My Temples, Too

a novel

QURRATULAIN HYDER

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Here dead we lie
Because we didn’t choose to live and shame the land from
which we sprang,
Life to be sure is nothing much to lose
But young men think it so.
And we were young.

A.E. Housman

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Prologue

The sun went down behind the cypresses. The evening wind was still chilly, though spring had arrived in the valley. Suddenly, the lights came on in a roadhouse called the Magic Lantern.

He had returned from the base hospital and stood by the window in the tea-room. Outside, a military truck disappeared into the growing dark. A Russian bomber flew overhead, vibrating the rickety windows of the hotel’s wooden structure. Then all was quiet again.

A group of WACS arrived in the adjoining room. Their merry laughter reminded him that The War had ended. Everybody was waiting to go back home—England, USA, India.

A motor lorry pulled up in the porch. He looked out of the window. A lot of frantic chatter ... Indian voices.

"What is it, Ram Singh?" he asked his batman who had rushed in, grinning.

"Pilgrims, sir. Returning from Lucknow."

"Lucknow, eh?"

"Fancy running into a bunch of Lucknowites in the back of beyond!" He came out on the balcony and spotted a pretty girl ascending the staircase.

"Their maidservant says they’re leaving immediately after tea," Ram Singh added.

"Is that all you’ve gathered from the maidservant?"

"Well, sir, they’re a family of rajahs ..."

"Well, well," he whistled cheerfully. "Find out more."

"Yes, sir."

He came out into the hall. The dance band had struck up an old tune. He saw the pilgrims advancing towards the dining room. The party assembled in the lounge had had their tea, and after a while they set off, downhill.

Stoically, he watched them go. Soon after, another bus-load of pilgrims arrived, Tibetan Shias from Ladakh.
“What else did the ayah tell you, Ram Singh?” he asked the batman as he took off his boots that night before going to bed.

“Not much, sir. She seemed to be terribly snooty for a simple Punjabi like myself, sir ... “

“One should never get discouraged, Ram Singh.”

“Sahib ...”

“Yes?”

“We must return home soon and find out all about them ... about the Miss Sahib I mean.”

“We shall, Ram Singh, we shall ...”

“Sahib, when are we returning home? What will happen now that The War is over? Mahatma Gandhi says we are going to be free and Jinnah Sahib says the Muslims must have Pakistan ... and ...”

“Yes—Ram Singh?”

“And, Sahib, I want to get back to Lahore. I’ve seen enough of battle-fronts, and some people said the other day... Are you asleep, Sahib ...?”

“No, no, Ram Singh, go on ... What did some people say?”

“That there will be a big war in India itself ...” But the batman saw his Sahib dozing and left the room.

Outside, the wind swept across the vineyards and military camps and springs. The night passed through the lonely wayside hotel, across high mountain passes and hamlets, and caravan pilgrims on the high winding roads and serais. Another day dawned, a bright and fresh spring day. There was birdbong in the pines and the nightingale sang in the roses ...

THE AIR WAS WARM AND HEAVY AND MANGO BOUGHS drooped to the ground, laden with fruit.

Koyals had hidden themselves in the thick foliage and cried out from time to time. Often, some little lad in a distant orchard copied their call, they replied promptly but remained hidden in the leaves. When the sun went down, the easterly wind struck against the trees and reached the innermost sanctuaries in the forest where the mango-birds sang. All is nothing ... All is nothing ..., the wind said. (Actually, it was the gardener’s son who was sitting on the ghat trying to blow his mango-leaf whistle.)

The day passed, the sun slipped down into the river, and the road that wound its way through the forest became dark and shadowed. When Anwar Azam of Amberpur drove through the forest, he noticed the fertile lands of Karwaha Estate. A whitewashed rest-house stood by the canal near a tiny hydroelectric station. Mango groves were surrounded by fields of sugarcane. There was dense greenery everywhere, cool and peace-giving. A saffron flag fluttered atop the Shiva temple of Thakur Rajendra Pratap Singh. The temple faced the new country house of the Thakur Sahib whose estate bordered the lands of Karwaha Raj. Buffaloes and pigs wallowed in the muddy pool. A little child
He was a bit fuzzy. He felt that he could do with another peg or two so they returned to the bar. Oshir continued, “She had jet black, very straight hair, which she wore like Amrita Sher-Gil … and she had lotus eyes, like Nandalal Bose’s Parvati.

“This chap is a master of clichés.” The doctor eyed Oshir gloomily and poured himself another drink. He had come here after four years spent in deserts and tropical jungles and in war-scarred Italy, and he had to leave on some other posting once again. Life continued … War or no War, there was no escape from the sheer fact of life.

“Life …,” Oshir Lahiri was saying.

Schoolgirls roller-skated on the embankment. Holiday-makers were dancing on brightly-lit lawns. Children laughed under the cedars. Fashionable ladies sparkled in their exquisite saris in ballrooms. The “season” was at its height in the hills.

“I came here to do a portrait of the European wife of an Indian princeling, but the woman had no soul. I made a bland portrait and am now returning to the plains,” the artist told the doctor. “I’ll go back to Lucknow. Sen Dada’s bungalow is my only haven in the Stormy Sea of Life—in the art school amidst the asoka trees. Ah, have you seen that divine painting of Sita in the Asoka Grove? Tomorrow I leave for Hardwar …”

“Hardwar …?”

“Yes. It’s a great place, Hardwar. City of Gods. The Atman may find peace there.”

“Atman?”

“Yes. That’s right. My Atman and yours, if you come along. Unfortunately, we are loaded with Atmans.”

“That must be terrible.”

“Yes. Om Shanti … Shanti … Shanti.”

“Shanti. I knew a delightful girl of that name. Shanti—yes, of course …” the doctor said. He also remembered the girl who had stopped for a while at the wayside hotel in Iran. So they talked some more about the Pangs of Wordless Chance and fell asleep on the Encounters and Separations of the mess sofas.

The wind suddenly dropped and in the strange quiet that followed, they sang Jana Gana Mana in the boathouse and felt elated. The girls squatted on the wooden floor and on upturned boats. The boys stood around and talked animatedly in groups. This was a motley crowd of young student workers from all kinds of backgrounds. Feudal. Middle Class. Peasant. They were liberals, and fire-eating revolutionaries, and mild, scholarly left-wingers, vegetarians and pacifists. Their chief occupation was day-dreaming. They talked of New Life and New Values and New Society and they were into Modern Indian Art, Group Theatre Movement and Folk Culture Movement. Their lives were a great big, exciting, very full-blooded Movement on the whole. They led strikes and went to jail and studied agrarian reform and social reform and all manner of other reforms. They mostly wore rough handloom cotton and sang Tagore’s songs and wrote about realism in literature. They were anti-British and passionately believed in Hindu-Muslim Unity, and discussed how the capitalists and the bourgeoisie of both the Hindu and Muslim communities had conspired among themselves to keep the Masses down. Since Russia had entered the Imperialists’ War for World Markets, it had turned into a People’s War and the Marxist-Leninists argued endlessly with the Nationalists and Socialists on the need for revolution in the country. The Reds were not popular with the Nationalists and the former called the latter “agents of the bourgeoisie”. The Nationalists had no respect for the Reds and loftily referred to them as “Moscow’s stooges”.

Off and on they attended their classes, too.

The group that had assembled in the boathouse tonight consisted chiefly of Nationalists. They were khadi-clad Gandhians and quoted extensively from Nehru’s Autobiography. There was a sprinkling of Forward Bloc people, too, who considered themselves true Marxists.

Many of them had suffered hardship in the national struggle and been tortured by the police during the 1942 Quit India Movement, in which some of their comrades had even lost their lives. They were optimists, courageous, honest, high-spirited.
There were other young people like them in all the university towns of the country. In fact their prototypes could be found in university towns around the world. This was the great and glorious brotherhood of happy, self-confident youth. As dedicated visionaries, they didn't want to be defeated. They had momentary bouts of despair but hated the word "frustration".

Tonight they were celebrating the first anniversary of their little magazine called The New Era. They had made speeches, discussed the magazine's finances, its policy, and finally the national and international situation.

"Tell us about the Middle-East, Roshi", someone asked anxiously.

"After Rashid al-Gilani—" the girl cleared her throat and began gravely. She had just returned from Iraq via Iran where she had accompanied her mother and elder brother on a pilgrimage.

"Did you hear the angels fluttering their wings when you visited all those shrines?" A boy cut her short. Most of these young people were atheists or agnostics.

Soon they switched over to god and religion and mysticism and Persian poetry. They loved to talk. They felt that the cultures and literatures of the world belonged to them, that they were the rightful owners of all civilization ... They wanted to learn and do things. They were heart-breakingly young and enthusiastic.

Suddenly a stranger got up from a corner and began addressing the gathering. "I would request Miss Irfan Ali once again," he said "to apologise in the next issue of The New Era about her comments on the two nation theory."

"This is Syed Iftikhar, isn't it?" somebody said.

A tough Pathan boy from the North West Frontier (he was an ardent follower of Abdul Ghaffar Khan, called the Frontier Gandhi) advanced towards him threateningly.

"Wait, Nawaz," the girl who had returned from Iraq interrupted hastily. He stopped at once. The new-comer noticed that she was held in high esteem by the crowd. A kind of local deity, he reflected.

"Come to the magazine's office tomorrow if you have to say something. Don't disturb our meeting here ...", she said calmly. Syed Iftikhar sat down. (There was great emphasis on "we" and "us" and "ours" in everything being said here.) Somebody began the national anthem. It was already past midnight. After the song they dispersed. The boathouse was plunged in darkness again.

That night Rajkumari Rakhshanda of Karwaha Raj dreamt that she had returned to that nameless valley somewhere in Iran where she had spent an evening in an army establishment and had met an interesting young man. She was surrounded by exotic flowers, unfamiliar music and strange faces. She was alone, deserted by her friends. She looked around desperately, but Ginnie and Christobel and Diamond and Kiran and Vimal and her brother Peechu, every one of them had dumped her and vanished. She was frightened and longed to come back home but home wasn't there. There was no home anywhere. The night was warm. She woke up and lifted the curtain of her milk-white mosquito-net. "Peechu," she whispered hoarsely.

"Grrr ... yes ... what's it, ole girl ..." Peechu replied from the other end of the verandah and fell asleep again.

Outside, the rows of flowering meolsiris stood still in the pale moonlight of the early hours. Not a leaf rustled in the garden. A pup had started whining piteously behind the stables. She lay still, waiting for the night to pass. Her elder brother Polu slept on another verandah. Even her mother hadn't got up to begin her preparations for the early morning prayers.

The hours passed. At daybreak, jasmine branches began to rustle in the breeze. She closed her eyes and was soon fast asleep.

The sun came up. The house was bustling with activity. Shola Pari, the maidservant, shouted from behind the trees, "Gul Shabho ... don't you go and wake up Bitiya. She came back very late from her meeting."
Gul Shabbo, who was on her way to the kitchen, called out to Zammarud, the African. “Zammurud … don’t you go and wake up Bitiya … do you hear?” Zammarud came to the verandah steps, jingling her bangles, and passed this information on to Mughlani Abbasi Khanum, their housekeeper of Mughal descent.

Abbasi Khanum lifted her heavy skirt up to her ankles and entered the Kunwar Rani’s room. “Peechu Bhaiya and Rosh Bitiya are still sleeping. They come home at all odd hours and wake up at noon.” She waited. “Now they will want their tea at 10 o’clock, and I have such a headache.”

The Kunwar Rani frowned. She was sitting on her divan reading one of her innumerable prayer-books. The housekeeper was a haughty old woman, and if she chose to retire to her room on the pretext of illness the entire administration of the rambling household would collapse temporarily.

The sharp rays of the sun were uncomfortable after the cool, short-lived splendour of last night’s moon. Rakshanda yawned and glanced at Peechu who was still snoring. One of Polu’s cocker spaniels was playfully chasing a squirrel under the moolsin. Polu was already in his bathroom, singing off-key. “It was a morning like all other mornings.” As always Peechu got up abruptly and jumped out of bed.

Shola Pari brought tea. “Mian wishes to see you, Bitiya,” she said in her melodious voice.

“I’m sure father is going to give you hell about something or the other,” said Peechu hopefully.


She bowed and salaamed. He placed his hand on her head and indicated a pink-and-gold envelope lying on the walnut table. “It’s a reminder from Ambapur House. You have been invited for dinner tonight. Give it to your mother.” She felt happier. What a god-sent opportunity to tease old Peechu silly. She rushed downstairs and entered the Kunwar Rani’s room.

“Invitation from Amberpur House.” She said breezily and flung the envelope on the settee. Then she ran off in search of Peechu. They were terribly fond of each other.

Abbasi Khanum emerged from the ante-chamber and sat down elegantly on the edge of the settee waiting to hear all about it.

Kunwar Rani Saltanat Ara Begum of Karwaha Raj occasionally presided over flower shows, gave away prizes at badminton tournaments, and attended Government House At Homes. But she followed ancient family tradition to the extent that she lived apart from her husband in the Zenana and met him formally only at lunch time. Kunwar Sahib had his dinner outside in the big dining hall, in the company of his friends. They usually conveyed their messages to each other through senior servants or the children.

Rakshanda jumped into Peechu’s room through the bay window. He was sitting at the dressing-table contemplating the left point of his Ronald Colman-type moustache.

“Peechu, you have been invited to Amberpur House in order to be viewed officially by your prospective in-laws …”

“Oh, pipe down.”

“You must wear that terrific grey suit of yours and …”

“Scram,” he growled, suddenly becoming very annoyed. “I’m not going.”

“I do hope you realize the consequences of your refusal …” she perched herself on the dressing-table.

“Hang the consequences …”

“But, Peechu, what’s wrong with this girl … She’s …”

“Why don’t you dispatch Polu to their place instead of me …? They’d be happier to bag the elder son …”

“There’s going to be great trouble in Ghufran Manzil if you continue being such an ass,” she said darkly.

“I’ll get myself transferred and get the hell out of here. Now go away!”

Rakshanda climbed the window again to jump out.

“Listen,” he shouted after her as she was climbing down into the garden … “Chris rang up just now.”
"Oh," she stopped midway, hanging from the sill outside.
"Asked us over for dinner tonight ..."
"You won't go to Amberpur House ...?"
"Damn Amberpur House," he roared.

"The ladies have arrived from Ghurran Manzil," the maidservants announced. There were ripples in the assembly of dazzling begums in the large drawing-room of Amberpur House. Some of them sat leaning against pillows on ottomans, daintily partaking of betel leaf and perfumed tobacco. The old Studebaker of Ghurran Manzil slowly entered the porch and stopped near the potted palms. There was general excitement and confusion. Servant girls ran to and fro. Teenagers giggled. Older ladies whispered among themselves. It was an important occasion. The only daughter of the Raja of Amberpur was to be betrothed to the younger Rajkumar of Karwaha Estate. And what a dashing fairy-tale Rajkumar he was. The girls sighed and talked among themselves. The pale and nervous-looking Jamila Sultana, who sat in another room surrounded by a crowd of females, her chin resting on her knees, was blushingly profusely.

There was more confusion in the reception room as the Ghurran Manzil ladies alighted from the car. Hussain Khanum, the Mughal housekeeper nearly toppled over the rice-pudding plates when she heard that the basket of jasmine garlands and the attar of roses were not ready to welcome the guests.

Another wave of sensational news swirled around the house stunning everybody. The guests of honour had arrived—with out the would be fiancée, Rajkumar Pechu.

Rakshanda got down from the car.
"Where is the telephone?" she asked a girl.
"In there," the girl indicated.

She dashed into the corridor and dialed her house frantically.
"Pechu," she said in an undertone. "I'm asking you again for the last time: come here at once! It's utterly embarrassing ... if you don't come. Hello ... hello are you there ...? Look ... if you don't come I'll never talk to you again." She had begun to cry.

"I'm coming," her brother replied hastily. "I'll be there in a few minutes."

When Peechu arrived, he was taken to the men's drawing-room and the ladies flocked to the glazed wall that screened off the inner parlour. From behind crimson plush curtains they saw the prospective bridegroom. He looked divine.

After dinner Kunwar Rani left in the Studebaker. Rakshanda joined her brothers in the Opel.
"Let's go to Christabel's—" she suggested.
"Good idea, that ..." said Polu who was unusually quiet and shy.

Peechu remained silent, driving at a comfortable speed.
"I didn't see Anwar Azam tonight at Amberpur House. He ought to have been there, considering that this was his sister's betrothal, etc."

"Polu said. He seldom talked but he had sensed a tension in the air and was doing his best to be of help by keeping some kind of conversation going. "Do you know where he is these days, Peechu?"

"No, as a matter of fact I don't," Peechu replied briefly.
"His mother was saying that he had gone to Faizabad to spend a month on the estate," Rakshanda said. "Aren't we going to Chris', Peechu?" she asked timidly.

"No ...," he roared, and with a jerk turned towards Outram Road.

Next morning Rakshanda sat at her window, painting her nails and feeling depressed. Another long summer's day with nothing to do. The vacation seems dreary after the hectic motor journey through Iran, and perhaps she would never meet that man again.

Peechu jumped into the room through the window—they always entered rooms through the windows. She was taken aback to see that he was laughing, his normal boisterous self. "Get up and get ready in two and a quarter minutes ..." He looked at his watch.
“What is it?”
“Kiran’s returned from Indonesia. Arriving from Delhi at 9 o’clock.”
“Golly …,” she threw her slipper in the air and swept into the dressing-room. “Does Ginnie know?” she yelled from the bath.
“How can she?” Peechu yelled back, “I just got Kiran’s telegram.”
“Let’s collect Ginnie, Diamond and Vimal on the way …”, she gushed as she came out brushing her hair hastily.
“Don’t be absurd. We can’t go to Ginnie’s place and tell her mother that we’re going to receive Kiran, please send Ginnie with us. Idiot!”
“Yes, of course, I quite forgot about that …” she said, crest-fallen.
They got into the car and reached the Mall. It was a Sunday morning and Hazrat Gunj looked deserted. Groups of students hovered about the coffee houses. The sky was overcast and the day was becoming cooler.
They reached Amausi aerodrome and waited in the Flying Club for the plane to arrive. Some people stood talking in the verandah.
“I still can’t believe that Mr. Katju is coming back safe and sound, and alive,” said somebody.
“I’m told he was caught up in the revolution out there …”
“He will go places, you’ll see … He’s done very well for himself at such a young age …”
Peechu turned around in his chair as he overheard the conversation. He looked at his sister and grinned. “Our Kiran is becoming important … He is being discussed already,” he whispered proudly.
A Bharat Airways Dakota arrived and a dreamy-eyed Kashmiri boy came out carrying a portable typewriter. “With his horn-rimmed glasses he looks every inch an intellectual journalist—whatever that means,” Roshi said. He was pushed towards the car, all three jabbering together with tremendous excitement.

Questions and answers were all mixed up in a flow of exclamations.
“Everything under control?” asked Kiran.
“Yeah,” Rakshanda answered with a drawl.
“How’s everybody …?”
“Great … it’s a pity that ‘everybody’ couldn’t come here to receive you. I did suggest it to Peechu, though.”
“What’s the gang up to these days …?”
“Ah—we are up to our poor little ears in local politics. You see, this new leader has arrived from Delhi and has set up his study circle in Aminabad and comes to all the delegacy centres of the ‘Varsity.’
“What’s his name … do I know him …?”
“Syed Iftikhar Ahmed, and he declared to me the other day—‘Your political party and your magazine and your ideals, etc. are encased in a house of glass which can come tumbling down any moment … Your lands, and your father’s influence in the Legislative Council, and everything. Because the Muslim nation knows well what course it has to take now. It refuses to be hoodwinked today by a handful of Muslim Nationalists like you.’ He has started a magazine called The New Muslim in order to counteract the subversive influence of The New Era among the Muslim intelligentsia …”
Kiran kept quiet. Rakshanda also fell silent. They continued their journey towards Ghufran Manzil.
Kunwar Irfan Ali got down from his swing-sofa and rang the bell for his manager, Lala Iqbal Narain. The latter had only a little earlier gone into the inner apartments where the Kunwar Rani sat behind the khas-khas screens. She had discussed with him the arrangements for the forthcoming marriage of her son, Peechu, with the daughter of Amberpur Raja. She consulted her old and loyal manager about the date and the other thousand and one details. Marriage was the most important affair in one’s life. The Lala had sat down cross-legged on the cane stool and taken out his saffron-coloured perfumed tobacco to chew. He was about to begin the deliberations with the august lady when
Shola Pari entered with the message that he was being summoned upstairs by the Master.

"Tell the Master that Lala will be there in a few minutes," the Kunwar Rani dismissed the girl impatiently and began calculating the auspicious dates of the next moon which would be suitable for the nuptial ceremony.

The grandfather clock in the dining-room struck eleven. The children hadn't returned from the airfield yet and the Kunwar Sahib wanted to drive down in the Opel to the estate in Faizabad before it became very hot. The Studebaker was out of order again. He hadn't been able to buy a new car because of the wretched War, and he didn't believe in train journeys during the summer. The district of Faizabad was eighty miles from Lucknow and he usually preferred motoring down. He picked up his book again, waiting for his manager.

Bees droned in the garden outside. Mysterious-looking bronze and marble statues standing around in the old-fashioned rooms seemed to be staring hard into the perfect stillness of the summer's day with their black and white sightless eyes.

The Kunwar Sahib rang the bell again and began smoking his elaborate gold-and-silver hookah. He had lived, thus, reading old Urdu and Persian manuscripts and smoking his gold-and-silver hookah, hidden in the sanctuary of the old mansion which his ancestors had built more than a century ago. He found himself in this house, swinging on the sofa, because of an accident of birth. This accident of birth counted a great deal in his scheme of things. A lot of water had flowed under the Moti Mahal Bridge, but there had been no change in the lives of the owners of Karwaha Raj. He spent the greater part of the year at his country seat in the village of Manather, and resided in Lucknow during the winter. He went to the hills every year in May and stayed either at White Flower Hall in Nainital or at the Savoy in Mussoorie. He had very little to do. Once in a while he presided over the British Indian Association and graced the University Court meetings, of which he was a member like the other taluqdars of Oudh. His father, too, had given donations for the construction of the magnificent red-stone building of Canning College. The late Kunwar Sahib's name was inscribed on a marble plaque, and his life-size portrait in oils adorned the oak-panelled walls of Bennet Hall along with those of other Hindu and Muslim 'barons' of Oudh. This university owed its very existence to the money given by the feudal chiefs of Oudh, but an ungrateful modern generation raised the war-cry of "Down with Feudalism" and "The Old Order Must Go" in these very halls. Kunwar Sahib witnessed all this but quietly continued reading his Avicenna and went to Chatter Manzil Club in the evenings to play chess with the old English members of the Indian Civil Service. In this new and bewildering world, only these white-haired Englishmen and the Kunwar Sahib understood one another to some extent.

The Kunwar Sahib adored tradition. He took old customs and old manners and old institutions for granted. He hated the new middle classes. He also took the basic structure of an Indo-Muslim civilization for granted. He still didn't want to believe that the two communities were swiftly pulling apart. He sat in his cosy drawing-room reciting Urdu poetry with his Hindu Talukdar friends, and fancied himself a solid rock of the Old Order.

Therefore when his younger son decided to enter government service a few years earlier, he was flabbergasted. No one in his family had ever worked before, and his genealogy went back hundreds of years. It was quite true that life was not as comfortable as it had been during the preceding centuries. Half the revenue of the lands was taken away by the British administration, and the two Great Wars had upset the entire economic equilibrium of established society. Still, government service was a disgrace. His son, however, quietly decided to apply to the Indian Air Force. When the Kunwar Rani heard of this she fainted, so the boy did not go for the interview to Ambala. But the following year he sat for the competitive examination of the Indian
Police Service and was selected. Kunwar Sahib didn’t seem to mind this very much as the Indian Police was, after all, an Imperial service, as glorious and coveted as the ICS. Only the fortunate few could join the ranks of this most highly paid and powerful bureaucratic system in the world. Luckily, Peechu had been stationed in Lucknow itself for the last year and all was well with the world.

Punu, the elder son, was quiet, peaceful, interested only in his flying club and his expensive dogs. He had been engaged to a cousin a few years ago and would get married when the girl finished her education at the Convent School in Nainital. But Peechu had turned out to be a bit of a problem child for his parents. He said he shuddered at the very idea of an arranged match. Luckily again, he had somehow been persuaded to go to Amberpur House the previous evening.

The Kunwar Sahib was a strange mixture of old and new, very broadminded about a lot of things. He belonged to the Anglicized generation of upper class Indians who went to Europe frequently, whose children were brought up by English or Eurasian governesses, and whose wives and daughters were leaders of fashion in high society. The Kunwar Sahib’s daughter, too, had been to a convent school, now attended the co-educational university, and had studied at the Marris College of Hindustani Music. She had also been to Uday Shanker’s Cultural Centre in Almora. She went to the Club with her brothers and was enormously popular among her friends. The Kunwar Sahib was very fond of his daughter and was greatly amused by her political activities.

The Kunwar Sahib had read much and thought much, for he had all the leisure in the world to do so. He patronized poets and musicians and Kathak dancers, and had composed some music himself. He was a great believer in the idea of restraint and a sense of proportion. According to him this was the basis of real culture, the hallmark of true breeding. A sense of proportion. The Golden Mean. One should know where to draw the line. That’s what he had told his daughter when she grew up. “You must know when to draw the line.” Yes, father, she had replied obediently.

The Kunwar Sahib didn’t get along very well with his wife. She more or less ignored him, too, and busied herself with the management of the estate in which she gleefully overruled her husband’s decisions. He didn’t mind it much. What he was really interested in was his library of rare books. The Kunwar Rani was domineering. She wasn’t very friendly with Rakshanda, either, but worshipped her sons and was still very pretty. At forty-five, she was far more attractive than Rakshanda. She was the daughter of a ruling chief, so she actually looked down upon her husband’s family and referred contemptuously to “this measly little estate”. She was cut out to be a Her Highness like her own mother, and missed being a ruling Nawab’s Begum.

So life continued as peacefully as the water of the Gomti which flowed in its eternal calm across the cypress gardens.

The car entered the gates of Ghufran Manzil. Kiran looked out of the window to see the familiar house, the old trees, the leafy garden. He had spent the best time of his life with his friends in this house and was happy to be back in Lucknow. For a moment he forgot all about the bloodshed he had seen in Indonesia, and the probability that he would never be able to marry Sir Krishna Narain Kaul’s daughter, Ginnie, whom he had adored hopelessly for the last three and a half years, ever since he had come to this colourful city from prosaic Allahabad.

Diamond and Vimal were already in Peechu’s sitting-room, waiting for Kiran. Then they went into the dining-room for lunch, and laughed and shouted and talked as always. The ‘Gang’ loved Ghufran Manzil for its homely and cosy atmosphere. In winter they sat under sunshades and wrote for The New Era and rehearsed their plays or discussed Vimal’s modern poetry. At night they would have music parties. Ghufran Manzil was referred to as the GHQ by the Gang. They were terribly attached to one another, had infinite confidence in themselves and they all wanted to do worthwhile things in life.
The rainy season was the most colourful of all, when mango-parties were held and seasonal songs were crooned and girls wore rainbow-coloured saris. The garden looked extraordinarily bright and fresh, and the rooms were filled with the fragrance of juhi flowers. Gay creepers covered stained glass windows and chandeliers swayed gently in the breeze when the doors were flung open. The back garden was full of lemons and promengates and oranges. A tiny canal divided this garden into two, and maidservants sat on its balustrade and gossiped when the day's work was done.

Rakshanda loved this dilapidated house of her forefathers. Its maintenance was not possible now and it was falling to pieces, but it was a silent reminder of past splendour anyway. She did not like to admit to herself that she was being self-contradictory, for why should she attach sentimental value to something which symbolized the solidarity of the privileged classes? How many thousands of peasants must have starved to death when the money that rightfully belonged to them was spent on constructing this building? Her communist friends tore her to pieces on her deviant tendencies and said that she was an agent of the landed gentry, masquerading as a progressive. Therefore she didn't admire this house openly. The Gang unashamedly adored it, but they too belonged to well-to-do families. How could anyone not like Ghufran Manzil and the culture it symbolized? For they loved culture and liked to spell it with a capital C in their articles in The New Era. Rakshanda loved Abbasi Khanum, too, although she was a living monument to the old regime.

Abbasi Khanum talked of the good old days when the late Kunwar Sahib sat on the moonlit terrace, holding court with his cronies. "Well, brother, you have become like the Id moon!" he would say to the Sahib Governor Bahadur, Sir Harcourt Butler, who came to pay him an informal visit in his carriage. No English Governor visited Ghufran Manzil now. Master Peechu spent his Sunday mornings like a ha'penny tuppenny mechanic, tinkering away with the engine of his battered little car. Miss Roshi went to college on a bicycle and wore her hair short like a Christian woman.

The annual income of the estate had been dwindling gradually but the Kunwar Sahib still gave pensions to the retinue of his father's old scribes, ex-managers, footmen and poor relatives. Many old families employed maidservants who were the descendents of the "Abyssinian" slaves of the old kingdom. Ghufran Manzil too had a lot of these black women. Zamburud and Almas were their last specimens. When they died, there would be no more Abyssinians left.

The city too had changed, teeming with all kinds of outsiders who had spoilt its atmosphere and ruined the purity of its language. Abbasi Khanum was a loyalist and adored the English. She remembered wistfully the days when only white Sahibs lived in their garden houses in the lush green localities of Buffalo Lake, Bird Lake, Monkey Garden, Alexander Garden and Heart's Delight. In the English shopping centre of Hazrat Gunj, there were no coffee houses and no native college girls and no English cinemas. There were the few showrooms of Murray Company and Whiteways and Dinshaws, and one or two shops owned by Scotsmen and Parisi. In the evenings, only the Mems and the Sahibs went out in their carriages for long drives. One of the first motor cars that came to town belonged to the late Kunwar Sahib. Off and on the Alfred Theatrical Company visited Lucknow and staged spectacular Urdu plays and operas. Abbasi Khanum remembered the fabulous prima donna, Miss Goltar Jan of Calcutta.

This city evoked so many memories, Abbasi Khanum would continue. Its fairs and festivals, its old institutions, its fine old buildings ... Many European-style houses were built by the Anglicized Nawabs of Oudh in the first half of the last century. Such houses would never be built again.

The first phonogram had also come to Ghufran Manzil when Abbasi Khanum was a little girl. She still asked Rakshanda to play the songs of her favourites, Janki Bai of Allahabad and Jaddan Bai of Calcutta ...