The room wasn’t hot any more, but there seemed to be nobody around for thousands of miles. Everyone must have moved inside to escape the rain, and gone back to sleep. Safe and snug in their houses ... Ginnie and Diamond and Kiran and Chris, all of them ...

The wind became ferocious carrying away the clouds after a light shower. In the early hours of the morning the flowers and plants in the garden woke once again and swayed happily. The storm had passed without breaking.

“Oh, life is very funny indeed,” said Mrs Chandra Hari Harpal, sitting on a cane chair under the lemon tree as she plucked a leaf and carried it elegantly to her cute little nose. The garden of the Dilkusha Club looked very pleasant after the rains. Mrs Pal kept smelling the lemon leaf delicately, lost in deep contemplation. “A penny for your thoughts, Sakina darling,” she turned round after a while and asked Mrs Asghar Imam who sat on another cane chair, quietly going through the pages of the latest Outlooker. The palm leaves rustled softly in the breeze. Old de Silva’s Goan band had struck up a waltz in the club building across the lawns. Cars passed by occasionally on the drive. “Salim hasn’t come yet,” Mrs Asghar Imam remarked somewhat forlornly, looking at the drive.

“Yes, isn’t that horrid of him?” Mrs Pal agreed. She spoke with a marked British accent. (Several years in the best English school in Darjeeling and all that.) “What,” she wondered aloud, “are these men doing inside? It’s such a lovely evening.”

She stifled a yawn ever so gracefully, looking bored. Then they saw the Hedy Lamar-ish looking Rani Jai Pal Singh coming briskly towards them. Her page-boy hair was ruffled in the breeze and she wore a Mysore georgette sari of the latest design.

“Hello, Sakina, Hello, Chandra,” she gushed, coming nearer. “Hello, Indira, my love,” crooned Mrs Asghar Imam in her small school-girl voice.

“Did you hear about this outrage?” the charming Rani said very excitedly, letting herself fall into a garden chair. “He has gone!”

“What do you mean, he has gone?” asked Mrs Hari Harpal absolutely wide-eyed.

“Where? Why? Good gracious!” Mrs Asghar Imam exclaimed. “Rumour has it that the other evening he went to Ghufran Manzil where, as usual, they were planning one of their eternal picnics, and all of a sudden he got up, got into his Commando and tore out of the gate, just like that, and rushed back to his district. It is further reported that he will never go back there, not to Ghufran Manzil, I mean ...” She finished speaking and leaned back in her chair, exhausted.

“Oh how dramatic of him. What happened next, Indira darling?” asked Mrs Hari Harpal.

“Jai was saying that he is about to be sent abroad for some training or the other. It is also reported, my dear, that that evening in the garden of Ghufran Manzil, Hafiz asked him: ‘Where are you off to, chum?’ and he replied ever so politely, ‘Do not obstruct my way, dear friend. I must go, I have to (she said, after the pause necessary for such a piece of information) proceed on my way ...’ or something to that effect. At the moment he is in Faizabad, on his tour, and then he’ll go away.” (She too plucked a few lemon leaves and began inhaling their sharp smell, reclining languidly on the cane sofa like a Hollywood siren of the 1920s.)

“What are people discussing so urgently?” Diamond asked a friend passing by on the garden path behind the palms.

“Oh, it must be about that rather sinister-looking Byronic friend of yours who is alleged to be a doctor. He reminds me of an Italian gondolier dressed in a lounge suit.”

“Omgosh ...” Diamond replied lightheartedly, “Longinus, it appears, has created quite a sensation. Woh!”

“Then what happened Indira darling?” gasped Mrs Asghar Imam unbelievingly.
“Jai was saying that he rushed off immediately to his IG at the Carlton and said to him . . .”

“Girls . . . do you know the latest?” the Rajkumari of Kamalgarh cried as she came rushing to the group under the palms and threw herself into a chair.

“What’s happened now?” the three ladies chorused in unison.

“Lady Misra just told me in the cardroom that, with her own eyes, she saw him driving towards Faizabad at breakneck speed this afternoon with that Mayfair girl, Queen Rose, by his side. Both of them were laughing their heads off as their car tore past . . .”

The ladies put down their glasses of sherry on the table and were silent for a while. This turn of events was too dramatic for words.

“Life is uproariously funny,” Mrs Hari Harpal commented, shaking her head. The sound of the dance band had become very clear in the ensuing silence.

“Don’t you feel this music is sounding a bit empty without him? You know what I mean . . . He was such a wonderful dancer . . . this was his favourite tune . . . Tropical Magic . . . moon of sensation . . . It seems as if he had never come here . . . Omigosh . . .”

“I believe the younger Kunwar of Ghulman Manzil is also going away to Dibrugarh or somewhere,” Mrs Asghar Imam said.

“Yes. And Lady Misra was saying that Christabel Hafiz is divorcing her meek and mild husband who is forever inhaling Vepex . . . common cold, you know,” the Rajkumari of Kamalgarh replied with obvious relish.

“How is it that for the last few weeks Rakshanda has stopped poking her nose in politics . . . although yesterday I asked her myself to help us in this work-party Lady Bose is organising for the Red Cross. That used to be just her cup of tea, you know, not very long ago. But now she just keeps pounding away at the piano, trying her hand at Chopin which she plays atrociously . . .” said Rani Jai Pal Singh.

“Someone told me the other day that Krishna Narain’s daughter has refused to marry the Bombay civilian and is going off on the Amarnath yatra. How very mirth-provoking,” said the Rajkumari of Kamalgarh and put her head back on the cushion, apparently exhausted by so many overwhelming scandals in a single gossip session.

The club building shone brightly amidst the trees, the moon was slowly floating out from behind the clouds.

The ladies remained quiet for a few minutes, contemplating their cigarette-holders, thinking perhaps about the vagaries of life; life which had offered them nothing but comfort and ease and luxury only because they had been born in rich families or had married rich men. These little storms in their fragile china cups provided all the excitement and fun in otherwise dreadful and monotonous and empty lives. They would die of sheer boredom if some of them didn’t get divorced or married under dramatic circumstances, or lost heavily at the races or made fresh conquests at hill-stations from time to time.

Suddenly one of them began talking unexpectedly about death.

“Mr Oshir Lahiri of Shanti Niketan died on Wednesday.”

“What a shame! Poor thing . . . I do remember having attended his one-man show in Nainital a couple of years ago . . .” said Chandra Hari Harpal.

“Did he commit suicide?” the Rajkumari of Kamalgarh asked hopefully.

“No, mere heart failure,” replied Mrs Asghar Imam. “Had you met him, Padma dear? I was actually planning to commission him to do the murals for my lounge . . .”

“No, I never met him . . .” the Rajkumari answered.

“Was he very handsome?” asked Sakina.

“You must remind me, Sakina, to tell Hari to move a resolution of condolence at the next meeting of the Culture Society . . .”

“I certainly will, my dear,” she said sympathetically.

“Ah, our Art . . . it’s in such a hopeless condition. Nobody in our country ever bothers about Art . . . Don’t you think we
should pay more attention to it ...?” asked Mrs Hari Harpal anxiously.

“Of course,” agreed the Rajkunmari, with a sudden upsurge of devotion. “I think I will buy all his paintings ... I’m sure he is survived by a young widow and lots of little children in some distant green village of Bengal ...” The Rajkumari was an incorrigible romantic.

“No, Padma, I don’t think he was married,” said Chandra.

“That makes his death infinitely more tragic and romantic, dying like Keats ...” the Rajkumari reflected.

“Art is such a ... wonderful thing ...” remarked Begum Asghar Imam after some profound thinking.

“It certainly is ...”

“I love all Art ...”

“And all artists, too,” Rani Jaipal Singh said, broadly hinting at the affair between the Rajkumari and a French violinist in Bombay, which had provided them with priceless material for gossip at their hen parties the whole of last winter.

The Rajkumari laughed. “Chandra ... Padma ... Sakena ... I, say, Indira ... where are you? We’ve been waiting for you in the card-room for ages,” said Mr Hari Harpal as he advanced towards them on the garden path.

“We were talking about Art, Hari darling,” his wife told him gravely as they rose to go towards the Club.

“We are now, how interesting,” Mr Harpal said as he bent down to light Begum Asghar Imam’s twentieth cigarette of the evening.

The heart is sinking very fast. Faster ... faster ... Autumn leaves have fallen off the trees and are being carried away by the current ... faster ... faster. A murky darkness has covered all existence and there is a bright beautiful world across the darkness where there are red-roofed houses with little front gardens, and round-eyed children with red ribbons in their hair, playing. Afternoon tea is being served on glazed verandas and most people are snug and happy, happy ...

On this side of darkness there is merely the echoing stillness of this lonely afternoon which makes every sound very clear, very sharp. The air is filled with flies buzzing and the monotonous sawing of some distant carpenter. The whistles of the paper mill are floating by circling the air, and the sounds come closer and closer choking one with their horrible monotony. The heart is sinking, sinking ... That moment will never return when one had sat so close to him, on the next sofa, on the adjoining chair, on the same patch of grass in the garden ... The sun is setting. The shadows of the asoka trees are lengthening menacingly. The garden of Noor Manzil is quiet like a stagnant pool. Soon another night will pass.

Last night she had gone to Ghufran Manzil and learnt that he had just left. This had happened before, she always missed him by a few minutes. That memorable evening at Dilkusha Club when she had danced with the younger Kunwar, he had been sitting there all the time but had gone and joined another group without even looking at her. She had come out of her depressing little house in the lawyers’ locality and been living in such emancipated places as Noor Manzil. She was a very popular member of Zeenat Riaz’s Saturday Group. She had transformed herself so successfully into Shehla Rehman, the poetess, from the slipshod and mediocre nonentity, Salwa Khatoon. She would have worshipped him. He never gave her a chance to prove her worth. She had looks and brains and a heart full of love and devotion, and it was all so futile. What a waste. Life was being wasted, wasted ... She was not at all ‘forward’. Perhaps that is what he thought she was. But one didn’t become ‘forward’ merely by being friendly with Zeenat Riaz. Let the Saturday Group go to hell. She didn’t care in the least for Zeenat Riaz’s spiritual brothers, she cared only for him. But perhaps he liked girls who fried puris and made mango ice cream. He paid no attention at all to her poetry.
The shadow of the church spire cut across the lawn. A Christian inmate of the YWCA passed by in the verandah in a white sari, walking like a ghost. The bells had started ringing for the evening song. All the lights were on in Zeenat Riaz’s suite of rooms; she was getting ready to go out. Shehla sat down on the stairs and covered her eyes with her little brown hands.

Finally she would drown in this meaningless expanse which engulfed her on all sides. How insignificant one’s life was! She had been a first class student throughout her college career in Allahabad. Her genteel house was decorated with bead curtains and embroidered pictures of cranes and tigers. She played badminton. Her younger sister had been married to a nondescript army captain but she herself had announced grandly to the family that she would be a career woman. She declaimed night and day in front of her slightly bewildered parents that the only thing she needed in life was scope. This was the trouble with the country, she declared, there was no scope for talented girls like her. Then she had got this lecturership in the Women’s Academy and haughtily snubbed her female relatives who were shocked by her refusal to get married. She turned her back on this barricade of petite bourgeois reaction and continued playing the harmonium after college. And now the frustrating life of her suburban home in Allahabad had given way to the exciting experience of Noor Manzil—she had actually been to the Dilkusha Club once which was quite out of this world.

But everything had ended. All those dreams. All those twilit landscapes, which now lay smouldering in the hinterland of her emotions. All inspiration for blank verse had come to an unglorious end. But then it occurred to her: most great art is produced by the tragic and the doomed. Look at all those European musicians and English poets, look at your own Oshir Lahiri. He was supposed to have had this great big broken heart. The thought gave her a strange new feeling of peace and confidence. She rose from the stairs and went into her room, feeling strong and serene like a nun. She sat down at the table and began writing her new poem. Grappling with a new and difficult metre with which she had been struggling for the past week she soon felt drowsy. She rested her head on the paper and closed her eyes.

“Shehla, darling,” Zeenat Riaz called out from behind the verandah screen, but she was fast asleep.

Zeenat Riaz walked up and down for a while, then put out the lights, came back to her portion of the verandah and sat down in an armchair. The sound of occasional laughter rose from the common room. The moon was coming up from behind the church. A group of economics teachers were playing Ludo at the other end of the verandah. Zeenat Riaz looked intently at the asoka trees and suppressed a sigh. Next month she would be exactly thirty-five years old. Today Brijendra Kumar Rohit had told her that Dr Salim had left. The Saturday group was disbanding at an alarming speed. Dr Saxena had gone to Oxford, Masud had joined the Indian division of the BBC, Rohit himself was busy wrangling a job in one of the new Indian embassies abroad. There would be no more Saturday evenings. She would be left out, bypassed by life once again. She’d be thirty-five. No going back to being young again. Then forty, fifty... A shiver ran down her spine and she was on the verge of breaking down. Salim had gone, he didn’t even say goodbye to her over the phone.

At this very moment he could be walking down a gleaming corridor dressed in white, looking handsome and distinguished or he could be entering the operation theatre... Or lying in bed writing a long letter full of pleasant intimacies to that punky little girl, Rakshanda, whom she hated like poison, while she sat here on this desolate verandah in Noor Manzil, surrounded by fathomless pools of solitude. Tomorrow she would be explaining Ricardian theories all over again to a class full of cocky female students.

She fell to day-dreaming again. That had been her favourite secret wickedness for years. She fancied herself in all kinds of wonderful situations. This time she was an exceedingly smart lady doctor in her early twenties. She wore a white sari of crisp
milk-white voile, and a long white coat over it. She was assisting
him, bent over an operation table. After a tiring day’s work in
the hospital (preferably somewhere in the hills among cherry
trees and silver oaks), they would go into a bright and sunny
tastefully furnished room overlooking the valley, drink tea and
talk shop. Then they would go to the cinema together ...

Bah. She was sitting in the back verandah of Noor Manzil
and still had to correct all those infernal test copies of the fourth
year economics class. Instead of wild mountains she was sur-
rounded by the mutual jealousies, intrigues and counter-intrigues
of other old maids on the staff ... She shivered again.

If only he had come ten years earlier. Just ten years. But if
wishes were horses, beggars would ride. The Ludo-playing
women had moved into the common room for a game of ping-
pong. She closed her eyes. In the afternoon she had received an
invitation from the Hafiz Ahmads ... ‘Dear Zeenat Apa, we will
be very glad if you join us on a picnic in the country this Sunday ...
’ She picked up the letter from the floor and re-read it in the
moonlight. ‘We will be very glad ...’ only she was ‘I’ forever.
Nobody would share her life and be ‘us’ or ‘we’ with her ...

The moon sailed up to the top of the spire. She looked at her
watch. It was very late and she had to be up early the next
morning for her class.

The air had become warm again after a rainless day. Petals of
yesterday’s roses fell softly, one by one, in the water of the bluish
glass vase on the mantelpiece. Rakshanda came into Pechu’s
sitting-room and opened the windows. The creeper of yellow
blossoms hung heavy over the verandah railing. The tennis court
and the little roller under the mango tree were visible from the
window. He had often sat on this roller in the mornings, reading
the newspaper, and had his afternoon tea on it on countless Sun-
days. The branches of the pomegranate tree rustled in the wind.
She could see them coming towards the house from the tennis
court. It was tea-time again. The dead leaves under the row of
eucalyptus trees crunched under their feet as they walked. To-
day he was not among them. That was a different world, an-
other time, when he too would be here, in this very room, on
these lawns, under the same trees. The standard lamp in the
corner stood terribly alone. He would stand under it (a little
affectedly, though) and turn the leaves of the Indian Listener.

They entered the room talking loudly. “Well, it’s fixed,” Dia-
mond announced excitedly. “we’re leaving tomorrow for the
country before day break. We’ll be there by ten o’clock at the
latest.” Kiran cracked a joke as he entered the room and they
roared with laughter. They were all extremely dejected because
Pechu was going away. Pechu’s trying to look happy too, she
said to herself. He’s going so far away. But Christabel is leaving
too, and eventually everything will be all right. He would al-
ways remain her own dear Pechu. He would be snatched by no
foreign women not even her own pal Chris. But I shouldn’t be
happy at all, she thought remorsefully. I’m sorrowful too. She
suddenly remembered her secret grief and began floating on waves
of dejection all over again. Pechu is going, Salim is gone.
Christabel is going ... What a mess, what an infernal mess ...
They sat up till late at night packing their suitcases. Pechu’s
luggage for his long journey to Shillong had been stacked in the
front verandah—he would catch the train from Faizabad to Cal-
cutta the next evening.

They spent the night singing songs and drinking coffee, and
slept a little in the various rooms of Ghulфан Manzil. Early in the
morning Anwar Azam and his stooge, Jamal, arrived. He had
been especially invited to join them by Diamond.

At the breakfast table, they suddenly realized Diamond was

“Diamond said to Glamour Boy, ‘Come on, G.B., let’s take a
look at the dawn,’ so they’re sitting outside on the portico steps
looking at the dawn ...” Vimal informed her weakly.

“The Dawn comes so early ...?” asked Firoz, his mouth full
of a piece of toast.
“Of course, this is the time for dawn ...” Vimal replied nonchalantly. “When do you have it in your part of the country ... In the evenings? Good Lord! Stupid man, I didn’t mean the newspaper ... I was referring to daybreak, sunrise ... I don’t know what it’s called in Japanese and Russian. I’ve been telling you that Diamond is outside, viewing the dawn. None of you seems to understand a simple statement ... Huh ..., he bent down over his cup again.

Rakshanda caught hold of Diamond as they were getting into the vehicles. “What,” she demanded good-humouredly, “is flirtation, if not this? What kind of stunt was it? ... Looking at the dawn, indeed! The poor fellow must have frozen to death in the chill outside, looking politely at the dawn without his tea ... And, he’s such a nice chap, he couldn’t possibly be interested in this kind of tomfoolery. You bit of so-and-so ...!!!”

“My dear child,” said Diamond gleefully, “he looked ever so handsome in the frost ... you have no idea. You see, Roshi, I usually get up at eight in the morning and had never seen how the sun rose. So I thought I may as well have a ‘dekho’ ...”

Peechu emerged on the porch covered with charms and talismans tied round his arms by the Kunwar Rani, to ensure a safe journey and a happy return. The maid servants brought dishes of curd and linseed oil and lentils, symbols of good fortune, which were presented to the traveller. Peechu hurriedly bent down to look at his reflection in the cup of linseed oil and dashed towards the car.

Polu’s dogs surrounded him, barking and wagging their tails. The battalion of servants and syces and gardeners and cooks stood around looking very sad. They all doted on their Peechu Bhaiya.

“Proceed safely, Peechu Bhaiya,” said Abbasi Khanum tucking the edge of her trailing skirt into her waist-band. “Curd and Fish. I give you, to the protection of the Protecting Imam. I further entrust you to the care of one thousand guardian angels ...” she repeated the traditional phrases solemnly.

“Curd and Fish, Peechu Bhaiya,” said Shola Pari and Gul Shabbo.

“Curd and Fish ... Curd and Fish ...” Peechu repeated hastily and climbed into the car.

The cars went out of the gate one by one. “So, this is the situation, partner ...” Jamil whispered to Anwar Azam as their car reached the Wooden Bridge. “Viewing the dawn, etc., with the gilrees ...”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Anwar Azam replied innocently. “I had to oblige Diamond, she did so much want a breath of fresh air ... Otherwise my conscience is absolutely clear.”

“What a devastating statement. As if your conscience is the monthly report of the municipality, stating that all the thoroughfares of the city are absolutely clean ... ha, ha!”

They proceeded on the Faizabad Road and in a couple of hours reached the spot near the cantonment, on the banks of the Ghagra, where a little board said, “This is not a Public Thoroughfare. “They stopped in front of the yellow villa and went across the road to pay their respects to Thakur Rajendra Pratap Singh, then made for the river with their fishing rods. “What a beautiful place this is,” said Christabel, sitting down on the sand.

“Perfectly divine,” agreed Ginnie, taking off her dark glasses. Their hair flew in the wind. “Let’s go to Sita-ji’s Kitchen,” the men said, climbing into a boat. Rohit had once said, “Ginnie darling, don’t be so grieved. You ought to start painting. Best remedy for forgetting.” She would certainly start painting, do a portrait of this exquisite-looking Glamour Boy, for instance against the background of the river. Ram Chandra must once have stood on this very spot, looking exquisite and dignified and quite like Glamour Boy. Time flew past. We stand here now. In an instant another few thousand years will go by, an instant which we pompously call centuries. We’ll never be so good, so unhappy, so lovable, so innocent ...

“Are you a good sitter, G.B.?” she said aloud, turning towards Anwar Azam.
“Sitter ... well ...” Anwar Azam replied, blushing and confused. “Do you paint Miss Kaul?”

“Oh yes,” she said grandly, “I’m a great one for painting. Roshi says in order to forget one’s sorrows ...” she suddenly checked herself. Anwar Azam blinked at her uncomprehendingly.

As they assembled in the large and musty drawing-room Rakshanda suggested “Let’s play His Majesty and Her Majesty ...” This was her favourite party game. The suggestion was greeted with wild enthusiasm. ‘The King’, ‘The Queen’ and ‘The Chancellor of the Exchequer’ were selected. Rival armies were formed, each with a captain. The King or the Queen whispered to the Chancellor what they wished to have at the moment, and as soon as the Chancellor made the announcement, a general scramble began. The captain who succeeded in reaching the Throne with the required object scored a point. For the most part Their Majesties’ demands were fantastic and required all the ingenuity and resourcefulness of the rival camps to produce the desired stuff first. Bicycles, pups, obscure kitchen utensils for the Queen, some impossible kinds of shoes for the King ... It went on. Her Majesty wanted a brass frying pan. Peechu dashed out and ran across to the house of the Thakur Sahib and brought back a new frying pan in a few minutes. Now the King and Queen became more difficult in their demands. The King said he wanted a certain variety of potted fern.

Both armies charged wildly into the garden to fetch the plant. Peechu was running very fast calling out to some of his soldiers when Christabel saw it on the garden wall. “Captain, Captain,” she shouted. “Come here, quick. Here is the potted fern, this one, look ... pick it up ... pick it up quick.” she pointed towards an artificial hillock with a little pot garden in a corner. Peechu reached the wall. Christabel, too, had jumped down from the mound trying to lift the pot.

There was no one around. The armies had drifted apart and their happy shouts could be heard from the distant corners of the garden.

Suddenly Peechu bent down and picked Christabel up in his arms. “Peechu ...” she screamed, struggling wildly to push him back.

Peechu heard another voice. He turned and saw Rakshanda standing perfectly still on the wall.

Christabel threw the pot down and shook the dust off her clothes carelessly. Then she walked back to the villa where they were shouting and calculating scores. Rakshanda followed her like a frightened little pup; they entered the drawing-room together. Christabel sat down on the sofa, still cleaning the mud from her bruised arms with her handkerchief. Nobody paid any attention, they were all busy shaking out the dust and leaves after their hectic search for the fern. “Fell on a thorny bush,” she told the Rani of Kamalgarh who had come out and sat down next to her in the meantime.

Suddenly Peechu burst into the room and stood threateningly in the centre, arms akimbo. With his bloodshot eyes and wild hair he had the look of a wild panther out of some forest. Everyone became perfectly motionless and a ghastly silence fell on the room. They all looked at Hafiz Ahmad who had at that very moment unthinkingly taken out the bottle of Vepex from his pocket.

“What’s the matter, Peechu ...?” he asked. His voice, clear and deep, resounded in the high-ceilinged room. The guests remained speechless.

“Shut up, Hafiz Ahmad,” Peechu growled, still framed in the doorway.

“I’m not going to say anything to you, my friend ...” Hafiz spoke somewhat sadly.

“I’m not your friend ... I am not anybody’s friend. I’m leaving this house this very minute, going away for good. To hell with all of you, you pack of roaming frauds ...” He turned his back on the gathering and walked out into the dark. The guests left the room one by one. Hafiz Ahmad remained in the room till the last. Then he too descended into the dark garden and sat down near the gate staring blankly at the river.
Peechu walked briskly towards the station. It was very quiet and the moon was hidden by black, elephant-like clouds. As he was crossing a little ditch, he was knocked down by an army truck which whizzed past and disappeared. It was Saturday night and drunken soldiers were returning from the mess bar in the nearby cantonment. Then the driver slowed down and looked back. A figure seemed to be lying unconscious on the roadside ... he speeded up and disappeared.

"Are you listening to me, darling?" Queen Rose was saying. Salim continued pacing the large room of the rest house, looking out into the dark. On the other side of the canal, across the sugarcane fields, lights shone in the yellow Sarangpur villa. A lot of cars were parked outside and countless shadows flitted in the half-lit garden. Sounds of laughter and merry-making cut through the quiet of the summer night. So they were all there, the whole bloody lot. She must be with them, too, organizing some party, gay as usual, laughing hilariously. They didn't know that he was in their immediate neighbourhood tonight, or they would have invaded the dak bungalow and dragged him to their house-party. The gardener made a bonfire of dry leaves under the window. The birds woke up, disturbed by the heat of the fire, and began circling around twittering madly.

"Mama has fallen ill again and Papa is in need of a new suit," the blonde girl was saying. "Jim doesn't want to dance anymore and has joined the navy ... Could you give me another cheque, darling?"

"I see," he said tight-lipped, threw the cheque book in her face and left the room.

She didn’t cry. She merely looked at the cheque book lying on the floor. Its pages fluttered in the wind. Imperial Bank of India. (That was the only reality in life, and the green pages will keep fluttering between her and the cabinet manager, between Syed Ifthikhar and Rahmatullah, between Ginnie's parents and the important man from Bombay.)

Suddenly she broke down. The bonfire in the cluster of trees outside had died down, making the night appear blacker. She rose from the sofa and powdered her nose in the mirror. Then she went out. The forest groaned with the wind. The yellow villa across the sugarcane grove was very dark and quiet too. The garage was empty. Salim had left in his Commando.

She too began walking towards the railway station. She could spend the night in the ladies' waiting room. How much sacrifice did they want from women? Was their love really worth it? What did they really want women to do? She was returning to her world. She would be back in her familiar universe of Ivy Court and the Mayfair green room tomorrow morning. There was nothing in the future except the repetitious round of days and nights. Nothing. Who said men knew the meaning of love and could understand a woman's devotion? Ha! Self-centred vain egoists ... They merely looked for bodies, all of them. They would never know what a woman's soul was, never ... Ha ... who is this? She bent down and saw a young man lying face down on the roadside among the wild daisies. Blood trickled out of his full red lips, Holy Mary! she gasped.

"Who are you?" the man opened his eyes with great difficulty. So they have got me again, he shuddered, but I won't go back. He closed his eyes. The face bending over him merged into the dreadful images of Rakshanda and the Rajkumari of Kamalgah and Mrs Hari Harpal and Mrs Ashghar Imam ... No, they won't get me this time. He shook his head vehemently and groaned with pain. The girl called out frantically to a passer-by and tried to lift him from the roadside.

Chowdhry Shamim arrived in his battered Ford at Ghuftran Manzil. "Did you hear the latest?" he shouted, entering the Kunwar Rani's room waving his hands wildly. "Catastrophe ... catastrophe!"
“What has happened?” she gasped, her face white. “An accident? My children drive so recklessly! They haven’t yet returned from the country …”

“They are perfectly all right. I have come with a really bad piece of news,” he waved his hands again.

“For goodness’ sake man, speak up …” she commanded indignantly.

“This concerns Amberpur House and you …” he sat down on the chair.

“Is Anwar Mian all right?” she enquired anxiously.

“He is, but his father kicked the bucket this morning.”

“Oh … I’m sorry.”

“Yes, you ought to be, because now Anwar, your prospective son-in-law, is as poor as a cobbler’s son.”

The Kunwar Rani was greatly shocked. She didn’t notice the relish with which her kinsman broke this news to her.

“You realize this, Rani Sahib, his father has died and his grandfather is still alive, so now according to law Anwar Mian is disinherited. And there is constant litigation in their state among various first cousins and other claimants …”

“But, Bhaiya, what shall I do now? I’m completely at sea. Roshi had at last agreed to marry him and … Did his father have to die now?”

“And the lands which he may have got some day are with the Court of Wards because the father, pardon my saying so, was a real rotter … Not that his son is any better,” he added in an undertone. But the Kunwar Rani chose not to hear his last remark.

“What shall I do now? I had decided, now that Bitiya had said yes, that we would go ahead with the wedding this December … Oh my God …”

“We’ll try to get some other proposals—it’s high time she was married.”

“Only the good Lord will come to my rescue now,” she wailed and called out: “Gul Shabbo! Has the Bhaiya taken both cars to Faizabad? Tell the Lala to have the carriage ready. It is the first day of the Holy Nights … I had completely forgotten, I must go to the shrine …”

Chowdhry Shamim came out into the garden and strolled about happily, looking at the squirrels.

“How are the cars coming back from the village so soon?” Gul Shabbo shouted with great anxiety as she came out of the pantry.

The cars stopped in the porch. Bhaiya and Bitiya’s friends came out, their faces white like washed cotton. Gul Shabbo felt as if she had seen a procession of walking ghosts.

The students’ ward in King George’s Medical College was full of merry-makers as usual. Pretty nurses flitted past in the shining galleries. New film records were being played on gramophones, cards were being dealt and bridge scores written. In the girls’ ward, patients in colourful housecoats chatted with students of the Medical College. From time to time, some of the famous and smart young doctors came into the wards and talked to the girls. Whenever the university students wanted a few days of undisturbed luxury, they merrily had themselves admitted into the students’ ward under some pretext or the other.

Rakshanda stopped the car in front of the students’ ward and asked if a Miss Kaul had been there …

“Not Miss Kaul,” the girl replied, “but a Miss Ridley dropped in just now, looking for you.”

“Oh … thanks …” Rakshanda said and drove towards the European ward.

She saw from the window that there was no one inside Peechu’s room. She entered the corridor.

“He is not fully conscious … in his delirium he says he doesn’t want to see anybody, but please go in,” someone said to her in a soft and silken voice with a terrible Anglo-Indian accent.

She turned around. It was Queen Rose.

She kept quiet and went into the visitors’ room. The other girl came in, too, and sat down on a chair. She apparently hadn’t minded being snubbed so pointedly by the illustrious Rajkumari.
The surgeon beckoned to Rakshanda from the gallery and she followed him into his brother's room.

After a while Peechu opened his eyes. He stared at Rakshanda for a few seconds. Then he began shouting again in his delirium. “Go away from here, Rakshanda Begum! Go away. I don't want to see anybody's ruddy face. Don't you know how much I hate you all?” He groaned and closed his eyes again. Rakshanda went to the window trying hard to control her tears. The red cunna bordering the lawn outside looked hot and bright in the setting sun.

Peechu had stopped tossing about and was probably asleep. She came out of his room and lingered in the red-stone balcony not knowing what to do next. Then she felt someone standing next to her. She still didn't move.

“He is very ill. Are you going to stay here tonight?” the girl asked softly.

“We all want to stay with him by turn, but he doesn't let anyone come near him,” Rakshanda replied somewhat unwillingly.

“If you like I can stay—he won't recognize me. He'll just think I'm a nurse. Look, I'm even wearing a white frock ...” she said simply.

Rakshanda looked at her standing there in the balcony against a crimson horizon. Her blonde hair was fiery in the rays of the red sun.

Another Christabel ... another Christabel ... the winds seemed to shriek in the garden downstairs. She moved away without answering.

The Anglo-Indian girl looked in amazement at the snooty princess rushing downstairs, heading for her car.

“So,” Rajkumari Jai was saying in the lounge of the Mohammad Bagh Club, leaning elegantly, “Hari told me that that night he dashed out of the rest house, got into his Commando and sped off in the direction of Manather. And Tasnim darling, I have heard it on very reliable authority that he reached the Little House in Manather and said to Chowdhry ...”

The dining hall was all lit up and the campus was full of pleasant laughter.

Diamond had just returned from the radio station but had yet to break the news to a lot of other girls.

“What happened, Diamond ole girl?” some of them asked as they threw their tennis raquets on the grass and squatted beside her.

“Oh, nothing much,” she replied in a bored voice. “He's married Qamar Ara ...”

“What???” the girls cried in utter disbelief.

Someone, somewhere, kept repeating the same bars of music on the piano in the music room upstairs.

“Most of these so-called super-smashers end up like this,” said one of the girls thoughtfully after the impact of the shock had subsided a little.

“Men, my dear,” said another “are dogs masquerading as humans, fit only for the annual kennel show. Even the best of them ...”

“These are very critical times, my dear. You never know what most of them may do ... Don't be too sure of your western education,” the philosopher among them remarked.

“You're so right ...”

“Fancy him marrying Qamar Ara, of all people ...”

“When all people ...”

All the drawing-rooms in town, all the clubs and coffee houses echoed with the same discussion. Diamond climbed onto her bicycle and went towards Rakshanda's house on Outram Road.

Ghufran Manzil had never appeared more quiet than today (it sounded quiet, Vimal Bhai, you know what I mean? Diamond said to him later when they met after many years in a restaurant in Tulsa, Oklahoma). Peechu was coming back from hospital the next day. Doors were being opened and shut incessantly. Servants walked about like will-o'-the-wisps.