

# The King of Calcutta

by Peter de Rast

“HURRY UP, DARLING, the boys are dying to see *Waterloo*.”

“Okay, Now you stay here till I get back. Come on, Krishna.”

The tall Nepali youth uncoiled himself from a chair like a steel spring and hovered behind me as I slung the bag across my shoulder and left my own hotel in Sudder Street where we usually stayed. I had a half share in it, with a Sindhi friend. We left Nancy and the kids playing cards. I could have cut straight across to Lindsay Street down an alleyway, but, in case anyone was following, I went straight up to Chowringhee intending to turn right there. But, as we reached the corner I saw something out of the corner of my eye that made me stop, and then turn left. There, on the pavement on front of the Museum, was a little boy, perhaps seven or eight, with no arms. He was clad only in a pair of short pajama pants and around his waist was a cord that led to a boy of about fourteen, well dressed, with a steel bangle, watch and gold sapphire ring. The little armless boy was collecting coins from passers-by with his mouth, and passing them to his young captor.

I could not resist taking a quick snap-shot with the miniature camera that dangled ready at my neck. But as I did so a huge bearded Jat in a pugree glared fiercely, and started rolling towards me from the side of the pavement, parting the crowd like corn stalks.

“*Array bhai!*” I said loudly to Krishna. “*Mera kamera men koi film nayin hai.*” (Hey, brother, there's no film in my camera.)

The giant paused and seemed to let off a head of steam out of some safety valve. Maybe it was his ears.

I side-stepped back into Sudder Street and went up the alleyway to Lindsay. There I went into a department store, up one flight of stairs, down another, out of a back door, along a lane, through the murgi market, down a maze of more alleyways, into the back door of an antique shop, and straight up a narrow flight of stairs into an inner sanctum. I barely nodded to the proprietor, a young, good-looking Marwari, who did no more than raise his eye-brow, as I scuttled through his shop, my bodyguard in tow.

The office was tiny but well appointed, and very private. We made ourselves comfortable on a chaise longue. After a few minutes the proprietor came upstairs.

“Hello, Peter,” he said, “what brings you here?”

“The usual, Gopal.”

“You only come to see me on business,” he pouted. “What about going to the races again?”

“All right, then. Saturday afternoon.” He smiled cheerfully.

We nattered about this and that. Mostly cricket and politics. In Bengal everyone talks about cricket and politics all the time.

“How much?” he asked, in the end, coming to the point. It would have been very bad form to do so earlier.

“I have no money in my New York account at the moment.” I said. “But I have deposited a check for ten thousand dollars and it should be collected within a few days, unless David Rockefeller goes broke.”

“He won't. He won't. That's more than a lakh. I'll have to ask my uncle.”

He picked up the green phone and said, “Lightning call,” then gave a number.

Within a minute he was through to Bombay. In India this trick only Marwaris know how to do. And, mind you, they pay for the privilege. He gabbled away, partly in English and partly in his Hindi-dialect. Finally he opened a drawer in his desk and took out twelve bundles of mint-new hundred rupee notes, blue and shining. Each bundle was neatly stapled and bound with a slim brown paper band. 120,000 rupees – forsooth. It certainly soothed me.

I wrapped the blue stuff in a newspaper and stowed it away in my bag. Then I gave him the check.

“By the way, Gopal,” I said, “would your staff to do me a little favor?”

“Anything for a friend.”

“You see, I have to rush off to the cinema with Nancy and the kids. Could you get this film developed for me and make two post card sized prints and send them 'round to my hotel?”

“Surely, Peter. It will be a pleasure. Don't forget Saturday. I'll pick you all up in my Chevy. Usual place.

“Fine. Thanks very much. See you.”

Most of our money comes through regular banking channels, but there are certain expenditures I just cannot show in the audit, such as bribes to politicians and government officials, unlicensed arms and ammunition, and so on. Also a bit of gratuitous help to the poor occasionally. So I have to fall back on people like Gopal and his big gold-smuggling uncle.

Actually, I make no profit from the hotel. I merely get the benefit of free accommodation on my trips to Calcutta, about once a quarter. My main work is running my own ashram in the Terai area of North Bengal, where I have about a hundred orphan boys. We have girls, too, but, per government regulation, they are not allowed to sleep on the same campus as the boys (though, from time to time, some of them do). Instead, we place them with families nearby and pay for their board and lodging. Then they come in daily for school and various other activities.

We came out of the maze of alleyways near the Elite Cinema: took a taxi to Park Street, got out, walked half a block and took another one to Sudder Street. It was a long way 'round, but safer. I stowed the blue stuff in my safe at the hotel, and then we all took the same taxi to go to the cinema. Nancy and I, our two sons Rob and Roy and our grown-up orphan-boy Krishna.

Nancy and the boys all loved the film. But my mind kept returning to that scene on Chowringhee. It pricked my conscience. Even the charge of the Scots Greys barely interrupted my train of thought. They had been in the Seventh Armored Div. with us in Germany. 'Course, they had Centurions then, not horses. But they were still 'gung ho', and still just about as decorative and useless I should think. But, as they say, bullshit baffles brains, sometimes. Suppose I started charging that big Jat with a saber. He could wrap it around my ruddy neck in two shakes. War is bloody stupid, really.

“Och, dinna worry, Arthur. They'll hold.”

The kilties, and all and all. Flopping down to reload, and then jerking up for a quick shot. Nasty little tricks. The stuff of military genius. Or it was once. Now it is some monster computer operating a bunch of killer satellites, and man's much-vaunted military intellect is about as relevant as a mote in a laser's eye. This kind of stuff belongs to the kindergarten of our race. Then where are we now? Class One, of course. Unless we are going back down to the cradle.

Even if I had the whole of Wellington's Army, plus the *Hermes* and *Invincible*, etcetera, I still could not get that little slave-boy free. Any large-scale interference from anywhere by force and the Marxist government would call for help from Moscow. With half the Russian fleet lying off Budge Budge, even the *Invincible* would have cause to pause. Absurd fantasy. I must be going nuts. If this was the Eighteenth Century, now, I could do the job with fifty Jolly Jack Tars. But all that probably did far more harm than good. One can never do any good by interfering with other people and depriving them of their rights. Besides,

who started the bloody slave trade? Liverpool was built on the rum-slaves-cotton triangle. Looks ugly enough, too. If I was an Indian citizen it might be different. But would it? Just what the heck could I do? Try to think like an Indian. It's the only hope of finding a solution.

“Blucher is coming. Blucher. Hooray!”

That's what always happens. The people who come along late, nice and clean and fresh, with their forces in being, pick up all the power and glory. After picking up all the money first. Who says we won the war? We lost both bloody wars. Whoever won, it certainly was not England. We were not only conquered, we were bloody well occupied. Starting with the goddam universities and the ministries of course (the two always go together). But that process started much earlier, in the late Nineteenth Century.

Anyhow, we are probably better off for it. Better to stay small like Norway and hang on tight for the ride. What would an Indian do? He would not be so stupid as to want to do anything. But suppose it was his own son, kidnapped, and mutilated for begging, for the profit of some criminal overlord? What would he do?

Let's start at the beginning. First of all, you have to look at the political equation. That's where the real power starts. Yes, the politician has power. But only at a price. He gets it from the people who support him, and he has to pay them back, otherwise next time no dice. Not in money. They give him that to buy votes from the hoi polloi or lumpen something or other. He pays them back in permits to run his businesses – and rackets. Rackets like that little armless boy on a string collecting fifty rupees a day with his tongue, plus half a kilo of filth. That's where they get the money back one hundredfold.

There has to be a politician behind it, otherwise it just could not go on. The police get paid, too, but they would not condone this sort of racket merely for money. They take the money because they have to condone it anyway. So they might as well get paid for doing nothing when they have no option. I know that from Bunny Das Gupta, and he's a Deputy Commissioner of Police, for gosh sakes.

And the Indian public? Why do they tolerate it? Would the British public tolerate it in England? Would I, as an Englishman, tolerate it in England? No, I bloody well would not tolerate it. There would be a civil war, even if I had to start it personally. And I know a lot of me old muckers would do the same. Then why don't the Indian public revolt? Is it because too many of them are destitute and illiterate? Because their governing classes are too soft and selfish? Because we kept them under

for too long and spoiled their character? Or was it already spoiled? Sleeman would have said so, the brass-bound bastard who stamped out forty-thousand thugs with only six hundred men, almost all of them Indian sepoy – his men, that is. In those days the ships were made of wood and the men were made of iron.

Non-violence is all very well, but in real life it doesn't always work. Water may put out fire, but only moral violence can control immoral violence. Which is which? That of course is a value judgment about which no two people will ever agree unless we get back to an order of objective absolutes in philosophy.

The contest is between the vision of Tagore and that of Bertrand Russell. I think I know which of them is universal.

I left the cinema feeling wrung out. After a quick coffee in the Bagh Shah – the boys had tea and cake – we came out onto the street and, without thinking, I turned up towards Chowringhee. The armless boy drew me like a magnet. And, to be honest with myself, it wasn't only him. It was his fourteen-year-old captor; he of the gold sapphire ring and the steel bangle; he of the puckish face and wicked black eyes, the cruel mouth and sensuous hair; he of the perfectly proportioned figure and inner fire. My, oh my. It was better not to think about him. But I must see if they were still there.

I wasn't going to do anything. I swear I wasn't. I was totally helpless and knew it. I could not even make up my mind whether it was right or not, even to try to do anything. But once Nancy saw that child there was no going back. She did not have Wellington's army, not the *Hermes* and *Invincible*, not even the fifty Jolly Jack Tars, but she made that big bearded farm-boy quail.

“That poor child. You ought to be ashamed of yourselves,” she gabbled away in Bengali, besides a lot of other things which it would be tedious to relate. It was this more than anything that won her the sympathy of the large unruly crowd that soon gathered. Bengalis, like most other peoples, love it if a foreigner speaks their language. A tall aristocratic babu in spotless muslin kurta with gold studs thrust his way to the front and towered elegantly beside the big Jat, regarding him like some sort of specimen.

“You see,” he said in Bengali, “it takes a foreigner to remind us Indians that our fatherless children are also human beings.”

The crowd roared with fury. They were ready to deal with that big Jat the way they dealt with some of the Ananda Marg Yogis on 30<sup>th</sup> April 1982, when they ended up as a charred pile of bones and flesh right on

the streets, as I saw with my own eyes. I decided that a dose of pacification was required.

“Everything can be settled peacefully,” I shouted in Bengali. “Let the exploiters of this child give him to us for his care and education. We run a government-licensed orphanage for such destitutes. Furthermore, I am even willing to compensate them for the loss of income by a cash subscription.”

Bengalis love this sort of compromise solution. They cheered wildly, and shouted to the Jat to accept my offer. Crestfallen, the big mound of blubber agreed. Even the arrival of a posse of policemen could not alter the resolution of the crowd. They all accompanied us to our hotel, where a document was drawn up. Someone produced two pieces of Non-Judicial Stamped paper, 5 Rs each. The babu turned out to be a retired gazetted officer from the Public Works Department, who now worked as a part-time consultant. He drew up a beautifully wordy document with enough 'Whereases' and 'Parties of the first and second part' and 'hereinafter called' to feed all the rats in Writers' Building for a week. All this took ages, and since we were now as hungry as the crowd, I gave an order to feed the multitude. The services of nearby hotels and restaurants were requisitioned in order to relieve the pressure on our kitchen. Carbonated soft drinks and paper plates loaded with various foodstuffs spread like horizontal rain from every side. Someone had laid on a few tuni bulbs and rigged up a P.A. system with Hindi film music, so the celebrations became almost typically nuptial.

By this time, as is typical with a Calcutta mob in its post-fracasal stage, everyone was immensely friendly. We were all crying on each others' shoulders, good guys and bad guys alike. And, after all, who can ever say which is which? As for me, I was head over heels in love. Not for the first time, and it won't be the last. What is more, though you may find this hard to believe, it was strongly reciprocated. His name was Shamsher Singh. But I called him Smasher then, and have done ever since: he of the steel bangle and gold sapphire ring, creamy silk shirt and brown jean-cut corduroy longs and teeny-bopper shoes; he of the cruel, so cruel and lovely mouth, and so wickedly intelligent eyes; and glossy black hair. Of course, Nancy knew. She always knows when I fall in love, even before I do. And she does not mind, so long as it is only a boy. If I ever fell in love with another woman, now, that would really upset her. But with the kind of boys you see around in India, in droves, there is not much chance of that ever happening.

“Let's go to my office, Smasher,” I said at last. “We have a lot to

talk about.”

We took little armless Tinku with us for safety. Neither of us wanted to let him out of our sight. Strangely enough, he was still, after all that fuss, bound with the cord which Smasher had in his hand.

“Do you have to keep him like that?” I asked.

“He wants it,” said Smasher. “He gets upset if I take him off.”

“Try.”

By this time we were in my secluded private office. I was very tired, so I threw myself down on the double bed that I kept conveniently ready there.

Smasher took off Tinku's cord and put it on the desk.

Immediately little Tinku put his head on one side and said, “*He, pyari lal, hamko mat choro*”. (Hey, red lover, don't give me up.)

Since Smasher ignored this, Tinku's face puckered up and soon he was sobbing pitifully.

“Okay,” I said, “I'm convinced. Better put it back on.” Once the cord was refastened, Tinku beamed with joy and started jiggling about cheerfully, admiring himself in the wall mirror and humming a Hindi song.

With no loss of sang froid, Smasher lay down on the bed beside me. I was on my back, and he lay sideways, his face against my shoulder, his big dark eyes probing my face speculatively. My heart was pounding furiously and a small pyramid near my crotch kept growing and growing.

“You should take your pants off, uncle. It would be more comfortable for you.”

I blushed hotly. Was he a boy or the devil? But I did as he said. It was always like that, from then on. He was always a jump ahead of me. I turned towards him on the bed and put one hand on his delicate shoulder, stroking the creamy silk of his shirt and feeling the warm flesh underneath. His eyes and mouth crinkled up, and his whole face dimpled as he laughed, the flash of white teeth a brilliant scimitar of unfathomable beauty. Then he kissed me. It went on and on for ages. I stroked and explored every nook and crevice and every shapely curve of his electric body with sensitive fingers, while he lay there willing to be idolized as a priceless trophy of love. He was superbly and blatantly narcissistic. Occasionally he would make soft whimpering noises, like an exploited victim of lust. But he shared every iota of lust himself. I was simply his instrument, whereby he could adore and enjoy his own gorgeous soul and body.

At last, far from sated, but willing to call a truce, I lay back and

rested.

“You had better understand one thing, uncle,” he said coolly, “Babu or no babu, that piece of paper has no value. Me and Tinku and our big bodyguard, Ved Prakash, are still slaves. There were two of our goondas in sight. Naturally, they did not declare themselves in front of the crowd. But I saw one of them follow us here. And the other must have gone to raise the alarm. Our mob controls at least two thousand goondas in the Calcutta underworld alone, plus a lot more in other cities, plus several politicians, plus a big chunk of the police.”

I looked sideways at him.

“Yes, Smasher,” I said, “It figures. I knew it would be like that. Which is why I had no intention of interfering, until the Mem Sahib started in on you and poor old Ved Prakash. I knew you were just pawns.”

We were silent for a long time, while once again I watched the charge of the Scots Greys in my mind, and thought of how much less than useless they would be on Chowringhee... The politicians employ goondas, that is, muscle men and petty criminals of all kinds, to fight other politicians, who in turn employ more goondas, and so on. It escalates exactly like the armaments race. Also, like the armaments race, the technology of street warfare continually gets more and more vicious. And since most of the politicians are a pretty gutless bunch, the goonda leaders soon end up running them like puppets. So after Babu Raj, we got Goonda Raj. No wonder so many of the poor people look back nostalgically to The Raj, when some Hooray Henry could still keep the peace in his own brainless way, within the ambit of his purview, and with no compulsion to reason why. He might or might not know that it was the peace of the grave, maintained for the benefit of some filthy rich Manchester mill owner with a country estate in Derbyshire. But as far as the poor were concerned, it was the men on the spot who mattered, and they were not all bad.

My bedside phone rang. “Hello. “

“Hello, is that you, Peter? Bunny here.” It was the Deputy Commissioner of Police.

“Hello, Bunny, how are you? How is Sheila?”

“Fine, fine. Listen, Peter, this is a bit urgent. I have just heard over the grapevine that the Home Ministry is in a flat spin over that beggar boy you picked up today.”

“Picked up? But Bunny – ”

“Oh, don't worry. I know that isn't the way it happened, but the



point is there are certain people who want to give it that kind of coloring.”

My heart felt like a lump of cold rock. “What do they want?” I asked tersely.

“Listen, Peter, don't worry. I can fix everything. We can make out like it was all a misunderstanding. The two boys will have to go back to their friends, of course.”

I could not blame Bunny for this. It was inevitable. He was as helpless as I. You can't fart against thunder.

“Bunny.” I said, “I would agree with you immediately. But how on earth can I tell Nancy? She was the knight in shining armor, you know, not me. This could break us up.”

There was silence for half a minute. “Hello, Bunny?”

“Hello. Look, I understand, Peter. I really do. I know the Mem Sahib after all. We'll have to think of a compromise. I'll do whatever I can. Bye.”

Shamsher had heard every word of his conversation, his face lying next to mine on the pillow.

“I told you so,” he said.

“People who say that all the time get very unpopular,” I barked.

“What are you going to do?” he asked.

“I don't know, really. What would you do?”

“If I Were a sahib, I'd fight.”

“Why?”

“Because that's the kind of person you are. You can't really do anything else, can you?”

“No, devil-boy,” I said mournfully, “not if I want to go on living with myself – and Nancy – I can't.”

“Why are the sahibs like that?”

“It's a question of self-respect, or honor. That is the only thing you take with you when you die. It is the one thing death cannot quench. You ought to know that. After all, you are a Rajput boy. In the old days the Rajputs knew more about honor than they did about survival, which is rather unfortunate.”

He propped himself up on one elbow, and stared at me very hard, his face flushed.

“Can I be like that, too?” he asked.

I thought this over. It was a very difficult question to answer.

“Yes,” I said finally, “you can. Provided you are willing to pay the price... But if I'm going to fight I have to know one thing first.”

“What?”

“Do you and Tinku want to stay with us?”

“Oh, yes, more than anything in the world. But you'll have to take Ved Prakash, too. I won't leave him.”

“Fair enough.”

Pensively, I picked up the phone and tried a number.

“Hello, is Kagenji there. This is Peter de Rast.”

“I am calling him now. Hold on.”

I could hear the venerable freedom fighter moving ponderously across the room with his stick. He sat down and took a deep breath before picking up the phone.

“Yes, Peter.” As usual, his voice was sharp as a whip.

“Kagenji. Thank god you're there. I'm in a spot of trouble, I'm afraid.” Briefly, I described the situation.

After I had finished he said, “I have forgotten your number.” I gave it. “*Bhalu!* I'll phone a few people and call you back.”

He was eighty-five years old, worked sixteen hours a day, and tended to conserve his energies as far as possible. A man of decidedly few words.

“Who is Kagenji?” asked the boy.

“A man to be proud of,” I said. “Right hand man to Doctor B. C. Roy, who was a man before whom even Nehru sometimes trembled. That was in the days when Calcutta could still remember it had been the second city of the British Empire.”

“What will he do now?”

“God only knows. But he'll do something. Don't worry about that.”

Usually I don't smoke. But I keep a packet of India Kings handy for guests, and now I lit one up, my hand shaking. Just then Nancy came in with coffee. She sat down on the bed with us and held Smasher by the shoulders, her mouth twisted into a droll smile that looked a bit like his. She had an extraordinary empathy for the boys I loved.

“Is he bothering you, Smasher?”

“Oh, no, aunty. He's super. I mean, I just love him.”

“Well, I know what you mean. So do I.”

“Really, sweetheart, this is quite embarrassing,” I said.

“I thought you'd given up smoking.”

“I have. I have.”

“Like Mark Twain. A thousand times.”

“If you say so.”

Tinku, by the way, had curled up on the carpet and gone to sleep

ages ago.

We munched sandwiches pensively.

“Have Rob and Roy gone to bed yet?”

“Yes, dear, and Krishna's sleeping on a cot outside their door. It's time I went to bed too. Are you going to be up long?”

“I've still got a few – business transactions.”

“I hope you're not going to keep that lovely boy up all night.”

“He can go to sleep whenever he likes.”

“I'm too excited to sleep,” said Smasher.

Soon after Nancy left Kagenji rang back. “The matter is quite serious, but I have managed to smooth things over. I have discussed it with the Home Secretary, the Chief Secretary and the Governor, in that order. The Chief Minister is in Bulgaria at the moment, but it is not necessary to disturb him about this.”

“Jeepers creepers! Is it that serious?”

These were the top people in the West Bengal State Government.

“I'm afraid so, yes. There are very powerful interests involved. Very powerful, indeed.”

“Who?”

“I am not at liberty to tell you that, Peter.”

“But you know.”

“Of course.”

I remained silent.

“Now, listen, my boy. Please be careful. The Deputy Commissioner of Police, Mr. Das Gupta will contact you later and give you certain instructions. Please come and see me next time you come to Calcutta.”

Next time? Why next time?

“All right, Kagenji. I will do whatever Bunny Das Gupta says, provided I don't have to give up the boys.”

“I rather think you will succeed in keeping them with you. But you will have some troubles. That's all I can tell you now. Good-bye, Peter.”

“Good-bye – and many, many thanks for the trouble.”

“No trouble. I'm always happy to help a genuine social worker. Give Nancy my best regards.”

I turned the radio on and listened to some soft music. After a few minutes Smasher fell asleep, and I also started to doze.

At about eleven pm the phone rang again. It was the Deputy Commissioner of Police.

“Hello, Bunny.”

“Now, Peter, please listen very carefully. Have you locked the hotel up safely?”

“That’s done routinely.”

“Well, tonight I strongly advise you to check it yourself – quickly. And don’t let anyone in on any account.”

“This sounds terribly melodramatic.”

“Just do what I say. We have stopped them from acting through the police, so now they have threatened direct action.”

“Rightho, then.”

“And tomorrow you will have to fly back to Bag Dogra.”

“But I am going to the races on Saturday.”

“Cancel. The Home Ministry have booked tickets for all of you on Indian Airlines. For eight passengers, that is. They will send a coach to pick you up at ten tomorrow morning. It will be escorted by two jeeps of the Highway Patrol and a Black Maria full of armed police.

“Jesus H. Christ.”

“Maybe He’ll help you, too, if you ask him. Good night, Peter. I’ll try to meet you at Dum Dum if I have time. Take care.”

“You bet. So long, Bunny.”

I put the receiver down and lay back on a stupor, trying to digest the avalanche of happenings. Could all this be true? All we had done, or tried to do, was rescue one poor mutilated and exploited beggar boy on the street, and now the whole government of the country was shaken to its foundations. If the situation in India was as bad as this, who could help all the other slaves, children and adults, sex-slaves, bonded laborers, life-time prisoners without trial, and all the other poor wretches who gave the lie to our high-flown rhetoric about democracy, socialism and so on? It was an impossible task. Beneath a mask of civilized values, the world was a hideously cruel place, an insult to any Creator who might legitimately claim responsibility for it.

But, as I had told the boy, honor was the only thing you could take with you. Now I might have to put my money where my mouth was. I got up, put my pants on, unlocked the steel almirah and took out my cartridge belt. I slung it with the bird shot up front and the buck-shot, fours and rifled ball at the back. Whatever was going to happen was going to happen at night and at very close quarters. I tucked a hammer down inside the front of my pants belt. Never go into action without a hammer. Much better than a knife, unless you are Jim Bowie. Then I took out the left-hand canvas glove with the umbrella wire stitched inside all the way up to the elbow. Guard for a knife attack while reloading. I

put a small torch in my pocket and slung a Field Marshall torch 'round my neck so that it hung under my right shoulder. Then I picked up the double-barreled twelve bore and checked it minutely.

As I turned I saw Smasher was awake, sitting up on the bed and staring at me with wide-eyed wonder.

“What are you going to do, uncle?”

“I really don't know. Just getting ready in case anything happens.”

“Give me a gun, too. I'll help you.”

“Ever had any training with firearms yet, son?”

“No.”

“Then much better not take a gun. Quite likely to shoot yourself in the foot if anything starts. Here, you can use this.”

I handed him a kukri, and a heavy torch.

Together we patrolled the whole house, the boy almost swaggering with the kukri. He had no fear, because I was there. But I, inside, was scared enough for both of us. I knew we were up against forces almost as powerful as the West Bengal Government.

The darwan on duty was a trusty ex-Gurkha Subedar with rows of bright medal ribbons on his Khaki uniform. His eyes lit up when he saw me loaded for bear.

“Expecting trouble, sahib?”

“Yes, Bahadur.”

“It'll make a change. Very boring job, this.”

“I'll bet it is. Rather you than me.”

Ved Prakash lumbered in. He had been asleep in the lounge.

“*Kya hua?*” he asked rubbing his eyes.

Smasher gabbled away in his Hindi-type dialect, explaining as much of the situation as the boy himself understood. Apparently we were going to be attacked by two thousand goondas. Ved Prakash looked at the young lad with loving attention: obviously he worshiped him, and who could blame him? I felt reasonably sure I could count on the big Jat if anything happened. He eased a bicycle chain from under his belt, keeping it ready. The two Dobermans, Pinch and Lynch, were fooling about as usual, jumping all over me. But eventually I got them into the lounge and closed the door on them. Second line of defense.

“Are the fire extinguishers workable, Bahadur?”

“Yes, sir. The man from Minimax was here last week. We refilled all the powder types, and there is a new CO<sub>2</sub> behind the counter.”

I went and got the CO<sub>2</sub> and put it close at hand. “Fire buckets?”

“Four sand and four water ready over there.”

“Let's hope that's enough.”

Just then Krishna came down, rubbing his eyes sleepily. “*Kya hua?*” he asked.

“Spot of trouble, Krishna. Got your thirty-eight?”

“Yes, here it is.”

“Okay, you patrol the back and sides and watch the alley windows. Check upstairs occasionally, too.”

I thought of Wellington before Waterloo, dozing under a tree with *The Times* over his face. A panicky aide asks him what their plan is. Annoyed at being disturbed, he replies,

“The plan, sir, is to engage the enemy.”

Then he puts the newspaper back on his face and continues to doze.

At that very moment, by sheer coincidence, Bahadur asked me, “What is the plan, sahib?”

It shook me up. But I replied, “The plan, Subedar Sahib, is to fight the bastards!”

It was a rough paraphrase, but it would do.

His eyes twinkled, and he whipped up a salute.

As if that were a signal, it started. I heard at least three fast-moving taxis drawn up with a squeal of brakes in nearby Free School Street. Then one smartly dressed Sikh with a suitcase came trotting round the corner and pressed the bell at the side of the collapsible gates. This was quite unnecessary, because we were all there staring at him from the other side, looking like a bunch of extras from *Good-bye General Custer*.

“If you please, sirs,” he said in a soft-spoken voice, “I need a room for the night. I have just now arrived here from Delhi.”

I'll bet he had, too. “Wait!” I whispered to Bahadur. In the foyer there were some internal collapsible gates which were left open. I closed and opened them again very quickly, making a terrific clatter. On cue, twenty or so heavily armed goondas rushed into sight, but when they saw the collapsible gates closed and double-padlocked, they froze in surprise.

“Very sorry, Sardarji,” I said sweetly, “the hotel is closed for the night, and there are no rooms available – *TAKECOVER!*”

I shouted the last two words as the Sikh pulled out a revolver. I made sure he was intending to point it my way before I shot him in the foot, and then I dodged behind the nearest pillar. Bahadur had already pulled Smasher back with him behind another, and Ved Prakash had also faded away somewhere.

The Sikh was hopping around and screaming fit to beat the band.

One of the goondas opened up with a Sten gun, but he could not fire bursts without hitting the Sikh, so he pumped single shots through the gates, which ricocheted wildly in all directions, whining like hornets. I wasn't worried about the Sten. The bloody things always jam and, true to form, this one did. I was looking for the bombers. There it was. Mills grenade. But the bloke had no training. Let it go with the lever. I was counting bananas from the instant it left his hand. Caught it on two bananas with my left hand. Flipped it back out on three bananas, and then *BABOOM*. There were two almost simultaneous explosions, because Bahadur had caught a grenade from another bomber and thrown it back, too. The pillars and collapsible gates blocked off the chocolate from us, and most of the blast, although my ears were ringing a bit. But for the poor sods out there it was a meat-grinder. On concrete, for Christ's sake. Not something I like to do, but it was them or us. One Molotov cocktail had got past us and played merry hell with the dining room doors, but Smasher and Ved Prakash doused it with the CO<sub>2</sub>

I reloaded with bird shot. Meantime, the goondas were screaming and shouting, cursing and threatening, as they retreated to the taxis, carrying their wounded. After the taxis roared away, Bahadur said, "I suppose we'd better inform the police."

"It's a courtesy," I said.

As usual, the police took ages to arrive. One Sub-Inspector with three armed constables. They had probably made darn sure the goondas were gone before they ventured forth. The Sub-Inspector asked a lot of damn-fool questions, checked my gun license, which was quite in order, and took a lot of notes and measurements concerning the blood stains in the street. He also retrieved a foot which had evidently been blown off. After the police had left, Bahadur went up to the corner to see if there was anyone in sight. That was how we found out why the Goondas never came back. Free School was packed with Gurkhas, heavily armed. Up on Chowringhee there were armored cars, and a whole lot of Military police wandering around in their cock-like turbans. Later on we discovered a company of Central Reserve Police near the Fire Station, while up towards Park Street there was the best part of a battalion of the Border Security Force. Just then a Guards Major came marching down Sudder Street alone, slapping his leg with a swagger stick.

"What the heck is going on here?" he asked. "Blood all over the bloody place."

"Come in, Major," I said cheerfully. "Join the war."

We opened up the bar and gave him a drink, while I described the

recent events. Soon he called in his brother officers, and we had half of Fort William in for an impromptu party in the middle of the night. They told us that, at very short notice, they had been ordered to go on a night exercise with live ammunition, to practice street fighting, and with orders not to fire unless fired upon.

“In all my born days,” said the major, “this has never happened before, and I surely hope it will not happen again. But don’t worry about those goondas. Just in case they come back, I will tell the men to shoot first and ask questions later.”

They never did come back.

At breakfast the next morning Nancy asked us what all those fireworks had been about.

“It was a military exercise, aunty,” said Smasher, winking at me.

“I am sorry to tell all of you,” I said, “that something very urgent has cropped up. We have to return home today by air. It’s those income tax people again.”

Nancy looked at me quizzically, while Rob and Roy protested loudly.

“Smasher and Tinku and Ved Prakash are coming with us, of course,” I said.

The airlines coach arrived on schedule at ten, and we piled in. The police vehicles kept at a discreet distance, so no one seemed to notice that they were there specially for us.

Bunny met us at Dum Dum Airport, in uniform, together with an Assistant Secretary from the Home Department. We were ushered through hastily into the VIP lounge. The whole place was swarming with armed police, but it usually is anyway.

An aide came up looking agitated, and Bunny went into a huddle with the Assistant Secretary and several other officials. They all looked flabbergasted. Then Bunny returned looking as if someone had just hit him with a mallet.

“Someone has come to see you,” he muttered.

They were all acting like a bunch of hens when a fox gets in.

But he was much more than a fox. He was a King. Tall and handsome, like Imram Khan with white sideburns, he moved with such ease and grace you would have thought he had not a care in the world. Smasher ran to him across the hall, and the tall man scooped the boy up on one arm, laughing. His suit was cream-colored with a light brown check, beautifully tailored. His pale blue cravat held an immense diamond on a gold pin. He strolled across the floor carrying the boy and



a gold-tipped cane, and ended up in front of the chair opposite mine.

“May I?” he asked.

Not to be outdone in politeness, I rose to answer him, and said, “Sure. Make yourself comfortable.”

Nancy was at the counter with the others, getting Espressos. So we were alone except for Smasher. Face to face at last.

The boy put his arm around the tall man's shoulders and pleaded with him, “Uncle, let me stay with uncle. Please. “

“Wait,” he said, raising his hand. “First I want to make the acquaintance of your new uncle.”

“You were the one who gave him that sapphire ring,” I said, as though finding the solution to a riddle.

“Yes,” he said.

“Okay, I suppose you already know a lot about me. I know nothing about you. But I might make some pretty shrewd guesses.”

“Such as what?”

“Such as that you are not about to tell me your name?”

“Ask Smasher,” he said, smiling at the boy. “Who am I, Smasher?”

“He's Uncle Suleiman,” said Smasher proudly.

“Suleiman the Magnificent?”

“No just plain Suleiman Mohamed,” he laughed.

“Well, I must confess you have the advantage of me.”

“Maybe in some respects, my friend. But not in all. By no means all.”

“May I know to what I may attribute the honor of a visit from you?”

“I wanted to meet the man who could defy me in my own territory.”

“By what right is it yours?”

His eyes became flint hard.

“In this world,” he said, “there is only one right, the right of the brave. And because of that I will let you take this boy and Tinku and the man. But remember, if any harm should ever come to them, I'll hold you responsible. And I have a long reach.”

Little shocks chased each other up and down my spine.

“I love him,” I said simply.

“I know that,” he said. “So do I. But I have a thousand boys and girls like him. Their passions are like bubble gum. The only real aphrodisiac is power.”

We both fell silent, until I said,

*“The earth is the Lord's,  
And the fullness thereof,*

*And He renders it unto the brave.”*

He frowned. “Where is that from?” he asked. “It’s an old Spanish proverb,” I said.

He repeated it, word for word, slowly.

“It is beautiful,” he said, “and very true.”

“Maybe beauty and truth are the same thing,” I said.

“That is a matter for philosophers, Peter.”

“Suleiman, you can get power and money in so many ways. Why do you torture and exploit little children?”

“You may be a philosopher, Peter,” he said, leaning forward and speaking quietly and earnestly, “but you are no psychologist. In my game I can only cater for what people want. People are basically jealous and cruel. It is not enough to be rich: someone else must be poor. It is not enough to have pleasure: someone else must have pain. That is why the public pay beggars, yes pay them, to go on begging. And why they pay more if they see them mutilated. And that is why your huge Western charitable organizations pour in money, year after year, to help the poor. They don’t want them to come up to the same level as themselves. They batten on poverty. They are part and parcel of an unjust and exploitative economic system.”

My head was beginning to spin. It was a bit difficult to take all that in at a time.

“They say the devil is a gentleman,” I said.

He laughed and replied, “The devil is in all of us. And God, too. I am no more free to change the world than the meanest sex-slave in my stable. It is as it is, and all you can do is to play the part assigned to you by fate.”

If the entire Cosmos is always in balance, as some mystics say, then Suleiman and I were both part of that balance, together with all the forces we had deployed against each other, reaching to the highest levels of government. I thought of Neils Bohr’s model of the electrons moving at random within an envelope of which the shape was governed by the quantum of energy. Was it all mechanical, or could a soul still stretch out its hand to something transcendental? Was there a Tunnel Effect even for us? Was there One to Whom we could turn? Were there any absolutes left in the post-Russell, post- Picasso, post-Stravinsky world? Not for modern-day sophists. As so often before, I felt alienated from my century. Did I belong to the Nineteenth, or the Twenty-first?

“There is always one free choice, though,” I said.

“What?”

“Honor or dishonor.”

He was thoughtful. Finally he said, “Yes. There you are right.”

He held out his hand. I took it. Because I just could not think of any reason not to. I still can't. And I still can't understand why. Then he was off, twirling his cane, with a last smile at Smasher.

“Who's he?” asked Nancy, bringing my Espresso.

“Oh, just a friend,” I said. I suppose he was too, really, after all's said and done. “My God. I'm so glad we were able to get these kids out of Calcutta.”

“*We* indeed,” said Nancy. “Without me you would have done nothing. All you men ever do is talk, and when anything happens you make such a big fuss.”

I started laughing, and so did Smasher. We were soon rolling about with tears coming down. Nancy went off disgusted. The really funny part of it was that what she said was quite true.