Syed Iftikhar sat in his little office in Nazar Bagh and tried to write the editorial for his magazine. He had gate-crashed last night and disrupted the meeting of nationalist student workers mainly because he wanted to take a close look at the girl, Rakshanda, about whom he had heard so much. She appeared quite a fraud to him, like the rest of them, wearing a handloom sari and talking of Gandhi’s ideals. This was typical of the whole crowd. How well he saw through them. He wrote:

These people are only seeking publicity by picketing the British offices and courting arrest on the merest pretext. All these upper-class boys and girls closely copy the Anand Bhavan family in whatever the latter does, and call themselves freedom-fighters. Freedom for the Hindus. Where would the Muslims of this subcontinent be if they didn’t organize themselves separately and obtain Pakistan ...? How mistaken the nationalist Muslims are. They are deluding themselves if they think that they will have any say in the policy of Hindu-dominated Congress. Abul Kalam Azad and Rafi Ahmad Kidwai and Hussain Ahmad Madni are mere show-boys. Muslim students must be aware of the dangerous activities of The New Era group which is led by Rakshanda Begum, a charming penny princess who ...

Summer was over, the monsoon arrived and departed. Winter came, which was the time for poetic symposia. The huge crimson canopy of the Music Conference stood at the centre of the exhibition grounds. Little shops of dolls and colourful cotton saris and silver ornaments clustered at a distance of a furlong from the main shopping area. Here the giant wheels rattled, and the lady who was half-fox and half woman, and the girl whose head was placed on a jar were being exhibited in little tents. Clowns danced on tiny stands and betel-nut sellers decorated their stalls with pictures of famous Indian film stars, Kemal Ataturk and King Reza Shah of Iran, popular wrestlers and the Nizam of Hyderabad. Parties of qawwali singers competed with one another under the trees. Peasants came every year from distant villages in their bullock-carts to attend the annual Urs of the Saint of Deva Sharif. Their children rode the giant wheel and the merry-go-round, and their womenfolk bought glass bangles and silver necklaces. If they had been fortunate enough to save some money over the year they purchased a cow or a pair of bullocks for their ploughs from the cattle-fair and went back happy. They had nothing to do with the dazzling modern exhibition which sparkled a little distance away.

People were continuously arriving from Lucknow and Barabanki on all kinds of vehicles—motor-cars, buses, tongas, ekkas and bicycles. The Music Conference was about to start.

“Let’s go back,” suggested Diamond.

“Let’s visit the shrine now that we have come,” said Rakshanda. Like Ginnie, she loved visiting shrines.

They reached the gorgeous white tomb which dazzled with fiercely bright lights and smelt of heavy incense and jasmine. The girls covered their heads and raised their hands in prayer. Rakshanda didn’t know what to ask for. She had everything. She noticed that her cousin Qamar Ara was already lost in prayer, motionless. The other girls felt quite uncomfortable and a little stupid seeing such devotion to the Almighty. Minutes passed. They didn’t know how to ask the simple country girl to stop praying and return with them to the exhibition.

Qamar Ara was ardently repeating the prayer that she constantly said anyway ... Please God, make Khurshid Bhai return home ... Please God ... Tell Khurshad Bhai to come back ...

The girls returned to the tent of the District Magistrate who was Ginnie Kaul’s uncle. They were joined by Peechu and members of the Kaul family and they proceeded towards the Conference pandal. The huge audience sat under the canopy. Several maharajas and nawabs as well as the English Commissioner of Lucknow Division and other officials occupied the front rows. There were balconies covered with reed blinds for purdah ladies on either side of the stage. Instruments were being tuned behind the curtain. The sound of ankle bells was rising from the adjoining tent which served as the green room. Footlights were being
tested. Vimal and his colleagues were perched on top of a ladder entangled with cables and headphones, making arrangements for the relay to the Lucknow radio station.

A galaxy of great musicians like Roshan Ara Begum, Narain Rao Vyas and Ustad Faiyaz Khan, and the noted dancer Kumari Asha Ojha were going to participate in the night's session. But at ten o'clock the compere announced that since Miss Asha Ojha unfortunately hadn't arrived from Allahabad, 'Queen Rose' and her brother Prem Kumar, who were originally scheduled to dance on the third day of the Conference, would perform instead.

The curtain rose and an Anglo-Indian blonde dressed as Radha came dancing on to the stage. Like most Anglo-Indian girls, she too was very good-looking, though her partner who danced as Krishna, and later did a solo dressed in black sherwani and white 'churidar' pyjamas, was a better Kathak dancer.

In the Eurasian and Indian Christian locality of Lucknow's Lal Bagh, several flats bear name-plates like “Pramilla Rani, Indian Dancer”, “Amina Begum, Film Star”, “Usha Devi, Oriental Dancer”, etc. Actually they are Anglo-Indian demimondaines who had become popular with the British, Canadian and American troops who passed through Lucknow during the War. Some of them had taken great pains to learn the difficult art of classical dance and, now that the War was over, they were planning to create their own floor-shows for western-style hotels or go to Bombay and join the films. Queen Rose was one of them. She also came from Lal Bagh, and styled herself a Kathak dancer.

Anwar Azam was walking out of the canopy after the session in the early hours of the morning when he was hailed by an acquaintance near the green room. Queen Rose stood leaning against the tent ropes, smoking a cigarette and talking to her father, a beery old Anglo-Indian. “I say, come here, old fellow,” the acquaintance called out. (He was the secretary of the Music Conference.) “Do meet these good people,” he said. Anwar Azam stopped, feeling quite flustered. He had no desire to be introduced to this half-caste dancer anyway and that too, in public.

“Kunwar Anwar Azam of Amberpur Raj, Miss Queen Rose. Her father, Mr Charles Ridley. Will you do me a favour, Anwar. You see, Miss Ridley has to return to town immediately, I believe you are driving back just now ...”

“Er ... Yes ...”

“Could you please accommodate them in your car ...? Oh, and you haven't met her Mamma. And this is young Jim, Prem Kumar to you ... I have a lot of things to attend to, excuse me ... The next moment he had disappeared into the crowd.

Anwar Azam found himself standing awkwardly with the girl.

“Shall we make a move then ...” he said politely. “I have a class in the morning.”

“Well ...” the girl laughed pleasantly, “Mamma has to meet someone at seven at the Railway Station so we must hurry ...”

The Rideleys scrambled into the car laden with attache cases. Queen Rose carried her make-up kit and ankle-bells. The car came out on the highway. It was a chilly morning. The trees and the fields were covered with frost. Bullock-carts passed by, their bells tinkling sonorously. Contrary to his expectations, the girl didn't talk. She had covered herself with a blanket and tied a bright red scarf around her head. Her mother, who suffered from elephantiasis, was chain-smoking. The father slept. Prem Kumar whistled an English tune.

“Where do you live, Miss Ridley?” Anwar Azam asked when they entered the city.

“Ivy Court, Barrow Road,” the girl answered gravely.

They reached Lal Bagh and Anwar Azam stopped the car in front of a modern block of flats.

“Thanks a lot, Mr Azam,” she said hopping down.

“It was very nice of you, men. Thanks awfully, men,” the rest of the family repeated.

“Not at all. Goodbye, Miss Ridley, Mrs Ridley.”

“Bye.”

He came out of the gate and turned towards Amberpur House.
Qamar Ara said: "Father, I too want to study in Lucknow."

Choudhry Asghar Ali remained silent. Sending her to Lucknow meant more expense. He couldn't afford it. His lands didn't yield much and his average monthly income had dwindled to the meagre sum of three hundred rupees. But his daughter sat there before him, fluttering her dark eyelashes, looking at him hopefully. His son also had eyes like her, and he fluttered his eyelashes too when he wanted to coax his parents about something. Khurshid had disappeared three years ago. People said he had gone underground, whatever that meant.

Qamar Ara was flushed with excitement, she had returned from the Big House which was on the other side of the courtyard wall. She had gone to Dewa Sharif with her cousin Rakshanda, and now Rakshanda and her party had come to Manather for a few days to enjoy life in the country. Their life is one big picnic anyway, thought Choudhry Asghar Ali without bitterness. He was a fatalist.

Rakshanda was about to return to Lucknow because the winter vacations were coming to an end. She had asked Qamar Ara to accompany her to Lucknow and join the Muslim Girls' College there. Qamar Ara was thrilled by the very idea.

The Ghufran Manzil folk always visited Manather in the winter, and the Big House came to life during their stay. Visitors arrived in palanquins and chariots and bullock-carts. Outside, in the men's apartments, people poured in constantly to meet the Kunwar Sahib and his two sons. Guests and relatives and hangovers on all sat down on the floor in the hall to eat lavish food at lunch and dinner. Women sang and chatted in the inner apartments. The villagers forgot for a while that it was a time of famine and war and high prices and political unrest. Some of them were even happy to see their masters. They took their beatings and their debts and their starvation for granted. They were great believers in fate. It was predestined that they be born poor and that the Kunwar Sahib be what he was. But they loved their master's children who were kind to them and who, they were told, were sympathisers of the Peasant Movement. They didn't quite know what the Peasant Movement was, though. Eighty per cent of these peasants were Hindu. But the communal problem did not exist in the rural areas.

"Please send me to Lucknow, Father," Qamar Ara said again.

Her mother sat on a prayer settee under the tamarind tree, cursing the Big House people under her breath. She glanced at her daughter. How she has become enamoured of the witch who gobbled up my son; just swallowed him alive. Why has Allah given everything to those people across the wall, and nothing to us ...?

A peel of laughter rose from the other side of the courtyard and Qamar Ara glanced wistfully in that direction. That was Rakshanda Baji and her friends. They must have come back after boating on the Ghagra. Lucky creatures.

The clock struck two in the Big House. Kunwar Sahib retired to his room after lunch. The girls had unearthed some ancient New Theatre records from an almirah in the drawing-room. They played them for some time, got tired, and went to sleep.

The stillness of high noon became intense. The peaceful lands of Karwaha Raj were bathed in the rays of a dim winter sun as the Ghagra flowed on. It had flowed like this when King Rama Chandra and Queen Sita had ruled here; it flowed on while Nawab Bahu Begum's barges sailed on its waves, and it was flowing today with the same indifference. The little village of Manather had slept by its banks for hundreds of years. An old Sufi monastery stood on top of a hillock outside the village. The monastery's compound contained the graves of the ancestors of the Karwaha Raj family. There were houses of Thakurs on the other side of the settlement. The Big House was situated in the centre. At harvest time the crop was brought and stocked in the barns. A pair of colossal scales stood in the courtyard to weigh it. Lala Iqbal Narain sat on a platform formidable supervising the proceedings. He was also constantly engaged in briefing lawyers about all the litigation that went on with the other zamindars. Litigation was an important hobby and an indispensable part of
feudal living. Ruins of old mosques, baths and mazes lay scattered in the vicinity of the Big House. They provided ideal nooks and corners for Rakshanda and Peechu and Polu to play hide-and-seek in when they came here as little children.

At a certain distance from the houses of the gentry, there were localities of barbers and weavers and cattle-grazers and butchers and cippers. At the other end of the village were the double-storied houses of rural courtisans, whose menfolk tilled their own fields. On the occasion of Holi, Diwali and the two Ids the women came to the Big House to sing and salaam, and were given the traditional gift—money. There was a sugar factory, too, in Manather. Sugarcane was brought on the train from the eastern districts and unloaded at the little railway station.

Manather had become modern in the last few years and been electrified the previous winter. There was a tiny hospital run by an American mission in it and several schools. The younger people very much wanted to have a cinema, too. Syed Iftikhar and some other leaders had also come here recently and established their study circles, and had enrolled members for their political parties.

Outside, the shadows began to lengthen and the wind became cold. A gust of breeze entered the pavilion and awakened Rakshanda. She got up and wrapped a shawl around her. Ginnie and Diamond were still fast asleep in the guest-room. She remembered with great boredom that she had to return to college soon. That reminded her of Qamar Ara. “Gul Shabbo,” she called out, “go and ask Qamar bitiya to come here immediately.”

“Yes, bitiya.” Gul Shabbo vanished.

Qamar Ara came running.

“Do sit down, Qamar Ara, let’s have some tea first,” said Rakshanda. The other girl kept looking at her admiringly.

Polu had already left for Lucknow in the Opel. Peechu came in to have tea with the girls.

“When are you all returning to town?” he asked Rakshanda politely handing a cup to his kinswoman.

“Tomorrow morning. Why . . .?” asked Rakshanda.

“Polu has absconded with the car, you’ll have to go by train.”

“By train? Oh, what fun!” shouted Diamond.

“Why didn’t you come in earlier, we would have played cards instead of snoozing,” said Rakshanda.

“How could I? Chowdhry Shamim, that dear cousin of Mummy’s, turned up wearing his latest suit. I had to talk to him the whole afternoon,” he replied, yawning.

Peechu noticed that Qamar Ara was frowning at the mention of Chowdhry Shamim. He changed the topic.

Qamar Ara’s eyes suddenly reminded Rakshanda of Comrade Khurshid, her strange cousin who lived with mill workers in Cawnpore and worked in slums and was paid Rs. 25 a month by the Party. He owned nothing and went about carelessly, wearing other people’s coats and shawls, and came to Ghufian Manzil to convert and educate his decadent relatives. He was quite mad. Poor old Khurshid. He had been underground for three years but before that whenever he met the Gang, they would make uproarious fun of his activities. He laughed like a child and was very popular with everybody.

It was said that the day before he disappeared he had come to Ghufian Manzil. Rumour further added that he turned up at midnight. Rakshanda was about to put out the lamp and go to sleep after finishing her homework when Khurshid burst into her room.

He looked as if he hadn’t slept for ages, and he stared at the girl with bloodshot eyes. Rakshanda was terrified. Perhaps he was going to kill her. But he merely said “Rakshanda Begum, you are a roaring FRAUD . . . You and your kind can’t bully me any more. Very soon, mind my words, very soon you are going to lose all this that is so dear to you . . . this rambling house and the junk it contains, and your verdant lands, your very lives perhaps . . . No, you cannot block my way any longer. I am glad that I’ve seen this terror in your eyes . . . this abject terror . . .
how much you must be loving your life ... Don’t look at me like that ...” he is reported to have said. “If you tell me to go away and never come back again, I’ll respect your wishes ... because you know very well that I am in love with you ... You know how much I love you ...” at which Rakshanda had screamed, “Get out. Get out of here, Khurshid Ali Khan or ...”.

“Or you’ll call the police, or the servants at least. Oh, you timid little bourgeoisie squirrel.” Thereupon he jumped out of the window and vanished. That was his way of saying goodbye to the girl he loved when he was ordered by the Party to go underground.

Night fell. The maidservants got together in their apartment to have their last betel leaves and discuss the day’s events before going to bed.

“Qamar Ara bitiya is going to Lucknow ...” Gul Shabbo announced.

“Yes, I know,” said Abbasi Khanum. “Rani Sahiba told me.”

“Why doesn’t the Rani ever meet Qamar Bitiya’s mother”? asked Shola Pari thoughtfully.

“This is Kal Yuga, Bitiya, and it is written that in this Black Age the blood of near-relatives shall turn white, and brothers shall not recognize each other ...” Abbasi Khanum began ominously.

“I have forgotten how the real trouble started between the two Houses. You told me the story long ago,” said Shola Pari.

“In the olden days,” said Abbasi Khanum, “there was this thing called loyalty to relatives, to friends and to masters and servants. Loyalty and affection and sincerity, but this is the age of wickedness. The younger branch of this family has become poorer due to constant litigation. Their only son and heir has become a rebel.”

Qamar Ara was told by her father at night that she would not be able to go to Lucknow yet. Some other time perhaps. She felt like crying bitterly. Why, why was she so unfortunate ...? Was she to end up marrying that crook, Chowdhry Shamim, who was angling for her because her mother had an independent income which she would inherit ...? How she envied her cousin Rakshanda ... Oh, how she envied her ...

The girls in the Big House got up at four in the morning. Shola Pari placed hot water in the bathrooms and the luggage was sent out under the supervision of Lala Iqbal Narain; they quickly drank their tea and climbed into the bullock-cart to go to the railway station. They wrapped themselves in shawls and the cart’s red-and-white curtains were drawn. Lala Iqbal Narain sat outside with the footman. The bullock-cart trundled down the kutch road under the stars. Soon the sleeping village of Manather and the mango orchards were left far behind.

From a distance, the tiny railway station of Manather looked like a giant had placed a toy house in the midst of vast green fields. The small-gauge train came rattling up and stopped for a couple of minutes. It was usual for the Lala to rush towards the guard and say, “The zenana of Karwaha Raj are boarding this train, please don’t leave in a hurry.” And the train would remain standing for another few minutes. It was all like a family affair, especially if the guard belonged to a neighbouring village.

The next train hadn’t arrived yet. Dr Salim was standing under the lamp-post on the platform, not knowing what to do. Finally he hailed a passing villager. “Does one get any kind of vehicle over here ... a tonga perhaps ...?

“We have bullock-carts and ekkas here, sir, no tongas. Where do you wish to go?” The villager turned towards Lala Iqbal Narain who had just escorted the girls on to the platform. “This Sahib Bahadur apparently wishes to go to the Big House ... take him there with you,” he said as he covered himself with his blanket and sauntered away.

The girls had perched themselves on top of a big black box under the station-master’s window. Diamond was the first to see him. “Holy Smoke,” she whispered, “what an absolute stunner ... Who could he be and what on earth is he doing here?”
“Well, well, what do you know. Life is full of strange happenings etc.,” said Ginnie. “Lala, why don’t you go and ask the gentleman, he may have broken journey to meet Polu.”

The Lala cleared his throat and approached the stranger, equipped with formal and florid phrases of welcome. At that very moment the train arrived and he rushed towards it frantically.

They were sitting in Peechu’s room in Ghufran Manzil. They had a hectic holiday in the country but from tomorrow their usual life would resume. Rakshanda was going through the layout of The New Era. Ginnie was hastily trying to finish the book review that she was supposed to broadcast that evening. Diamond sat at the piano, playing a tune which had caught her fancy at the Music Conference. They were tired and relaxed and gloriously happy.

A car pulled up in the drive outside. Somebody got down and closed the door with a bang.

“Ginnie dear, you’re sitting near the door, just go out and see who it is,” Rakshanda said, without raising her head from the drawing-board.

Ginnie remained absorbed in her book review. The horn blew again. It was an unfamiliar boot.

“God, how lazy can people get,” Rakshanda said, yawning.

“Diamond dear, will you peep out and have a dekho.”

Diamond swung round on the piano stool.

“Don’t disturb me,” she replied, “in my moments of musical inspiration.”

There was a knock at the drawing room door. Reluctantly, Rakshanda went out to the verandah and found him standing near the ferns, looking around disconsolately.

“You are Dr Salim!” she exclaimed. How simple and easy life was, after all. Here he was, standing right at her doorstep. “How do you do,” she added in her convent-school manner.

“My brother told me about you only this morning. He was expecting you any time today. Do come in.”

He followed her into Peechu’s room. Ginnie and Diamond remained absorbed in their work, trying hard to appear indifferently and bad-mannered. Rakshanda looked at them for moral support, then decided to follow their example and go back to her own. Because, she noticed, the creature did appear to be quite conceited.

“Do sit down, please.” I should remain cool and collected, she said to herself. “Would you like to have some coffee,” she asked in her perfect-hostess voice.

A motorbike stopped on the gravel and Kiran burst in through the window. The girls heaved a sigh of relief. They had never loved old Kiran more. Rakshanda immediately felt more secure and sure of her ground. The Gang was there, after all, to give her shelter, protect her.

“Hello Kiran,” the three girls chorused with more than their usual enthusiasm.

Kiran surveyed the situation with the expert eye of a reporter. He noted gleefully that the girls were being hugely rude in order to retain their reputation of “intellectualism”. The Gang was always hostile to outsiders.

“Roshi”, he said in an admonishing tone, “Don’t you know old Salim?”

“Well, not officially.”

“You know Roshi, don’t you,” he turned to the newcomer. “Peechu’s sister—has a remarkably low IQ.” He went across and sat down at the window.

“I’ve seen you in all kinds of unusual places,” said Rakshanda.

“What in heaven’s name were you doing on that little wayside station last Sunday?”

“You see,” Kiran tried to explain on Salim’s behalf (as he seemed to be in no hurry to answer the question, he was fiddling with his cigarette lighter), “Salim had informed poor dim-witted Peechu that he had been transferred to Pratapgarh from Dehradun, and that he would stop at Manather to meet you all.
Peechu says that, as usual, he forgot all about it and nobody went to the station to receive him, so he had to return to Lucknow by the next train ....

"Good God! What a shame," said Rakshanda, "if you had managed to reach our village we would have taken you out to shoot partridges."

"And given you lots of sugarcane to eat," said Diamond. She loved sugarcane.

"But we were returning to Lucknow ourselves," Ginnie reminded them ...

"In that case you ought to have come there earlier," said Rakshanda.

"How is it that Peechu never mentioned you to us?" demanded Ginnie.

"It wasn't frightfully important to mention," said Diamond. "Why do you think that you should be informed about everything that goes on under the sun?" replied Kiran. "After all, we men have our own circles of friends," he added airily.

"You've raised such a hue and cry that while I was still in the Police Lines, I heard that Doc had turned up," said Peechu jumping in through the bay-window.

"Who's turned up?" asked Ginnie.

"This historic character," Peechu said, presenting the new-comer to the crowd with a flourish, "was with me in Inter-Science at Allahabad. Then he joined the Army after qualifying as a doctor, and went away to all manner of terrible outposts. He's now going to Pratapgarh as the Civil Surgeon."

"Are you mad, too?" Ginnie asked him gravely.

He blinked. These girls were quite awful. The Bright Young Things of India, no doubt.

"You must be, for no sober person can claim to be Peechu's friend," Diamond added helpfully.

"Let's have some tea," suggested Rakshanda.

They're trying to suggest that I've come to the Mad Hatters' Tea Party, he thought uncharitably.

"Let's adjourn to Chris's place," said Ginnie, "and leave the men here to have their stag party."

The girls filed out and got into the Opel.

"Hey, where are you off to," Peechu shouted after them, "we're coming to Chris's, too."

The boys got into Salim's car and followed the Opel.

"This man," said Ginnie to her friends, "is attractive and he knows it. What's worse, he's used to getting a lot of attention from females. We ought to constantly ignore him so that he becomes normal like the rest of us."

So he had found her again. He wanted to tell his old batman that he had met the dazzling Miss Sahib, after all. But Ram Singh was far away, back in his village in distant Punjab, while he was sitting here in his room at Lucknow's Carlton. He had forsaken his uniform and returned to Civvy Street, back in the familiar world of house parties and shikar expeditions. He didn't belong to this so-called high society but he was here all right. The War had brought unexpected opportunities of bettering their prospects to thousands of middle-class young men like him. Where would he have been otherwise if the stupid western nations hadn't fought among themselves? He wasn't interested in politics. All he was after was the good things of life and a peaceful and settled existence. He knew what a lack of the good things in life meant. He was the seventh child in a family of ten and his father had been a court munshi till the hour of his death.

He couldn't understand all the talk that went on in his rich friend Peechu's group. All this cant about revolution and the undesirability of the upper classes. He had just returned from Raja Hafiz Ahmad's house whose English wife, Christabel, was charming and clever and a brilliant conversationalist. All of them were charming and clever and brilliant conversationalists. All these westernized young women who spoke English with a convent accent, and who were busy pretending that he hadn't evoked their curiosity and interest in the least.

He wished he could also meet that peculiar Bengali artist he had come across in Dehradun and question him about the exist-
ence or non-existence of Soul in these women. He felt he was being unkind. They were quite nice, actually, he had no need to be suspicious of them.

At the Englishwoman’s place they had been reclining on divans, or had squatted on Persian carpets, and were all doing their best to make him feel at home. He did detect an undertone of patronage in their voices because they guessed that he didn’t belong to the exclusive set of "landed gentry". And they also talked of Fundamental Contradictions while they had coffee in crested china.

He thought of Peechu’s sister again. She had an olive complexion and wore her straight blue-black hair in a big coil at the top of her head. She didn’t look like a Nandlal Bose, though. Ah, these poets ... She must be a good dancer, for she walked gracefully. The Rhythm of Life ... She had tried to be a perfect hostess again and had repeated, “Gosh, I do wish you had come to our village, Doc (she had easily and effortlessly become informal with him, endeavouring to prove to him that they were all real bohemians at heart and he needn’t be afraid of her at all). We would have taken you to the border of Nepal for a tiger-shoot. Are you the huntin’, shootin’, fishin’ type? My elder brother, Polu, is.”

Then Christabel and Hafiz had spoken to him of last year’s shikar when they had bagged a couple of panthers in Kumaon. He would like to get to know Hafiz better. He looked different. They could become good friends. Not that Kiran the journalist and Vimal the radio-man were bad fellows, they were just not his type.

The telephone rang. It was Peechu on the line wanting to know if he was coming to the New Year’s Ball at Dilkusha Club the next day.

He was taken aback. Another year had gone by. Day after tomorrow would be 1946.

“Do come along, Doc,” Rakshanda was saying now, “if you don’t have anything better to do.”

He spent New Year’s Eve at Dilkusha Club with Peechu’s crowd. They were all there, with the exception of Kiran and Vimal, who either couldn’t afford such expensive luxuries or had no time to waste. What he couldn’t understand was how Rakshanda combined Dilkusha with her New Era. He would try to find out.

They were all there. Native men and women in dress-suits and flowing saris celebrating the New Year with tremendous gusto, singing English songs, wearing paper caps, drinking. The English were about to quit India, but they would remain behind in the form of these strange creatures.

It was a cold December night. The chauffeurs lay huddled in the front seats of cars parked outside. The clock struck twelve. “Auld Lang Syne” was sung. People wept and laughed and hugged one another. “Happy New Year to you, Rakshanda,” he said to her, a little tense with whisky and emotion. “Happy New Year, Doc,” she replied amiably.

She left with her brothers soon after. He was detained for another round of drinks by the wife of a senior official who was away in Delhi. He had already started making his conquests in this city. When he left the club it was three in the morning, his head ached terribly, and he had a strong desire to run away from the world of rajkumaris and senior officials’ wives.

He got into his car and began driving towards Ivy Court, Barrow Road, the abode of the Eurasian dancer, Queen Rose.

The tip of her nose had frozen so she pulled the quilt up to her ears and looked at the luminous watch. She had got up again in the dead of night. Cold winds howled outside in the trees and she lay there wide awake, remembering all the old Christmas seasons, all the New Years, all the songs she had sung, dancing around school and college bonfires. The wonderful days of childhood. Why does one’s childhood always appear so wonderful? She thought of the years at the Convent in Nainital and the girls and boys she knew then and would perhaps never meet again,
and those lovely times ... and all that life had held out for her this day each new year's day.

She lay there dreaming. Why shouldn't I dream? Every girl, all human beings have a right to dream. Come to think of it, she could write an excellent article on it for *New Era*, Dreaming of a New Morn ...

When she got up it was still dark and frosty. Shola Pari came in with the news that her various aunts and great-aunts had already arrived last night and were having a high-level conference in Rani Sahib's room.

"Why, what's happening"? she asked.

"Don't know, Bitiya, perhaps some important guests are arriving."

At that moment Peechu also came in and got into the adjoining bed, making an igloo with his quilt. He was up and about unusually early as he had to go to the Police Lines for the Christmas Parade.

"Coming to see the Parade, idiot?" he asked.

"Nope."

"Do you know who is coming ...?"

"To your Parade ...?"

"No, no, right here, at home."

"I don't. Who is it?"

"Promise to take me to the pictures first, only then will I reveal his blessed name."

"Who is it, tell me quick."

"First you must promise that you'll buy me a good New Year present. Thereafter I'm going to break an extremely important piece of news. You should also bow down and salaam seven times ..."

"Tell me who it is," she yelled.

"Nawab Jehangir Qadar."

"Nawab who?"

"Jehangir Qadar that naval son of Mummy's fourth cousin, thrice removed. No wonder when I got up this morning I saw all the lights on in the guest house and Lala running around shouting instructions and a regular todo everywhere. Now I must run along." And he jumped out of the igloo and disappeared.

The guests arrived in the afternoon, a family from Murshidabad. Their son, Jehangir Qadar, was in the Royal Indian Navy and had recently returned from overseas. They were here to "show" their son to Rakshanda's parents with a view to matrimony.

In the days that followed, friends teased her endlessly on the subject of Lt. Jehangir Qadar and everybody had a wonderful time at her expense.

A few days later Christabel threw a grand dinner in honour of the young lieutenant.

Shehla Rehman, a new comer, was also present in Christabel's lounge when Rakshanda arrived. She had come to Kiran's office a few days earlier requesting him to publish her poems in *The New Era*. He had promised to introduce her to Rakshanda so that she could discuss her poems with the joint editor herself. Shehla had arrived recently from Allahabad and was teaching European History at the Women's Academy. Rakshanda had invited her "Lala Rukh" this Saturday to meet everybody, but Kiran, being extremely forgetful, had neglected to fetch her from the YWCA where she was staying. She had taken a tonga and come there alone. She felt miserable getting down from the tonga when everybody was arriving in limousines, but it couldn't be helped.

Now she sat in a corner of the lounge looking at the people who were all complete strangers to her. She couldn't even spot the famous Mr. Katju. Then she saw her Principal, Miss Zeenat Riaz, and felt slightly better. Later in the evening she met Rakshanda and Peechu and the others. She also met Dr. Salim.

A westerly wind was rushing through the trees when Qamar Ara's tonga reached Moti Mahal Bridge. The curtain tied across the back seat of the vehicle fluttered wildly and Qamar Ara caught
a good glimpse of the wonderful new world which awaited her. A number of girls were cycling up and down University Road. The tonga turned right at the crossing of Isabella Thoburn College, traversed the dusty Faizabad Road and finally entered the portals of Karamat Husain Girls' College.

Qamar Ara had joined the "Muslim School" at last.

Most of the girls who studied here came from conservative middle-class homes. Their own little universe lay enclosed within the high walls of the college compound. Men were not allowed anywhere inside the campus. The only males on the staff were four ancient bus drivers with flowing white beards, the only visitors allowed were fathers, brothers or uncles. They sat in the drawing-room in the Teachers' Building where the girls came out to meet them for a few minutes. A formidable old ayah sat there all the time, watching, in case there were any trespassers.

Qamar Ara was deliriously happy. Rakshanda Baji had promised to invite her to Ghufran Manzil when she had a purdah party.

One day, as she was returning to the hostel after playing basket ball, Nasiban Ayah called out to her, "Bitiya, your brother wants to see you." Qamar Ara was stunned. Had Khurshid Bhai turned up? She ran frantically towards the Teachers' Building.

"What does he look like?" she asked the Ayah, panting. "Is he very fair?" "He is dark—almost black, this brother of yours," Nasiban replied nonchalantly, and taking a pinch of perfumed tobacco, vanished down the corridor.

Qamar Ara entered the Visitors' Room, stopped dead and ran back, disappointed and confused. The man who stood there wasn't her brother at all. It was some stranger. He was staring at her spellbound, as if he had never in his life seen a more wonderful creature.

"You are Rakshanda Begum's cousin, Qamar Ara Begum, aren't you ..." he was asking, courteously.

"Yes, please."

"Since I was passing this way, Rakshanda asked me to hand this over to you ..." He gave her a parcel of books which she had wanted badly. She took the parcel nervously.

"Your are Rakshanda Baji's ..." she ventured to ask.

"I am a friend of hers ..." he replied briefly, turning to go.

She kept quiet. Just listen to him, she thought, says he is a friend of hers, as if Roshi Baji were a man. How funny. But the ways of the cities were strange indeed. Especially modern ways.

"Goodbye," he said looking at his watch. He was getting late for the Club.

Qamar Ara went back to the hostel.

The Kunwar Rani was frightfully upset. She was seldom so worried about things. The barber-woman had come from Amberpur House with a message: let us know your decision regarding the proposal of marriage between Anwar Azam and Rakshanda Begum. Give us a definite answer so that we can look for a girl elsewhere. The message also implied that they wanted to know if Peechu Mian was really going to marry their daughter, Jamila Sultan, or not. "We cannot go on postponing the dates of these two matches indefinitely," the barber-woman added darkly.

The Kunwar Rani couldn’t quite decide which was a better match—Anwar Azam of Amberpur Raj or Lt. Jehangir Qadar of Murshidabad. Her husband didn't seem to be worried about the girl's marriage, and she was already an old woman of twenty-four!

As she sat on her divan lost in thought, Chowdhry Shamim dropped in from somewhere. "You look troubled, Baji Jan," he said with great concern.

"My children will drive me up the wall, Shamim Mian."

"What's the trouble now, Baji Jan?"

"Shamim Mian, what do you think of Anwar?"

"Anwar ... you mean this Amberpur fellow ...?"

"Yes, yes, why ... Shamim Mian?"