcame the language barrier; Durga became proficient in English, while Harry learned the local dialect. Seizing an opportunity,

Durga asked Harry to teach her the violin, an instrument she preferred over the piano. For Harry, who had long admired the princess from a respectable distance, this was a welcome chance to be near her.

Under his guidance, she became a skilled violinist and also discovered her own artistic talent, often sketching Harry in secret. Their shared lessons fostered a deep intimacy that soon became the subject of gossip throughout the palace and the town. Durga's grandmother confronted her about the relationship, warning her that getting involved with an assistant artist of a different faith and country was like "playing with fire." The princess, however, dismissed this as the typical worry of a grandmother for her granddaughter of marriageable age.

One person who abhorred this intimacy was none other than prince Shaurya, who loved and adored Durga so much so that he could sacrifice his right arm for Durga if she wished so, and if he had his way, he would not allow her to be married and sent away. He disliked Harry so much that he occasionally surreptitiously spoiled his paintings and made the violin out of tune. That became so common that Durga once asked her brother, whom she loved like anything in the world, to refrain from such nefarious activity in vain.

Thus, verbal clashes between Prince Shaurya and Harry became common. Prince Shaurya would often challenge Harry to target shooting; most of the time Harry would excel over the prince. Many times Harry hit the bull's-eye eight out of ten times, while the best score of the prince was never better than six out of ten, in spite of his repeatedly changing the guns. Whenever he failed to hit the mark, he would be

thrown into an uncontrollable rage and even destroy the gun only to import yet another new version of the same gun. On the contrary to this, Harry always had to stick to his ancient medium-bore rifle handed down to him as a family heirloom that was the only gun available to him. He was too financially handicapped to change guns at the drop of a hat. He was ambidextrous and could shoot equally well from any shoulder; the prince lacked this skill in spite of his practicing in private to master it.

The enmity between the two became so grave that the prince decided to eliminate Harry. He kept on looking for a suitable opportunity. The desire to eliminate Harry came unexpectedly to him one day when he found both his sister and Harry in too intimate situations in a bower. He was so enraged that for the first time in his life he slapped his beloved sister and asked his henchmen to take her to the palace and keep her locked up with appropriate guards so no one could help her to get away. He then turned to Harry and took up a feisty cuff, where he was found to be no match for Harry. This infuriated the prince so much that he called his four henchmen to overpower Harry, tie his hands and feet, gag his mouth, blindfold him, and keep him locked in a room without food or water, ensuring complete isolation and secrecy. Which they did with alacrity, leaving a man constantly as a guard.

After this, he returned to the palace and shouted at Durga, threatening to kill Harry if she did not sever all ties with him. He further threatened to have Harry's parents dismissed from their jobs—an act that would doom them

financially and likely lead to their eviction from their state-provided home.

The Prince's outburst soon attracted the attention of the entire household, becoming the primary subject of gossip for days. Some ladies even claimed they had anticipated such a calamity from the moment the Princess began her violin lessons and grew intimate with Harry. They openly disparaged her choice, noting that she could have married a "real" prince without batting an eyelid—someone who would eventually make her a queen.

Next, the Prince instructed his henchmen to dump their victim into a closed horse-drawn coach. They were to drive to the hunting lodge under the cover of night to ensure the incident remained a secret. Once there, Harry was to be locked in a room without food or water.

Two days later, Prince Shaurya arrived at the lodge on a fast, sturdy horse. He burst into the room and began a brutal assault on Harry, who lay immobilized—his hands and feet bound, his mouth gagged, and his eyes blindfolded. Shaurya kicked the young man repeatedly; Harry, now little more than a "bundle of bones and muscle," stood no chance against the fury of the enraged Prince.

Still unsatisfied, Shaurya struck him repeatedly with the butt of his gun until Harry lost consciousness. For a fleeting moment, the Prince considered shooting him, but better judgment prevailed. He left the room to steady his nerves with a strong drink, contemplating his final move to eliminate Harry forever.

On subsidence of his rage, he called his men to do away with Harry any way they liked and dispose of the body the way they thought proper, with a warning that the matter should remain confined among them only.

After some time, the men reported gleefully that the victim had been strangled to death. Now they faced the riddle of how to dispose of the body. The henchmen suggested throwing it into the nearby fast-flowing river, but the Prince rejected this. He rightly reasoned that the body would eventually float to the surface, where it might be discovered by passersby or attract vultures.

To ensure all evidence of Harry was erased, he modified the plan. First, they stripped the body and burned every stitch of clothing, with the exception of the gold chain and cross around his neck. The men removed the jewelry and handed it to the Prince, who decided to keep it as a souvenir—a trophy of his "victory" over Harry. Upon returning home, he locked the chain in his personal vault, hidden from every eye in the palace.

The henchmen, after burning the clothes, threw the ashes in the river, thus leaving no trace of the victim. The next step was to tie the body to a large stone, big enough to sink the corpse to the unfathomable depth, not allowing the body to come up, thus erasing all signs of the crime.

Once the heinous crime was over, the prince gave each of the men five gold sovereigns to keep their mouths shut and leave the state by the next day, never to return at the threat of death. The partners in crime nodded their heads in unison and left for the capital to collect their belongings and

families to go to British India in separate villages. It may be just a coincidence that all were found dead mysteriously within a fortnight after their departure from the state. The lifeless body of the then chowkidar, who had secretly seen the crime enacted, also received one sovereign for not spilling.

The bodies were found in the garden without any visible cause of death, leaving no evidence or witnesses to the crime. Upon returning home, the prince and his henchmen spread a rumor that Harry had fled to British India to save his life after being severely beaten. Harry's parents, however, saw through this blatant lie and lodged a formal complaint with the King. In response, they received only hollow solace and assurances that the state would do everything to find their son.

The King secretly suspected that the culprit was his own son, Prince Shaurya. Failing to receive justice, the parents continued their search, running from pillar to post to no avail. They even sought help from the British police, who flatly refused to interfere in the internal affairs of a princely state. After several months, heartbroken and defeated, the parents left Shridham Garh forever.

5

Me, the Prince, and the Coy Girl

I was born into a family that was rich on both my maternal and paternal sides. Of them, my maternal side was far richer than my paternal side; the former was headed by my grandmother, Smt. Prabha Devi. My father, Devvrat, was the only son of Prabha Devi, who had been given half of her huge wealth to head a separate line of business independently. He already had inherited my paternal grandfather's flourishing business. Hence, I could afford the best education in any prime institute in India or abroad, financed either by my father or grandmother. My father would have liked to finance my education independently.

I did my graduation in geology and hydrology from a reputed institute in India and was sent to do my post-graduation in England, my father insisting on bearing the cost himself without any contribution from my grandmother with a few riders: that I would return to India after completion of the course of my choice, I would not be extending my stay abroad for more than five years at a stretch, I would marry only an Indian girl of any caste and creed, preferably in India, and I would not be extravagant and would manage my life within the money sent by my father while at the same time saving enough for emergencies.

My grandmother, Prabha Devi, who raised me and was much wealthier than her son secretly, assured me that I

could always rely on her for unlimited funds whenever needed, without my father's knowledge.

When in England I happened to meet a boy of my age and height with a brown complexion lighter than my dark brown colour. In India he would be considered to be a fair-complexioned youth, while I would be considered to be dusky, an adjective not liked by my grandmother back in India. She considered me to be fair enough to be an Indian; she considered me to be good-looking but not as handsome as her late husband.

The boy I was talking about has sharp features of a Greek god with slightly curled hair and a well-shaven face, and, to me, he seemed to be different from other Indian boys. He was doing his post-graduation in economics, social science, and management. He was known either as Adi or Dev.

He wore nondescript clothes and mostly traveled on public transport, his favorite mode being London's famous double-decker. Incidentally, this was also the preferred mode of travel for me. We both liked to travel in the first row of the upper deck, which gave a panoramic view of the streets of London. Many a time we traveled together and dined in modest restaurants; he didn't mind sharing the bill with me. The other thing common between us was our utter dislike for the English people in general and the administration in particular. Both of us realized that we were treated as second-grade citizens in spite of our intelligence and status back home.

Each university had more than one debating club; the most common subject among them was the advocacy of independence for British colonies. Adi refrained from joining any of them, despite my pressuring him to do so. I realized why he kept away from such clubs only when I discovered his true identity quite some time later. Another thing that puzzled me was his occasional disappearance for a few days without an obvious reason, only to reappear nonchalantly. On repeated inquiry, he reluctantly said that he sometimes had to go to Vienna to see his grandparents, who were lodged in different sanatoria for various chronic illnesses. This, again, was perplexing to me.

This lasted until one day I found him wearing a three-piece suit, traveling in a Rolls-Royce driven by a uniformed white chauffeur and a uniformed white guard. Finding me walking on the curb to catch public transport, he asked the chauffeur to stop and, to the surprise of the two white men, stepped out of the car and invited me to ride with him. I initially politely declined, but it was to no avail; he held the door open for me himself. Only then did I discover that he was not an ordinary postgraduate student, but a prince from an Indian princely state called Shridham Garh and the heir apparent to the throne. His full name was Kumar Bahadur, Shriman Aditya Narayan Singh Dev Ji.

The prince was friendlier to me than the rest of the students. We were so intimate that people doubted our sexuality and passed oblique remarks about us, unaware that we both had our own separate social circles. Adi's circle naturally comprised those from the higher echelons: royal families, nobility, business tycoons, and many Indian princes

who were either heirs apparent or cousins with no chance of ascending the throne. This latter group led a lavish life, indistinguishable from those who would one day be kings. They met in exclusive clubs and costly restaurants to wine, dine, dance, and womanize.

I was not surprised when Adi told me he had learned to master various firearms, horse riding, skiing, flying, and Western music. In contrast, I could only afford to master riding, rowing, and the handling of firearms.

Adi, besides the above group, also had two distinct groups in which he moved. The first consisted of lesser mortals from rich families in India, like me, and those from the upper middle class in India who have come to England to study for Indian civil services, law, engineering, or medicine to have better prospects back in India.

The other group consisted of elite members from royal families of princely states in India, which could be called a conclave of princes belonging to different ethnic backgrounds, colors, and creeds who preferred to lead luxurious life, not minding staying in England for an indefinite time so long as they had financial backup from their states in India. In contrast to us, who have no intention to live in England for a period more than strictly required. Which was a rider from my father while funding my education that restricted my stay in England to five years at a stretch.

I belonged to a student group whose finances came primarily from two sources: allowances sent by parents in India, or stipends provided by either the British government

or Indian princely states that sponsored their overseas education. It was among this second group that I noticed a girl named Suhasini.

She possessed a simple beauty, marked by a dusky Indian complexion and captivating, doe-like eyes. Suhasini stood out because she exclusively wore Indian attire—a sharp contrast to the other girls who favored Western clothing and short hairstyles. Suhasini often endured teasing for her traditional choices. She took pride in her thick, luxuriant hair, which she wore in a waist-length plait and refused to trim to the fashionable shoulder-length. For formal events, her preferred outfit was an emerald green Indian silk saree, and her only adornment was a modest gold chain with a sapphire pendant. I was completely mesmerized by her appearance, and after only a few meetings, I fell deeply in love, a feeling that only intensified with time.

For my part, I usually dressed in casual clothes, favoring a sapphire-yellow shirt and black trousers—a combination I liked most. Suhasini spoke softly and rarely looked boys in the eye. She seemed unaware of her sweet smile or my growing affection for her. Many times, I caught her surreptitiously looking at me with amazement and, perhaps, admiration. She was more comfortable talking to me and Adi than to anyone else, avoiding those who were extravagant, boisterous, or prone to pranks.

She excelled in her studies, though law was her favorite subject. I often waited outside her college to escort her back to her hostel, yet I could never find the courage to ask her out alone. She never objected to going with me if Adi accompanied us, which made me wonder if she was actually

in love with him. Our proximity to her was envied by several other girls who coveted our company—though they were usually more partial to Adi than to me.

Suhasini possessed a beautiful voice, honed by six years of formal training in Indian classical music. Her talent made her a frequent performer at the musical gatherings common within the Indian community in England. I made sure to attend every performance—not because I had a discerning ear for music or a talent for singing, but simply for the chance to be near her. She remained steadfast in her refusal to learn Western music or dance, viewing dancing with boys as contrary to Indian culture. Staunch in her beliefs and religious rituals, she kept a small sandalwood idol of Lord Ganesh in her room.

Though I could not take her out, I tried to be with her as much as possible, talking about all the subjects under the sky, except my love for her. I was not sure of her feelings about me. Whenever I was alone thinking of her, I would play the game "She loves me, she loves me not." The result of which more often went in my favour.

Her platonic proximity to Adi was probably more political than anything else; both of them abhorred British people, which I too shared. The friendship between Adi and Suhasini lasted for the rest of their lives. The other common factor between Adi and Suhasini was that both were loners and introverts. I would have been happier if she was a little closer to me as well; however, there was no rivalry between me and the prince regarding our friendship with Suhasini. I still remember how I craved to touch her but refrained because she might not like it. We three had a common

dislike for frequent winter drizzles and the bone-chilling cold of English winters. We missed the scorching summers and torrents of monsoon back in India, collecting falling green mangoes after summer evening storms, which Adi never experienced due to his aristocracy, which barred him from enjoying such middle-class pleasure.

Suhasini was the daughter of a retired schoolteacher in one of many princely states in India and came to England on a stipend from the Maharaja of this particular state to pursue humanities and law. She passed her law with credit and was called to the bar. Besides practicing law, she also took up the test for the elite examination of ICS and passed with laurels, that included riding. Unfortunately, she could not be selected only for her gender. Later the service was opened to Indian ladies too, who proved to be as efficient as their male counterparts.

I developed so much interest in her that I wished to marry her. I was sure that my parents would not have any objection because she was Indian and Hindu; I was not sure about my grandmother's reaction to this only because of her financial and social status. I was confident that I could win over my grandmother if I persisted. I even thought of taking Adi's help in letting her know my feelings for her. Which I kept delaying, resulting in my failure to express my feelings to her.

I still was not courageous enough to tell her my liking for her and propose to her. Then came an unexpected cable from her mentor, the Maharaja Bahadur Sir Pratapaditya Singh Dev Ji of Jaigarh. Stating that he wished her to return home to join his services. The wish of the maharaja was as

good as an order, so she had no choice but to return home, abiding by the order. Which she reluctantly conveyed to me and Adi that sent a sense of grief throughout my body. I could not sleep for many nights and always thought of expressing my affection to her at the first chance, which I could not do due to apprehension of rejection.

Within a week she collected her documents and disposed off her belongings except for the bare minimum.

Inspite of her preparation to be back home, I still could not find the courage to propose to her, and she left unceremoniously. I did not have the heart to see her off at the airport, though I had purchased a 14-carat gold ring with an emerald at the center matching the color of her favorite saree to present to her and propose right in the airport. My failure to express my desire to marry her sent me into a long period of depression.

After an arduous week-long journey to India utilizing air, rail, road, and sea, Suhasini reached her destination and had an audience with her mentor, who was so impressed with her achievements abroad that he immediately appointed her Head of the Law Department. To the chagrin of those already handling the department. None of the persons handling the department had any knowledge of prevailing law, nor did they try to learn it. However, she quickly discovered the department was in crisis. The staff was inefficient, lacked proper legal training, and openly resented working under a foreign-educated woman, whom they deemed unfit for such complex management.

Beyond the personnel issues, Suhasini found the records in shambles. There were two dozen cases pending across the judicial spectrum—from lower courts to the Supreme Court—including an inheritance dispute that had been stuck in the Privy Council for two generations. Whether the state was the petitioner or the respondent, it was bleeding money to an "army" of external legal professionals. Suhasini realized these advocates and solicitors were hand-in-glove with the internal staff and government officials, deliberately delaying procedures to siphon off public funds.

She decided to sort out the matter herself and settled more than three-fourths of the cases outside the courts by every means available to her, including much-tried and practiced bribery. In the rest of the cases, she appeared herself irrespective of the level of the court to plead and was successful in getting judgment in favor of the state in all cases, thus becoming the most favored official of the ruler in the state. The Maharaja was so pleased as to appoint her as second diwan, that was not liked by many. He bestowed upon her a limousine and gave her unrestricted access to his entire stock of horses. Furthermore, she was allocated a residence commensurate with the position of Diwan, the state's highest official.

I lost contact with her after she returned to India. I never attempted to reach out—though it would not have been difficult—because I feared she might not approve of it. At the time, I also wondered if she had preferred to marry Adi instead of me. That presumption, I later realized, was entirely wrong.

It was only in the second half of my life that I found that their relationship was purely platonic. They had remained close despite the vast gap in their social origins: he was a prince, while she was the daughter of a schoolteacher. However, her eventual rise to the second-highest post in the princely state of Jaigarh naturally elevated her standing, taking her far beyond her humble beginnings to a position of high administrative power.

Adi's presence in England offered me some relief when Suhasini had departed. I would endlessly talk about Suhasini with Adi, yet keep my desire to marry her as a close secret in my aching heart; no doubt Adi was a little perplexed with my strange behavior. He could faintly suspect that I was in fact in deep love with Suhasini and perhaps wanted to marry her.

The solace of having Adi's company was short-lived because, after the completion of his various trainings, he was asked by his father, Maharaja Bahadur Samarendra Singh Dev Ji, who had been ruling the state of Shridham Garh for three decades, to be back home to learn statecraft and administration from him and his selected group of ministers, making him aware that he was his heir to the throne and would have to run the state affairs after he has ascended the throne.

Six months after Suhasini's departure from England came the inevitable departure of the prince. This was yet another grief to me; I had yet another three months to complete my courses in various institutes that would make me an expert in geology, mining, and hydrology.

Unfortunately, things took a dramatic turn in the form of the independence of India, dividing it into two parts: a larger India and a small, fractured, truncated Pakistan. It was a joyous moment for 300 million persons on both sides of the line dividing them, but a tragedy for another 10 million involved in the greatest migration of population from one country to the other in the world. There was a small number of people comprising the rulers of the princely states; they were the rajas, maharajas, and nawabs of the princely states. To them independence of India came as a thunderbolt when the newly formed government, by an executive order, annexed all the princely states, merging them with existing provinces. This changed the rajas, maharajas, and nawabs from sovereign to subject; they were given a paltry sum as a privy purse and some fringe benefits. Many of the rulers, in anticipation of such an eventuality, had either invested well abroad or stashed large sums and costly jewelry in Swiss banks. The rest were left to fend for themselves. It took them a few years to get adjusted to the changed situation. Kumar Aditya Narayan Singh Dev, who was then the ruler of the state of Shridham Garh, had invested well abroad in the form of bonds and debentures and put cash and jewelry in various banks in Switzerland. He even transferred the ownership of many landed properties and industries owned by the state of Shridham Garh to the names of his family members and close relatives loyal to him, who he believed would not cheat him; however, in later years, he found that his presumption was wrong. In a few instances his so-called loyal relatives proved to be otherwise; the central government was at a loss, not being able to impound the fortune of the former rulers that has either been put in

banks abroad or the properties in India transferred to the relatives of the princely rulers with all its might backed by the socialism to which they vowed.

The first general election was held in 1951-1952. This gave former rulers a chance to turn the tables by joining the political bandwagon. Political parties, searching for candidates with a guaranteed path to victory, favored these former rulers, as they still held a strong grip on their erstwhile subjects. The rulers did not miss this opportunity; they contested the elections with the confidence that they would win, and their presumptions proved correct. As expected, most won by a thumping majority.

Many of the most influential and wealthy rulers secured berths in various ministries. Maharaja Pratapaditya, in addition to running for office himself, fielded Suhasini in the fray. He contested a seat in Parliament while Suhasini ran for the State Assembly; both won by massive majorities. Suhasini was subsequently appointed as a junior minister in the state cabinet, while the Maharaja chose to remain a member of Parliament, wielding considerable influence over the ministry.

In the years that followed when politicians developed the habit of changing political parties for better pasture. Suhasini refused to change her original party in inspite of its losing the election. That put Suhasini in party opposed to the ruling She inspite of being in a losing party, won all the elections she contested without losing her popularity among the public, ultimately becoming a cabinet minister in the central government ruled by her party.

Surprisingly, Aditya Narayan also chose the same path, ending as a cabinet minister in the center never losing any election he contested without changing alliances. A time came when Suhasini and Adi were both senior ministers in the central cabinet.

Inspite of their being cabinet ministers, both kept their hobby of riding. To fulfill their hobby, they joined a prestigious riding club along with Suhasini's husband, who rarely took part in competition. Suhasini and Adi were often seen cantering on the ground to gather. They would occasionally engage in friendly racing on long runs. Was it just coincidence that Suhasini always won the race, or did Adi deliberately allowed her to win!. The happenings were so common that some of the tabloids took it as a scandal and published derogatory remarks against both. At this stage the prime minister, who was a father figure, thought it better to step in and, under the pretext of security, asked them to refrain from it, which they abided.

6

Adieu to the Second Friend

The departure of Suhasini has left me pretty sad; the only solace was that Adi was still in England. This bliss did not last long, as his inevitable departure came to be true; Adi had been sent to England to learn the western methods of governing along with other subjects like elementary law, economics, and management and to implement them to rule the state of his origin back in India. As if it was not sufficient to manage a larger state Shridham Garh he still needed to be taught the actual statecraft prevalent in India from his father and a select group of experienced ministers. To fulfill his obligation, he said goodbye to England in six months.

The unfortunate day of his departure arrived, and I made the deliberate choice to see him off at the airport. This was in stark contrast to my reluctance to see Suhasini off when she had left for India just months earlier. The airport was crowded with Adi's friends and well-wishers—a mix of high-ranking princes from the conclave and common acquaintances.

Instead of approaching him directly, I chose to stay discreetly at the back of the large gathering. However, this didn't stop Adi from spotting me. Ignoring everyone else, he came straight over to where I was standing.

He shook my hand and drew me into a prolonged hug. His voice heavy with emotion, he implored me to keep in

touch once I finally returned to India. I was genuinely taken aback to see tears clouding his eyes and his lips trembling with unexpressed sadness. My own vision blurred as tears welled up, and I quickly wiped them away.

To avoid any further emotional distress or embarrassment, I hurried out of the airport before he even boarded the plane. This painful farewell marked the second major heartbreak I had experienced in a very short time.

The departure of Adi, closely following that of my unspoken love within a six-month period, precipitated a severe period of grief and depression. Initially, I sought comfort in alcohol, but quickly recognized the potential for dependence and promptly ceased the practice before it became a habit. I instead spent more time in sports and spending sufficient time in studying text books. Regaining my focus took some time, but I successfully channeled my energy back into my studies, culminating in my passing the post-graduate examination with a commendable grade. This qualification rendered me eligible for positions in both private and government sectors in England or India. Ultimately, I chose to join the British Mining Enterprise—an English firm—to gain valuable practical experience in the fields of geology and hydrology.

The British Mining Enterprise (BME), seeking better returns than its current worldwide operations, decided to explore the potential for mining various minerals in Central Africa. The company planned to investigate in deposits of copper, cobalt, iron ore, and rare earth minerals—and potentially of gold, diamonds, and chromium—before

making a significant investment in the region, which was then a popular destination for European explorers. The company was not satisfied about the result of its already present small team in Africa.

7

The African Saga

Upon completion of my apprenticeship with British Mining Enterprise in England, I was commissioned by them to undertake a comprehensive mineral survey in Africa. While the remuneration offered seems to be too generous—luring me to accept the job, which initially appeared generous—it ultimately proved inadequate considering the arduous and complex nature of the project, which was situated in a remote location far from modern society.

Access to the location was restricted to an arduous overland route from the north, requiring passage through the Sahara and sub-Saharan deserts, interspersed with tropical and sub-tropical jungle. With no available modern transport, travel relied solely on camel-drawn carriages, makeshift river crossings, or foot. The journey presented significant inherent dangers, including threats of attack from hostile local groups, who were supposed to be cannibals that preferred to burn the victim on the stake; exposure to wild animals; and the risk of contracting infectious diseases.

The alternative route involved a three-day journey by steamer down the Nile River, followed by two days of trekking on foot, and concluding with a river crossing by canoe to reach the destination. The village was the hub where the legendary doctor, missionary, and explorer David Livingstone worked for three decades before he was presumed dead.

In the absence of any news of him for five years, *The New York Herald* commissioned Henry Morton Stanley—a renowned investigative journalist and an explorer with extensive knowledge of uncharted Africa—to find out the truth. After a tedious journey, Stanley reached Livingstone, found a pale, emaciated man, and famously remarked: “Dr. Livingstone, I presume?”

Dr. David Livingstone, a medical graduate from Glasgow with a strong religious calling, joined the London Missionary Society, which was dedicated to spreading Christianity among non-Christian populations worldwide, including the then-uncharted regions of Central Africa. The mission was seeking a young, enthusiastic explorer with a medical background to fulfill their ambitions in remote Africa.

Having recently graduated in medicine and surgery from the University of Glasgow, Livingstone readily accepted the missionary post. He arrived at Port Elizabeth, South Africa, via the southern route in late 1840 at the age of 27. At the time, he possessed a functional knowledge of general Western medicine and specialized expertise in tropical medicine.

Livingstone was deeply inspired by the missionary Robert Moffat, who had spent fifty years in South Africa spreading Christianity, fighting human trafficking (then a lucrative European business), and opposing systemic racial segregation. Livingstone later married Moffat’s eldest daughter, Mary.

Livingstone's mission focused on three key areas: converting tribal communities to Christianity, attending to their medical needs, and providing education. This final task proved challenging, as many tribes believed that receiving a Western education would prevent them from reaching heaven after death.

A major personal goal for Livingstone was to locate the source of the Nile River, which was a significant geographical mystery at the time. This quest necessitated traversing vast expanses of dense tropical forest and crossing multiple regions populated by various tribes, who were often engaged in skirmishes over dominance. The journey was further complicated by the presence of wild animals and endemic communicable diseases. With no modern means of transport, travel was conducted entirely on foot. Communication relied solely on runners—a system that often took weeks due to difficult terrain, inclement weather, and illness. Messages frequently failed to reach their recipients because of a runner's death or incapacitation.

After arduous exploration, he discovered the mighty Victoria Falls and Lake Victoria, the latter being the source of the Nile. The portion of the river originating there is known as the White Nile. During its course, numerous rivers of varying sizes join the White Nile before it finally empties into the Mediterranean Sea. Livingstone also mapped the origins and courses of many other rivers, tributaries, and waterfalls.

Stanley tried his best to persuade Dr. Livingstone to return to England with him to recover his health and share his discoveries—findings that solved many mysteries of the

"Dark Continent." However, Stanley's efforts were in vain, as Livingstone refused to leave.

Although Livingstone did not accompany Stanley at that time, he returned to England in 1856 and published his famous treatise, *Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa*, under the patronage of the Royal Geographical Society. The book became an overnight success and remains a cornerstone of research regarding African geography, jungles, wildlife, and the environment to this day.

Livingstone returned once more to his beloved place of work, only to die there in 1873 in what is now part of Zambia. It was his wish to be buried at the site of his labors, or at the very least, that his heart be buried there. While it is a matter of legend whether his heart was truly interred in Africa, historical records confirm that his embalmed body was shipped to England and buried in Westminster Abbey.

To reach my place of work in Africa, I decided to take the northern route. From England, I traveled to Cairo by regular shipping liner and then up the River Nile by a smaller steamer. The journey was monotonous and arduous. The steamer was actually a cargo ship with only a few cabins for passengers; I had selected it for financial reasons, as I was headed to a God-forsaken place for an uncertain duration.

During this time, I caught glimpses of the Nile hippo, the mighty Nile crocodile, and other animals I had not seen before in India or Europe. The journey took three days and led me through various African countries. The vegetation and weather changed every two hundred miles, ranging from the greenery of Egypt to the semi-arid and arid landscapes of

the Sahara and sub-Saharan regions, eventually returning to lush evergreen tropical forests. On the third day, I was dropped off at a riverine port and told to walk ten miles, only to cross yet another river by rowboat to reach my final destination.

The steamer's captain—an experienced, jovial, and helpful Egyptian sailor—took charge of my arrangements. From a crowd of a dozen men, he secured two local porters to carry my luggage and negotiated their wages, which included food and a guaranteed place to stay the night. He ensured they would not have to navigate the return journey through the forest after dark, as the first leg of our journey would take a full day on foot. He also cautioned me about the region's dangers, specifically lurking wild animals and rampant, deadly diseases like malaria.

The captain further informed me that there was likely an English priest, who also happened to be a trained doctor, at my destination. I could always fall back on his services in case of ill health; the local people called him "the second Livingstone" for his devotion to missionary work, treating patients, and educating them as much as possible.

The couple, referred to by the local population as the 'second Livingstones,' had dedicated over two decades to the area when I first encountered them. Like David Livingstone before them, they had committed to living and working in Central Africa for the rest of their lives.

The doctor's wife, though not a physician herself, was a trained paramedic with extensive experience in women's health—specifically difficult deliveries. Having also completed

a course in anesthesia, she served as her husband's anesthetist, relying solely on chloroform, as it was the only option available. Interestingly, the local population required significantly higher doses of chloroform than Europeans, a disparity attributed to their heavy consumption of home-brewed alcohol. In addition to treating minor injuries, the surgeon often faced the challenge of performing emergency operations under limited lighting, relying only on natural light or a torch.

The couple had a son, George Cunningham, who studied medicine in England on a church stipend. This funding was contingent upon a binding agreement requiring him to serve India's tribal communities for five years following graduation. After earning his degree in medicine and surgery, George also obtained a diploma in tropical medicine to prepare for diseases prevalent in the tropics that were not covered during his training in England.

Upon completing his education, he was deployed to a remote tribal region in India. This necessitated an arduous week-long journey by sea, rail, and road. After three days at sea, he arrived in Bombay. From there, he traveled two days by rail to central India, alighting at a station with a meager platform. Finally, he endured a two-day journey by bullock cart to reach a settlement consisting of only a few huts.

One of the huts functioned as both a makeshift dispensary and a church, overseen by a priest who doubled as a paramedic. Aside from preaching christianity, he shouldered the medical responsibility for a population scattered across twenty square miles. The priest welcomed the arrival of a trained professional with relief and a beaming

smile, unaware that the young doctor was woefully unprepared for such a challenging environment—one where the locals placed more faith in traditional folk healers, known as *Baigas*, than in modern science. The *Baigas* held a firm grip on the tribal community regarding medical treatment, often incorporating witchcraft into their practices. Emboldened by this influence, they frequently challenged the doctor and the paramedic; however, modern medicine ultimately prevailed.

The newly qualified doctor, for his part, was appalled by the primitive state of the medical facilities and instantly developed a deep disdain for both the location and his new role. This feeling persisted for almost a year. Gradually, however, he found his patients friendly enough to be called "lovely" and began to like his work.

By his third year in the job, he was in love with the place and the people; by the following year, he had decided to settle there permanently. He built a modest residence-cum-charitable hospital with four indoor beds and a modest operating theater. The location of his choice was equidistant from the states of Shridham Garh and Dharamgarh. He maintained a good rapport with both royal families, eventually becoming their consulting physician. His place of work was near the site where an aristocratic Englishman would, years later, start another charitable homeopathy dispensary in a different guise.

After a few years, the doctor married a tribal girl who had completed her matriculation. He sent her to a Christian medical college to train as a Licensed Medical Practitioner (LMP), with a specialization in midwifery. While she was

training, he registered for a course in emergency surgery management for difficult and resource-deprived environments.

Over the years, the doctor gained such deep trust and confidence from the tribal community that they would wait for days just to be examined by him, even when his wife assured them their ailments were mild. This preference was likely due to his foreign training and his status as a foreigner.

Every year, Dr. George Cunningham traveled to Africa to visit his father, Senior Dr. Cunningham—a legendary figure revered as the 'second Livingstone.' These journeys offered George a necessary respite from his grueling work in India while providing a unique opportunity to master tribal healthcare in resource-poor settings from his far more experienced father in the matter.

He was often struck by the epidemiological parallels between the two continents; despite the thousands of miles separating them, the disease patterns were nearly identical, with the notable exceptions of river blindness, sleeping sickness, and yellow fever, which were absent in India. Tragically, the lack of vaccines in both regions meant epidemics that were frequent and devastating. Furthermore, despite their expertise and best preventative efforts, both father and son frequently fell victim to the very waterborne and parasitic infections they fought to treat. This also applied to their families and persons working with them.

After thanking the captain and receiving good wishes from him, I started my first journey on foot in the African forest. There was hardly anything that could be called a road;

all that was present was a narrow trail mostly travel by wild animals and rarely by human travelers like me, that many times passed over rivulets and unbridged creeks. After ten hours of tiring walking, we reached the bank of the river that the kind captain had mentioned.

It was a hamlet with several thatch-roofed houses that offered lodging. Travelers could choose private rooms for sufficient privacy or opt for what was an ancient form of the modern-day "dormitory," where four to five travelers shared a larger hall with hardly any privacy. The private rooms were significantly more expensive than shared accommodation. I chose the eatery that appeared least filthy to spend the night.

My chosen room provided a bed and food, with optional amenities like a mosquito net and boiled water, or more extravagant options such as alcohol and companions for the night, all for an extra fee. I limited my choice to food, boiled water, and a bed with a mosquito net. That prevented the buzzing mosquitoes from reaching me but not the bedbugs that were aplenty in the bed, who feasted on my blood, preventing me from sound sleep.

The porters, at my expense, enjoyed a hearty meal and ample alcohol—luxuries they hadn't had in days. They chose to sleep on the floor outside my room without nets.

The following morning, I paid the porters their wages, supplemented by a generous tip, before they loaded my possessions into a rowboat that was already overcrowded with passengers that made the journey precarious. The river crossing took about an hour, landing me on the far bank,

from which my headquarters, Ville Livingston, was yet another five-mile walk away.

I completed the final leg of the journey with a second pair of porters, who deposited my belongings inside the office of the British mining enterprise. Upon completing the delivery, they immediately demanded an audacious tip—an amount equal to the entire wage we had settled upon just to reach the destination. Their justification was the uncertainty of finding another passenger to hire them for the return trip to the river.

Ville Livingston was a small village with two *pucca* buildings. One, bearing the signboard of the British mining enterprise, was to be my residence, office, and makeshift laboratory. The other was the residence-cum-hospital of the doctor whom the captain of the boat had spoken about. There, I was met by a short, unshaven white man in crumpled clothes, welcoming me with a friendly smile. I immediately realized that he was the 'Second Livingston' described by the steamer captain earlier. I was tempted to use Stanley's now-famous phrase, 'Dr. Livingstone, I presume.'

Before I could say anything, he shook my hand warmly and coined a new phrase: 'Welcome to nowhere from everywhere'—a greeting I had not heard before. He introduced himself as Dr. Henry Cunningham from Edinburgh.

The nearest post office was twenty miles away, and the main hospital was 100 miles away. They were joined by a partially metalled road without any bridge or culvert on any

creek or rivulet, which were plentiful. A rail link was a far-fetched dream."

The settlement also boasted a tin-roofed church with a modified pulpit for the doctor, who acted as a priest to deliver the sermon every Sunday—not by choice, but by compulsion. Many priests in the past had come to this God-forsaken church and left in dismay. Surprisingly, there was a piano that the doctor had brought from England with utmost care, along with tons of medical equipment and medicine mostly acquired through donations. The doctor did not allow anyone to lay hands on his precious instrument, lest it be put out of tune; thus, the only person to play it was the doctor himself.

The doctor had been a celebrated pianist before joining the church and opting to work in Central Africa as a missionary. Besides the piano, there were two other musical instruments: a bamboo flute and a pair of small drums similar to tablas, both played by Black boys whom the doctor had taught himself. His wife occasionally participated by playing the violin. The doctor had also trained ten boys and girls to sing hymns, having noticed that many of the tribal youth had voices well-suited for singing.

The kind doctor even learned tribal music and the steps of group dances, in which he often indulged. He owned a battery-operated cine projector, and every Sunday evening, he screened a Hindi film that attracted many spectators. The show was interrupted by two or three intermissions, which he used to show missionary materials glorifying Christianity and the advantages of the faith, including free education at the mission school in a nearby town."

The ground floor of the two-story masonry building with the signboard served as an office and store; it also provided living quarters for two Indian families who were already employed by the company. I was assigned two rooms and a kitchen on the first floor, along with an attendant who acted as my housekeeper and cook. Groceries had to be purchased from a village market ten miles away, which was held every seven days.

It was not uncommon to hear the roar of lions and the cries of other wild animals. I was warned that panthers and smaller carnivores frequently visited the area in search of food. The panthers had a particular liking for domesticated dogs; consequently, only two dogs in the locality had survived their attacks. Out of natural instinct, these survivors made it a habit to seek shelter behind doors immediately after sunset.

There was no electricity or piped water in the village. Water was carried by porters from a nearby river, which was known to be infested with the parasites that cause river blindness and sleeping sickness.

The office was manned by two persons: one was designated as superintendent and the other as his assistant. Both claimed to be well-versed in mining and geology; in fact, they had no formal training in either. Initially, they did not appreciate my appointment as the head of the office. However, within a fortnight, I proved I had no intention of lording over them—provided they did not deliberately hinder my work—by collaborating cordially and giving them due respect.

In the following two months, I surveyed a large area, mostly on foot, accompanied by porters to carry my scientific equipment. I found the area was rich in minerals worth further exploration, with a high potential for mining. While the work was interesting and challenging, I eventually had to give it up due to recurrent attacks of malaria, dysentery, and diarrhea. This occurred despite regularly taking Paludrine (a prophylactic drug), drinking only boiled water, sleeping under a mosquito net, and applying repellent whenever traveling in the forest. Consequently, I decided to return to England and submit my encouraging findings.

Upon returning to England, I submitted my report stating that the area was highly suitable for mining copper, iron, and other trace metals present in larger quantities than previously estimated. They appreciated my work and offered to let me continue the survey at double my previous pay. While the offer was tempting, I was feeling homesick and had been weakened by endemic diseases. Consequently, I submitted my resignation, collected enough dues to cover my journey back to India, and said goodbye to London, where I had spent many pleasant days with Suhasini and Kumar Aditya Narayan Singh.

8

The New Ruler

The prince, who would be the first ruler of the state of Shridham Garh, educated in the west with a socialistic inclination, had a daunting task ahead of him to uplift the fate of his subjects, who mostly belonged to lower castes and tribals, who were uneducated and practiced traditional tribal values, including tribal medicine.

While his state was more advanced than other princely states—with schools, medical dispensaries, and decent infrastructure—Shridham Garh still fell short of the standards in British India.

Prince Aditya Narayan was committed to closing this gap by upgrading healthcare, education, and transport, with a personal ambition to bring a railway line to the state. His father, observing his son's maturity and capability, decided to abdicate in favour of his only son because he found that he was no more in the prime of his health. Which received the mandatory consent from the Viceroy.

The royal astrologer set the coronation for an auspicious date eighteen months away. This created a problem: the prince was still unmarried, and tradition required the ruler to be married before ascending the throne. An extensive search for a suitable princess was launched, ending in his marriage to the famously beautiful

and fair-skinned eldest daughter of a ruler from a distant Himalayan state.

The marriage was held on the day fixed by the royal astrologer months ago, in pomp and show befitting the two royal families. I was duly invited to the marriage. As I was still in England preparing to wind up my affairs in England and return to India. I could not attend the marriage ceremony. The newly married couple had their honeymoon in Switzerland. After a honeymoon in Switzerland, the couple faced a practical issue. The new princess, accustomed to the cold of her Himalayan home, found the summer heat of the plains unbearable. She, therefore, chose to spend her summers either at her father's palace or in one of the prince's family villas in the hill stations, Darjeeling being her favorite.

Within one year of his marriage, Aditya Narayan had his coronation in equal pomp and show, with many heads of the ruling princely states attending the ceremony. Unfortunately this time too I could not attend the actual ceremony due to unavoidable circumstances in the family. Which I compensated for by attending a gala reception held in one of the largest hotels in Calcutta a few days after the ceremony to commemorate the coronation.

My grandmother, Prabha Devi, also received a personal invitation from the Raja, whom she had known for decades through their business dealings. She decided to give the bride a diamond tiara and wanted me to present a ruby necklace and a platinum bracelet. I disliked the idea, reasoning that the couple was so wealthy that such gifts would be trivial to them.

This left me with the dilemma of choosing an appropriate unique object for them. I had an altogether different plan to present something that may not be as costly as the ornaments suggested by my grandmother but rare and unique, for which I searched many shops dealing with antiques; ultimately, I found an object of my liking in the oldest curio shop of Calcutta.

It was a medium-sized metal vase, almost black due to its antiquity. The shop owner claimed it to be more than two centuries old and made of *ashtadhatu*. Many persons have in the past initially shown interest in it but have backed out on the pretext that it was not genuine and not worth the price demanded. The owner wanted to dispose it off at a price that I consider to be a throwaway, and I gladly paid for it without heckling.

I took the vase to a renowned silversmith of Calcutta, who immediately recognized it to be an antique made of sterling silver. He treated it with an appropriate chemical to confirm his belief and cleaned, buffed, and polished it to reveal its true nature. It was made of silver overlaid by gold filigree, adding to its beauty; cleaning revealed that it was made in England really two centuries ago.

I am sure the shopkeeper who sold it at such a low price would have been stunned to find that the piece was genuine and precious, which he had sold to me at a throwaway price, and banged his forehead. The gift was liked by the bride and the bridegroom for its antiquity, and they treasured it for the rest of their lives.

In time, the royal couple was blessed with a son who inherited his mother's complexion and his father's sharp features. He was the heir apparent, destined to rule the state. However, history intervened; following India's independence, the central government integrated the princely states, and he was stripped of his chance to ascend the throne. But this did not prevent Aditya Narayan from giving the best education to his son in India and abroad, with special emphasis on political science and management. Although Aditya Narayan would have preferred his son to pursue the prestigious Indian Civil Services, his son's decision was to enter the corporate world—despite his father's initial reservations—ultimately proved to be a wise choice.

Even though the prince and I went our separate ways, we remained good friends. He visited Calcutta often and would always invite me to dinner at his luxury hotel. I couldn't afford such places on my own and was too proud to ask my grandmother for money, so I was never able to return his generosity. This was a stark contrast to our student days in England. Before I knew who he really was, I could have easily treated him to a meal at a modest restaurant or split the bill in a renowned restaurant.

In India, I tried to return his kindness by giving him antiques I found in curio shops across the country. Whenever I visited him in his home state of Shridham Garh, he'd take me sightseeing, shooting, or rock climbing. During one of these visits, before his state was annexed, he hesitantly offered me a professional contract. He wanted me to conduct a geological and hydrological survey to see if the

state's minerals and rivers could be used for profit, like irrigation and electricity.

Despite initial reluctance, I accepted a lucrative three-month consulting contract after being strongly urged to take payment for my work. Given that my own business was struggling, the offer—which included generous compensation, personal accommodation, and a fully equipped office provided by the state—was impossible to refuse.

This arrangement led me to the isolated, supposedly haunted hunting lodge along with Sunny in my motorized caravan, where I established a small secondary office and a basic lab. Two of my assistants joined me two weeks after my arrival in the haunted lodge.

The *chowkidar*, who had a habit of dissuading travelers from staying in the lodge just to avoid his duty to look after them, eagerly told the assistants elaborate and exaggerated stories about the spirits that often visited the lodge and advised my assistants better not to stay in the lodge during the night. On hearing the stories of the spirits and believing them, the terrified assistants decided to stay away from the lodge at night, preferring to stay in the *chowkidar*'s village and commute daily and leaving before sunset. They also suggested that I should stay away from the lodge, but I dismissed their concerns, telling them that I did not believe in paranormal phenomena, though I had encountered a white spirit on the very night of my stay, and assured them that even if there were spirits in the lodge, they did not harm any guests.

9

The Exploration and Their after

As per the agreement signed, I decided to start the exploration by setting up an office in the haunted lodge where I had the nightmarish experience of meeting a spirit earlier.

The first riddle to be solved before I started my detailed exploration of the land was to find out the source of the water that was stored in the tank by the side of the lodge.

I, as usual, was accompanied by Sunny, armed with my shotgun, and Sunny with his axe and hatchet. We decided to begin the work by exploring the cliff beyond the lodge, especially to find the origin of the creek that supplied water to the lodge and thereafter got converted into the river with multiple bends and a waterfall.

The detailed map of the survey of India indicated that thereafter the river traversed the state, dividing it into two distinct landscapes: one towards the lodge and the other opposite it. The first was an almost barren, rocky area, covered with shrubs and bushes inhabited by small wild animals and birds like peacocks, peahens, pheasants, porcupines, jackals, and occasional panthers and bears. The second was flat cultivated land intermingled with dense forest that rendered various types of forest products of commercial value when exported outside the state.

The path to the hillock's summit was a gradually steepening spiral, narrow in places, demanding careful passage with one's back to the rock. To our surprise, the top revealed a flat, lush plateau. At its center lay a small pond of indefinite depth, fed by crystal-clear water trickling from a neighboring hillock—a place I planned to explore later.

A narrow stream flowed from the opposite end of the pond, quickly broadening into a creek. To confirm the creek's source, I employed a civil engineering leak-tracing test, unusual for geologists: we poured several gallons of non-toxic colored liquid into the pond near the stream's origin. The next day, the water in the lodge's man-made tank was tinged with the same color, definitively proving the pond atop the hill was the source of the creek. My sense of triumph was as great as Livingstone's upon discovering the origin of the Nile.

The water from the tank flowed to cross the road in front of the lodge through a culvert and ran parallel to the road for about half a mile, only to take a turn away from the lodge a quarter mile away to take yet another turn to follow a course parallel to the river's original route and the road in the opposite direction to form a waterfall. At the foot of the waterfall was a large depression about a hundred yards in diameter, forming a pool of crystal-clear water.

The local tribals believed that the clear-looking water was actually so toxic that anybody going within ten yards of the edge of the pool was bound to be dead and sucked into the pool. The pool, inspite of containing numerous large fish, nobody ever tried to catch them there. Hence, the fish have reached their maximum size; the tribals did not think it

safe to drink the water or bathe in it either. The pool, besides fish, was home to many aquatic birds and animals. Which, too, were not hunted or caught due to the same fear.

I, not a subscriber to superstition, tried my luck to fish in the pool to prove that the belief of the tribal was unfounded. I managed to catch a large fish without being dead or sucked into the pool. Following which Sunny, a tribal himself, gathered enough courage to take a bath in the pool without a mishap and made it a point to swim in the pool whenever he found time. I, on my part, shot a few migrating birds in the pond during our stay in the lodge to supplement our diet.

From the dreaded pool originated a thin river called *Bachchi Godavari*, as it was considered to be the daughter of mighty Godavari, or simply as Bachchi River, that joined Godavari a few miles downstream. Godavari, after traversing many miles, ended in the sea.

At the mouth of the estuary of the Godavari was situated a small port that was used for commercial purposes. The remaining part of the beach was one of the least visited beaches inspite of its scenic beauty and hence remained the cleanest of all the beaches that I have frequented in India and abroad.

The beach should have been developed as a tourist destination earning precious foreign exchange, which I mentioned in my final report on exploration of the state to Aditya Narayan.

After ascertaining the origin of the Bachchi River and its course, we traveled the whole length and breadth of the

state. We were surprised to find the treasure trove of minerals, forest products, and other flora and fauna that could have brought millions of pounds of precious foreign exchange to the state exchequer if explored.

During our survey, we used not only our cottage on wheels to travel but also the bicycles. Many times we travelled on bullock carts or crossed the rivers in precariously narrow canoes, not to mention journeys on foot. When we were far away from the locality, we had to spend the nights in tents stored in the mini truck.

It was not uncommon to see wild birds and animals during our passage through the forest. We happened twice to see tigers crossing our path, oblivious of our presence. Sighting black bears and panthers was not uncommon. It was a sight to see peacocks spreading their wings and raising the plumes of their tails, trying to impress the females of their harems.

One dusk, on returning from our usual expedition, I entered my tent to lie down to relax after a hectic walk in the forest and found a soft, cold, wet object heaped in a circular raised bundle. I was at a loss to identify the thing. I called Sunny to inspect.

Sunny, who had by this time lit a hurricane lamp, came rushing to see the object and quickly found that it was nothing but a non-poisonous snake that, after a meal, had managed to find a cozy place to rest. He brought a stick and lifted the snake to throw it in the jungle. One morning when I opened my eyes, I found a pair of mountain scorpions enjoying their mating dance on the floor. They too were

caught by Sunny in a professional way and let loose in the forest. He was a staunch believer in preserving the environment, which included not killing animals, birds, fishes, and insects without purpose.

One evening, returning from our usual exploration, we found a caravan larger than ours parked in front of the lodge. Sunny befriended the Indian attendant of the caravan and made a survey of the interior of the caravan. It was fully air-conditioned with a radio and a generator beside a large refrigerator that worked on kerosene. Like us, they also carried many jerrycans full of petrol, kerosene, and drinking water.

They also stored many tins of preserved food and powdered milk. The caravan has bunks to sleep in and other paraphernalia to sustain three persons, out of whom one was the Indian driver who, besides being a driver, mechanic, and electrician, also doubled as a cook and washerman and was befriended by Sunny and the other two, the American owners of the caravan.

The next morning, I met the owners of the caravan, a middle-aged couple, over breakfast. They had been commissioned by the American university where they taught comparative zoology. The couple had already been briefed about the presence of multiple spirits in and around the lodge and, as was typical, had been advised not to stay there. This information thrilled the wife; in addition to being an expert in zoology, she was an enthusiastic student of the paranormal and considered the lodge the perfect site for an exploration of apparitions.

For the past five years, they had been working in India and the surrounding regions, studying the habits and habitats of the *hangool* (the red deer of Kashmir) and the snow leopard in Nepal, Bhutan, and Sikkim. They had discovered many startling facts about their subjects—observations they noted had not yet been published. They found that much of the information circulating among the villagers was unfounded hearsay. Their main purpose in visiting this "Godforsaken" lodge was to use it as a base to confirm reports that the surrounding forest harbored both white tigers and black panthers.

They inquired from me if I had any knowledge about such an occurrence, to which I told them that I was oblivious to the presence of white tigers in the area; I have neither encountered one nor heard about them from the tribals. As far as black panthers are concerned, I have many times heard about their ghostly presence in and around the remote villages.

The story goes that one of the male leopards went against the rule of the jungle; that enraged the Forest God so much as to curse him that his progeny will lose their beautiful rosettes and their skin will be replaced by black color!.

I had only a single glimpse of a black panther as it dragged a still-struggling chital stag—larger than itself—by the neck across my path. It disappeared into the shrub forest, likely seeking to hide its prey from other predators like larger panthers, tigers, or even a pack of hyenas that might snatch such a hard-earned prize.

After finishing my routine survey, I returned to the lodge as the evening deepened into night. I found the lady preparing to investigate paranormal phenomena, armed with a specially blessed candle. She moved through the house, inspecting every nook and cranny while strictly monitoring the flame; a steady light signified a space free of negative energy, while a quivering flame betrayed the presence of spirits. When she reached my quarters, she was aghast to discover that the room I occupied was the haunt of a formidable spirit. Furthermore, she sensed that in my absence, various other spirits frequently took up residence there.

She planned to bring one of her friends who practiced planchette and could call the spirit to speak in sign language to the spirit, who could reveal many secrets. I am not sure if she actually succeeded in her mission to be assisted by her friend because I never met them thereafter.

After completing the survey, I submitted a bulky report with a synopsis to Shri Aditya Narayan with special reference to the areas that were rich in minerals and worth exploring. Which I marked on a detailed map of the survey of India.

I also narrated the stories of the spirits in and around the haunted hunting lodge, providing details of my encounter with the fair—and most probably British—ghost. Aditya listened to the stories with amusement and promised to visit the lodge during the next full moon, a month after Holi, to confirm my account. He summoned the royal priest and the astrologer to hear my narration. After listening, they huddled together for some time and concluded that if someone performed the Śrāddha at Gaya for each spirit

separately, they might be liberated from their ghostly existence; however, nothing could be done for the "Sahib" ghost because he was not Hindu.

Aditya Narayan ordered that the Śrāddha be performed at Gaya at state expense by specifically designated individuals. He found only a few volunteers, even for a huge sum, because they considered the task too dangerous—fearing it might cost them their lives and turn them into ghosts themselves. Since I have never visited the lodge after my assignment, I remain as oblivious to the result of the ritual as I was to the outcome of the planchette.

Kumar Aditya Narayan was impressed with my job and started the work on a few projects that interested him most, sending invitations to mining firms in India and abroad, including the British mining enterprise where I worked before returning to India. The enthusiasm of Aditya Narayan got a severe jolt when his state, with all other princely states, was annexed by the Indian government, leaving no power to the rulers. This brought to a halt all the projects started by Maharaja Aditya Narayan. The maharaja, anticipating such calamity, has invested well in foreign countries and transferred all the properties of the state to his or his family's name, including many buildings and factories spread all over India. This saved him and his family from being paupers, unlike some rulers who did not have his farsightedness and virtually became hand-to-mouth within a few years.

Like many former rulers, Aditya Narayan successfully transitioned into politics with the ruling party, winning his first state election by a landslide. His electoral success continued uninterrupted, both at the state and central levels,

even when his party was out of power. He began as a deputy minister in his state and steadily rose to become a cabinet minister in the central government.

Coincidentally, his career path mirrored that of my old flame, Suhasini. Both started as deputy ministers in their home provinces before becoming central cabinet ministers. Presently, Aditya is the minister of trade and commerce, while Suhasini is the minister of geology and hydrology—a fact I was unaware of, though I knew of her high position in central administration.

Aditya and I remain good friends, and he has always offered his help, but we never spoke of Suhasini—though we indulged in talking about many a moment of joy in England. Having served in the same cabinet, he and Suhasini maintained the close bond they formed in London, and their families were deeply intertwined during their political exploits. They also shared key personal qualities: both were financially and politically honest to the bone, strict disciplinarians, and skilled administrators capable of withstanding any political pressure; hence, people preferred to keep a respectable distance from them.

10

I Settle down and get Married

I called my grandmother, Prabha Devi, "Maa" and my biological mother, Aparna Devi, "Chhoti Maa." I was raised by Prabha Devi from my infancy because my mother became too ill to care for me shortly after my birth. My grandmother raised me with deep motherly attachment and affection.

While there was a fleet of attendants—including an Anglo-Indian governess who groomed me in a Western style and a Hindu scholar who taught me the ways of a wealthy Indian life—these circumstances did not make me a spoiled child. My grandmother did not spare the rod when required. My teenage training included swimming, horse riding, and driving. Chhoti Maa had no say in my upbringing; she simply observed me grow as my grandmother wished. Even my father did not interfere with my grandmother's decisions, including the choice of my school and subsequent career.

As per the custom of the day, my grandmother, Prabha Devi, was married at the tender age of twelve to my grandfather, who was just eighteen at the time. Unfortunately, my grandmother was widowed shortly after the birth of my father, Devvrat; she brought him up as a single parent with sufficient financial independence.

Prabha Devi was the only daughter of a rich businessman, Rai Bahadur Brindavan Das, whose life was a "rags-to-riches" story.

Brindavan Das himself was one of the many children of a peasant with a small holding in a village near Rampur, which was to be his in-laws' village as well in later years. He was married in childhood. At the time of marriage he was eleven years and his bride was eight years. By the time he was eighteen, his wife gave birth to a girl and named her Prabha Devi. However, something unpleasant happened between his and his wife's family, the exact cause of which remains a secret all through. This strained relation between the two families made him detest his in-laws' place so much so that he never visited their house all his life. His wife, with her daughter, was allowed to visit the village whenever they wished. Brindavan Das did not want his growing daughter, Prabha Devi, to mix with the children of the village of her maternal uncles. However, contrary to his wish, Prabha Devi was too fond of her maternal uncles' families and the village. She eagerly waited for the vacation to go to the village where she had many girls and boys as her friends. Out of many of her playmates, she was more attached to one girl of her age called Binodini, who was better known as Binu.

Brindavan Das, who later became a Rai Bahadur due to his generous contributions to British war efforts, aspired to be knighted or at least bestowed with the title of Raja Bahadur, neither of which materialized due to Indian independence in August 1947.

He kept on contributing to the government of India that followed the departure of the British with the hope that he would be awarded one of the civil honors in due time, which did not materialize.

This was compensated years later when his only daughter and heir to his vast property, Prabha Devi—my grandmother—was awarded the Padma

Shri and later the Padma Bhushan for her philanthropy and her service to the upliftment of women and the downtrodden. She, for her part, did not publicize her charity. She was a staunch believer in the dictums, “What the right hand gives, the left hand should not know,” and “Give till it pinches.” It was, however, a well-known secret that four primary schools, two middle schools, and a high school depended heavily on her contributions. She served on the Board of Trustees for many of the trusts her father had started, and she established ten stipends and grants-in-aid for numerous students in India and abroad for higher studies.

Rai Bahadur Brindavan did not find success overnight; his life was a journey of gradual ascent filled with ups and downs. With little formal education—having only completed primary school in his village—he ran away to the district headquarter to find his way in the world. He began working as a menial helper in the shop of a wealthy Marwari merchant.

Through sheer diligence and integrity, Brindavan gained the merchant's absolute trust. The owner eventually felt comfortable leaving the keys to his cash drawer with Brindavan whenever he was away. The merchant soon came to view Brindavan as a 'lucky mascot,' as the young man's hard work brought unexpected prosperity to the Marwari businessman's shop.

Years later, the grateful businessman gave Brindavan an unconditional loan of ten thousand rupees to open a small grocery shop in a nearby town. Brindavan applied his strict work ethic to this new venture. Over the years, he expanded into diverse sectors, though he kept the original grocery shop running with a team of assistants who were held to his high standards of honesty; anyone found violating those standards was immediately dismissed.

When Brindavan saved enough to repay the loan a year later, his mentor refused the money, insisting that Brindavan keep it as a gift. However, the mentor introduced a new discipline: he gave Brindavan a metal piggy bank with a secret combination known only to himself. He instructed Brindavan to deposit coins daily and bring the bank back in a year. The mentor jokingly promised that he would keep any amount in excess of ten thousand rupees as 'interest.'

Faithfully, Brindavan returned a year later. When the mentor opened the bank, they discovered the savings totaled roughly twelve thousand rupees. True to his generous nature, the mentor took the two-thousand-rupee surplus in coins, exchanged them for currency notes, and gifted them right back to Brindavan.

Brindavan continued the habit of daily saving for the rest of his life. He never forgot the Marwari merchant's benevolence, treating the mentor's family as his own extended kin. This bond was passed down to my grandmother, who maintained cordial relations with the merchant's family until her last days, instructing my wife and me to keep the friendship between the two families unbroken.

My paternal grandfather, too, was a rich entrepreneur by himself, but not as rich as the Rai Bahadur. He was an ardent supporter of Indian independence, hence was on the wrong side of the British government, putting him in trouble many a time, which hampered his business. This did not prevent him from criticizing subsequent governments run by Indian political parties for their misdeeds; he did not spare any party in power in this manner and hence was considered to be a permanent rebellion by all governments.

My father was his only son and inherited his modest business, maintaining his financial independence separate from my grandmother's business empire, which she had inherited from her father. This resulted in two parallel business houses within the same family: one very wealthy, headed by Prabha Devi, and the other less affluent, headed by her son—my father—who did not like his mother meddling in his enterprise.

My father married my mother, Aparna Devi, when he was sixteen and she was fourteen. She did not come from a business family; rather, her father was a top-ranking government official earning the highest possible salary. This, however, did not match the wealth of Prabha Devi's family, which caused my mother to feel insecure throughout her life and remain subservient to my grandmother. No one in the family ever disobeyed my grandmother's orders; her wishes were treated as indelible commands.

My grandmother funded my early education. My father agreed to this on the condition that he would be fully responsible for my higher education, both in India and abroad. Although my grandmother consented reluctantly,

she assured him that he could always rely on her for financial support if necessary.

Prabha Devi inherited Rai Bahadur Brindavan Das's many factories in Bombay, a mansion in a prime location in Calcutta, acres of irrigated land in the United Provinces, square miles of sagon, saal, and sheesham plantations in CP and Berar, and coal and mica mines in Chota Nagpur.

As part of an agreement between my father and grandmother, I was sent to the best English-medium school in Calcutta and later enrolled in one of India's premier institutes to pursue a degree in geology and hydrology, which I completed on my own merit. As agreed earlier, my father bore the entire cost of my college education. After graduation, I was sent to England to pursue postgraduate studies in my favored subjects—geology and hydrology—two fields of immense future potential in India.

Readers will recall that after completing my postgraduate studies in England, I had a short stint in Africa. Thereafter, I returned to India and joined the Geological Survey of India, against the wishes of my family. The central government position at the Geological Survey of India was quite comfortable in comparison to my job in Africa; however, I gave it up within a few months, as I had very little meaningful work to do. This was not conducive to my training or temperament.

After resigning from the government job, I took a few months of sabbatical leave to explore the possibility of starting my own consultancy firm to advise clients interested in mining and water management. I found the venture to be

viable, with immense potential, and I personally remained closely involved in the survey process. Armed with this information and supported by my friends and peers, I opened an office in Calcutta, soon earning enough to meet my expenses independently while saving sufficiently to expand my business.

My doting grandmother felt that it was high time for me to get married so that she could see her great-grandson. I initially protested vehemently against her proposal, which led to considerable cajoling, coaxing, and prodding from both sides, eventually culminating in emotional blackmail by my grandmother, which ultimately forced me to agree.

My grandmother had already selected the girl, who happened to be the granddaughter of Binodini of Rampur, where Prabha Devi had spent many of her summer vacations. The village was about two hundred miles from Calcutta. Binodini herself had been brought up in this village and, coincidentally, married a man from the village's middle class; consequently, she continued to live there after marriage. Binodini's family depended on a small holding of agricultural land, placing them in the lower-middle-class category.

Rampur happened to be the village where Prabha Devi's maternal uncle also lived. Like Binodini's family, they too belonged to the middle class and depended on small agricultural holdings that were fortunately irrigated, yielding sufficient crops to sustain the family and save enough for their children's education and marriages. Prabha Devi spent at least ten days each summer in Rampur, a practice her

father did not like, as by that time he had become sufficiently prosperous to be classified among the super-rich.

During her frequent visits to Rampur, she developed a close bond with Binodini, playing with her and even spending nights in her modest house, which lacked electricity and piped water, occasionally sleeping on the floor. Their favorite game was the marriage of dolls. On one such occasion, Prabha Devi promised Binodini that when they grew up and had grandchildren, she would arrange for her grandson to marry Binodini's granddaughter, and vice versa.

These regular visits continued for many years, until Prabha Devi was married and moved to Calcutta. Over time, contact between the two friends became less frequent but never ceased, and neither forgot their childhood promise. Many years later, Prabha Devi was blessed with a grandson, whom she named Vijay. I was that boy. To keep the bond intact, Prabha Devi conveyed this news to Binodini and expressed the hope that it was now time for her too to be blessed with a granddaughter. For this, however, both had to wait another five years.

In due course, Prabha Devi attended not only the marriage of Binodini's son but also the Annaprashan of his firstborn daughter, during which she confirmed her wish that the girl be married to her only grandson, Vijay, when he came of age.

When I reached the age of twenty, my grandmother felt that it was the right time for me to get married. This desire, however, could not be realized because I was sent abroad for

higher studies, which compelled her to postpone my marriage by another five years. Had I not gone abroad, she would have had me married at twenty. Once I returned and started my own enterprise, my grandmother felt that the time was ripe for my marriage and that it should not be delayed further. Accordingly, she discreetly sent a formal proposal one day to the bride-to-be's family in Rampur.

The grandmother's proposal was conveyed to the family concerned through an emissary. The parents of my to-be bride were surprised to realize that Prabha Devi has kept her promise to get her grandson married to their daughter. They were too delighted at the possibility of their only daughter, Ananya, getting married to such a boy from so rich a family and consented to the offer. Keeping in mind that this was a far-fetched dream unimaginable for them due to the huge difference in financial status of the two families—on one side was multimillionaire Prabha Devi, and on the other was her middle-class childhood friend Binodini's family. The consent was conveyed to Prabha Devi to her utter delight.

As usual, Prabha Devi did not think it necessary to consult my parents on this matter; they were only informed when grandmother thought that it would be better if I met the girl personally.

This raised the tricky question of how I should meet the girl. There were two possibilities, the first being that I, along with my grandmother and my parents, go to Rampur, which was rejected outright by my grandmother because that may cause inconvenience to the bride's family. The next alternative was that the family of my would-be wife would come down to Calcutta so all the members of our family to

see the girl. This suited Prabha Devi, for whom she had already made a plan that the girl, along with her parents, should come to Calcutta on the pretext of attending my twenty-fifth birthday ceremony that was due the next month. To which the girl's parents hesitantly agreed.

Now came the knotty question of my seeing the girl and giving my approval, which was largely unnecessary, as my grandmother's choice was final and not subject to objection from any member of the family, including my parents and me.

As on all occasions, Prabha Devi had a solution ready for this as well. She sent a formal invitation to the family to come to Calcutta to attend my birthday, conveyed through yet another emissary to Rampur. A member of her staff was assigned the duty of bringing them from Rampur to Calcutta by train in interclass, paying their fares, and bearing all travel-related expenses; the required funds were given to the assistant in advance.

On the appointed day, the task of receiving them at the station and escorting them to the guest house near our residence was entrusted to none other than me. I did not relish this assignment but could not wriggle out of it, as it was my grandmother's wish—almost an undeniable order.

The purpose of sending me to the station was twofold. First, the girl in question and I would have an opportunity to see each other at close quarters and exchange a few words. Second, the family would feel honored that Prabha Devi's grandson was personally present at the station to receive them, which would put them at ease.

I reached the station just in time to see the train slowing down, with my grandmother's emissary waving from the window of the compartment to indicate its location. After the train came to a halt, the party, accompanied by our staff, disembarked from the otherwise empty compartment. The assistant alighted first, followed by two identical boys—obviously twins—about ten to twelve years of age.

Their complexion was neither fair nor dark. They had large eyes, sharp noses, and thin lips, and were dressed in identical, newly purchased cotton half-shirts and shorts, except that one wore a light blue shirt and the other a light pink one to distinguish them in the crowd. They wore new canvas shoes without socks. Their dusky faces bore a light application of face powder to make them appear fairer, and their hair was generously oiled and neatly combed.

The children were awed and astonished to see the large station, with more people than at the biggest village fair. They made a beeline for a cart selling ice cream and had to be restrained by the escort. I instructed him to buy one cone of the best ice cream for each of them, which calmed the duo until the ice cream was finished.

In the meantime, a couple about my parents' age, dressed in simple cotton clothes, alighted from the compartment, followed by a girl of uncertain age. She was attired in an emerald-green saree, draped to cover both shoulders, as was the custom in smaller towns in those days. Given a choice, she would have preferred a skirt to the saree, which she was clearly finding difficult to manage. I lost a few heartbeats as my eyes fell on her dusky brown, doe-eyed face, framed by long lashes and kohled lower lids.

She had a stark similarity to Suhasini back in England during my postgraduate days, except she was a little shorter, thinner, and younger. This happened for the second time in my life; the first was when I met Suhasini for the first time. I instantly fell in love with the girl at first sight as she alighted from the compartment, trying to hide behind her mother. I thanked grandmother for her choice and made up my mind to marry her if I ever have to be married.

The escort introduced me to the couple, emphasizing that I was the grandson of his boss, Smt. Prabha Devi. As per custom, I touched their feet. They, in turn, blessed me and directed the girl and the twin to touch my feet, to my utter embarrassment. To the children, the red-shirted coolie was a spectacle. They had never witnessed a man carry such an immense load on his head all while a bag hung from his shoulder and a water can was clutched in one hand, the other gracefully raised to steady his cargo on the head.

The escort asked a coolie to carry the luggage to our car waiting outside, to which the coolie quoted an exorbitant amount. The escort was aghast and started haggling with him. At this stage I intervened and asked him to pick up the luggage at a price he wanted. This was not liked by the escort or the guests, who expressed that they were accustomed to carrying larger goods in their village without any difficulty. The escort thought that this was nothing short of robbery.

As we made our way to the car, our escort gripped the boys' wrists, keeping them from being swallowed by the crowd. The couple and the girl moved forward, with me trailing a few steps behind our small procession. The boys were thrilled by the size of the car, and even more so that I

was the one driving. They were also amazed by a small, whirling fan and a radio playing music that seemed to come from nowhere.

I had the boys sit with me up front, while the rest of the family settled into the rear seat. Our escort, wanting to impress his passengers, gave the porter a generous tip before deciding to follow us in a separate taxi. To put the children at ease, I asked for their names and how I could tell them apart.

One of them introduced himself as Kaalicharan and the other as Krishnacharan, proudly adding that their names rhymed with their father's name, which was Ramcharan. They also eagerly shared that their mother was Kamala Devi and their sister was Ananya—which was the first time I had heard the name of the dusky beauty. In response to my second question, one of the boys pointed to a black birthmark as big as a four-anna coin on his right temple, explaining that his brother had a matching one on his left. To their great annoyance, he added, their friends had nicknamed them "Left" and "Right."

As we began crossing the iconic Howrah Bridge, the children were amazed by its sheer size. They watched, fascinated, as a stately procession of steamers and barges passed beneath us, weaving between sailboats and rowboats. The sight of a double-decker bus thrilled them, and they eagerly asked if we might have time to ride one. They were equally amused by the coupled trams and the horse-drawn carriages carrying passengers.

What truly astounded them, however, was seeing men pulling rickshaws laden with people or goods. This was a world away from their village, where people walked moderate distances carrying belongings on their heads or shoulders. They explained that women typically balanced loads on their heads, sometimes carrying a child on the hip, while men used their shoulders and backs. For large goods, their village used carts drawn by bullocks, never by human labour.

Women driving cars was yet another novelty. They also shared that their nearest railway station was two miles from home, a small stop where only two passenger trains paused for just a minute each day—one in the morning and the other at night, heading in the opposite direction. They had taken the night train to reach Calcutta, enjoying uninterrupted sleep and savoring morning tea and breakfast served right in their compartment.

The guests were accommodated in the family guest house near our residence with staff exclusively meant to attend to them. The attendants were depressed to see such middle-class guests; they were accustomed to seeing rich guests who would give them liberal bakshish, which the present guests may not do or may give very little. They were still depressed when the staff in a low voice told them not to accept any bakshish from the guests even on their insistence, which will be generously compensated by the employer. I dropped them in the guest house with assurance that their needs will be looked after by the servants present in the guest house, which were aplenty.

An hour after their arrival at the guesthouse—once they had made themselves comfortable and the boys had

completed a wide-eyed survey of the building's grandeur—the guests relaxing on the lawn were surprised to see a lady alight from a costly car.

Her hair was snow-white, parted in the middle, and cut short to her shoulders. She wore subtle makeup with a tinge of lipstick, diamond studs in her ears, a thick gold chain around her neck, a ruby-studded bangle on her right wrist, and an expensive wristwatch on her left. Attired in a light-colored silk saree that appeared quite costly, she drove the Bentley herself, while her driver and a guard sat in the rear seat.

The parents of Ananya could not fathom who she could be and the purpose of her visit. The lady, realizing the situation, told them it was but natural for them not to recognize her because the couple had last met her at the time of the Annaprashan of their daughter, Ananya, when she was only eight months old. She introduced herself as Prabha Devi, grandmother of the groom-to-be, who has escorted them from the station. His name was Vijay, and he called her "Maa" and not "grandmother" because she has reared him since infancy. She also informed them that she was a childhood friend of Ramcharan's mother, Binodini, whom she used to play with whenever she went to her maternal grandparents' house at Rampur, which also happened to be in the same village as that of their mother, Binodini.

Prabha Devi inquired after Binodini's health, whom she had expected to accompany her children, when she was told that she was eager to come but her poor health prevented her from taking the journey. Prabha Devi expressed deep regret upon learning that illness had

prevented her friend from making the journey. Turning her attention to Ananya, the grandmother embraced her warmly, planted a kiss on her cheek, and declared that she was exactly the kind of girl Prabha Devi wanted for her grandson. The comment left Ananya blushing deeply.

She asked the driver and the guard to bring the gifts she had brought for them, which consisted of a silk saree with suitable ornaments to be worn by Ananya during the birthday celebration of me the next day. She also presented the parents and the twins with suitable clothes to be attired in during the function. The gift also consisted of a large amount of fresh fruits, dried fruits, and sweets for the family that was sufficient for a dozen people for more than a week.

The astonished parents were still too puzzled at her undeclared arrival and could not understand how to welcome her. All they could do was to touch her feet. Prabha Devi enquired about the journey, hoping that it was not too troublesome. She repeatedly expressed her disappointment that Binodini could not accompany them and promised to visit her sometime after the marriage. She told them that her purpose of visiting unannounced was to meet the bride-to-be and personally invite them to the birthday party the next day.

The next day was my birthday. The morning was spent in a special pooja and a sumptuous lunch for the bride's and bridegroom's families at noon. After the lunch, people retired to their respective rooms to relax. Ananya's mother was all the time worried about how her daughter would adjust to such a rich family and expressed her apprehension many times to her husband, who too was equally sensitive to

it and hoped that, God willing, everything would be all right because he trusted his daughter's ability to adjust in adverse situations.

Well before the evening ceremony, grandmother discreetly called Ananya to her room, where a beautician was waiting. Who gave Ananya a well-required manicure, pedicure, and facial, mild makeup, and a good hairdo.

Once the beautician departed, the grandmother retrieved a pair of heavy bangles from her private locker. She asked Ananya to put them on, explaining that they were an heirloom given to her by her own grandmother-in-law. Over the years, the bangles had ceased to fit Prabha Devi—once too loose for her youthful wrists and eventually too tight—so she had preserved them for decades, waiting for her granddaughter-in-law. She added a delicate gold chain and ear studs to the gift, reminding Ananya to wear the saree given earlier. However, noticing Ananya's simple, worn sandals that did not match the dress, she immediately summoned a maid to take measurements and purchase footwear to match the ensemble. Overwhelmed by such lavish generosity, Ananya promised to comply with the wishes that felt distinctly like royal commands.

In the evening, the traditional cake cutting ceremony was followed by a lavish dinner held in our enormous dining hall. The hall featured a massive, single-piece dining table with matching chairs and could easily accommodate fifty guests. The space was softly lit by a central chandelier, casting a gentle glow that created the sensation of candlelight illumination.

The invited guests were mostly our intimate family friends and some eminent persons. Most of the guests came with their spouses; some were accompanied by their marriageable daughters to mingle with the bachelors present at the party. It was not surprising that Vijay was their first choice, not realizing that Prabha Devi had already chosen the dusky, coy, doe-eyed girl sitting aloof in the corner for Vijay.

Some were accompanied by their well-groomed and preened sons with the hope that their sons would meet girls of their liking. The girls spoke mostly in English. Some of the girls were pretty boisterous and gregarious, well-decked and in loud makeup. Others were quiet and coy in simple dress. Ananya preferred to sit with these simple girls rather than with the boisterous girls.

The boys were disheartened at the absence of alcohol but were delighted to ogle ladies of all ages. All of them were wondering who the coy, beautiful girl was, admiring the beauty and sobriety of Ananya, not realizing that she already had been chosen as the would-be wife of Vijay.

Prabha Devi consistently took the lead, acting as both a gracious hostess and the event's capable organizer. My parents remained behind her as usual, playing second fiddle whenever a matter concerned me—with the exception of my higher education, which they financed fully. > Ananya's parents sat still behind my parents, trying to manage their twins during the party. The twins, however, managed to escape the crowd to explore the family's adjoining drawing hall. They were stunned by its vastness, realizing it was larger than their entire house in Rampur. They gazed in

astonishment at the sheer scale and grandeur of the massive chandelier.

Their attention was then drawn to the numerous hunting trophies fixed to the walls: the stuffed heads of tigers, panthers, bears, and various deer and antelope. They also discovered a large, silver-framed oval mirror flanked by two huge elephant tusks. They found it entertaining that the mirror made their reflections appear significantly smaller.

Coincidentally, one of the tigers was shot by Prabha Devi in her younger age. My parents had no contribution to these trophies because in spite of being good shots, they refrained from killing any animal or bird for a trophy. They had voluntarily opted to be vegetarian and teetotalers.

Suddenly, the parents of the twins realized their children were missing. They made a fervent search and found them in the drawing hall, pulling them back to the dining hall. They instructed them to behave and not leave their seats or touch the food unless asked, stating that otherwise, they would be thought of as gluttons rather than connoisseurs, which the other guests were.

After the dinner, Prabha Devi asked the guest to move to the adjoining ballroom to enjoy music and dance. I, being the birthday boy, had to dance with several girls, not all of whom were very proficient in western dance. The first person I danced with was my grandmother, who, over the years, had mastered the art of dancing to western music. She was an expert in waltz and foxtrot; she was not very fond of other modern forms of western dance.

My parents refrained from dancing on the pretext that they were not feeling well, even though both were nimble-footed experts in all types of Western dance. After her marriage at the age of fourteen, my mother had been taught Indian classical dances like *Kathak* and *Bharatanatyam*, alongside piano lessons and Western ballroom dancing. This was done at the insistence of my grandmother, and my mother excelled in all of them.

I found Ananya sitting alone, curiously and amazedly observing the scene. She shared this reaction with the other "simple" girls, most of whom were untrained in western dance. This time, her attire covered only her left shoulder, revealing her slender neck and the gold chain my grandmother had given her earlier that evening.

Some boys asked Ananya to dance with them, which Ananya politely declined, saying that she had not learned western dance, to their utter dismay. While dancing with other girls, I surreptitiously looked at Ananya and admired her beauty in a simple dress and only right makeup.

Once I had enough dancing with modern girls, I thought of trying my luck and went to her and sat next to her. Wishing that I could touch her, which she carefully avoided, and she even declined my offer to dance with her; the usual plea was the same as she had told other boys: that she has not learned to dance. The grandmother, who was watching us from a distance with expectation and anticipation, was disheartened by Ananya's refusal to dance and then and there made up her mind that she will appoint a female dance teacher for Ananya to make her proficient in western dance after the marriage. Prabha Devi compensated

for this by asking the guest to give ear to the songs that Ananya would sing for them.

Although Ananya initially wished to be excused, she hesitantly agreed to my request to perform. She began with a song praising the God of Fine Art, followed by a few popular film songs, and concluded with a heart-rending love song that drew thunderous applause from the audience.

The party continued till midnight, when grandmother politely declared the end of the ceremony. Only Ananya and her parents were left to see the gifts unpacked. Once that was over, grandmother said she had an announcement to make; everybody looked curiously and expectantly at her. To everybody's delight, she declared my engagement to Ananya.

She produced two small velvet cases, each containing a 24-karat wedding ring, one with a yellow sapphire and the other with a green emerald. I was surprised at her choice of the gems in the rings. I wonder how she could correctly guess the choice of color of the gems of our preference in the engagement rings.

She asked me to put the emerald ring on the ring finger of Ananya and for Ananya to reciprocate by putting the sapphire ring on my right ring finger. This was the first occasion when my longing to touch her came to be true, sending a sense of pleasure all through my body.

This followed the announcement of our marriage date, which was to be after a month. My grandmother had consulted the family priest and chosen this day as most auspicious beforehand without the knowledge of my parents!. To which my would-be parents-in-law mildly

protested, saying that it was too short a period for them to arrange a daughter's marriage, to which Prabha Devi assured them that they need not worry; everything will be taken care of without any dowry. Her only demand was that the marriage be solemnized at Calcutta in her guest house.

A day before the stipulated date next month, Ananya, along with her parents and some relatives, arrived in Calcutta in second class as usual with four attendants of my grandmother's choice; they were instructed to pay the fare and other ancillaries. They were to reach the guest house in an exclusive bus to stay in the same guest house where they had stayed earlier. My grandmother saw to it that the building received a fresh coat of paint and was properly decorated with lights two days before the guests arrived. She insisted that the groom's party should be welcomed with proper fireworks when they arrived at the place of the marriage and that all the expenses be billed directly to her.

The evening before the actual day of marriage was devoted to a *Shehnai* recital by the most eminent *Shehnai* player, accompanied by equally renowned *tabla* and flute players. The remuneration paid to each was the highest paid to any artist in those days. Playing of the *shehnai* the day before marriage is considered to be auspicious; hence, grandmother opted for such a luxury.

The occasion was held on the lawns of the guesthouse, attended by a group of eminent connoisseurs of music of the town, friends of the groom, selected relatives and friends of the family, and all the people accompanying the bride from Rampur and other places.

The recital was to be followed by a lavish dinner. This dinner was an extension of a ceremony known as a pre-bachelor feast. Legend has it that any bachelor eating with the groom-to-be on such an occasion was bound to be married within the year; thus, there was no dearth of enthusiastic, unmarried young men eager to share the meal.

For the musical performance, a wooden platform—approximately twenty feet square—was built under the supervision of the maestro's specially trained assistant. The platform was covered by a thick cotton mattress and draped with a frilled silk cover. At the center lay a carpet flanked by two cylindrical pillows. The stage was elegantly decorated with flowers and adjustable lighting.

The immaculately dressed maestro arrived in a chauffeur-driven Mercedes, accompanied by his drone player, the eminent *tabla* player, and the flute player. These three artists occupied the rear seats, while the two most senior disciples of the *shehnai* player occupied the front seat. The great *shehnai* player did not permit anybody to carry his instrument, which he persisted in carrying himself. The instrument was placed in a velvet-lined sandalwood box adorned with an intricate silver design. The other members of the party followed in a large station wagon.

On reaching the site, Prabha Devi personally received the maestros, leading them to specially reserved seats. Meanwhile, the others rushed to the stage to set the instruments in an orderly manner and suitably arrange the lights. Once everything was in place, the artists ascended the stage to take their respective seats. My father was entrusted

with introducing the artists, which he did in eloquent language.

The chief instrumentalist introduced the rest of the assistants simply by pointing at them and specifying their roles, while refraining from mentioning them by name. The musicians began the program with a recital dedicated to Shiva, the god of music. This was followed first by a solo by the *shehnai* player, and then a duet by the *tabla* player and the *shehnai* player.

The next recital was a solo performance by the *tabla* player, followed by a combined performance featuring the *shehnai*, *tabla*, and flute. The recitals included intermissions to be filled by the junior artists. The function concluded with a farewell tune played on the flute in a somber mood. The song was none other than the famous farewell piece by Wajid Ali Shah, "*Babul mora naihar chhuto hi jaay...*"

This moistened everyone's eyes, and Ananya sobbed with her face in her palms. Seeing this, Prabha Devi sat next to her, putting her arms around Ananya's shoulders and consoling her, saying that everything would be as good as it was in her mother's house. I could do nothing but look soulfully at the poor girl from a distance.

At the end of the recital, Prabha Devi gracefully ascended the stage to present mementos to the three lead artists. Each received a silver platter, approximately twelve inches across, engraved with the names of the bride and bridegroom and the date of the marriage. The other members of the party received silver mementos from my father, according to their position in the hierarchy. My

grandmother, with folded hands, requested that the artists dine with the other guests; however, the three senior artists politely declined, explaining that they were forbidden by their gurus from eating any food not cooked in the home. The other members, however, were permitted to enjoy the lavish dinner.

On the morning of the wedding, as guests gathered for breakfast at the guesthouse, a small bus pulled up and a lively band stepped out. Dressed in striking, colorful uniforms—with the bandleader's attire being the most ornate—the group quickly organized into a formal rectangular formation. To the delight of the guests, they began performing a traditional repertoire of celebratory wedding music on drums, bagpipes, and flutes.

After some time, an elegant car stopped in front of the guest house, and from it stepped Aparna Devi —my mother, whom I called *chhoti maa*. She was modestly dressed, in contrast to my grandmother's gorgeous attire from the previous morning.

She was followed by a lady attendant carrying a fair-sized suitcase, who was in turn followed by a group of ten female attendants. All were in similar attire, carrying bronze plates of different sizes filled with sweets, fresh fruit, and dry fruits, all covered by suitable silk cloths. One of them carried a silver bowl containing turmeric paste to be applied to the bride in a special ceremony that was to follow. Another attendant carried a bronze pitcher filled with mustard oil, while a man followed with a large fish on a brass tray.

Chhoti Maa gestured for the attendants to leave, retaining only the driver and her car. Once the others had gone, she opened the suitcase to reveal an array of gold ornaments, jewelry, silverware, and women's attire, which were soon displayed on a table. After some small talk, Aparna Devi left, noting that she expected to see everyone in the evening for the marriage and reception. She made it a point that they should consider all the presented utensils their own and did not need to bother returning them.

Once she had left, all the ladies present thronged around the ornaments. Some were quite impressed, others evaluated their cost by weighing them on their palms, and others scrutinized them for their purity. One relative was not very impressed and said that she would have given much more if her son had married this particular girl. This continued until the bride's mother put all the ornaments back in the suitcase and kept it in a secure place. At the same time, rituals were performed at our house revolving around me. I could not comprehend the purpose of most of them.

On the evening of the wedding, I put on a suitable outfit and was driven in a flower-decked open limousine. The procession consisted of many cars and people on foot, preceded by an English band. The journey lasted almost an hour and ended with a fireworks display that lasted another hour. The actual marriage ceremony took place at midnight and lasted for about two hours.

The next day, my wife and I returned in a similar procession to our house to be welcomed ceremoniously by my mother. This was the first time she had been involved directly in one of her sons' marriage ceremonies. Otherwise,

my parents sat in the wings, observing from a distance; they had no official role, as they were overshadowed by the 'one-man army' of Prabha Devi.

It was only two days after the wedding—following many ceremonies centered on my wife and me—that Ananya and I were finally granted some much-needed privacy. We were led to our flower-decked bedroom amidst the usual merriment and lighthearted jokes, some of which were quite ribald. As everyone left with their good wishes, I bolted the door and hugged and kissed my wife for the first time. To my delight, she turned red with embarrassment, sending a pleasurable sensation through me. I lifted her in my arms and placed her on the bedecked bed. Lifting her face to see her clearly for the first time, I again found a stark similarity between Ananya and Suhasini, save for a scar on the left side of Ananya's forehead reminiscent of a childhood injury. She was lightweight and slightly shorter than Suhasini.

This brought to mind an anthropological theory suggesting that unrelated individuals can be perfect look-alikes—a statistical rarity said to occur once in every ten million people. I wondered if this phenomenon explained the resemblance between Suhasini and Ananya.

I confessed to Ananya that I had decided to marry her the very moment I first saw her at the station. She shyly admitted the feeling was mutual, saying she had been so impressed by my appearance and manners that she had secretly wished she would one day marry 'this handsome boy'.

My grandmother wanted us to go to Switzerland for our honeymoon, but I preferred to go to her *dacha* on the sea beach about two hundred miles from Calcutta and did so. We enjoyed about a four-day stay there, wishing the bliss lasted longer, enjoying every moment in each other's company. On one occasion Ananya expressed her desire to be allowed to continue her study and practice of music, to which I had no objection. Returning home, my mother again welcomed us ceremoniously, as she has done after our return from the marriage house to our residence.

I finally found the right moment to share Ananya's aspirations with my grandmother. To my surprise, she agreed instantly to Ananya finishing her degree and continuing her music. In fact, she insisted that Ananya go even further by pursuing a postgraduate degree in economics and management, viewing her as the natural successor to the family business. To prepare her, grandmother hired a renowned music tutor for both classical and modern styles, as well as a governess to refine her etiquette in a way that balanced Western manners with our own Indian traditions.

This exceeded my expectations, and to my utter delight, I was entrusted with teaching my wife to drive the family cars—including my grandmother's favorite Bentley. Every morning, under the guise of practice, I took her on two-hour drives without any drivers or guards following us. This continued for about a month until Ananya became proficient enough to drive alone. During these enjoyable outings, we often stopped at roadside *dhabas* for *samosas* and *kachoris*, though our privacy was frequently dampened by the sight of the guards shadowing us from a distance.

A few days after returning from the honeymoon, I joined the office and started working as usual but returning home earlier than I used to do before marriage, which was noticed by everyone in the family, especially by my grandmother, who even teased me about it.

The grandmother was not very happy with the idea of me running a consulting firm. She still thought that I would be better off if I joined one of her many companies as director. I carefully avoided her lure and continued to work more devotedly on my newly formed consultancy independently.

My wife's studies were interrupted due to her pregnancy after one year. The news of her being in the family way brought immense happiness to all the members of the family, with grandmother most excited to be able to see her great-grandson. She took Ananya for antenatal examinations every month and asked every person in the family to see that Ananya was not involved in any household chore so that she could continue her music practice.

In due time the ceremony of the baby shower was celebrated with pomp and show befitting the family tradition. Ananya received many gifts on the occasion. The most impressive was a set of a necklace, bracelet, and matching earrings of diamonds and rubies by my grandmother. My mother's present was a little less costly; it consisted of a pair of heavy gold bangles overlaid by intricate enameling.

Ananya gave birth to identical twin boys after two years of our marriage in the costliest nursing home managed

by British doctors and nurses. My grandmother was delighted to see her desire fulfilled more than her expectation. I teased my grandmother that she has got one great-grandson as a bonus. The joke was enjoyed by everybody present.

Surprisingly, each boy has a black birthmark on the forehead, a mirror image of each other, one on the right side and the other on the left, similar to their maternal uncles.

The infants were named Shashank Mouli and Mayank Mouli in a separate ceremony after six days of birth. At six months of age they were given their first solid food in an elaborate ritual of *Annaprashan* for which my in-laws were specially invited; unfortunately, they could not attend the ceremony as my father-in-law was bedridden with malaria. That was very common in the villages those days. They were represented by their twin sons, Kaalicharan and Krishnacharan. As the duo were too young to travel by themselves, grandmother, as usual, deputed one of her trusted lieutenants to escort them to Calcutta and back.

After the ritual pooja, the maternal uncles fed the infants their first morsel—a dab of rice pudding on their tongues—and presented each with a small gold ring. Realizing that such an expensive gift might be a social or financial burden for Ananya's parents to match, grandmother compensated by giving the twins five hundred rupees each. She blessed them with the advice to put the money in the bank rather than spend it frivolously. She also sent an abundance of sweets, dry fruits, and clothing for the family, along with a white silk saree for her friend Binodini, specifically chosen to be suitable for a Hindu widow.

Prabha Devi would have loved to raise the boys in the way she had reared me, save for her age and ever-increasing engagement in the business. There was no dearth of nannies and ayas to look after the children under the watchful supervision of my grandmother.

The children learned to call my grandmother "Maa" and my mother "Chhoti Maa" as they heard me and Ananya calling them so. Initially the children used to call their own mother "Ogo" because in public I used to address Ananya so. In due time the twins were sent to a renowned public school in India and later to Eton in England. After graduating from English universities, they went to Harvard and Stanford in the USA to pass economics and management. This time too neither I nor my parents had any say in the matter. My mother, like on all other occasions, had little to say in the upbringing of her own grandchildren.

Prabha Devi disapproved of her granddaughter-in-law, Ananya, taking the children to Rampur village every summer. She felt the village lacked amenities and would have preferred that they use her well-furnished bungalows in the hill stations. This situation mirrored her own childhood; her father, the Rai Bahadur, had similarly disliked her summer visits to the village.

Once Ananya's visit to Rampur with her twins was finalized, Prabha Devi made a suggestion I found completely impractical: installing a generator in the village just so the children could have ceiling fans. This time, I was bold and firm enough to reject her idea outright.

Her next demand was for Ananya to be accompanied by a male and a female attendant. This seemed absurd, as it would create a significant burden for Ananya's parents. At that point, for the first time, my mother stepped in. She politely explained why the plan was unworkable, and the grandmother reluctantly agreed.

While she never openly opposed the visits, grandmother insisted that Ananya refrain from wearing expensive jewelry or fine attire, starting from her very first trip after our marriage. She argued that such displays of wealth might invite the 'evil eye'—a restriction that persisted even after our two sons were born. During these trips, Ananya was permitted only a pair of bangles, small earrings, and a thin gold chain. Neither Ananya nor I ever protested this arrangement.

As was the custom, when she departed for Rampur with the twins for the first time, they were escorted in first class by an attendant of grandmother's choice. I was unable to join them due to business commitments on the specific date grandmother had selected after consulting our family astrologer. Her argument was that if the journey was not undertaken on that particular day, the next auspicious and suitable date was six months away. This was important because she was taking her twins to Rampur for the first time. In initial years my sons were not comfortable with the hot, dusty weather of Rampur without electricity and piped water.

Grandmother hated the idea of Ananya visiting her paternal village every summer, whether with her children or alone before they were born. Realizing she couldn't prevent

the trips entirely, she sought a compromise: she wanted to install a deep tube well and a generator powerful enough to run a pump and supply electricity to the house.

At this stage, Ananya pulled me aside and said that installing these at her paternal house was absurd. She was concerned her parents would feel slighted, as they were perfectly accustomed to living without piped water or electricity. Ultimately, Grandmother relented. Ananya suggested that if Grandmother was set on installing a tube well, it should be at her maternal uncle's house. His family was dependent on the freshwater well at Ananya's house, which was about a furlong away from their residence—a distance for which they even had to employ someone just to make the trips.

Grandmother didn't initially care for the suggestion. However, after mulling it over for a few days, she eventually abandoned the plan to install the pump and generator at either residence.

From the age of five, my sons developed a liking for village life. Despite the absence of facilities, they were very happy in the rural environment; they took to village life as easily as a duckling takes to water. They made friends with the local children irrespective of their social status. The twins were amused to see water being drawn from the well via a pulley, and they preferred to bathe at the well just like the other village children. Additionally, they learned to climb trees, swim in the pond, drive a bullock cart, and gather fallen mangoes after the usual summer storms.

Upon returning home, the children would enthusiastically recount their adventures to my grandmother—much to her horror—detailing exactly how much they enjoyed them. They even suggested, “Why don’t we all move to the village permanently?” These suggestions terrified Prabha Devi. She would have preferred them to learn swimming at an exclusive club and questioned the usefulness of learning to climb trees or drive a bullock cart. Once they were old enough to drive, they were sent to an elite driving school instead.

Ananya, who had minimal responsibility for raising her sons while completing her post-graduate degree in management, began taking an interest in my business, which was growing by leaps and bounds.

Over the years, I had diversified into coal, iron ore, and timber. Upon their return to India, Shashank Mouli and Mayank Mouli were given responsibilities across my expanding enterprises. Consequently, the company was now led by my wife, my two sons, and me. Meanwhile, due to her advancing age, Prabha Devi began delegating the management of her sprawling business to my sons, who also inherited my father’s business.

11

Meeting an Unexpected Lost Friends

My grandmother was the polestar of our lives, and her passing left a profound void for Ananya, our children, and me. She died peacefully in her sleep, untouched by illness—a grace that few are fortunate enough to experience. Even now, many years later, we still feel the weight of her absence and deeply mourn our loss.

My parents have retired to a remote village in the Himalayas. They built a house devoid of the luxuries they were accustomed to in Calcutta—an ashram where they arrange Bhajan recitals every evening, accompanied by discourses from learned sages. Ananya, the children, and I visit them regularly. Ananya even tried to persuade them to return to Calcutta permanently and visit the ashram only in the summer, but they firmly declined. Before retiring from the business, my father divided his wealth and company into two equal parts for Mayank and Shashank, both of whom manage their shares with equal dexterity.

During this period my ever-present man Friday, Sunny, who was almost my shadow throughout my active life too, retired and settled in his village back in Santhal Pargana. On his retirement I gave him twenty-five thousand rupees as gratuity and arranged for a pension of two hundred rupees per month for the rest of his life. He, with the money of the gratuity, purchased a small second-hand truck to start a transport business, earning sufficient to purchase a new

truck in two years and a third still a year after. He named his business Sunny Transport and Automobile. Besides the transport business, he ran a school to teach driving to tribal boys. His own granddaughter too learned to drive from him; that was uncommon in remote Santhal villages those days.

Sunny's long experience with me and his knowledge of automobiles came in handy for him to maintain a steady and ever-increasing income. It was difficult for his drivers, cleaners, and mechanic to hoodwink him. One day, to my great surprise and pleasure he arrived unexpectedly in a chauffeur-driven car to share some wonderful news: his lifelong dream had been realized. His youngest son had graduated from the NDA and was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the Indian Army.

His financial prosperity and his sons joining the army as officers made me immensely happy, and I wished them well with the assurance that they could fall back on me if they ever required my help without hesitation. I gave him a miniature truck made of sterling silver as a memento for his son.

By this time, I was well established in my business with offices in Delhi, Bombay, and Madras. A difficult situation arose that I had not encountered before: I ran into trouble with the central government regarding the allotment of mines and royalties. After trying all means at a lower level in vain, I decided to meet the Union Minister in charge of Geology and Hydrology in person. I was told that the ministry was headed by a strict lady called Girinandini Jha, or simply 'Girija.' Until that time, I had no inkling who she was.

I realized that if I failed in my efforts to impress the minister, I had two other people who could help me: Aditya Narayan and perhaps Suhasini, if I could reach her. Both were cabinet ministers in different central ministries.

I had been in constant touch with Adi over the years, but I never took undue advantage of his position for my business. Conversely, I had not contacted or met Suhasini in years, though I was privy to her rise to power. My lack of contact was perhaps due to a psychological fear: that she might be married with children and might not like my meeting her, or might not even recognize me at all.

I kept these alternatives available in case I was unable to secure a meeting with the minister personally. My Delhi staff worked diligently to coordinate an appointment, eventually securing a slot two weeks out. They were strictly cautioned that the minister adheres to a rigorous schedule; any delay on my part would result in an immediate cancellation and an indefinite wait for a follow-up.

On reaching the office on the day and time of appointment, to my surprise I was ushered into the anteroom of the minister's office with utmost respect and courtesy that was unusual in other ministries both in the state and center. The usherer opened the door of the chamber of the minister and announced my arrival. On reaching the office, I was greeted by the minister courteously, and to my utter surprise, she got

up from her seat with an extended hand to shake my hand and address me by my first name, Vijay. She softly said, "Hello, Vijay, how are you?"

She was attired in simple khadi without any makeup. The ornaments that she wore were a gold bangle on her right wrist and a large wristwatch on her left. She had a mandatory sindoor dot of a married woman on her forehead and a speck of sindoor in the parting of her pepper-salt hair that was tied in a big bun.

As I looked at her carefully, I was astonished to see a strong resemblance to Suhasini from my youth in England. Noticing my bewildered expression, she pronounced, "Yes, you are right. I am Suhasini—whom you haven't cared to contact even when it was very simple to do so after you returned to India. I waited for you till I jumped into politics". In stark contrast to my own actions, she, on her part, had managed to keep a tab on my activities all these years, despite her profession. I wondered why and how.

I realized she was no more the coy little frail girl afraid to speak to boys. Over the years politics and administration have made her a stern-looking, strict administrator.

The answer to her question looked superfluous. I was surprised when she told me that she was sorry that it took a fortnight for her office to arrange the meeting. But once the file had been brought to her, she, noting my name, asked the staff to hasten the meeting on that particular date and time even if it meant cancelling some meetings already fixed.

She has already gone through my file and found nothing to stop the deal; the matter should have been solved long ago at a lower level. She further told me that she had added a few points to my demand that would be beneficial to my firm. She already had passed the order as soon as the matter was brought to her notice, a day before. She asked

her assistant to bring a copy of the order. That would be my personal copy; the original order would be sent by post. I got up with usual thanks and started to leave the office. At this point she asked if I would like to have dinner with her the same evening at her residence. I hesitantly agreed to her generosity. She called her personal driver to drop me at my hotel and pick me up at 8 o'clock in the evening to reach her residence.

Upon arriving at her home, I was introduced to her husband, retired Lt. General Pran-Nath Jha. A Maithili Brahman and a veteran of both World Wars, he was a man of striking presence—tall, fair, and poised, with sharp features, a balding head, and a distinguished handlebar mustache.

Shortly after, someone I never expected to see arrived in a rush, apologizing for his late entry due to an urgent meeting of his ministry. It was Shri Aditya Narayan. Although he had renounced his formal titles after Independence, he was still affectionately addressed as "Maharaj" in his former state. Now a Cabinet Minister for Trade and Commerce, he was both surprised and a bit wounded that I hadn't approached him directly for assistance, noting that he could have resolved my issue with ease. He insisted that I call upon him for any future help, whether within his department or another ministry.

Interestingly, both he and Suhasini were now senior enough to be viewed as potential successors to the Prime Minister, whose failing health and advanced age made a transition of power seem inevitable. Despite being rivals for

the nation's highest office, there was no bitterness between them; they maintained a relationship of mutual respect.

I enjoyed the vegetarian food, with the host apologizing for not providing non-vegetarian food and alcohol, as she belongs to a Maithili Brahmin family. The general, after the dinner, excused himself to retire to his room to listen to BBC news and enjoy his regular nightcap that has become his second nature from being in the army, as opposed to Girija, who is a teetotaler.

After dinner, the three of us moved into a modest drawing room. It was then that I noticed she was wearing an emerald green saree and a delicate necklace—an ensemble she usually reserved for formal occasions back in England. I couldn't help but wonder if her choice was merely a coincidence or a deliberate gesture.

As we reminisced about our time in London, Adi stayed for about half an hour before rushing off to conclude a meeting; he had only carved out time from his packed schedule to attend Suhasini's dinner and reconnect with me after all these years. During our conversation, I realized he was remarkably well-versed in my professional life. Both Suhasini and Adi expressed their relief that I had avoided the temptation of politics—much like my grandmother, who they noted would have been a formidable asset to any political party.

She knew many things about me, as my wife turned out to be a distant cousin of her husband. She knew about my children and their career. She herself was the mother of two sons, one in the Indian Foreign Service and the other in the World Bank, both posted in America.

After an hour, I turned to leave, but Suhasini stopped me to share something private. From her drawer, she produced a small box containing an ornate gold medallion, a single sapphire gleaming at its center. She confessed that she had once imagined a different goodbye: she had hoped I would meet her at the London airport to propose. In return, she had sacrificed much to buy this medallion, intended as a token to tether my heart to hers until we could marry in India.

Because that moment never came, she had carried it home in silence, her heart heavy with a grief she thought I didn't share. As I finally reached the door and turned for one last look, she pulled me into a desperate, first-ever embrace. "Look at this when you think of me," she whispered, her voice thick with emotion. "Perhaps it will bring you luck."

When she let go, her eyes were bright with the same tears I had seen in Aditya's years before, and she vanished into the room to hide her sorrow. At least somebody observed the tear in her eyes.

It took me about an hour to reach my hotel. As the car reached the hotel, the driver hurriedly opened the door, expecting me to alight. Oblivious to his gesture, I sat motionless for a few moments only to come to reality hearing the driver say, "Sahab, hotel aa gaya." I staggered to my room and ordered a strong drink and put on "do not disturb" board before going to sleep. In the morning, I got up to someone singing a Hindi song in a melancholic voice, which, when translated into English, would be "Let Bygones Be Bygones."

12

The Prince Who Would Not Be a King

After Harry's disappearance, the palace fell into a veneer of normalcy, acting as though he had never existed. Yet, beneath the routine lay a heavy silence—the deceptive lull before a catastrophic storm.

Durga, the princess's maid and confidante, was the first to sense the coming gale. She watched as her mistress withered, spending her days weeping over sketches of Harry and enduring her brother's cruel taunts. What the maid initially mistook for simple heartbreak was soon revealed to be something far more serious: the princess was pregnant. When the news reached the Rajmata, the family's matriarch offered a chilling solution. She produced a vial of ancient, untraceable poison from her private vault, suggesting they kill the princess and blame a snakebite—a common hazard of the palace gardens—to preserve the family's honor. Though the princess's parents rejected the murderous plan, the Rajmata remained unrepentant, blaming the entire "imbroglio" on the girl's failure to heed earlier warnings to end the affair.

The princess's mother suggestion was to get the fetus aborted. The king did not approve of both the proposals because the Rajmata's suggestion was as sinful as the murder of two lives. His objection to the second proposal was that

he personally disliked abortion and promised to manage the problem in his own way; that was to take the princess to Calcutta with the pretext that she required a treatment that was not possible in his state.

To give shape to his plan, he took her to Calcutta. The only person to accompany him was his confidant and counselor, Suhel Singh. In Calcutta the princess was examined by a female English doctor. The king actually wanted a confirmed diagnosis of pregnancy. Unfortunately, the gynecologist, who was catholic, confirmed the pregnancy and suggested continuing the pregnancy because, due to her faith, she could not support abortion. She even suggested that once the child was born, it could be sent to an orphanage for adoption. The king thought over the matter for two days and realized that if the child was born in Calcutta, the inquisitive reporters would smell it and splash the news in tabloids.

Knowing that a public scandal would shatter the royal family's prestige, the king orchestrated an elaborate ruse. He announced that the princess required urgent medical intervention in England, claiming her condition was beyond the expertise of local physicians. To justify a four-year absence, he framed her stay as a long-term recovery at a specialized sanatorium—a period that would secretly allow her to attend university and obtain degrees in law, humanities, and public administration.

The king and the princess sailed for England accompanied by a British governess and an Anglo-Indian nurse on an oath of confidentiality with handsome pay and sufficient money in British pounds for their family left in

India. The two adhered to the oath till the last person involved was alive.

Once the father, daughter, and their two female companions had departed for England, Suhel Singh remained in Calcutta. His mission was to erase any trace of the princess's visit to a gynecologist. He meticulously crafted a cover story, insisting she had actually been examined by a competent neurologist who recommended treatment abroad. This story also explained the royal family's travel plans: the queen would join the princess later, allowing the king to return in his state, as a long absence was impossible for him. Upon his return, Suhel Singh disseminated this blatant lie with such conviction that nearly everyone in the state, apart from a few skeptics, believed it. To achieve this, he used the full extent of his intelligence and administrative prowess—skills he had honed since childhood through his close association with the king.

Upon arriving in England, the king found a hospital that specialized in discreetly handling unwanted pregnancies. For a significant fee, the hospital could also arrange for the adoption of any child born out of wedlock. The king made a generous donation to secure their services and guarantee their silence.

In response to his large contribution, the hospital offered a specific plan: the newborn would be placed in an orphanage until adopted. This arrangement, however, came with two conditions: the child had to be converted to christianity and baptized with a christian name. To ensure total secrecy, the parents' identities would never be revealed,

and the mother would be registered under a pseudonym to prevent any future legal issues.

On reaching London, King Veer Bahadur Singh purchased a villa in the suburb and made every arrangement for his daughter and her entourage's comfortable stay till she delivered. He kept sufficient pounds in a British bank to meet every requirement of his daughter.

Thereafter, he left for his state with an instruction that he be informed well in advance of the expected date of delivery, so that he could arrange for the newborn's future.

The princess was pretty depressed about losing not only Harry but also her family, relatives, and friends.

Seeking to brighten her mood, the governess arranged for her to return to her education under the guidance of elite instructors. Her curriculum was expanded to include musical training in piano and violin, artistic expression through watercolor and dance, and refined instruction in the social graces of western society.

The governess and nurse accompanied the princess to the hospital for her monthly antenatal checkups. However, following the seventh visit, the gynecologist grew concerned upon finding the fetus larger than expected. As there was little that could be done at that stage, she recommended moving to fortnightly examinations rather than monthly ones. By the eighth month, the doctor predicted a difficult labor but provided reassurances that they were prepared to manage any complications.

In due time, Durga gave birth to a healthy son without any of the difficulties the doctor had anticipated. He was an

adorable infant with the complexion of an English baby—complete with blond hair, blue eyes, and, surprisingly, a birthmark on the left side of his forehead—yet he retained his mother's facial features.

Tragically, the princess was forbidden from even seeing her child. The only information she received was a simple description: she had a fair-skinned son with blue eyes, blond hair, and a birthmark. Immediately after birth, the baby was taken to an orphanage and baptized with the name Benjamin. He was then adopted by the very wealthy Earl Winston and his wife, Lady Elisabeth, both forty-five years old, who had been married for twenty-five years and remained childless despite seeking the best medical treatments in Europe and America. Adoption was their only remaining option, and they had been extremely selective, rejecting many children before choosing Benjamin for his English characteristics.

The Earl's family was immensely wealthy and belonged to the nobility, maintaining close ties with the royal family. Their vast fortune included extensive farmland, forests, and numerous country houses. They owned everything from stately horse-drawn carriages to the most advanced automobiles. Their global business empire was vast, with major investments that included a controlling stake in one of India's leading railway companies.

The earls, to avoid uncomfortable questions, decided to shift to Switzerland, where they have a mansion nestled in the Alps. The child Benjamin was well looked after by an army of nannies, virtually treating him like a royal child. With age, he was admitted to the best multilingual school

that taught not only English but also German and French, along with Latin, usual games on ice, shooting, and riding. During all his growing years, his real parentage was kept a guarded secret. Before fifteen, he was given a guided tour of Europe, North America, and India, where the Earl has interests in railways. During his school days, he was not only made well acquainted with the European classics but also Eastern culture so that when he grows and wishes to join his majesty's services, he should be among the top few.

The earl, being a devout British subject, thought it better that Benjamin, who was now known as Benjamin Winston and heir to the earldom, be educated in English universities. Thus, they shifted to their home in England and sent Benjamin to Oxford to learn political science, management, and statecraft.

Being handsome and athletic, he was obviously very popular among girls, especially among the daughters of nobility. He also represented the university in various sports and games.

Then came the fateful day that changed Benjamin's life altogether. That was his twenty-first birthday, which the earls decided to celebrate as a special occasion, heralding Benjamin into official adulthood.

The birthday celebration was a magnificent affair held at the palace, boasting a guest list of royalty, nobility, high-ranking civil servants, and military leaders, alongside the Earl's extended family. Following an evening of cocktails, dancing, and dinner, the master of ceremonies called for

silence to announce that the Earl and Lady Winston had an important statement to make.

The earl, after the usual introductory speech, announced that Benjamin would inherit his title and all movable and immovable properties. This was greeted by thunderous applause. They thronged round Benjamin to congratulate him and wish him the best.

The earl, after a long pause, announced that Benjamin was not his biological son. The earl and Lady Winston had adopted him soon after his birth. The earl's voice was almost choking, and a tear film was visible in his eyes. Lady Winston was seen wiping her eyes; she rushed to bewildered Benjamin, whose face was contorted in pain, and she hugged him to say that she and the earl loved him very much and the remark of the earl was just a legal formality, and he remains their most loved son. That made Benjamin start crying. He unclasped his mother's hands and rushed out of the hall to his room and bolted the door, only to break into an uncontrollable sob. He, inspite of the boundless love and affection showered on him by the earl and Lady Winston, found himself almost alone in the world that evening.

It was several days before Benjamin returned to his usual routine. During that time, he withdrew from his parents, abandoning the shared breakfasts and dinners that had been their tradition for years. Once his initial turmoil subsided, he confronted them about his true parentage. They claimed total ignorance, explaining that the church responsible for his baptism and adoption had kept the truth from them as well. While his parents were content to treat the matter as a closed chapter, Benjamin was haunted by a

gnawing suspicion that they knew more than they let on and were deliberately concealing the truth.

Though Benjamin kept a calm exterior as if everything was alright, he kept on his search for the truth.

This made Benjamin try every piece of information available in various hospitals, churches, and adoption homes to unravel the mystery; he made a list of the probable churches that could be involved in this and ultimately was able to pinpoint the most probable church.

On reaching the church, he was received very cordially, but when he raised the question, he faced the first hindrance in the matter, which was the requirement of a nod from the bishop. Benjamin sought an audience with the aging bishop. The senile bishop initially feigned his failing memory and expressed his inability to impart the information; moreover, he made it clear that even if he could remember the incident, it would not be possible for him to divulge it to Benjamin due to its legal implications, and that would be an ethical impropriety. On persistent request from Benjamin and a promise by him to get the church repaired that required urgent attention at his cost. The bishop granted the permission to the priest to show him the papers if they were still available.

Now came yet another obstacle in the form of tracing the file that might contain the information. After repeated requests and the lure of a large donation, the priest agreed to locate the file and show it to Benjamin. He went through pages of the tattered register and reached the most probable date of his adoption. To his utter surprise, he found that the

page that contained the information about him had been neatly removed from the otherwise intact register. Benjamin suspected the information had been deliberately destroyed.

Although he was reluctant to blame his adoptive parents fully, he couldn't help but feel they were responsible and part of a carefully orchestrated conspiracy.

Saddened and depressed, Benjamin returned to his aging parents and started pestering them for the information, but in vain. All they said was that they had never thought a certificate of adoption was that important, and so had not bothered to obtain one. They assured him that the absence of such a document would not hinder his inheritance.

The next action of the Earl was to call his legal firm and prepare a detailed will that would stand the scrutiny of the court if challenged later. He bestowed all his property on Benjamin and asked him to forget the announcement just like a bad dream.

Benjamin, in his quest, even browsed through the pages of the local newspaper of those days to find any clue about his adoption without success, even though the papers were full of news of adoption and advertisements for adoption of other children.

Benjamin continued his studies and passed the difficult examination of the imperial civil service, topping the list that entitled him to a posting of his choice anywhere in the British Empire. Benjamin sought a few days to make up his mind. The most lucrative posting was in India. The variable

climate of India ranged from freezing Himalayan cold to blistering warm desert.

That deterred many Englishmen from joining the service in India, yet a large group of adventurous youths dared to join the service for not only the salary but also unending fringe amenities and extended immunity from many misdeeds.

After much research, Benjamin had an uncanny feeling that at least one of his biological parents might be Indian. His presumption was based on repeated remarks by his peers that his countenance was more oriental than English; had he been slightly brownish, he could have been passed as an Indian or, at the most, an Anglo-Indian. Initially Benjamin resented the remark, but then he became accustomed to it; he found his face too attractive to the girls who wanted to be pretty intimate with him, with the desire to get married to this most eligible rich boy belonging to nobility.

Benjamin eventually married one of the many daughters of an Earl, but their marriage was short-lived. His wife's unruly, extravagant, and boisterous behavior led him to suspect her of infidelity. The couple divorced, and Benjamin was left without an heir. The divorce was costly, as he had to pay a significant amount in alimony, leaving the future of Earl Winston's property uncertain without an heir.

After giving serious consideration to the pros and cons, he decided to join the post allotted to him in India. Where he proved to be a capable administrator and a leader who kept the officialdom united. Over the years this led him to a town that served as the headquarters for the king's agent.

The function of the royal agent was to act as liaison between the imperial government and the princely states. The rulers of the princely states treated the one-sided treaty between the crown and the princely states as a *fait accompli* and grudgingly agreed to its implication. The function of the agent was overseeing the princely states in eastern India.

This region included the state of Shridham Garh, which was ruled by a liberal and broad-minded ruler who had a good relationship with the British regent. Benjamin as the regent, often visited the state, primarily for the abundant hunting opportunities. He also visited other princely states, driven by a persistent desire to uncover the mystery of his own parentage.

13

Life of Princess Durgeshnandini in Europe and Thereafter

Ramsingh, the grandfather of the chowkidar, proved to be a good storyteller. He took the whole of pre-lunch time to reach up to this part of the story, which impressed Vijay, who was almost glued to his seat, occasionally smoking.

By midday, Sunny informed them that lunch was ready, and if Ramsingh wished, he could have his lunch with Vijay, which Ramsingh this time agreed to but informed them that he would require another three to four hours to complete his story, with an hour's siesta. That contains the events revolving round Princess Durga, her stay in Europe, and thereafter her life in India, where she played a pivotal role in the future administration of Shridham Garh.

The readers may recall that the newborn child of the princess was taken away from her and sent to an orphanage; this left her oblivious of the fate of the infant.

Soon after the birth of her child, she was sent to a villa somewhere in the French Riviera by her father to keep her away from the prying eyes of the public and the tabloids. The weather there was warmer than the rest of Europe and more akin to the seashore of Shridham Garh, yet not as warm as Shridham Garh.

On the Riviera, she lived the life of a real princess in a palace surrounded by acres of greenery, a well-maintained lawn, and a garden with many fountains, a swimming pool, and a stable for her pedigreed horses—all of which reminded her of her days with Harry.

She was provided with an army of servants and maids, headed by the English governess who had accompanied her from India and stayed all through her days of grief in England. The Anglo-Indian nurse had already left her service and migrated to Australia; as promised to the princess's father, she had kept the secret well-guarded, without even her children knowing about it.

The governess took every step to groom Durga in Western culture, including Western dance and music. Three years had passed, and her father wagered that the public's fickle memory had finally clouded over her absence following Harry's baffling disappearance. Yet, a handful of skeptics remained unconvinced by Suhel Singh's official account. They sensed a darker plot at play, unable to ignore the suspicious timing between the princess's departure and the vanishing of the painters' sons.

As is well known, the royal household and the court at Shridham Garh successfully spread news of her disease and subsequent recovery from that elusive disorder. They further announced that during her stay abroad, she had graduated from university and mastered various skills at several institutes; she was expected back in Shridham Garh within a few months—a return she ultimately made.

On return she was received with great gaiety. The crowd consisted not only of her parents but also of her father's valet, Suhel Singh, who adored Durga more than his own children. He headed a team of her well-wishers. In vain Durgeshnandini searched for her brother in the crowd. She was not astonished at the absence of the one who doted on her like anything possible on earth and thought that it was but natural for him to abstain from the grand reception she was being given. The most probable cause she attributed to was her estrangement with him before she went abroad and his not even making casual inquiry about her all these years.

Reaching the palace, she was led to the room where she lived before her unfortunate departure for England and found it maintained in the same condition as she had left it. Even with the framed watercolor painting of the dancing peacock presented by Harry was at the same place as she had left it. The mere sight of the picture brought a surge of nostalgia.

Tommy, her favorite German shepherd, who was almost blind due to age, could recognize her by smell and started jumping at her, alternately barking and whining. All the members of the household and members of her extended family were very happy and made it a point to call on her; of course, a few passed remarks that were not very complimentary. Durga, realizing her present position, ignored such uncalled-for remarks and decided to deal with them appropriately when the time came.

She went through the palace room by room and found them as she had left them years ago. In spite of meeting all the members of the family, she was surprised not to find

Prince Shaurya anywhere in the palace and was told that he was away hunting and was not expected back in three to four days.

She also went to the stable to see the horses she had left before going abroad. In the stable she was astonished to find a magnificent horse thumping his hooves and neighing even when she was few yards away from him. Coming nearer, she found that it was her favorite horse called Alpha, who had recognized her after so many years by smell from a distance. She went near him and patted him on his neck and caressed his mane. This quietened the horse. She spent about half an hour with the horse. As she started moving away, the horse again started neighing, which brought Durga back to spend another few minutes with him. Once the horse was at ease, Durga left the stable wondering how animals like horses and dogs can recognize persons years later by smell and sight.

She made it a point to visit the horse daily thereafter and ride it in the manner she used to do many a time with Harry before she went abroad, which was not liked by her brother, to whom Harry was a persona non grata.

After four days, Princess Durga came to know that her much-loved brother had returned and gone straight to his section in the palace, not even bothering to inquire about the arrival of Princess Durga. However, ignoring the behavior of Prince Shaurya, Princess Durgeshnandini rushed to her brother's room with open arms to embrace him as she would have done earlier whenever the prince was back from his expedition in the forest.

Prince Shaurya almost ignored her, only asking about her well-being. Durga was hurt at his behavior and found him reeking with the smell of cheap alcohol; he was unstable as well. To Durga he looked emaciated with a bloated face and pouches under his lids, all due to drinking too much and an undisciplined life. He has not formally married after the death of his second wife but has many mistresses.

Suhel Singh, the King's loyal confidant and keeper of the court's secrets, privately warned Durga that Maharaja Veer Bahadur Singh's health was failing. The King, anxious over the state's future after his death, was desperate to see Durga wed. He had already set his sights on Maharaja Bikram Singh of the neighboring Dharma Garh. Although a ruler in his own right, Bikram Singh was a widower whose young son, Pratap Singh, was currently being raised by his grandmother.

When Durga confronted her father, she was blunt: she would prefer a life of spinsterhood over becoming a widower's second wife. The Maharaja revealed his high-stakes gamble: he intended to disinherit Prince Shaurya and pass the throne to Durga's future son. However, this plan hung by a thread. If Shaurya were to die before Durga produced a male heir, the lineage would break, giving the British government a pretext to annex the state or install a Court of Wards to seize control of the state.

Princess Durga, though not fully subscribing to the idea, had no choice but to get married to the person selected by her father in the interest of the state and royal family. The marriage between Princess Durgeshnandini and her would-be bridegroom, Maharaja Bikram Singh Dev Ji, the ruler of

the neighboring princely state of Dharamgarh, was solemnized in a relatively simple manner.

Her husband was fifteen years older than she and could not be called handsome; at the same time, he was not ugly, with a dark complexion. Thus now Princess Durga was Maharani Durgeshnandini of Dharamgarh with a stepson, the heir apparent to Raja Bikram Singh.

Maharani Durgeshnandini in time gave birth to a healthy, dark-complexioned boy with her sharp, beautiful face and named the child Laxman Singh Bahadur. Thus the ruler now had two sons, the first from his deceased wife and heir to the throne of Dharamgarh and the other in line of succession to the throne of Shridham Garh from Durgeshnandini. Thus the two heirs apparent to two adjoining states turned out to be stepbrothers.

Soon after the birth of Durga's son, Maharaja Veer Bahadur Singh passed away with remorse that he could not bring up Prince Shaurya to be up to his expectation and befitting of the family tradition.

Now a peculiar state of events happened. On one side, Durga's stepson was not yet an adult to be the ruler, so the British government appointed Durga as regent for the state of Dharamgarh. On the other hand, she had inherited the throne of Shridham Garh as well, bypassing Prince Shaurya; this virtually made her the ruler of two adjacent princely states, Dharamgarh and Shridham Garh.

Once her stepson became an adult, she handed over the reins of the state to him, and she shifted to her father's state, Shridham Garh. Princess Durga's own son and her stepson

had a good rapport between them and were raised to be future rulers of two adjoining states. Princess Durga, now called Rajmata, loved both the boys with equal affection. Her stepson, who was about ten years older than her own son, loved the younger one as his sibling.

In the meantime, the physical and mental condition of Prince Shaurya deteriorated so much that he was quite happy not to be burdened with the task of ruling the princely state of Shridham Garh so long as he received the privy purse granted by his late father. The state was flourishing well under Rajmata Durgeshnandini; she saw to it that her son did not come under the spell of Prince Shaurya, who has now become notorious for his nefarious deeds of not only teasing women of any age but also molesting anybody within his reach even in the palace. His bunch of henchmen were his partners in crime, which included abduction, murder, and violation of the honor of women; especially vulnerable were the poor women.

Once, he and his henchmen abducted a young tribal woman at gunpoint while she was traveling with a group of relatives, including her husband. The prince and his associates then outraged her modesty.

Three days later, her body—naked except for a few brass ornaments—was found floating in the river with evidence of assault. The victim's husband resolved to avenge the misdeed, even if it meant killing the prince and as many of his partners in crime as possible.

To execute his plan, the husband stalked the prince, observing his every move and waiting for the right

opportunity to get his revenge. That chance came one day when the prince was alone, tracking a tiger he had wounded the previous night. The prince was acting on a strong belief in the unwritten hunting code: "The person who draws first blood must be the one to kill the animal." He did this to prevent the tiger from either dying slowly of starvation or, worse, becoming a maimed man-eater and a threat to the public.

The enraged husband shot an arrow dipped in strong poison that could bring down a bison when hit. He shot the poisoned arrow from close quarters that brought the prince face down, sprawled on the ground. His loaded rifle fell from his hands a little away from him. The prince tried to retrieve the gun to shoot the assassin but could not reach the gun, as the assassin had already picked it up and thrown it away from the reach of the prince. The tribal came near the body of the prince only to find him still alive, frothing from the mouth and in uncontrollable fits.

The outraged tribal removed all the clothes of the prince, pulled the arrow out from the original wound, and stabbed many parts of his body, including his private parts, with the point of the poisoned arrow that increased the concentration of poison many a times, finally giving him a parting kick on his rump. He wiped the arrowhead with the cloth of the prince, picked up the rifle, and disappeared into the forest, not to be found anywhere thereafter. He threw the arrow and the gun in the fast-running river at different places. As to prevent anybody from finding them and by chance tracing them to him. He did not search the clothes for the possibility of any money or costly thing.

When the prince failed to return after four hours, his associates grew worried. Their alarm intensified because they had not heard a single shot from his gun, leading them to fear he had been killed by the tiger or was too injured to defend himself. After a difficult search, they found him lying face-down.

Even before reaching the body, they saw vultures perched on a nearby branch, waiting for him to die. As they approached, a crow cawed—a signal that sent two jackals, which had been licking warm blood from the still-alive prince, scuttling away. The scavengers rushed off only to wait at a distance, hoping that the men would leave without the injured man.

The associates were horrified to find the prince convulsing and frothing at the mouth, his body naked. His clothes were gone, and a later discovery showed they had been used to wipe blood from a sharp object. Curiously, his wallet was found intact, still containing enough money to have tempted any attacker.

Proving that the murder was not for money but may be as a part of somebody's revenge. The body was soaked in blood from multiple wounds on his body, out of which one at the back of his chest was bleeding more than the others. To the henchmen, the wound on his back looked like a stab wound, and that they concluded—somebody had stabbed the prince in the back with either a dagger or spear. They were at a loss, not finding his gun near his body, confirming that somebody had stabbed him and run away with the gun. They feared that the assailant may be hiding behind some boulders and waiting for them to come to retrieve the

body and kill them as well in the same ghastly manner. Hence, they decided to leave the place as quickly as possible with the convulsing prince on a makeshift stretcher, with one man with a loaded gun keeping an eye out for any possible assailant.

With great difficulty they brought the unconscious, convulsing prince to the palace, where the state physician told them that the prince had not only been injured by a sharp projectile, maybe an arrow or a spear, which most probably was laced with strong poison. The poison was more serious than the wound caused by the arrow. He suggested that the prince should be immediately taken to British India for treatment in one of the mission hospitals about fifty miles from Shridham Garh for treatment and possibly save the life of the prince. Rajmata Durga arranged for her estranged brother's trip to the hospital as fast as possible, but in vain. The prince died even before he was put on the vehicle that was meant to take him to the mission hospital. Before he died, he opened his eyes and moved them in every possible direction as if searching for something or someone and murmured the word "tribal" three times before he finally died. Shockwaves rippled through the palace and the town alike. Yet, beneath the outward horror, many breathed a secret sigh of relief; they viewed the 'demon's' suffering as a divine retribution—a punishment the prince had long deserved.

The last rites of Prince Shaurya Narayan Singh were held in a simple and solemn way by the son of Durga, Laxman Singh Bahadur, as Prince Shaurya was issueless. Over the next few months each of the henchmen that the

tribals could recognize were systematically eliminated by various methods; even those who had managed to take shelter in British India were not spared.

Once the final rites were concluded, the Rajmata's first act was to banish the late prince's mistresses. Stripped of their status and denied any financial settlement, they were ordered to fend for themselves with no further aid from the state. Even their desperate pleas to remain as lowly servants were coldly rejected.

Her next order was to examine the dead prince's personal papers. To their horror, they discovered he had pawned many costly artifacts and even sold gold and silver utensils and imported cutlery to businessmen within the state. The Rajmata managed to pay off all the debts Shaurya had incurred by mortgaging these items, even having to repurchase some for far more than their actual value.

Many articles were still with his accomplices, who had been fleecing the prince relentlessly. To set an example, the Rajmata gathered four of these men, had them stripped, and tied them to trees. She then ordered each to be whipped fifty times in public. Thereafter they were deported outside the state with a warning that whoever returns in the future would be handed over to the tribals to lynch them any way the tribals thought best.

While going through the papers, they stumbled upon a gold chain with a cross hanging from the middle, marked with stains that looked like dried blood. The presence of the cross proved that the owner of the chain was christian. This struck Rajmata like a thunderbolt, reminding her that she

had seen this chain around Harry's neck often. She had requested him many times to give it to her as a memento, at which he would break into a hearty laugh, brightening the birthmark on his forehead.

In due time, Rajmata Durgeshnandini decided to hand over the state of Dharamgarh to her stepson, Pratap Singh, who was now mature enough to be crowned. Her decision was duly approved by the Viceroy, who had earlier appointed Mr. Benjamin Winston, ICS, as the representative of the Crown to oversee the vassal states. Consequently, Benjamin became not only the Lieutenant Governor but also the regent to the eastern states. Having been knighted and later elevated to the peerage in England, he was known as the Lord of Mohanpur, with his full formal title being Lord Benjamin Winston of Mohanpur.

According to tradition, the prince was required to be married before his coronation ceremony. Consequently, the event was preceded by the marriage of Prince Pratap Singh to the daughter of the ruler of another princely state. The age difference between the prince and his wife was only three years.

The coronation was solemnized with the pomp and show befitting the status of Dharamgarh, attended by rulers of suitable status or their representatives from across India. The long list of invited dignitaries was headed by Lord Benjamin Winston, acting as the representative of the Crown.

14

The prince, His stepbrother, and half— brother

Following the extensive religious, administrative, and political rituals, Rajmata Durgeshnandini escorted Kumar Pratap Singh and his wife to the throne. To the rhythmic chanting of Sanskrit mantras, she placed the bejeweled ancestral crown upon the head of the new king. From that moment onward, he would be known as Maharaja Pratap Singh Bahadur of Dharma Garh, with the customary Sanskrit titles prefixed and suffixed to his and his wife's names.

After the ceremony, the newly crowned Maharaja and his consort, the Maharani, approached the Rajmata, who stood as grace incarnate. The ruler touched her feet, seeking her blessing and her steadfast protection, support, and love. Throughout the proceedings, his stepbrother, Laxman Singh, sat to the Maharaja's right, while the Rajmata occupied a separate throne set slightly apart from the King.

To her left, a short distance away, sat the Viceroy's representative, Lord Benjamin. Maharaja Pratap Singh then turned to embrace his stepbrother, Kumar Laxman Singh—the man who would remain next in line to the throne until the Maharaja fathered a son. He then approached the Lieutenant Governor and shook his hand; the Englishman, in turn, conveyed the Viceroy's best wishes and personally

congratulated the new King, promising the full protection of the British government. When Maharaja Pratap Singh formally introduced him, the Lieutenant Governor bowed low to the Rajmata.

At that moment, a hush fell over the room as those present noticed a startling resemblance between the Rajmata, Kumar Laxman Singh, and Lord Benjamin. Aside from their coloring—the Rajmata and Laxman being of dusky complexion with dark eyes, while the Lieutenant Governor possessed the fair skin, blond hair, and blue eyes of his heritage—their features were nearly identical. The only other difference was a prominent red birthmark on the left side of the Englishman's forehead. Overcome by the sight, the Rajmata grew dizzy and had to be helped to her throne by Pratap, Laxman, and Benjamin himself. When she finally opened her eyes, she found the British official leaning over her, his own face etched with astonishment at finding himself a fair-skinned replica of the Queen Mother.

After the coronation ceremony, the newly throned maharaja and maharani led a procession to the temple of the deity of the royal family with Durgeshnandini just behind them and Benjamin on her right. She putting her right hand on the crook of the left elbow of Benjamin as per Western etiquette. Which was otherwise against the accepted rule that stated, "The rajmata or the maharani is not to be touched by any person but the close relatives of the royal family." The other relatives and courtiers were just required to bow to them from a distance not less than a yard. Benjamin tried to stay with Durgeshnandini as long as possible, only to be politely reminded by his aide-de-camp that he has some more

engagements and many heads of other princely states are waiting for an audience with him.

The lieutenant governor, Benjamin, left the next day for his headquarters and retired to his room with an instruction that he need not be disturbed for the whole morning. Benjamin kept on pondering if there was any possibility that Rajmata was his biological mother or a very close relative of hers. The second seemed to be more possible.

To escape his dilemma and a mental state as saddening as the evening he learned he was the earl's adopted child, he took out his violin and played a melancholic tune until he felt better.

He relentlessly continued the search for clues regarding his parentage. The burning question remained: even if Rajmata Durgeshnandini was his biological mother, who was his father?

Driven by this riddle for two years, he finally uncovered the history of an English artist's family. The father had served as the official state painter for the royals, while the mother was Princess Durgeshnandini's governess. Their son, though officially labeled as his father's assistant, had actually tutored the Princess in the violin and the art of watercolor landscapes.

He dug deeper, discovering not only a rumored romance between the princess and the artist's assistant, but also the dark conclusion to that tale: the mysterious disappearance of the painter's son following a violent altercation with Prince Shaurya.

To this day, the cause of his disappearance remains an unsolved mystery. The region is filled with folklore describing a doomed romance between a handsome European youth and a stunning princess, though the ultimate fate of the lovers is always left to the listener's imagination. A ballad recounting this tale is still sung by the local tribals on the full moon following Holi. The song was originally penned by Suhel Singh—a man of many talents: a gifted lyricist, a sonorous singer, and a master of percussion.

Benjamin pondered the facts and narrowed his search for his father down to two possibilities within the painter's family. He quickly ruled out John Edward, reasoning that the painter was past his prime, a pious christian, and a devoted husband of twenty-five years—hardly a candidate for an illicit royal affair.

Consequently, suspicion fell upon the only son, Harry Edward John. People still speak of Harry's charm and elegance, as well as the contradictory stories surrounding his sudden vanishing. It was as if John Edward, his wife, and Harry had evaporated into thin air, leaving behind no trace other than their oil paintings in the palace.

Certain that the truth was still out there, Benjamin pinpointed Suhel Singh—the Maharaja's former valet and trusted confidant—as the one man who could solve the riddle. He lured the elderly Suhel to the Governor's residence under the guise of consulting him on old territorial disputes between Shridham Garh and Dharamgarh. Though Suhel was wary and initially hesitant due to his failing health, he eventually accepted the invitation.

When Suhel arrived, he was met with the kind of ceremony usually reserved for a head of state. To his shock, Benjamin stood up to greet him personally with a handshake—a gesture far too deferential for a governor to offer a former valet. Suhel's sharp instincts, honed by years of state administration, immediately warned him that this was no casual historical inquiry. Benjamin then ordered his bodyguards to close the doors, ensuring their conversation would be held in strict confidence.

After Suhel Singh had been seated and had his usual tea, Benjamin exchanged courtesies about his personal health and the well-being of Rajmata and her sons and came to the exact subject for which he had called Suhel Singh, which revolved round the mysterious disappearance of Harry.

Suhel Singh initially expressed that he was not privy to the matter. After repeated questioning, cajoling, and coaxing, the only information he imparted was that he was bound by an oath of secrecy. All he claimed to remember was that the painter's son had a birthmark on his forehead like Benjamin himself.

Armed with this new insight, Benjamin finally glimpsed a ray of light at the end of a long, dark tunnel. The mystery was no longer impenetrable, and he pressed on, determined to coax the truth from Suhel Singh.

When all the tactics failed to get definite information, the governor tried to use the much-practiced method of bribing Suhel Singh, offering him a suitable reward in the form of a civil honor and zamindari—which Suhel Singh

politely declined. After hours of conversation that oscillated between decades of history and the intimate details of the bygone royal court, Suhel Singh finally relented. He agreed to divulge the dark secret regarding Harry's murder and the disposal of his body.

He admitted he was fully aware of Durga's romance with Harry, her subsequent pregnancy, and the birth of their son in England. That child, he revealed, had been sent to an orphanage for baptism and adoption. However, the trail went cold there; Suhel claimed total ignorance regarding the events that transpired between the adoption and Durgeshnandini's return to India three years later. He suspected that not even the Maharaja knew the identity of the adoptive parents. If the King did possess that knowledge, he had guarded it jealously, never sharing it with his valet and close confidant Suhel Singh. For his part, seeing the Maharaja's silence, Suhel had never dared to ask the maharaja about the secret.

The information above made the jigsaw of Benjamin's birth fall into a perfect picture, except for one missing piece: confirmation of his father's identity. This prompted Benjamin to travel back to England to confront his adoptive parents with the possibility of Durgeshnandini being his biological mother. The aging couple expressed their ignorance of the matter, while still affirming their unending love for him.

Upon returning to India, Benjamin attempted to question the Rajmata directly about her relationship with Harry and the possibility that she was his biological mother. However, he was met with a stubborn, impenetrable wall of

silence. The only information she offered was that Harry had taught her to play the violin, paint in watercolors, and handle a gun. She noted that Harry was as handsome as Benjamin and even possessed a similar birthmark, yet she deliberately suppressed any mention of a physical relationship or the details of her time in England and the French Riviera.

Her evasiveness only strengthened Benjamin's conviction that Durgeshnandini and Harry were indeed his parents. Having left no stone unturned in his search without success, Benjamin decided it was time to play his trump card to break her emotional defenses. He devised a meticulous plan to force the truth into the open: he invited the Rajmata to the governor's house as his personal guest for his upcoming birthday. She accepted the invitation reluctantly, sensing a hidden agenda—a suspicion deepened by the perplexing fact that the lieutenant governor had pointedly excluded her two sons from the guest list.

The birthday party held in the Durbar Hall of the Governor's House was attended by many high-ranking officials and socialites; also present was a select group of maestros, representing both European and Indian music in classical and contemporary styles.

The evening unfolded with its usual elegance: cocktails and dinner were followed by a musical recital. When the guest performers finished, those familiar with Benjamin's talent on the violin urged him to play. He agreed, but with a surprising display of deference—he first requested the Rajmata's blessing and insisted that she, a fellow devotee of the violin, perform a closing piece after him.

This action by the lieutenant governor astonished the guests, who wondered why he would seek the permission of the Rajmata rather than the maestros present. To their surprise, Benjamin began with a segment of an ancient ballad depicting the tragic love between a princess and a shepherd. He played three more pieces, all well-received; but by coincidence, the final melody was the very one Harry had played for Durgeshnandini before vanishing from her life.

The performance brought tears to Durgeshnandini's eyes, though she struggled to conceal them from everyone but Benjamin. Composing herself, she agreed to play the evening's final tune. She deliberately chose the first melody Harry had ever taught her; however, she became so overwhelmed by the memory that she suddenly begged to be excused. Rushing to her room, she broke down as the trauma of Harry's disappearance hit her like a sledgehammer.

By now, she was all but convinced that Benjamin was the son born of her union with Harry. That night, she lay awake, tormented by a dilemma: revealing their relationship publicly would not only tarnish Benjamin's career but also destroy her own image among subjects who revered her as a demi-goddess. Ultimately, she resolved to reveal the secret only to Benjamin, binding him to a promise of strict secrecy—even from his beloved wife.

On the following day, the Governor arranged for breakfast for three to be brought to the Maharani's suite. His decision to join her for breakfast had been conveyed the night before, and he requested to be informed once she was ready.

He was accompanied by his wife—his second, after having divorced his first wife on the grounds of adultery within two years of their marriage. That divorce had cost him a fortune in alimony to a woman who, despite her own noble background, had been unfaithful. In contrast, his present wife was a commoner and a devout Christian with a simple appearance. She loved Benjamin not for his wealth or status, but for his character, physique, intelligence, and his passion as a connoisseur of music and art. She was an expert in Western classical music and had a son in England who was the heir to Benjamin's hereditary peerage.

At the appointed hour, the governor and his wife arrived at the Maharani's suite for breakfast. Benjamin immediately noticed that the Maharani barely touched her food and seemed deeply upset. When the meal concluded, Benjamin surreptitiously signaled for his wife to leave, ensuring the room was secure from eavesdroppers so he could speak with the Maharani in private.

As he turned to Durgeshnandini, he found her weeping bitterly. He stepped closer to console her, but his presence only seemed to intensify her sobs, leaving him standing frozen, unsure of how to comfort her.

Once she regained her composure, she told Benjamin she needed to share something deeply private. She revealed her conviction that he was, in fact, her son born of her relationship with Harry. She listed the undeniable resemblances: his stately physique, fair complexion, blond hair, and blue eyes. Most telling was the red birthmark on his left forehead—identical to one Harry had. She explained

that even his walk, his manner of speech, and his virtuosity on the violin mirrored his father's.

She then recounted the painful history: how she was taken to England to deliver a male child who looked perfectly English, complete with the birthmark. Tragically, the doctors had taken the newborn away before she could even look at him. She ended by describing her subsequent three-year exile on the French Riviera.

Benjamin received the news with a sense of calmness rather than shock; he was simply relieved that the lifelong mystery of his parentage had finally reached a resolution. Embracing Durgeshnandini for the first time—not just as a host, but as a son—he confessed his deepest wish: to take her back to England and care for her with all the dignity and honor she deserved. Yet, reality intervened. He acknowledged that their respective duties in India made such a life impossible for the time being.

Durgeshnandini, the queen mother to two princely states, returned with a mixed feeling of happiness and sorrow. The first was meeting her long-lost son, and the cause of her sadness was that she could not publicly declare that Benjamin was really her biological progeny born out of marriage and his father was none other than Harry.

Around this time, a shift occurred in the administration: the Imperial Civil Service was renamed the Indian Civil Service. The scope of power was shrinking from a global colonial jurisdiction to one confined solely to India, and officers were offered a choice between the two. In those days, the service was a bastion of the British elite. By law,

Benjamin fit this mold perfectly; he was born in England, raised by English parents, and carried a British passport. Yet, the secret Durgeshnandini had revealed created a silent fracture in that identity. He now knew that while he was legally English, his bloodline was Anglo-Indian.

Many of the members opted to revert back to England to avoid scorching summers, torrential monsoons, and great floods alternating with drought, multiple infectious diseases, and occasional earthquakes. Only a few chose to remain in India for the unfettered power and unexplained immunity they enjoyed, with the sole aim of supporting and maintaining the British hold upon India.

Benjamin, having solved his dilemma of parentage, which was his purpose of being in India, opted to go back to England and join his adoptive parents, explaining to them all the developments and reassuring them that his love and affection for them remained as strong as before; that gladdened and relieved the old couple immensely. The relieved couple died within one year after they had been informed about Benjamin's parentage. The earl was first to go, only to be followed by his devout wife a month later.

The Rajmata now had three sons in her life: her biological sons, Benjamin and Laxman Singh, and her stepson, Pratap Singh. Since Benjamin held no claim to the throne, appearance of Benjamin in the scene sparked no rivalry. Instead, the dynamic shifted from a political one to that of genuine brotherhood—a bond that endured for the rest of their lives.

In private, the three men shared a warm, back-slapping camaraderie. They dropped their titles in favor of familial affection, addressing one another by age; Benjamin, the eldest, was affectionately called 'Bade Bhai ji,' while Laxman, the youngest, was simply 'Chhote.' However, in the public eye, strict protocol was maintained. The distinction remained absolute, with the two Rajas addressing Benjamin as 'Your Excellency,' and he reciprocated with 'Your Highness.'

The most common sport they were involved in was hunting, following the well-established rules of Shikar. These rules dictated shooting only adult male animals—both herbivores and carnivores—while competing for the largest antlers of sambar and chital, or the biggest tiger or panther. Another sport they enjoyed was target shooting at the range. Surprisingly, Benjamin always excelled more than the other two, likely due to genes inherited from Harry.

Years later, after much water had flowed down the Bachchi and Godavari rivers, Durgeshnandini handed the reins of Shridham Garh and Dharamgarh to Laxman Singh and Pratap Singh, choosing to retire from state administration. Withdrawing from palace intrigues and court politics, she dedicated her remaining years to the downtrodden. She worked alongside a clan of Hindu savants—men who wore no ochre robes and lived within society, yet had devoted their lives to the service of the marginalized, at the same time believing in one superpower. "He was the embodiment of the infinite: omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient. Shapeless and unfathomable, his dominion extended far beyond the Earth, governing the

celestial dance of stars and galaxies across the cosmos. Nothing in the universe occurred without his knowledge, for he was not only the witness to all things but the very cause of them.

They did not believe in worshipping icons or idols. They even refused to offer flowers or burn incense to please Him. Instead, their entire spiritual ritual consisted of singing hymns in praising the almighty. They sang the songs sitting cross-legged on the floor; their singing was supplemented with the playing of harmonium, *Khol* (a common percussion instrument popular in eastern India), cymbals, and flute.

They believed the almighty resided within every living being. They rejected all caste distinctions. In their view, every member of society was equal, regardless of their occupation or status in life.

Meanwhile, Suhel Singh—the foster brother and lifelong shadow of Veer Bahadur Singh—also passed away. He had been the King’s friend, philosopher, and protector, often shielding him from compromising situations. Suhel took the royal family’s deepest secrets to his grave, the most significant being the truth of Harry’s death and Benjamin’s parentage.

While Suhel’s sons and grandsons possessed just enough competence to secure positions at court, his lineage eventually produced a brighter spark. His great-grandson, far surpassing his predecessors, cleared the coveted Indian Administrative Service examination. He rose to the rank of District Magistrate and was posted back to Dharamgarh, which had by then transformed into a district headquarters.

After leaving India, Benjamin served in various colonial posts before finally retiring to England to manage his large estate and enjoy his government pension. However, during his active years, however, he frequently found time to visit Shridham Garh incognito. His primary goal was to investigate a haunted hunting lodge, hoping to witness a benevolent, fair-skinned spirit said to appear on the full moon night following Holi.

On one such visit, he unknowingly checked into the very room where Harry had been murdered. The chowkidar of the time warned him that the room was haunted, begging him to move to an equally comfortable room or, at the very least, to lock his door from within during the night. Benjamin ignored both pieces of advice. Instead of sleeping, he decided to keep watch after dinner. He sat in a chair facing the open door, armed with a loaded revolver and a powerful five-cell torch—a contraption that had only just appeared on the market. From his seat, he could spot the slightest movement on the moonlit veranda.

In the silence of the night, he was enchanted by the sound of music drifting from a tribal village a mile away, where locals were celebrating the new harvest. As an expert in music, Benjamin was astonished to recognize the melody. It was a folk song he had heard many times in Shridham Garh—a ballad about a tragic romance between a poor foreigner and a rich Indian girl. He immediately realized the song was about Harry and Durga.

Despite his determination to stay awake, sleep eventually overtook him. Sometime after midnight, he was roused by the suspicion of soft, light footsteps moving inside

the room. He scanned the floor, which was bathed in moonlight streaming through the large glass window on the west wall. However, instead of a spirit, he found two large mountain rats. One was scurrying across the carpet in search of food, while the other was gnawing at the woodwork, attempting to burrow a passage into the bathroom.

He shoed them away to continue his vigil. Benjamin decided to remain awake the rest of the night, sitting on the armchair, keeping the door open so he could see the moonlit veranda well. The villagers were still enjoying the moonlit night with song and dance in rhythm with the tribal instruments. At about 3 o'clock he felt somebody walking on the veranda towards the door of the room; it was a human figure that looked larger than normal. The figure stopped a few feet away from Benjamin's position as if staring intently at him.

Benjamin quickly got up, revolver in hand, and walked toward the figure. As he almost reached them, the form suddenly turned to walk away and vanished into thin air, leaving nothing behind but the foul stench of a decaying corpse. It happened so fast that Benjamin couldn't see the person's face; all he could visualize was the outline of a naked human body retreating. Benjamin searched the building room by room, as well as the garden below, but found no trace of him.

Another surprise that struck him was that the garden gate was securely bolted. This led Benjamin to believe there was indeed a paranormal being in the building—one he was unable to recognize or communicate with. Disheartened and more perplexed than ever, Benjamin left for headquarters

after two more days of vigil. Before departing, he narrated his experience to the *chowkidar*, who was unsurprised; the story merely confirmed his knowledge of a harmless spirit that visited the lodge every year on a fixed date, leaving without a trace.

Seeking a quiet retirement, Benjamin moved to India and settled in a secluded spot midway between Shridham Garh and Dharamgarh. Living under a hidden identity, he developed a profound fascination with Hinduism. To engage with the sacred texts in their original form, he mastered Sanskrit, Urdu, and various local dialects. In the meantime he managed to return to England to arrange his affairs, legally renaming his son Edward to include "Harry." Following Benjamin's passing, his son ascended to the peerage as Lord Harry Edward Winston of Mohanpur, taking his rightful seat in the House of Lords.

15

Benjamin and the tribals

As previously mentioned, Benjamin chose to make India his permanent home, content to live on a modest ICS pension that was a mere fraction of his former English earnings. Despite these humble means, he remained dedicated to his mission: the empowerment of local tribal communities. His legacy in the region was so profound that the area eventually came to be known as "Benjamin Dhaam" in his honor.

Prior to his return to India, Benjamin quietly established a £100,000 trust in Rajmata Durgeshnandini's name. Without her knowledge, he appointed Maharaja Pratap Singh, Maharaja Laxman Singh, and Suhel Singh as trustees to manage the fund. The trust was dedicated to a noble cause: providing financial support for underprivileged Indian students struggling to complete their education in England.

Eventually, Benjamin was initiated into the same spiritual clan that Durgeshnandini had joined—a coincidence he would only discover years later.

To maintain his anonymity, he crafted an elaborate disguise featuring a flowing beard, a prominent mustache, and snow-white hair reaching his hips. He wore long sleeves to conceal his complexion, leading locals to believe he was actually an Indian albino with a British accent. Although he

personally would have preferred to be dressed in saffron attire, he had to opt for the plain white dress of his brethren as per the custom of the clan to blend in with the general public. He walked barefoot and spoke fluent Hindustani, though he could never quite mask his distinct English accent.

In his leisure time, Benjamin captivated audiences by playing Indian devotional songs on his beloved violin, inspiring many of his brethren to seek his tutelage. He also mastered the khol, a traditional percussion instrument. It was a mesmerizing sight to see this fair-skinned, barefooted ascetic, the khol slung around his neck, dancing perfectly in rhythm while singing hymns.

He assembled a skilled musical ensemble of violinists, khol players, and the ever-present harmonium, supported by others playing cymbals of various sizes. Evening devotional sessions became a routine. Notably, in accordance with clan rules, the pedestal before the congregation remained **devoid** of religious icons, and no sermons were delivered.

He taught the children of illiterate tribals the basics of English, Hindustani, and the vernacular. Under his tutelage, pupils mastered basic mathematics and became dexterous in reading and writing English and Hindi; some even mastered Urdu. In his new "Avatar," Benjamin funded the admission of many students to primary and secondary schools in Dharamgarh and Shridham Garh. Some even attended colleges in Calcutta on stipends from the Durgeshnandini Trust, becoming literate enough to join government services in both British India and the princely states. Many of them reached very high positions, as high as secretaries in state

government, following the merger of the princely states after some years.

Despite this modernization, he insisted they remain rooted in agriculture and their usual tribal rituals. He championed the preservation of forests and wildlife while advising them to shun "soothsayers" and witchcraft—unfortunately, this advice was rarely followed in letter or spirit.

Benjamin also focused on vocational skills, encouraging the tribals to improve their metal and bamboo craftsmanship, as well as their music and dance. They learned improved weaving methods, eventually creating cloth of such quality that it was sold in big cities. He could be considered the father of the cooperative movement in the tribal belt; he urged them to stop unfair bartering with dishonest traders and instead sell for cash. He established a cooperative tribal bank offering low-interest loans, effectively eliminating loan sharks, which was met with strong opposition from the affected money lenders, who took every step to disrupt the cooperative movement among the tribals. However, his advice regarding social reforms—specifically refraining from polygamy and frequent separations—was largely treated as a joke by the community.

He was struck by the immaculate condition of the mud dwellings. Despite being constructed from simple materials like straw, wild reeds, and branches, the roofs were impressively waterproof. Typically, each home consisted of two rooms and a modest kitchen, all opening onto a covered veranda. The residents maintained the walls and floors by plastering them with a traditional mixture of cow dung and

lime; the floor was specially treated with a mixture of cow dung and mud. The veranda walls, in particular, were adorned with murals depicting tribal customs, local wildlife, and the natural world.

In this region, a typical village consisted of a sparse cluster of eight to ten huts dispersed over several miles. Here, prosperity was measured uniquely by the ownership of Salfi (fish-tail) palms. These trees provided a sap that, once harvested at dawn and fermented, created a mild spirit enjoyed by the entire community. The more trees a man possessed, the higher his status. However, true wealth was rare; lacking the means to afford bullocks or plows, most villagers tilled the earth by hand with pickaxes and shovels. They primarily cultivated millets—hardy, drought-resistant grains that, while reliable, brought in far less profit than paddy or lentils.

It was very common practice among the tribals to visit weekly markets, which were held for three to four hours in the morning, ending in cockfighting. The cocks were specially raised for this event that involved betting that usually consisted of a few hundred rupees only. The person whose cock won the fight got the other man's bird as a trophy. On the fringe of the market invariably had a place where locally brewed alcohol was sold that was stronger than home-brewed salfi. The tribal men and women came to the market in their best clothes, the women wearing flowers on their well-oiled hair.

Benjamin was intrigued by two paradoxes of tribal life: the surprisingly low birth rate and the malnutrition. He attributed their robust health to an incredibly diverse diet.

They were opportunistic eaters, consuming almost anything found above or below the soil. While their staple food was coarse grain—grown on rugged, rain-fed land or gathered from the wild—they enriched this base with roots, tubers, and fruits.

The protein in the diet was sourced from small game killed by arrow, caught in snares, or fish netted from local water bodies. However, obtaining a large animal, whether hunted or found dead, was a premium event that sparked two or three days of celebration across multiple villages. Their quest for food was so bold that they would even drive a tiger away from its freshly killed prey if the opportunity arose.

The first mystery—the surprisingly low birth rate—appeared to stem from the use of a specific concoction with contraceptive properties, administered immediately after childbirth. The ingredients of this mixture were a closely guarded secret, passed down exclusively from mother to daughter. To this day, the formula remains an enigma that baffles modern medical experts.

By this time, Benjamin had become famous as "Babaji." He had acquired enough knowledge of homeopathy to treat minor ailments for both the tribal and non-tribal populations. As he offered his services free of charge and achieved a high success rate, he earned the affectionate title of "Doctor Baba."

Years later, Dr. George Cunningham, a missionary trained in Western medicine, opened a primitive hospital near Benjamin's clinic. Despite their differing medical

approaches, they became fast friends. Benjamin frequently referred cases that were not amenable to his mode of treatment to Dr. Cunningham; their bond was further strengthened by their shared missionary zeal, as well as their common nationality and background.

He went to great lengths to explain that Hindu rituals were not as complicated as false sages made them out to be. This clarification helped stop the surge of conversions to Christianity. That was welcomed by both the maharaja and elite Hindus. However, his unique way of preserving Hinduism remained a mystery to many so-called "social uplifters." These individuals opposed him, wrongly accusing his followers of being a new missionary sect that violated traditional Hindu rules. They deliberately stirred up trouble, going so far as to physically assault his followers and threaten them with death if they did not leave. Despite the danger, his followers faced these threats with unwavering bravery.

After a long and fulfilling life, he passed away peacefully while in deep meditation. He was cremated according to Hindu rites at the very spot where his biological mother, Durgeshnandini—the Queen Mother of two states—had been laid to rest. The funeral pyre was lit by Maharaja Laxman Singh himself, who accorded him full state honors. The Maharaja later commissioned a modest marble mausoleum on the site, which remains a place of pilgrimage. To this day, people gather annually on his death anniversary to pay their respects with a solemnity that honors his philosophy.

16

Epilogue

This saga intertwines two parallel narratives. One follows the lives of English nobles and Indian royals, while the other chronicles an Indian family's rise from rags to riches. The epitome of this financial empire was a resourceful woman, Prabha Devi, who was well-versed in finance, administration, and political maneuvering. A central character is Vijay, her beloved grandson, whom she reared as her own child. Her influence over his life was absolute, extending even to the choice of his wife.

Vijay's story is a chronicle of a failed love affair. Because their love remained unexpressed, he and his counterpart, Suhasini, chose diverging paths that never crossed until much later in life. Suhasini entered active politics, eventually rising to the level of a senior cabinet minister and a contender for the premiership. Meanwhile, Vijay became a leading tycoon with a business empire spanning the globe.

A chance encounter finally brought them face-to-face when Vijay faced a complex legal crisis with the central government that threatened his business with ruin. This meeting resolved the imbroglio and culminated in a cordial dinner. Also in attendance were Suhasini's husband, a decorated retired general, and Aditya Narayan, Suhasini's rival for the premiership.

Aditya, whose sportsmanship was forged in a socialistic British milieu, bore no malice toward Suhasini. He shared a

history with both her and Vijay, having studied alongside them in England. Though he preferred to keep his royal lineage in the shadows, he was the heir apparent to the princely state of Shridham Garh—formally titled Kumar Bahadur Aditya Narayan Singh Dev Ji. He eventually ascended the throne, destined to be the state's final independent ruler.

The prince dropped his royal titles when he joined politics after his state was annexed by the newly formed government of the Indian republic.

Ever since they parted ways in England, Suhasini and Vijay have lived as strangers. Suhasini watched his life unfold from afar, while Vijay deliberately shunned her—not out of malice, but because he was too afraid to admit he loved her. The tragedy of their silence was mutual: Suhasini shared his secret desire for marriage but stayed quiet, certain that if she reached out, she would only face rejection.

The meeting briefly rekindled the embers of love between them, yet the flame quickly yielded to a stark realization: they were well past midlife, married, and both raising grown sons. With a quiet understanding, they accepted it was time to let bygones be bygones. Their story frequently converges with others, connecting various characters and plots.

The other story spans the period from the decline of the Mughal Empire to India's independence and the integration of the princely states. Tracing its roots from the founder, Veer Bahadur Singh, the royal lineage of Shridham Garh culminates in its final sovereign, Shrimant Aditya Narayan Singh Dev Ji. He stands as a pivotal figure—a

mutual friend and a vital emotional bridge connecting Suhasini and Vijay.

Breaking with the traditions of his ancestors, Aditya Narayan was the first heir of his princely state to complete a Western education in England. This experience instilled in him liberal and socialistic ideals that defined his career, particularly after his state was annexed by the newly formed—and ideologically aligned—Indian government.

After the princely states were abolished, Aditya Narayan Singh entered politics and eventually became a cabinet minister in the central government. He was a close friend of Vijay, a commoner who was the grandson of the Indian multi-millionaires Prabha Devi. Their friendship dated back to their student days in England, despite their different family backgrounds.

During his reign, Maharaja Aditya Narayan commissioned his friend Vijay—now the head of a burgeoning consultancy—to conduct a comprehensive geological and hydrological survey of Shridham Garh. To fulfill this mission, Vijay established his office and laboratory in a century-old hunting lodge. The lodge had a reputation for being haunted, which meant few tourists ever stayed the night.

Undeterred, Vijay arrived with his longtime companion, Sunny Tudu—a man who served not only as his driver but also as his guard and guide. Upon arrival, the property's chowkidar (caretaker) warned them that the lodge was plagued by a legendary white spirit. Vijay, however, dismissed the warning; he suspected the caretaker was merely

trying to scare them off to avoid the work of attending to guests.

Vijay insisted on staying for the duration of the project. Yet, during his stay, he eventually came face-to-face with an apparition he could not identify. Despite never discovering the spirit's true nature, and contrary to the caretaker's intimidation, Vijay stood his ground and remained in the lodge until his exploration was complete without encountering the spirit anymore because the spirit visited the lodge only once a year, one month after the full moon of Holi, the tribal festival of the new harvest.

During his stay in the lodge, Vijay came across a man who was the great-grandson of an individual privy to many royal secrets. Because this ancestor had been a contemporary of the then-reigning Maharaja, the man was able to shed light on the history of the lodge and its connection to a "white spirit" who had been murdered in the very room where Vijay was staying. Through persistent effort, Vijay discovered that the spirit was an English youth named Harry John Edward, the son of a court portrait painter.

The body of the British youth was thrown in the depth of the nearby river without ever being recovered. Only to be converted to a spirit that visited the lodge every year on the full moon a month after Holi.

An American paranormal specialist later confirmed the presence of paranormal beings at the lodge. Her findings were further corroborated by another American expert who could decode messages received on a planchette from invisible spirits. The man was able to communicate directly with a white ghost, who identified himself as Harry.

The spirit of Harry explained that he had been murdered on the orders of Prince Shaurya Singh because of his affair with Princess Durgeshnandini. He confirmed their love affair and physical relationship but said he didn't know if she had a child from him, as he lost all contact with her after being strangled to death inside the haunted lodge. His spirit revealed that it was now trapped in a one-square-mile area around the depths of the Bachchi River, in front of the lodge, where his body had been thrown after being bound to a large stone.

The story reveals that the princess really carried the child of Harry, the murdered English youth. In due time, Princess Durga gave birth to a son with distinct British features in a hospital known for clandestinely handling illegitimate births in England, where she was taken surreptitiously by her father. The infant was transferred to a corrupt orphanage, baptized as "Benjamin," and quickly adopted by a wealthy, childless couple—Earl Winston and Lady Elisabeth—who raised him as their own.

On his eighteenth birthday, Benjamin's world was shattered when the Earl and Lady Elisabeth revealed that he was adopted and that they knew nothing of his biological origins. Determined to uncover the truth, Benjamin joined the Imperial Civil Service as a means to travel to India, ultimately becoming a lieutenant governor who, besides acting as administrator of British provinces, oversaw the affairs of adjoining princely states, including Shridham Garh and Dharamgarh.

Once to unravel the mystery, Benjamin invited the Queen Mother to one of his birthday ceremonies in the

governor's house, where she was given a special position. She stayed in the governor's house for three days in splendor befitting the governor's mother. That was the occasion when the queen mother spelled out the truth that Harry was his biological father.

Once his parentage had been settled, he decided that he would spend his post-retirement life in India in a place equidistant from Shridham Garh and Dharamgarh to be near his real mother and stepbrothers with whom he had a relation as cordial as between siblings.

The other job he took was to have a face-to-face with the white spirit in the haunted lodge, which did not come to a successful end. In spite of his staying in the haunted lodge for a week round the full moon after Holi. He spent the rest of his life as a Hindu savant without giving up Christianity, in which he was baptized at birth. He lived a long post-retirement life serving the tribals and uplifting the downtrodden only to die at the ripe age of ninety while in deep meditation. He was cremated in Hindu rituals that included lighting the funeral pyre by his stepbrother, now the ruler of Shridham Garh, at a place where his mother was cremated years ago with full state honor.

Even centuries later, the inhabitants of Shridham Garh and Dharamgarh hold the memory of Durgeshnandini and Benjamin in high esteem. They also continue to talk of their generosity long after they have passed. To this day, people speak in awe of the tragic romance between the princess and the young foreigner, which ended when the foreigner vanished without a trace, leaving an unsolved mystery.

The villagers put the romance between the princess and her lover on the same pedestal as the historically failed lovers Heer Ranjha, Shirin Farhad, and Dhola-Maru of North India and the local love story between the daughter of a rich tribal chief and a poor town-dwelling youth, which subsequently formed the fabric of many village dramas and ballads enacted during the arrival of the new crop by village bards.

Moving back to the other side of the story, we encounter the narrative of the silent, unfulfilled love between Vijay and his colleague in England, Suhasini. Although they harbored a deep affection for one another, a lack of courage kept their feelings unspoken. They eventually went their separate ways when Suhasini was duty-bound to return to India to serve the princely state that had sponsored her overseas education. Following India's independence, Suhasini embarked on a distinguished political journey. Her impeccable career saw her rise through the ranks to become a cabinet minister, ultimately positioning her as a serious contender for the nation's next Prime Minister.

Aditya Narayan and Suhasini, who had once studied together in England, pursued similar political careers after the princely states ceased to exist. In a twist of fate, he became her companion as they served together in various ministries. Aditya was such a close confidant of Vijay that he was the only one privy to the unspoken, tragic romance between Vijay and Suhasini. Vijay returned to India many months after Suhasini's own departure. Though it would not have been difficult for him to contact her, he refrained from

doing so, fearing she might reject him—even though she secretly felt the same way.

After a long, successful career as a consultant in mining and hydrology, Vijay faced a crisis so critical it required a meeting with a central minister. He was completely unprepared to find that the minister was none other than Suhasini. The encounter painfully reopened the wounds of their failed romance.

By this time, they had resigned themselves to their fate, which led to an outcome far better than they could have imagined: they are now both happily married with loving families and well-settled children.

Readers will recall that Rajmata, in a burst of emotion, revealed that she was the biological mother of Lord Benjamin. By then, Benjamin was also aware that Harry, the murdered British youth, was his father. Upon retiring from his government post, Benjamin returned to India and settled in a small township midway between Dharamgarh and Shridham Garh, which later became known as Benjamin Dhaam.

Although he did not renounce his religion, Benjamin embraced Hindu philosophy to establish a clan that successfully prevented the local tribes from converting to Christianity. He lived long enough to be revered as a saint by the local population. After his passing, he was cremated according to Hindu rituals at the very site where his mother, Durgeshnandini, had been cremated years earlier. His last rites were performed by his stepbrother with full state honors.

