

Section II

Chapter I

Five more winters had been added to the three hundred “years of Jeewan Niwas. The whitewashed walls were a little “more yellow; the mildew a little more widespread over the “lime plaster, the iron gate had begun to corrode with “moisture. But the haveli stood firm as if good for another “hundred years. Inside the haveli life had changed. In these “years Sangram Singhji had died; Bhatianiji had been carried “to the cremation ground a few months after the death of her “mistress. Pari complained a little more of pains and aches, “but her voice was firm as ever and her authority remained “unchallenged. Dhapu had transferred her attention to “Vikram, the baby who was born three months after the “death of his great grandfather. There were no celebrations “this time. The family goddess had been quietly worshipped.

Bhagwat Singhji's wife had not forgotten Lakshmi. In the “beginning, she did all she could to kill the gossip that women “shared with her under the pretext of being concerned. First “she hid the truth by telling everyone that Lakshmi had “unexpectedly been called by her brother who needed her help because his wife was seriously ill. But she was not able to “convince anyone. The news had quickly spread through the “bazaar that Lakshmi had run away from the haveli. Some “said she had fled because the mistress had beaten her for “stealing a silver cup. But no one outside the haveli knew the “real reason. The servants of Jeewan Niwas refused to talk. “This aggravated the inquisitive women who tried every “means to penetrate the secret. When Lakshmi was not seen “around in the gullies, it was rumoured that she had “committed suicide by jumping into a well. There were “others who said that she had run away with the peddler of “old clothes who every three months went to the haveli to buy “old newspapers and whatever else he could get.

But even after five years Bhagwat Singhji's wife never “tired of hoping that one day Lakshmi would come back to “the haveli. Every two months she would send Pari or Khyali “to get news of her whereabouts. After a time Khyali resented “this futile effort on the part of the mistress and even hinted “to her that Lakshmi was leading a life that was not “honourable. But Bhagwat Singhji's wife never believed him. “She had heard that Lakshmi had gone away to her village “but, not being able to face the anger of her relatives, had “come back to the city. Lakshmi's brother had refused to keep “his sister fearing that it would annoy the elders of his family. “No one in his family understood Lakshmi's behaviour.

To “them it was natural that a husband scold his wife. In fact, “they were sure that once she knew that no one was on her “side, she would return to the haveli. But they were proved “wrong. Once Lakshmi knew she was not welcome in her “brother’s home she had returned to Udaipur. She had moved “from Hari, the panwala’s house, to work as a servant in the “house of a tailor in the city. When she was recognized by “someone known to the haveli in the bazaar she would turn “her back and refuse to talk to them. But Bhagwat Singhji’s wife was satisfied to hear that she was in Udaipur and seen “from time to time. She secretly hoped that Lakshmi would “regret the day she foolishly left the haveli and that she would “come back to her, if not to her husband. Five years had passed since Lakshmi had left the haveli.

Geeta felt more at ease. She could now admire the graceful “movements of the women without feeling clumsy herself. “But she had made no friends. The daughters and daughters- “in-law of her age in the other havelis were no companions to “her. With all their bashful glances and their timid ways she “found them shrewd and calculating. They never expressed an “opinion and never revealed their feelings. They seemed like “little canaries in a cage who sang and twittered but seemed “to know no passion. Their large eyes full of yearning and “longing looked dreamily on the world beyond from behind “their veils. Though young, some unknown fear seemed to “have eaten away their natural exuberance. They, followed “the traditions of their families at the bidding of their elders, “but they lacked the same faith or commitment to it. It “seemed to Geeta that they were waiting for the day when “they would be freed from their confinement. But on the “surface they showed no dissatisfaction. In fact, Geeta longed “to feel their placid acceptance of life.

Bhagwat Singhji’s wife complained that she no longer “had the energy to manage the household but she continued “to supervise every detail. She was still the first to be up in the “morning and the last to go to bed. It was she who coaxed “Vijay and her brother Vikram to eat, and it was she who “received women from the havelis.

In spite of herself, Geeta, too, had changed. She had lost “much of her girlish impetuosity; her temper was more “subdued. She had gradually forgotten her own carefree “girlhood, in which there had been uninhibited laughter and “freedom. Though she still kept a little apart, Geeta had become more and more involved in the routine of the household; She accepted the discipline of the haveli without protest. But there were many times when she felt the crushing weight of the walls that shut off the outside world. The chatter of the maids that floated into the courtyard, were amusing distractions, but not sufficient to be really satisfying.

The house was unusually quiet. The mistress of the house “had gone to spend a few

days with her brother's family and "Bhagwat Singhji and his son were on business out of town. "The courtyard was bathed in the soft yellow light of a "wintry moon. The maids huddled in the courtyard verandah "around a twig fire lit in a broken earthenware pot.

Geeta sat on a mat, a shawl wrapped round her shoulders; "her hands were spread over the crackling twigs. She stared at "the little flames that erupted each time a twig was added to "the fire. The flames lit her face but her eyes were remote as if "she was somewhere else, and there was a weariness in her "expression.

'Binniji, it will not be long before it is midnight,' said "Pari concealing a yawn. 'If Kanwarani Sa were here, then "you could have gone to bed. But on the night of the full "moon Lakshmi the goddess of wealth, the giver of all, must "be worshipped,' said Pari in a low earnest voice.

Geeta nodded her head and pulled the slipping shawl "around her shoulders.

'It is not the same without Kanwarani Sa,' said Dhapu "gloomily. 'If she were here, do you think we would be all "gazing at the flames? We would have been talking and "laughing; not even a child would have slept.'

'Binniji is different,' said Pari. 'She is educated; she has "other things to occupy her. Gossip is for those like us who "cannot read or write.' There was a slight trace of sarcasm in "her voice.

'Dhapu is right, Parijiji,' said Geeta ignoring her remarks. "Without Bhabhi the haveli seems quite empty. How much "longer will she be away?'

'The midwife came in the afternoon and said your uncle- "in-law was not well. Kanwarani Sa will have to stay at least "two or three days more,' replied Pari and took out her snuff "box.

It wasn't until the barking of the dogs had died and even "the jackals were silent, that Ganga got up and woke the "women who had fallen asleep in the verandah. The time had "come for lighting the wick that illuminated the face of the "smiling goddess.

The sleepy eyed women walked drowsily to the little "prayer room where the image of the goddess of wealth stood "buried in flowers, fruits and nuts. The incense sticks on the "stand were ready to be lighted.

'Binniji, first put kumkum on the forehead of the "goddess,' whispered Dhapu.

'Now put the coconut,' she said after Geeta had followed "her directions, 'then the fruits and the sweets at her feet.' "After a pause Dhapu added: 'Now light the sacred "lamp.'

Geeta did as she was told. As soon as the silver lamp was “lit, the women joined the palms of their hands and sang the “hymn of the goddess. The sweet smell of incense filled the “tiny room. The worship over, Geeta distributed the conse- “crated fruits and nuts to the women.

'May you always wear red and live to see your great “grandsons,' said Pari in a caressing voice as Geeta bent down “to touch her feet before going up to her room.

The two children slept soundly in their room. Sita as “usual had curled up near Vijay's bed.

Dhapu who had accompanied Geeta waited till she was in “bed, then lay down on the carpet next to the bed.

'Binniji, do you know why Kanwarani Sa is with her “brother?' said Dhapu sitting up in a voice full of mystery. “No, tell me why, that will put me to sleep,' said Geeta “with a smile from under the soft silk quilt.

'Well, if you want to know the truth, I will tell you.' Her “eager voice showed that she was yearning to talk. 'Gopal “Singhji, Kanwarani Sa's brother, is ill but not so seriously “that your mother-in-law has to stay with him,' Dhapu “started. Her lips smacked as if she were relishing the taste of “some hot and spicy food, and then she added: 'You know he “is very rich with lands and lots of gold. The wealth has not “yet been divided and even the rich have to die, whether they “like it or not.' Dhapu paused and took a long breath as if to “get renewed strength to continue talking.

Geeta lifted her head, her curiosity aroused. He has children then what has to be worried about? She asked puzzled.

'Of course, his sons will get the property. Did you think “he would divide it among the servants? But it is not all that “simple,' replied Dhapu edging up to Geeta's bed. 'You have “forgotten that Gopal Singhji has one son from his first wife “and two from his second.'

'And two daughters,' added Geeta.

'Daughters do not get property. They were given their “share of the gold when they got married. They are no “problem,' said Dhapu, dismissing the interruption. 'Now let “me go on, or we will never sleep. When Gopal Singhji's first “wife fell ill, his wife's sister came to nurse her. She was really “wonderful. For a whole month she stayed up nights looking “after her ailing sister. I saw her with my own eyes getting “thinner and thinner every day.'

'Go on, come to the point. How you love embroidering “everything,' said Geeta.

'Don't be impatient.' Then, in a loud whisper, as if what she was about to reveal was highly confidential, she said, “You remember how Bhabha Sa never parted with her small

“tin box, poor thing she didn't have much in it; till the last “she had it under her pillow. Well, Gopal Singhji's wife also “had a small box in which she, too, kept pieces of jewellery “and money. Even when her body was burning with fever, her “hands would go under the mattress and feel the box. Well, “the night she died; the whole family was at her bedside but “when they looked for the box it was not there. It had “vanished.'

'Don't tell me that. I have lived here long enough to know “that not even a piece of halva can go undetected. And you “want me to believe a box full of gold just disappeared. “Didn't everyone run to Arjun, the fortune teller?’ said Geeta “with biting sarcasm.

'There you go again attacking the havelis. Whether you “like us or not, it is here that you have to live and the sooner “you understand us the better,' said Dhapu with a little “giggle. Then as if to calm Geeta she put her hands on the silk “quilt, clearing her throat in preparation to reveal the great “secret known only to her.

'All right, if you must know, I will tell you,' she said “seriously. 'They say that Gopal Singhji's wife's sister stole “the box. I am sure she is keeping the ornaments for her “sister's only son; how wise of her!'

'Who says she stole the box?’ asked Geeta indignantly. “No one really, but everyone hints that it is the sister.

How can one accuse her directly? There is no proof but I “have seen the sly looks women give whenever she wears a “new piece of jewellery.'

'What a bunch of ungrateful hypocrites you are. Talking “always of family love and unity and yet you don't hesitate to “call a poor innocent woman a thief. Anyway, what is Bhabhi “doing in her brother's haveli?'

'She is not taking any chances this time. She is there to see “that everything is divided equally among the three boys, “especially the remaining gold of the family. After all, you “cannot expect a step-mother to be fair. Kanwarani Sa knows “human nature. Her brother is old and she wants everything “partitioned while he is still living. Is that hypocrisy, too?’ “said Dhapu mockingly.

'No, she is quite right. When it comes to gold no one can “be trusted,' said Geeta avidly and turned her back to Dhapu.

Chapter II

The next morning Geeta got up earlier than usual. With “her mother-in-law away, the responsibility of taking out the “daily rations fell on her. As she combed her hair, she heard “Champa's loud voice from Vijay's room.

'Get up, Sita, you spoiled child. Who do you think you “are? The future mistress of Jeewan Niwas, or what, that you “sleep even when Vijay Bai Saheb is up and ready.'

'It is so cold, Bai,' Sita pleaded, snatching the quilt from “the maid's hands. 'Just a few minutes more.'

'Get 'up immediately or I will really give you a slap. What “has come over you? Day by day you are getting worse. Soon “you will be asking to eat from a silver thali, You are no “longer a child. Remember that! Learn to clean and sweep or “even the mistress will have no use for you. Just because Vijay “Bai Saheb plays with you, don't imagine you are her equal.'

Sita got up, rubbing her eyes, rolled up her bedding, “pushed it under Vijay's bed and ran down the stairs. “Champa followed her.

Geeta finished dressing and followed them a few minutes later, to the kitchen. She found that Pari had already taken “out the day's rations, sorted the vegetables, measured the oil “and the ghee in little cups. When the old maid asked her if “what she had taken out was not too much, Geeta's face “flushed with embarrassment. Her mother-in-law did not “have confidence in her judgement as far as the running of the “kitchen was concerned, and this undermined Geeta's “confidence. Besides the maids had been in the haveli for “much longer than she. Therefore, in the role of the young “mistress of the haveli she felt awkward. She was afraid to “instruct or dispute with the maids, especially Pari, who “knew more about managing the kitchen than she did. “Though she had noticed the cook lavishly spreading ghee on “the servants' rotis, she did not have the courage to tell him “that.

Just as Geeta had finished looking over all the provisions “before her on the floor of the kitchen verandah, Vijay came “down tightly holding on to Dhapu's hand. She looked neat “and tidy in her starched blue and white school uniform. She “stood before her mother as if to get her approval.

'Sit down there and drink your milk, or you will again be "late for school,' said Dhapu trying to release her hand from "Vijay's tight grip.

'I will not sit here. I will drink my milk in the other "verandah,' said Vijay defiantly and looked across the "courtyard, to where Sita sat huddled trying to keep herself "warm.

'Sit down at once and don't make a fuss,' said Geeta "firmly.

Vijay was taken aback, no one really spoke to her harshly.

She looked up at Dhapu with her large, moist eyes.

'If children get on your nerves, leave them to me,' said "Dhapu. She picked up Vijay and walked swiftly away from the kitchen. 'Imagine scolding a little child of five for "nothing,' the maid muttered as she left.

A thin smile hovered round Geeta's mouth as she sorted "out the vegetables. The only chance for Geeta to discipline "Vijay was when her mother-in-law was away. But even then "the maid pounced on her if she said anything and imme- "diately accused her of being a heartless mother. But in spite "of all the indulgence the servants showed to her, Vijay knew "the limits to which she could go with her tantrums.

'See what a good girl Bai Saheb is. She has drunk the last "drop of milk,' announced Dhapu a few minutes later "proudly putting the empty glass in front of the young "mistress.

'Stop grinning and go or the car will never reach the "station in time for Kanwar Saheb,' said Geeta.

Dhapu quickly gathered her skirt in her hands and rushed "to get Vijay. She had forgotten that Bhagwat Singhji was "arriving by the morning train from Chitter.

Vijay grabbed Sita's hands and pulled her from behind the "pillar where she stood shivering.

'Come to school with me, Sita, It would be such fun if "you too went to school, at least come with me to the car,' "said Vijay dragging the girl behind her.

'Leave the girl alone, Bai Sa. She already gets into enough "trouble because of you,' said Dhapu sharply.

'If I can go to school, why can't Sita?' Vijay insisted "petulantly, holding on to Sita's cold hands.

Dhapu took Vijay's hand with force and released Sita "from her hold.

Sita went back quietly to her place behind the pillar and "sat down with her head buried between her knees. 'Now what are you sulking for? Get up and wash your face. If you go around with matted hair and a running nose,

Vijay Bai Sa won't play with you,' said Champa shaking the "girl. But Sita kept on sitting and did not move.

The maids scolded Sita, even slapped her at times, but "they loved and cared for her. They hid her in their skirts "when Vijay was in a bad temper, to protect her. It was only "when Sita was difficult, that they reminded her that she was "motherless and ugly and they were not paid to do her work. "In spite of seeming harshness they indulged her. They had "brought her up since the day Lakshmi had walked out of the "haveli and kept a strict eye on her as they did on their own "children, never allowing her to play in the streets.

Vijay found Sita a willing slave. She bullied her, pulled "her hair, but if ever Sita got into a bad mood, Vijay bribed "her with toffees and toys. She preferred her to all the other "children of the haveli.

Pari locked the storeroom, then came and sat down in the kitchen. It was nice and warm inside. 'Parijiji just look at Sita. How stubborn she has become inspite of my telling her to get up she sits there sulking,' said Champa, trying to pull Sita up by the hand.

'Bai, leave me alone. I do not want to wash my face,' "whined the girl and freed her hand from the maid's clasp.

'Do you think I care if you are covered with sores?' "Champa snapped back. 'But when lice crawl in your hair and "your face itches, don't come crying to me. I am fed up with "you.'

'Stop nagging her, Champa. Let the sun grow a little "warmer. Then she will get up. Don't you see she is cold?' "said Geeta, in a stern voice. She was distracted; her mind was "on what Vijay had said as she left for school.

Pari got up to warm her hands over the kitchen fire. Then "when she saw Champa leave in a huff and Sita continued to "sit where she was, she said, 'Binniji, I know you love Sita but she must not be spoiled. After all, she is only a servant's child "and without a mother to care for her. If she gets used to a "soft life, she will suffer later on. Besides she must learn to "obey us, the maids.'

'I suppose you are right, Parijiji,' said Geeta apologetically.

The sight of the huddled girl seemed to put Pari in a "reminiscent mood. With a faraway look in her eyes she said: "Binniji, I will never forget that day five years ago, I can still "hear Kanwar Saheb's deep voice saying, "Get out of my "sight, you rascal, Heeralal, you good for nothing", while "Heeralal stood trembling before him. "You have betrayed "my trust. Heeralal, do you hear me? Get out of this haveli "and never again show your face. Did I bring you up from a "child that you dared to take the honour of an innocent

"woman?" Binniji, you would have seen Kanwar Saheb's "gentle face swept with anger. He could hardly speak, he was "so angry. But Heeralal flung himself at his feet and held "them sobbing. "Forgive me, Andata, Giver of Bread", he "pleaded. "I meant no harm; you can kill me; you can do "what you like with me, but I will never leave the haveli. It is "better you throw me to the vultures than dismiss me from "your service. '"

Pari could say no more. She burst out crying.

Geeta's eyes were also heavy with the unshed tears. She "gulped down the lump in her throat.

'What is the good of crying, Jiji?' said Khyali. 'It is all "over now. Heeralal is not the same man since that day. He "never lifts his eyes when a woman is anywhere near him. He "goes about his work quietly; even with us men he keeps a "distance,' he said reflectively, stirring the lentils on the fire.

'Yes, Khyali, Heeralal has got his punishment, but what "about poor Lakshmi?' sobbed Pari.

'In which world do you women live?' Khyali asked with a sneer. 'Lakshmi is flourishing. I told you I saw her in "Hathipole the other day. I could not recognize her at "first. She has grown so fat. When I tried to speak to her, "she proudly turned her head away. You should have seen "her eyes, seething with hate as she looked at me, but "Kanwarani Sa continues not to believe me when I tell her "that she will never enter the haveli gates again.'

Geeta only half listened to the servants. Her face was "serious and her lips were tightly pressed together. She looked "across the courtyard, her eyes resting a while on the curled up "bundle of flesh on the verandah. Then she sat up erect as if "she no longer could contain her thoughts and said with quiet "authority, 'Parijiji, Sita must go to school.'

Pari stared open mouthed at the young mistress as if "someone had struck the maid on the head. The cook quickly "went inside the kitchen and stirred the dal on the fire.

After the initial shock, Pari pulled herself together and "said decisively, 'Binnijiji, Sita is a child of a servant. She "cannot go to school.'

Geeta looked at the maid defiantly. Her voice quivered "with anger as she said, 'Vijay goes to school and you do not "object. Why shouldn't Sita?'

'Vijay Bai Sa, God bless her, is the daughter of this haveli.

How dare anyone point a finger at her? She has the ". protection of wealth and family. What does Sita have? She "must be protected from the outside world. Binniji, you do "not yet know Udaipur and its customs. Sita has to marry. "Leave her to us, the servants. We know what is best for her.' "Pari spoke with unusual bluntness.

Geeta felt outraged at the maid's accusation. Her eyes “flashed in challenge, but she controlled her natural impulse “to answer back.

Seeing Geeta silent, Pari said, 'Binniji, don't be upset; “there are other ways of helping Sita. You can give her a big dowry and so help her to get a good husband.' Pari's voice “was gentle. Then she added softly, 'Binniji, a girl who has to “live in the village must be sturdy. She cannot be pampered. “Her limbs must be strong to pull water from the well, to “plough the fields, collect the cow dung. As it is, Sita is lazy. “You send her to school and she will begin to think she is a “little lady.'

'The girl already loves to play with the boys in the streets.

Once she has no one to keep her in check, she will be up to all “kinds of mischief. Who will be responsible? Not me. I have “enough trouble with her as it is, she already thinks I am “nobody,' said Champa with a sense of grievance.

Just as Geeta was about to get up, the sound of the horn “from the .gate was heard. The maids fled in various “directions. The arrival of the master of the haveli was always “a sign for the maids to stop talking and get on with their “work. The cook took the lentils off the fire and put a big pot “of water to boil for the master's bath. There was instant “activity in the courtyard.

Geeta straightened her sari and pulled it over her face as “Gokulji entered the kitchen verandah.

'Hukkum, Kanwar Sa will be ready for his food in half an “hour,' he said to Geeta with deference.

Pari got up. Her limbs seemed no lon

Bombay, "her father was always ready to answer any of his children's "questions no matter how busy he was. Then she thought of "the day when she got married. How her mother had stood at "the door fighting back the tears that clouded her eyes, but "had managed to say to Ajay, 'Take good care of my child. "She is very precious to us. Do not be impatient with her if "you find her too outspoken.' Two big round tears dropped "on Geeta's cheeks. The room seemed to suffocate her. She "felt trapped in the haveli, with its tradition and its "unchanging patterns. She thought of the big gilt-framed "portraits in the men's apartments. Six generations of the "family looking down on her; each face reflecting the "confidence of his lineage.

Geeta said to herself, 'What if I cannot trace my ancestry "beyond my grandfather? That is no reason why I should "surrender;' She was filled with rebellion and her face "stiffened. She was determined not to be crushed by the "haveli.

The verandah outside was filled with the sound of "women. Sarju, the midwife, had come especially to bring "news about Gopal Singhji's health.

Dhapu came into the room, looked at Geeta's sad face "and said gently, 'Binniji, do not be so upset.' She sat down "on the edge of the mattress before continuing to talk. 'Are "you really serious about sending Sita to school? Then I will "tell you how to go about it. You should never have blurted out what was in your mind, especially to Parijiji. How often "I have cautioned you! But never mind. It is still not too late "to get your way.'

Geeta gave her a dry, uninterested smile.

'Binniji, your father-in-law is a big man with a big heart. Suggest it to him. He is afraid of no one. You are fortunate "that Kanwarani Sa is not here. After what Lakshmi did, he "will not take any risks with her child.'

'How do you think I can get permission from Kanwar Sa "when I cannot talk to him?' said Geeta impatiently.

'In the past that has not prevented you from making "known your wishes. Do you forget when you wanted to go "to your parents' house and Kanwarani Sa refused because it "was Diwali? Well then, think who conveyed your wishes to "him,' said Dhapu, her eyes sparkling. 'Now listen carefully. "While Kanwar Sa is having his food, I will tell him you want "to ask his advice. Then you tell me what is on your mind and "I will convey it to him just like the last time. Kanwar Sa will "take the right decision. Now smile, no more frowns,' said "Dhapu with satisfaction as she and Geeta got up.

Dhapu straightened the sheet over the mattress, pulled the "curtains aside and went out of the room with Geeta. Gokul "had already announced to the cook that the master was "ready to eat.

Bhagwat Singhji came into the women's courtyard. He “wore a white starched shirt over loose white pants. His tall, “erect body was wrapped in a grey shawl. Geeta stood behind “the maids and with them bent low with folded hands and “touched the ground in front of him. There was a natural “simple elegance in the man that commanded respect. A “wonderful calm seemed to radiate from his reserved “personality. In his presence people were subdued. There was “an aloof reticence in his bearing that did not permit “frivolity.

He talked a while to the maids, enquiring about their “children, and then went into the women's sitting room. “While he talked Dhapu nudged Geeta; she understood that “she should go into the adjoining room, and wait there.

Gokul put a small lacquered stool in front of him. Pari sat “on the floor at a little distance from him, her sari drawn over “her face. Gokul brought in the silver thali and placed it on “the stool. Pari looked into the contents of each cup to make “sure that the cook had put enough ghee in the vegetables.

'The food is not as good, Hukkum, as when Kanwarani “Sa is here to supervise,' said Pari humbly.

'There is too much, Pari. I cannot possibly eat all this,' “said Bhagwat Singhji, taking out a cup from the thali and “putting it on another stool.

'This is not too much, Hukkum. Binniji has personally “seen to the cooking; you must taste a little of everything,' “said Pari, putting the cup back in the thali.

'How is Binniji?'

'She is well, Hukkum.'

Bhagwat Singhji ate while Pari talked. She told him “about his brother-in-law's health and how things were in “other havelis. She told him that the accountant of Jeewan “Niwas had had a son. Bhagwat Singhji listened attentively. “He depended on Pari to keep him informed about his “obligations to other havelis.

'Pari, I hope Binniji does not feel lonely. This is a big “house and it can be depressing at times especially for “someone like her. This time both her mother-in-law and “Ajay are away. I hope you are taking good care of her.' There “was deep concern in his voice as he spoke. A great surge of “affection flooded Geeta's being as she heard the words from “behind the door. She longed to express her feelings of love “and appreciation to her father-in-law, but then the old “despair damped her emotions. She hated the etiquette that prevented a daughter-in-law from talking freely to her “father-in-law. 'Even after seven years I am a stranger to “those that are mine, and I will always remain a stranger,' she “thought hopelessly.

'No, Pari, I cannot eat another roti. I can no longer digest "all this rich food. You forget, I am getting old,' said "Bhagwat Singhji with a smile.

Dhapu had come and sat with Geeta after she had helped "Khyali in the kitchen. This was the moment to speak. "Bhagwat Singhji was about to get up.

'Hukkurn, Binniji wants to ask your advice,' said Dhapu "in a supplicating voice, dragging herself nearer the half-open "door.

Bhagwat Singhji pushed the stool away and waited for "the maid to continue.

'Hukkum, Binniji wants to ask you whether Sita should "go to school.'

Bhagwat Singhji looked at Pari who sat in front of him "with a wooden expression on her face, as if she were not "concerned. It was not for her to interfere when family "members talked.

Then, after a minute of silence, he leaned forward and "said, 'Education is a good thing. I know it is not the custom "in Udaipur to send girls to school. People are afraid of "marrying educated girls. But times are changing, Pari,' he "said, looking at her intently. 'After all, it is better to be in "school than play in the streets.' Then, as an afterthought he "added, 'We must think this out carefully. It is an important "decision to take. We must not do anything in haste,' "Bhagwat Singhji said getting up, 'Sita is our responsibility.'

Geeta stood aside until her father-in-law left the court- "yard. Her eyes were smarting with the unshed tears of love "and gratitude. There was such goodness hidden behind his "austere formality.

'What did I tell you?' Dhapu turned to her and triumph- "antly continued, 'I warned you the first day you came to the "haveli, "Never get into an argument with the women in the "haveli." We are all mean. The men are generous and "understanding. They look beyond our little world. Come "now and be happy. I left my laddoo half finished; seeing your "sad face, I could not bear to eat it,' she said with a broad "grin.

'Bai, but Bhabhi will be furious with me,' said Geeta in a "small, timid voice.

'Why should she be furious? You have not stolen gold, "have you? She will not be happy, that is for sure. She will "immediately think of the extra expense, but don't let that "worry you. That is her habit. One cannot change one's "nature,' said Dhapu philosophically.

Geeta walked across the courtyard to go to her room not "quite convinced with Dhapu's assurances. She also felt "apprehensive about Pari and what she would think of her.

The courtyard was quiet. There was no chatter in the "verandah. Sarju had left. It was only around Bhagwat "Singhji's wife that the maids and their children all clustered.

Chapter III

The rooms in the haveli were difficult to keep warm. They “were either too big and airy or too small, damp and dingy. “Geeta had opened the tiny windows in her room to let in the “fresh air and the ra

'What a terrible mistake I have made,' said Geeta to "herself. The screams from the next room became louder, but "Geeta absent-mindedly continued to twist the strands of her "hair. She did not hear the door creak open.

'Binniji,' said Champa with deference, 'Pariji says it is "time we left for Gopal Singhji's haveli.'

Geeta was instantly brought back to reality. In her day "dreaming she had completely forgotten that she had to visit her mother-in-law. She hurriedly plaited her hair, while "Champa took out a starched green sari from the cupboard "and unfolded it for her.

'Bhabhi, when will sita go to school?' asked Vijay "bursting into the room. Her brother stood beside her "smiling. Geeta did not answer her. She continued pleating "her sari.

'Bhabhi!' shouted Vijay. 'When will Sita go to school?' "When she got no answer, she stamped out of the room in "anger.

Geeta found Pari in her usual corner in the kitchen "verandah hugging her threadbare shawl around her should- "ers. 'May you live in your husband's shadow for a hundred "years,' she said when Geeta touched her feet. There was no "rancour in her voice, no change of expression in her kind eyes "as they looked over Geeta's clothes.

She got up slowly. Her hands trembled a little as she "straightened a pleat or two of Geeta's green sari. Then she "fondly drew the sari over her young mistress's face. 'Come, "let us go now,' she said.

The car moved slowly, the street was narrow and filled "with people. Gopal Singhji's haveli was at the far end of "the walled city and to go there one had to take the main "road that passed through the city bazaar. The busy scene "diverted Geeta's thoughts from Sita. She could hear the lusty "shouts of a peddler as he pushed his cart and rang a small "bell.

'New brass or old. Come before it is too late.'

Heeralal pressed the horn but the man kept going in the "middle of the road shouting, 'Bring your broken vessels, "change them for new.' The car had to come to a crawl till the "man turned into a side street.

At the corner of the gully, the balloon man yelled, 'Come, "little ones, poor and rich, come one and all and make your choice. Balloons of all colours. For few annas only. Come. I will not wait forever.

The streets were a tangle of bicycles, rickshaws, bullock "carts, tongas and, of course, pedestrians, each threading his "way through the congestion as if everyone else were an "intruder.

Geeta's eyes fell on the village women carrying their "baskets of vegetables on their heads and their faces un- "covered. Tall and slender, their arms covered with lacquered "bangles and their legs jingling with silver anklets, they "tripped nimbly along, undeterred by the confusion and jostle "of the road. Their heavy skirts swayed as they shouted, "Eight annas a kilo, new onions, just eight annas a kilo. "Sweet corn fresh from the field, four annas a kilo. Beans and "cauliflower, six annas a kilo.'

In the distance Geeta could also see the pavement barbers "shaving customers, cobblers hammering the leather soles of "shoes, little boys soliciting passers-by to have their shoes "polished.

The car passed the tonga stand where in the midst of "puddles of urine the horses munched away blades of green "grass. A bullock cart forced Heeralal to change into a lower "gear and stop. The cart-man prodded the ribs of his oxen "with a short stick. He called them names, and pulled their "tails, but the oxen moved out of the way in their own time.

In the cloth shops there were bright green, red and orange "saris fluttering gently as they hung through rings from the ". ceiling. Men and women sitting on wooden stools outside "the shops were bargaining with the shopkeepers.

As the car slowed down Geeta saw the eager faces of "shoppers staring at the car, and she envied their freedom. "They were free to choose saris from a hundred different "shades and designs, but she could select only from the bundle "that the accountant brought to the house. Geeta watched some children pushing their way through the crowd around "the peanut vendor, and she yearned to join the happy boys "and girls.

Heeralal had driven in the streets of Udaipur for thirty "years and knew all the hazards of the gullies. He was "accustomed to the little children who sat on the edge of the "drains and eased themselves and then darted across the "street. He was never surprised; and he never lost his patience "with the vendors who ignored the horn of the car. He sat "relaxed behind the wheel and recognized many of the "pedestrians with a nod of his head.

As the car approached the clock tower in the centre of the "city, Heeralal pointed to a shop and said it belonged to the "haveli goldsmith. Geeta had seen jewellery made by him, but "never seen his shop. Further down the street were the little "stalls of the silversmiths and money changers. Pyramids of "rupees, annas and four anna pieces were neatly arranged in "front of them. These stalls were always crowded with "visiting villagers coming into town. The village women "wore red saris, printed saris and skirts, and the underfed "half-naked children clung to their mothers.

The village men stared at the scales that weighed the silver "bangles they wanted to buy. The women's faces beamed as "they held the bracelets in their hands.

Geeta noticed how the eyes of these women sparkled with “joy, whereas the women of the haveli always looked at their “gold with greedy eyes. For them their jewels were something “to hoard, to think about. They were never satisfied because “there was always someone in another haveli who had more “than they. Geeta envied the village women who walked “proudly away from the shops with little bundles tucked “under their arms and the newly purchased bracelets on their “wrists.

The scenes in the bazaar were so fascinating that she wished the drive would go on forever, that time could be “suspended so that meeting her in-laws would be indefinitely “postponed. Women behind thick walls had none of the “exuberance of the women in the streets. They were like “dressed-up dolls kept in a glass case for a marionette “show.

The car turned abruptly into a narrow gully; the noise of “the bazaar faded away. Heeralal changed gears again. There “was just room for one car. Even the cyclists had to dismount. “The pedestrians walked in single file almost touching the “car. The open drains on either side of the street were full of “stagnant yellow slush. The continuous row of connected “houses behind the drains were in varying degrees of despair. “Some had broken doors, others had large patches of peeled- “off plaster on the walls. The unpaved road was littered with “rubbish that women threw from their windows. Cows “roamed carelessly, smelling the rubbish heaps and moved “only when the car stopped in front of them.

Geeta was not aware that the traffic had diminished and “the car had passed the private temple of Gopal Singhji’s “haveli. Her mind was still enthralled by the lovely street “scenes and her own thoughts when the car came to a gentle “halt.

‘Binniji, be careful as you walk. Don’t trip over the “stones,’ said Pari opening the door of the car.

The two maids walked on either side of Geeta, No one “spoke. Women of the upper classes did not talk in the streets. “The three women avoided the little heaps of cow dung that “lined the gully. They went round the puddles of urine, “holding their noses, to avoid inhaling its odour. The strong “offensive smell followed them till they reached the huge “carved wooden door of Gopal Singhji’s haveli.

In the days of feudal glory, elephants carried their masters “through the gate to dismount inside the vast open courtyard.

Now only stray cows and dogs hung around the solid walls. “There was a musty smell of decaying hay that came from the “cowsheds in the far corner of the courtyard outside. The “women entered the haveli from a side gate to avoid walking “round the haveli to the main entrance.

The old retainers of the haveli welcomed Geeta and the “maids. Pari sat down on the

verandah with them, panting a “little. She had not the strength to climb the steps leading to “the women’s apartments.

Geeta entered the bare rectangular room which was full of “women, but they talked in hushed voices, so unlike them.

‘Gopal Singhji must be seriously ill,’ thought Geeta, as “she bent down to touch the feet of her mother-in-law who “sat with her elder relatives. Geeta sat down next to her and “in a whisper asked, ‘Bhabhi, how is Mama Sa?’

‘He is as well as he can be at his age. The astrologer says “the next two days are bad for him. After that the stars “combine favourably. We will see,’ Bhagwat Singhii’s wife “said in a grave voice. Then she drew a deep breath and asked, “‘How have things been in the have? I hope you saw how “much ghee was taken out. Khyali cannot be trusted. He will “give rotis to anyone who is around if no one is watching. “These days no one can afford waste.’

‘You are right, Kaki Sa, these days no one can be trusted,’ “repeated a woman on her other side, nodding her head in “agreement. ‘You know the other day a thali full of milk “sweets just disappeared. But I dared not say a word to the “servants. Their heads are swollen; they know we are “dependent on them. The days when servants behaved as “servants are over. They are so rude and insolent now,’ the “woman continued in a mournful voice.

Geeta lifted her head, relieved that nothing was seriously “wrong with her uncle-in-law. She looked slyly through the “muslin sari to see if anyone of her age were nearby. It was difficult to be sure who was who. With their heads bent and “their faces covered, everyone looked alike. She wanted to “be as far away as possible from her mother-in-law. Geeta knew “that by now she must have heard about her confrontation “with Pari and it was only a matter of time when she would “talk to her. She did not want to be scolded in front of others.

Finally, Geeta recognized a few familiar faces through “their thin rainbow-coloured veils and at the first oppor- “tunity she shuffled across to them.

‘Why did you go and sit with all the elderly women?’ said “one of the girls, as Geeta joined them.

‘What else could I do? My mother-in-law was there,’ said “Geeta in a low voice.

‘At last you have understood our etiquette; remember “how you used to jeer at us for not talking to you in the “presence of the elders,’ said the girl nudging Geeta.

‘I wonder when we will be allowed to leave,’ said another “girl yawning. ‘I have been

here since early morning and now “the children must be back from school. I came here thinking “we would leave after half an hour but, as usual, my mother “in-law is enjoying herself talking, so I may as well forget the “children.'

'Is Gopal Singhji Mama Sa really ill?' asked Geeta “intrigued that no one talked about his health, and yet it was “because of him that they were all there.

'Sh ... sh ... you must not ask these awkward questions. “Of course he is ill.' She leaned forward a little and smiled.

It did seem a little strange to Geeta to have everyone “gather when the patient's condition was not serious. But no “one seemed to mind leaving their houses so early in the day “to sit chatting. The lady of the house moved among her “guests accepting their solace with a sigh.

'When did you come? I did not see you come in. My eyes “are getting worse every day.' Geeta heard the heavy monotonous voice of her aunt-in-law, Nandu Bua Sa, behind her. The young girls immediately lowered their heads coyly.

Nandu Bua Sa was Bhagwat Singhji's sister. She was thin “and stern looking. Her face bore an expression of chronic “disapproval. Her mouth was always caught in a pout and her “lips twitched nervously. Her eyes constantly darted around “from face to face trying to fathom their meaning. But, at “heart, Geeta had learned that she was warm and loving. She “had lost her husband only two years earlier. Before she “became a widow she was known for her love of jewels and “bright colours. Geeta had always felt a little under-dressed “in her aunt-in-law's presence. She used to carry her jewels “with pride and her satin skirts with an elegance that many “half her age were unable to do. Even now her black sari was always starched and ironed.

'Binniji, when will I eat food cooked by your hands?' she “said, lifting just a little of Geeta's sari to see her face. Geeta “demurely lowered her head.

'Looking at you now child, who could say you were not “one of us? You have become a real Rajasthani,' her aunt-in-law said fondly and with pride. 'But why have you become “so dark? You were fairer when you came. What troubles you “that you look like this? You are the only daughter-in-law “and that too with a mother-in-law who is a jewel. What “more can one ask for?'

'Yes, everything in the haveli is yours and God has also “given you a son and by his grace you will have many more,' “said another woman.

'Binniji, come closer,' said Nandu Bua Sa. Her voice “dropped to a confidential whisper. 'Is it true that you are “sending Sita to school?'

'Who is Binniji to make such decisions?' retorted Bhagwat "Singhji's wife. She moved up closer as she said stiffly: 'My husband has been thinking for some time of sending the "servants' children to school, even the girls. You know as well "as I do that havelis can no longer give employment to the "servants' children. Times have changed. It is our duty to "prepare them for the future.' She talked rapidly as if to cover "up something distasteful. She did not want anyone to think "that Geeta had become bold enough to take decisions on her "own without consulting her.

'You are right. Who can feed servants and their children "today? In the old days the servants were satisfied with lentils "and dry rotis, but today they want ghee on their rotis and "sugar in their tea. They forget that havelis now have no "money,' said a woman, nodding her head in agreement.

Geeta sat with her head bent low as she listened. She felt "cold though the room was warm. All these old women "shared a common past; they had all tasted-some more "some less-the grandeur of feudal glory. They worshipped "the Maharanas of old and were forever living in the past. "They never forgot that their prosperity, their haveli, their "gold, were all due to their beloved Maharanas, and deeply "regretted their eclipse. They had confidence born out of "hundreds of years of unbroken tradition. They never faltered "or hesitated. If ever in doubt, they consulted the astrologer. "Life, with all its suffering, was never unbearable. They "shared each other's joys and wept together in sorrow. They "were strong and even ruthless when it came to upholding "family customs and ties. Tradition was like a fortress "protecting them from the outside world, giving them "security and a sense of superiority.

Geeta felt an outsider, an onlooker. She could never share "their past. But Geeta, over the years, had come to appreciate "their tradition though she could not regret the passing of an "era.

The room was becoming stuffy. The women were moving restlessly. Geeta longed for some fresh air but she dared not "get up as she was encircled by too many elderly in-laws.

'Binniji, come out on the terrace with me. I feel a little "unwell,' said Manji Bua Sa, a cousin of Bhagwat Singhji, "She was in her early sixties but her skin was smooth and "unwrinkled. Each feature in her face was beautifully "proportioned. Her chiselled nose was as finely shaped as her "mouth. Her walk was stately as if she never had to bend to "anyone's wishes. Though she gave the impression of being "aloof, her innate tenderness drew people to her. At first "Geeta had been impressed with her cousin-in-law's beauty "and dignity only; but when she came to know her better, "Geeta loved her for her compassionate understanding of "other people's problems.

On the terrace the sun was pleasantly warm. Little “sparrows twittered on the edge of the latticed wall and then “flew away. Geeta felt revived by the cold air. She wanted to “pull back the sari from her face and inhale the fresh, clean “air, but she knew she could not in the presence of her “cousin-in-law. Instead, she leaned against the wall, her sari “fluttering over her face.

'I am glad you are bringing new ideas into the haveli,' said “Manji with a directness that made Geeta feel at once at ease. “I do not know, Bua Sa, whether it is right to disturb the “life within the haveli.' Geeta replied without hesitation.

'Do not be afraid. It is time things changed. Once we, the “old, are dead, the havelis will no longer survive. It is no good “living on in the past; for the sake of our children, we must “look to the future.'

'But I don't know whether that is so for the poor,' Geeta “mused. 'Perhaps it is better to leave them alone to carry on as “they have always done. They stand together in their poverty. “Education could even be harmful if it separated them from “one another.'

'Can education harm anyone, child?' asked Manji. 'Our “sacred writings say that to educate the poor is the highest “form of charity. If Sita can learn to read and write, she will “never feel helpless.'

A slight shadow of regret fell on Manji's calm face. She “brushed it off with a shake of her head and then said in a “solemn matter-of-fact voice, 'Binniji, I have been a widow “since the age of fourteen. I know what it is to be illiterate; “the days and nights have been long for me. Do not look like “that at me. No one is to blame for this. When I was a girl, we “were not allowed out of the inner courtyard after the age of “seven. There was no question of going to school. But time “have changed and even the thick walls of the havelis are “crumbling.' Geeta watched her face through her green “muslin sari. 'Our men cannot continue to live off the land “any more. They will leave the havelis, so their women be prepared to face the world.'

As she spoke, her eyes became abnormally large. The years “of suffering welled out simply and naturally. Her voice was “clear. Her face wore no mask. It was a sad face, an “unforgettable face, but a face so proud that it did not ask for “pity.

'How did you pass these many years?' asked Geeta after a “little while. She had always wanted to know more about her “cousin-in-law's life.

'Yes, I almost a child widow, but remember not without “a family. My in-laws were wonderful people. You should “know that. We have the same ancestors.' She smiled. 'I lost “my husband in the same year his brother lost his wife. So I “brought up his two children. They became mine. Of course, “I have not known many of the pleasures of life,'

she sighed. “, As a young girl I could not understand why I was forbidden “to wear jewellery and coloured saris like the other women. “A widow's presence on religious occasions was considered inauspicious. That hurt me most; I loved the gaiety that goes “with our festivals. But later on I understood. No one was to “blame for that, it was the custom in Udaipur. It was my fate “to be a widow in this life. I had to learn to accept that. All of “us have to pay for our past actions. Who knows what sins I “must have committed to have lost my husband? Still, I have “had compensations. My nephews love me like a mother. “Binniji, I do not need to be pitied. A widow has her place too “in our society; do not forget. These women, our relatives you “see here, feel responsible for me.' A thin smile parted her “lips. 'But the children are grown up now and they will leave “one day. If I could read and write, I would not feel so lonely. “Once they are gone, time will hang heavily on my hands. “No, you must send Sita to school, even if it means a little “inconvenience to you,' she said with renewed force in her voice.

Geeta stood silent, too moved to say anything. She did “not notice her mother-in-law come out on the terrace. “Manji, I thought you had left when I did not see you,' “said Bhagwat Singhji's wife casually.

'It was getting hot and stuffy inside so we came out here “to have a little fresh air,' replied Manji, smiling.

'What have you both been talking about?' asked Geeta's “mother-in-law, lifting a little of her sari from her face. “Oh, nothing special. I was telling Binniji about my life.' “I hope you told her that once a girl is married, her home is “where her husband is, whatever happens,' said Bhagwat “Singhji's wife. She never missed an occasion to bring home “to Geeta that her first and in fact only duty was to serve her “husband's family.

'There, your mother-in-law is right,' said Manji, tenderly “looking at Geeta, who stood fidgeting uneasily.

'In order to become one with the family, one must first “learn to listen to one's elders,' said Bhagwat Singhji's wife, “stiffening up her body and looking a little forbidding. Then, after a moment of silence, she said, 'Just imagine sending “Sita to school now, just when she is getting to be useful in “the house. But Binniji thinks that I am old and foolish. Well, “I may be that, but I do know that once a girl has gone to “school she will never take a broom in her hand. I have my “maids, Binniji. They will never leave me. But I was thinking “of your comfort. You have a long life ahead of you. Si!a “would be a perfect maid for you. I would marry her to one of “the servants' boys and both of them could serve you But not “if she goes to school.'

'Kaki Sa, you may be right but we should not be selfish if “we can help the poor to improve their lot,' said Manji, “firmly.

'But you will agree with me that Binniji should have "asked my permission first before doing anything?' Bhagwat "Singhji's wife insisted.

'There you are completely right, but we all make "mistakes. You must forgive Binniji this time. She won't do "it again,' said Manji with an indulgent smile.

Bhagwat Singhji's wife noticed that some of the women "in the room had already started making their gestures of "farewell. She would have liked to continue talking but she "knew she had to be with her sister-in-law when the guests "left. Geeta followed her mother-in-law and Manji inside.

Nandu, seeing the three women enter, left the women she "was talking to and went over to Bhagwat Singhji's wife; she "tapped her lightly on the shoulder, and took her aside. "How did you manage to get your brother to divide the "property so quickly and so fairly among the three sons?' she "asked admiringly.

'I did nothing. It was all done according to the wishes of "my brother. He did not want the name of his haveli to be "tarnished after his death. You know how many of the "havelis have disgraced themselves with property disputes.

He wanted everything clear and on paper while he was still "alive,' replied Bhagwat Singhji's wife, trying to sound "convincing.

Nandu did not wish to contradict her, although she knew "that it had taken Bhagwat Singhji's wife three days to "convince her brother that his son from his first wife must be "treated equally with his other sons. She had also heard that "strong words had been exchanged between the two sisters- "in-law. Nandu would have liked to probe a little deeper, but "women came up to Bhagwat Singhji's wife before leaving to "urge her not to worry, that her brother would soon recover.

When distant relatives had gone and only Manji and "Nandu were left, Bhagwat Singhji's wife got up and said "with a great show of reluctance to her sister-in-law, 'I hate "to leave you alone, but if I don't go today, then I can't for "the next three days for they are not auspicious. But don't "worry. I will come again. Keep the butter lamp burning in "front of the goddess. I have already told the accountant to "give the priest a hundred rupees to propitiate the planet "Jupiter.' Bhagwar Singhji's sister-in-law lowered her head in gratitude and silently bent down to touch her sister-in-law's "feet.

Chapter IV

Bhagwat Singhji's wife waited to get home before saying "anything to Geeta. She had got all the details of what had "transpired between Geeta and her father-in-law. Pari told "her, as she changed her sari, how she had dared to contradict "the young mistress, but then once Kanwar Sa got interested, "she had kept quiet. While Pari talked to the mistress in her room, Bhagwat "Singhji's wife planned how to meet the situation. She knew "no purpose would be served if she directly confronted her "husband. She decided the best way to influence him was "through the trusted family accountant.

Bhagwat Singhji's wife called him to the inner apart- "ments and urged him to tell her husband that to send Sita to "school was not right. A small, shrewd man, whose father "and grandfathers had served the family, the accountant. had "already made up his mind to caution the master against such "a step. When the mistress spoke to him, he readily agreed "with her. He was not afraid to advise Bhagwat Singhji when "it came to upholding the name of the haveli. But he waited to be summoned by Bhagwat Singhji rather than ask for an appointment.

Two days later, after the accountant had finished reading "out the monthly accounts of the haveli, Bhagwat Singhji "told him to look for an appropriate school for Sita. The "accountant rubbed his hands nervously and then meekly "said that such an act on the part of the master would be "resented by the other servants. He pointed out that there "were other servants who had served the haveli longer than "Gangaramji, that Dhapu and Ganga had children too. "Bhagwat Singhji listened attentively and then reminded "him that all the servants had been given land by his father, "that Dhapu's children had been given in marriage by the "mistress and that her husband, in addition, had been given "three acres of irrigated land by him. The accountant nodded "his head but kept looking at the ground. This was his way of "showing disagreement. It was a fact that Bhagwat Singhji "had given generously to all his servants and provided long- "term security for them. The reasoning of Bhagwat Singhji "could not be disputed by the accountant, but he still was "not completely convinced. But he knew his master well "enough to realize that nothing he said would change his "mind. He had decided to take a calculated risk in permitting "Sita to go to school and he, therefore, had to follow his "instructions.

For a week, he had gone from school to school in the city "but there was always

something that did not meet with his “approval. At last he found a private school run by a charity “organization that seemed right for Sita. The fees were a little “high but he knew that his master would not hold that “against it. He registered Sita's name and completed all the “formalities. But the mistress still refused to let Sita join “immediately. An auspicious day had to be found. The family astrologer was consulted and the day that Sita could “go to school fell a week later.

The courtyard was filled with the sweet smell of incense that “morning. Special prayers had to be offered to the image of “the goddess of learning before Sita could start. An oil lamp “flickered at her feet. The women of the haveli, the “neighbours and their children came, touched the ground “with their foreheads, and muttered a prayer before leaving to “do their early morning chores. Afterwards Champa watched the sky and only when she was convinced that letting Sita sleep longer would be “imprudent, she shook the girl awake.

Sita got up without protest. She knew it was the day “when she was to start school. From the day she had been “registered in school, Sita had gone about the haveli like a lost “child. The maids let her do as she pleased. The mistress gave “her money for salted peanuts; but nothing brought a smile “on her face. She even refused to play with Vikram, whom she “loved to push around in his little green car. So when Champa “woke her up, she followed Champa silently, as if she was in a “dream, and sat down on the edge of the verandah near the “tap.

Champa took a handful of cold water in her hand and “splashed it on Sita's face. The sting of the icy water brought “the child back to life.

She turned her wet face to the maid and in a little, timid “voice asked, 'Bai, will the teachers beat me in school?'

'Of course not!' replied Champa firmly. 'Do you think “teachers are paid a hundred rupees a month to beat girls? I “could do that,' she said, swallowing the lump that rose in “her throat. 'Come, wipe your face and I will oil and plait “your hair. You cannot have your hair flying all over your “face.' Champa's voice was full of tenderness.

Sita sat down meekly, her head bent low. Champa put oil “in her hair, massaged a little, and then combed out the “knots.

'What has happened to your voice, little squirrel?' said “Champa, no longer able to bear the silence. 'Now that you “will need your voice, you have lost it,' she said affectionately “patting the girl on the back.

'Bai, who will give me my roti for lunch?' asked Sita “timidly.

Champa covered her mouth with her hands to swallow “the sob that she could no

longer contain. Then when the “little girl turned her face and looked at her for an answer, she “said with a tinge of tender reproach, 'Do not think you can “fool me with those big eyes of yours. Do you think I have “forgotten your loud cries when the dal was salty or when the “roti was slightly burnt? This is the first time in all your seven “years that you have sat still and allowed me to comb your “hair. Have you forgotten all the slaps I have had to give you, “little mouse?’

But Sita sat cross-legged and continued to look at the “maid, with imploring eyes brimming over with tears.

'I suppose you eat when the others eat. How should “I know, child, what happens in school? I have, never been “to one.' A big tear fell on Sita's cheek. Champa wiped it “off with her sari and said softly, 'Do not cry in front of “the girls or they will know you are afraid and will bully “you. From now on, you are on your own and you must be “strong. Come, let me help you put on this old dress of Vijay “Bai Sa.'

'Sita, oh Sita! Come and drink your tea,' shouted Ganga “from the kitchen. 'The goddess alone knows when the poor “girl will again get anything to eat,' muttered the maid as she “stirred the luke warm tea with her finger.

Sita, small and defenceless, stood at the door of the kitchen. Her teeth were clamped tight with fear, her eyes “were moist with unshed tears.

'Sit down and drink the tea, and eat this roti. I have “especially made it nice and crisp,' said Ganga, looking “pityingly at the small body standing in front of her. 'Hurry, “or you will be late.'

'Now remember not to fight with anyone like you do “here. Those teachers cannot be trusted. You just do as they “tell you and you will be all right.'

Sita stared at the cup in front of her as if she were afraid to “touch it. Her face was smudged with dried tears. Ganga “pulled her down gently and then broke a piece of roti and dipped it in the tea.

'Open your mouth,' she said lovingly. Sita opened her “mouth and closed it to swallow as if she were a mechanical “toy.

'Do not worry, child,' said Ganga stroking Sita's smooth “oily hair. 'In a few hours you will be back home and then “you can tell us all about the girls in school.'

'Bai, I cannot eat any more. I am not hungry,' said Sita “gulping down the roti with a sip of tea.

'Finish the roti,' coaxed Ganga wiping her nose. 'On an “empty stomach you won't

be able to remember what the “teacher says. Your stomach will growl and the girls will “laugh. So eat, there is only half the roti left.'

Sita finished the roti, then wiped her mouth with the back “of her hand and went and sat in her usual place behind the “pillar in the verandah, her head buried in between her knees.

Dhapu came running down the stairs, her teeth chatter- “ing, and her sari closely wrapped round her body, and went “into the warm kitchen.

'Where is our little schoolgirl?' she said cheerfully. “Leave the poor child alone,' said the cook as he poured “milk into a silver glass. 'Just look at her sitting there. She has not opened her mouth the whole morning. Even a man's “heart would melt looking at her face. Does Binniji think just “because we are servants she can do as she pleases with our “children? Let her try and send a daughter of mine to school “and see. Yes, you can do what you like with boys but to “expose a girl to the world! Never!'

'Sh! Do not talk so loudly. As it is, Binniji is sorry she ever “suggested school for Sita,' said Dhapu putting her fingers to “her lips.

'She should be sorry. All this would never have happened “if Gangaram were not spineless. It is easy to beat one's wife “but to stand up to the mistress requires real guts. He works “like a donkey and never looks at his only child.'

'What need has he to look at his child, when we are here?

Do you think we neglect her?' said Dhapu in a sharp “indignant voice.

'Look at that sorrowful bundle of flesh and then talk,' “replied the cook with sarcasm.

'Sita, Sita, where are you? Are you ready for school?' “shouted Vijay excitedly, from the top of the stairs.

She ran down the stairs and then across the courtyard and “stood in front of the despondent girl. 'Do not worry, Sita. I “will teach you the alphabet. It is not difficult. I will do your “homework for you. Do not worry,' she said gently holding “the girl's hand. 'Come with me while I drink my milk.'

Sita got up as if there were no strength in her to resist and “followed Vijay into the kitchen yard.

'Dhapu, tell Sita not to be afraid,' said Vijay looking at “her little friend's downcast eyes. 'Every day on the way back “we will buy peanuts and toffees. Sita, don't be sad. We will “have such fun together,' Vijay tried to encourage her, and “got up.

'Wait, Vijay Bai Sa, don't be in such a hurry to go, you get “lunch in school, what

about Sita? Left to you the girl would starve to death,' said Ganga, giving Sita a wrapped-up. "packet. Then lifting Sita's chin she said, 'I have put a lot of "sugar in between the rotis. Don't let anyone snatch them "from you!'

Pari sat watching everything. She did not have the heart "to console the wide-eyed Sita, but when she saw the two "girls walk out of the courtyard she called out, 'Eh, Sita, "haven't you seen that a lamp burns in the prayer room? First "go and prostrate yourself before the goddess of learning.'

Sita turned back and Vijay followed her into the prayer "room. Both the girls bent down on their knees and touched "the ground with their foreheads and then hurriedly left the "room.

The maids silently watched them go out of the courtyard.

Gangaram stood in a corner with his eyes fixed on the "ground. As soon as the car was out of the gate, Pari got up "with a deep, long grunt. She limped across the yard to the "kitchen and picked up the handbroom.

'What are you doing, Jiji?' said Dhapu, snatching the "broom out of Pari's hand. 'Are we all dead that at your age "you should sweep the floors and put us to shame!' Pari did "not resist; she sat down again and gazed vacantly in front of "her.

Though Pari had not looked to Sita's daily needs, the "little girl was very dear to her. Sita was not a cuddly child "nor pretty. Her dark, thin face was pinched, her eyes were "big and her nose was long and crooked like her father's. She "whined and cried for the least little thing, but her ways were "endearing; she hung around Pari, especially when there was "no one with her. When everyone slept in the afternoon, she "sat and pressed Pari's legs and told her little stories she knew.

'The haveli seems empty without the little mouse,' said "Pari at last. 'If no one else, the goddess will take care of her.' "Then, drawing a deep breath she mumbled: 'We are only servants. Our destinies are tied with the mistress but, no "matter what she does for us, we and our children will remain "servants. No one but God can change one's destiny.' Her "usually soft voice was harsh and dry.

'If only Gangaramji had not lost his temper, Lakshmi "would still be here,' said Dhapu scrutinizing Gangaram with "black, hostile eyes as he dumped firewood in the kitchen "verandah.

Bhagwat Singhji's wife had heard all the sniffing and "sighing from the puja room and she finished her prayers "hurriedly, bowed her head reverently in front of the deity "and then came out of the room. As she neared the kitchen she walked more slowly and stared

at Pari: 'What is all this crying about? Looking at you "all, people would think we were murderers. Yes, servants "will remain servants, no matter what you do for them. It is "not in their nature to be grateful. Here I am spending money "on the girl. I have fed her and clothed her all these years but "today you women are behaving as if she had been sold for "gold.'

Bhagwat Singhji's wife shook with anger as she spoke. "Tell me now, if you don't want Sita to go to school, I will "see that she does not. Keep her in your laps but don't "complain about her.' She gave a cold, scornful look at the "maids before she walked away proudly.

As soon as Bhagwat Singhji's wife turned her back, the "maids looked up, stunned. No one spoke. In spite of the "mistress gossiping with them and sharing her life with them, "there was never a question of taking any liberty with her. "Pari got up immediately and went towards the mistress's "room. She knew the mistress was especially angry with her "and this she could not bear.

Chapter V

The strong words of the mistress had-a sobering effect on “all the servants. Even the cook was silenced. But in the “confusion everyone had forgotten that Bhagwat Singhji's “widowed niece Kanta was coming that day to stay in the “haveli for a brief vacation. It was only when loud persistent “banging was heard on the side door later in the morning that “they remembered and then the maids rushed around.

Bhagwat Singhji's wife got up hurriedly. She straightened “the sari over her head and greeted Kanta as if she had been “waiting for her the whole morning. The maids brought in “the luggage, the cook Quickly took down the silver plates “and put the oil on the fire to fry savouries. Gangaram, seeing “everyone was busy, slunk away to have a Quiet smoke.

'How is your mother-in-law, Bai Sa?' asked Bhagwat “Singhji's wife as soon as Kanta sat down in the sitting room. “‘The same as ever, Hukkum; sometimes pleased with me, “. otherwise nagging as if I were the cause of all her troubles.

She hardly talks to me, she spends most of her time going to “the temple.'

"Then it is true that she is thinking of giving away her “money to the temple?"

'She keeps threatening to do that from time to time. But “where is the money to give? That is just her way of keeping “me under her domination.'

'Don't talk like this. You know she has gold and that's “money. Bai Sa, you can't afford to displease her. Remember “sweet words cost nothing.'

The conversation was suddenly interrupted by Pari who “came in agitated. She asked the mistress for the keys of the “store. The cook was angry, Gokul impatient. There was not “enough milk for Bhagwat Singhji's guests. Even after “diluting the milk with water, there was not enough.

The two ladies got up hurriedly and went into the “kitchen. One of the servant's children had already been sent “to buy milk; another had gone to buy sweets. There was “complete confusion; voices rose, and the servants exchanged “accusing glances with each other. The master of the haveli “was never to be kept waiting. His guests were always to be “served in a manner appropriate to the haveli's reputation for “hospitality. In the women's side anything could do; no one “was too upset if the milk fell short or there were

not enough “-refreshments to go around. The cook knew how to stretch “things for the ladies, but it was dangerous to play tricks “when it came to serving the men.

'If you servants had not sat and cried the whole morning, “we would not be in such a confusion. We have never before “been short of milk,' said the mistress haughtily.

The cook listened with a mischievous glint in his eyes, “while he fried the savouries.

'Why was everyone crying?' asked Kanta with surprise, “while arranging a tray for Gokul to take inside.

'Ask Dhapu. Her sari must still be wet with all the tears “she has shed,' the mistress taunted.

Dhapu kept her head down and went on peeling the fruits. “Before the question could be repeated Gokul's twelve- “year-old grandson stood panting in front of the door, “holding an earthenware cup of milk in his hand.

Once the trays were taken inside there was quiet again in “the kitchen.

'Bai Sa, eat something now,' said Bhagwat Singhji's wife “placing a plate before Kanta.

'Not just yet, Hukkum. First I will go and see Geeta “Binniji. Is she not feeling well? Why isn't she here?"

'If you had heard the servants this morning, anyone “would be afraid to face them. No wonder she has not dared to come down. I am glad Ajay Bapu is coming back today. “So much has happened during his absence. I hope he does not “think we have been hard on his wife.'

Kanta found Geeta in her room reading a book. She “closed the book and got up as soon as Kanta came in. “Binniji, I am disturbing you. You go on reading and I “will come back later. I will be here for a couple of days. “There is no hurry,' Kanta grinned apologetically.

'No, no, Bai Sa, come and sit with me.' Geeta's voice was “warm and welcoming. Though she had heard her mother-in- “law's sharp words to the maids, she was still not easy in her “mind. She yearned to talk to her husband about Sita. She “could still be withdrawn from school.

Kanta eased herself down and made herself comfortable “on the mattress. She took out her betel nut box from her “blouse pocket and delicately put a pan in her mouth and “chewed it with satisfaction and then looking at Geeta's “drawn face, said with concern, 'Binniji, don't pay attention to the servants. They are all spoiled. They feel we exploit

“them, especially these days when people in factories earn a “hundred to two hundred rupees for just eight hours of work “a day.’

‘Bai Sa, this time the servants are right,’ Geeta answered “sadly. ‘They are all angry with me because Sita was “miserable about going to school. After all, the girl has been “brought up by the maids. They treat her like a daughter. “Where else in the world would you find this kind of “devotion?’

‘There you are right,’ she answered. ‘My maid has really “had a hard time with me, especially after I became a widow, “but she refused to leave me and go to work in another haveli “for more money. She said, “My mother put me in your care “and I will die in your home.” Binniji, when my husband was “living, we were comfortable. I had servants, not as many as “there are in this haveli but enough for our needs. But he died “suddenly and then I had very little, and there were my two “sons to bring up. My mother-in-law has always resisted “spending money on us. Even to this day she feels that I have “hidden wealth which I am hoarding until she’ dies.’ Kanta “spoke with little emotion, as if she didn’t care.

Geeta looked at her placid face, intently trying to fathom “what really went on in her mind. She had heard her cousin- “in-law’s story from others; but, like so many stories in the “haveli, it was difficult to discern how much of it was “enlarged by gossip. Geeta liked Kanta, who was always “cheerful. She carried her stout body gracefully. With all her “bulk she seemed always to be gliding rather than walking.

Geeta found nothing that intrigued or interested her in “Kanta. She was open and simple. Her calculations were “obvious and that made it easy to contact her. She was in her “early thirties but widowhood had not sapped her vitality nor “destroyed her self-confidence. She lacked the serenity and “compassion of Manji. Kanta was not interested in other “people’s problems except at the level of gossip. She was too “preoccupied with herself to take the suffering of others “seriously. Her pleasantly smug manner almost successfully covered her arrogance. She talked incessantly of predesti- “nation but seemed to be waiting to avenge her fate in the “success of her two sons.

‘My mother-in-law has reason to feel as she does,’ “continued Kanta after swallowing the betel nut and tobacco “leaf with relish. ‘You know my husband died young, but “that was no reason why I should have had no money. It was “my fate. No one is to blame,’ she stated in a matter-of-fact “tone and sat silently for a while, thinking.

Geeta fidgeted with the end of her sari, waiting for Kanta “to resume talking.

Then dreamily Kanta continued: ‘Though I was married “into a poor family my father had plenty of money. He never “worked, as you know, just lived like a rich man’s son. But “my paternal grandfather was kind and shrewd. He knew “that his son had got into bad

habits that made my mother's "life very hard. He worried about her and wanted to give her "money so that she would have enough for her few needs after "his death. But by now you know how difficult it is to do "anything in secret in the havelis. Besides, he did not want to "annoy his son and face family criticism. Then he fell ill. I "was his favourite grandchild and I spent a lot of time with "him. He was not happy about me as I had been married into "a poor family though a very respectable one. One day, when "no members of the family were in the haveli, he called me to "his bedside and said, "Listen carefully, don't miss a word I "say. I have not much longer to live. In our farm house "outside Udaipur where your asthmatic uncle lives, in the "store room where old brooms and buckets are kept, in the "left side wall as you enter are hidden gold and silver. No one "knows this. I had it all cemented in, many, many years ago "when you were still a baby. It is always wise to live "unpretentiously and think of the future. When I am dead, "have the wall torn down. This money is for you and your mother. I know you cannot buy happiness with gold but it "helps to make life a little less hard to live." After a few "weeks he died.'

'Did you ever find the gold?' asked Geeta eagerly.

'Of course, it was all there. Slabs of yellow metal with "gold and silver coins neatly built into the wall.' Then her "voice trailed off; she took a deep breath and in a voice tinged "with sadness added, 'Binniji, you only get what is your fate "and never more. My mother was a wonderful woman, "God-fearing and pious. What a pity she died before you were "married. She was afraid when I told her what my grand- "father had said. She knew no craft. She was simple and "trusting. She told my father where the gold was but never "what my grandfather had said. She did not want to say "something that would cast doubt on my father's character. "She was a true Hindu wife who worshipped her husband. "Well, when my father died, all the money, everything, "naturally went to my brother.'

She paused briefly and then continued in a monotonous "voice, 'For a few years his wife was kind to my mother, but "then she began to resent spending money on her. My mother "never complained. When relatives asked her why she wore "torn, patched skirts, she made excuses but never said a word "against her daughter-in-law. If only my mother had been "saved the sorrow of seeing me become a widow, her last "years would have been bearable. My widowhood added to "her grief. She died an unhappy woman.' She tried to smile to "hide the storm of emotions that raged within her.

Geeta sat rigid, staring at her cousin-in-law through her "suppressed indignation. She looked at the round and "cheerful face, and she was filled with anger. She wanted to "shout and shake her from her apathy; she wanted to tell her "that it was criminal to accept everything as part of one's "predestined fate and that she should fight to get her share of the money from her brother; she should stop wasting her life "just being pleasant to everyone. But she did not speak; only "her lips trembled with anger.

'I have been talking so much that I have lost count of the "time. The children must be back. There is so much noise "downstairs,' said Kanta wearily, and got up slowly.

'I, too, forgot today is only half-day school,' said Geeta "standing up abruptly; all her uncertainties about Sita were "forgotten listening to Kanta's story. She pushed her hair "back and covered her head properly and then followed Kanta "out of the room.

Sita and Vijay were on the kitchen verandah, turning the "pages of an illustrated book.

'Look, Sita, this is A for apple,' shouted Vijay, her eyes "sparkling. 'This is B for ball. I will teach you two letters "every day. You must be a good girl and practise writing,' she "said as her finger moved slowly deciphering the printed "alphabet for Sita.

The maids fluttered around, their eyes brimming over "with sympathy, ready to clasp Sita to their bosoms, but "Sita's eyes were glued to the glossy pictures illustrating each "letter of the alphabet. She did not even raise her head when "Geeta stood before her.

'Bhabhi, look at all these books Sita got. They are even "better than mine,' said Vijay excitedly.

'Sita, did the teachers beat you?' asked the mistress, "looking at Ganga.

'No, Hukkum.'

'Did the girls snatch your rotis?' the mistress asked again, "emphasizing each word.

'No, Hukkum. I like my school,' replied Sita, reluctantly "lifting her eyes from the book.

The maids felt the sting of the mistress's words, and dispersed, feeling guilty for the fuss they had made that "morning.

The cook listened with amusement. He felt happiest "when there was a mild storm brewing in the kitchen. He "worked better and ordered the maids with impunity. "Normally, he would have provoked the mistress some more "but the dish he was preparing needed all his attention. Ajay "Singh was returning home after ten days in Delhi and "Bhagwat Singhji's wife had ordered an elaborate meal for "him. The maids carried out Khyali's instructions silently.

Geeta quietly watched Khyali mix the different spices "before he put them in the oil to fry. She was relieved to see "Sita happy and engrossed in her book.

Kanta was already deep in conversation with Pari outside "the verandah. It was not long before the sound of a familiar "horn alerted everyone that the car bearing Ajay Singh had "entered the gates of Jeewan Niwas.

Ajay Singh came to the inner courtyard after he had first “paid his respects to his father. He touched his mother's feet, “exchanged a few words with her and then went upstairs to “his apartment to bathe.

Geeta stayed on in the kitchen helping to arrange the “thalis. Ajay Singh and his parents, with Kanta, ate in the “sitting room. The maids nudged and winked at each other “watching Geeta with unsteady hands pour out the lentils, “take out the steaming rice, spread the ghee on fire-hot rotis. “They let her do the work waiting for her to spill something “before they took over.

The cook muttered under his breath. He didn't find it at “all amusing to have the young mistress in the kitchen; she got “in his way. He liked to work fast.

After everyone had been served, Geeta had her food in the – “kitchen verandah and went up to her room. She was “impatiently waiting but she knew that her husband would only come when his mother had finished telling him all about Sita.

'You have been through a real storm,' said Ajay coming “into the room smiling. Geeta was taken unaware as she “stood looking out of the window.

'So you have heard all about my great victory over Pari,' “said Geeta lightly and turned from the window and sat on “the bed. Dhapu with her cunning mind should really get the “credit. But I was so mad with Pari that I went ahead “regardless of the consequences.'

'You did the right thing; I am proud of you. It is time for “new ideas to enter the haveli,' said Ajay Singh with “conviction.

'It is so easy for you to say that, but it was I who had to “face the anger of the maids, the relatives, and your mother. I “can't tell you how I regretted having been so impetuous. If I “could have, I would have run away from here; it was awful, “especially without you,' said Geeta passionately. 'But now “sit by me and tell me about Delhi. What did you do there?'

As soon as the word Delhi was mentioned Ajay Singh's “face lost some of its colour and his eyes darkened. He “ignored Geeta's question and after a moment of silence said, “What you did was right; in your place I don't think I would “have had the courage to take such a bold step, but don't “worry. I am now back and will support you in every way “possible. These old maids are little tyrants; don't be “frightened by them. They don't realize that my mother's “generation will die and with it the traditional way of life “and purdah too. It is time you taught them something new.'

'The change won't come as quickly as you think,' Geeta “said sadly. 'You don't know the women here; they are all “rooted in ignorance and superstition. For the slightest thing

“they run to Arjun the fortune teller, even though he was so “wrong with Lakshmi. He is such a convincing crook to these ignorant women. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred he is “wrong, but still it is to him they all go, clutching money in “their hands. How can you educate such people? But let us “not talk about the haveli. I have had enough now of the “haveli. Tell me what you did in Delhi,' she insisted eagerly.

'I was kept very busy in the university. I hardly went out,' “replied Ajay Singh.

Geeta studied him, her eyes open wide and waited for him “to continue.

Ajay Singh got up slowly from the mattress, where he had “sat nervously, and went and sat on the bed beside Geeta, “Then in a halting voice he said, 'Geeta,, I am going to “disappoint you terribly. I have been made Head of the “Department of Physics in the Udaipur university. I prefer to “stay here than go to Delhi. There are many like me there “while here I can be really useful.'

Geeta hid her face for a moment. Then she burst out “defiantly, 'I knew something was wrong. Why were you “afraid to tell me this before? Do you think I am so blind not “to have guessed that you would never leave Udaipur? But “don't look at me like that, I don't need your sympathy.'

Ajay looked at Geeta's proud, flushed face and gently “drew her close to him.

That night Geeta went to bed as if a heavy stone had been “removed from her path. At last she knew that her hope of “leaving Udaipur was a flimsy, unreal dream. Instead of “feeling desperately trapped, there was a strange peace within “her. A few words had put an end to her restlessness. She fell “into a profound sleep as if she had not slept for months.

Chapter VI

Three months had passed since Sita's first day at school. "The maids' fear that Sita would be difficult proved wrong. "She got up without having to be awakened; she gave the "maids no trouble about getting ready. She washed her face, "changed her clothes and even tried to plait her own hair. But "in the last three months she had become more subdued; she "never argued with the maids when they asked her to sweep or "clean the utensils. She now never fought with the other "servants' children and gave in to them even when she was in "the right. In spite of this the servants' children liked her less "and sniggered at her each time she put on an old frock of "Vijay's. They grinned at her menacingly and behind her back "called her the little mistress. But Sita ignored their taunts "and did all she could to help in the haveli. Every evening she "mixed the oil cakes with the fodder for the cows, something "she had refused to do before. She never talked about her "school. When asked, she hung her head embarrassed and "nibbled at her fingernails.

The maids missed her whining and her former tantrums.

The truth was that Sita knew that the girls were all poor like "her. They did not notice that her frock was too long, or that "her sweater was faded and torn in places. The teachers were "kind and did not chide her if she repeatedly made mistakes in "learning the alphabet or if she did not do her homework. "Still the best part of going to school for Sita was the drive to "and from school with Vijay.

The girls in the school surrounded her when she got down "from the car. She enjoyed telling them all about the toys that "Vijay had and of all the other enticing things in her "cupboard. The other girls listened to her with rapt attention,

On the way back from school Vijay always insisted on "buying hot savouries. Sita was careful to wipe off the "crumbs from her mouth before she entered the courtyard, "Sita had learned in the three months that she was more "privileged than the children of the other servants. She knew "instinctively that this annoyed the other children. In fact, "she did not feel any different from them but since joining school she had little time to spend with them. -'

The days passed rapidly for Sita and it was soon time for "the school to close for the summer vacations.

The hot winds of summer had begun to sweep through “the haveli, bringing with them dust and masses of dry “leaves. The pavement stones burned the soles of bare feet. “The verandah was no longer a place where the women “gathered; they sat inside the large sitting room with the “mistress till the afternoon sun cooled down. The flies “covered the verandah, when everyone else felt sweaty and “weary they seemed to have the energy to flit from one thing “to another.

The routine of the haveli changed only in terms of the “hours of rest and work. The whole household got up before “dawn when the air was still cool and tried to finish the heavy “work of cleaning and cooking before the sun became unbearable. The afternoons were quieter in summer than in “winter. It was too hot to go out visiting.

The servants' children were the happiest as the days grew “warmer and the winds more dusty and sharp. It was in the “summer that the trees behind the haveli were laden with “fruit. Every year the children from the streets as well from “the neighbouring havelis came to plunder the mango as trees “and eat the raw fruit in the backyard of Jeewan Niwas. One “day Sita sat under a shady tree sucking her lips after she had “nibbled a raw mango. Vijay, with the other servants' “children, threw stones at the branches of the tree to bring the “unripe fruit down. Some other children were perched on “the branches of a jamun tree, busy rifling the juicy purple “plums.

'Look, Sita, what I have,' said Vijay triumphantly “emptying her frock of little green mangoes.

'Vijay Bai Sa, when will school open again?' asked Sita as “she sat down next to Vijay.

'Oh, I forgot that tomorrow is our last day in school.

What fun, now we can come here early in the morning. Sita, “we too will climb the jamun tree. Just see those boys eating “all those jamuns. They let only the bad ones drop to the “ground.'

'Vijay Bai Saheb, after how long will school open again?' “asked Sita absent-mindedly.

'I don't know,' said Vijay carelessly. 'But not for a long, “long time. I am so happy. I hate school.'

'Bai Saheb, you know I like my school,' said Sita in a “small confidential voice.

'You stupid! You like school, do you? You are a real silly girl.

You can't even read or write properly and you like school,' “Vijay mocked. 'Stop talking nonsense. Get up and help me “gather the mangoes.'

Sita's little dark thin mouth closed up immediately as if a thorn had pricked her finger. But she did as she was told. She “felt hurt at Vijay's remarks but did not answer her back. She “picked up the mangoes without any joy.

The children were running to and fro gathering up the “fallen fruit, when Gokul came down the stairs shouting and “waving a stick.

'You little thieves! Who do you think you are to steal the “fruits of the haveli? Come here, all of you and see what it “feels to have your bones crack.'

The children fled in all directions carrying what they “could and leaving the rest behind. They were afraid of “Gokul; they knew he meant what he said. But he could not “run after them and so they always got away with their loot “and returned for the rest later.

Gokul walked slowly, his arthritic legs moving un- “steadily, but he flourished his stick in the air and shouted. ““You rascals, this time I will let you go but if I see you here “again, not a bone in your body will be left.'

Vijay and Sita huddled together trying to suppress their “giggles. Then as Gokul's eyes fell on the two girls, he “lowered his stick and deferentially folded his hands and said “gently, 'Vijay Bai Saheb, don't eat raw mangoes. You will “get a sore throat. Those rascals leave nothing to ripen. They “carry everything to their mothers who grow fat on stolen “fruit. One day worms will eat their insides. Then they will “learn.'

Vijay burst out laughing and Sita tried hard to keep a “serious face as Gokul climbed up the stairs with difficulty “and went back into the house.

'Dhapujiji will be happy with all these mangoes. She “makes lovely hot pickles,' said Sita, holding up the bottom “edge of her frock and picking the green unripe mangoes from “the ground.

'Be careful that my grandmother doesn't see you or then “you will be the hot pickle,' said Vijay laughing.

'I know that, Bai Saheb. That's why you go up to the “haveli and I will go round the backyard to the servants' “quarters. '

'Come up soon. I want to show you the new toys my “father got for Vikram,' said Vijay, running up the steps to “the haveli. She had forgotten that she had hurt Sita with her “harsh words.

'Where is Sita?' asked Bhagwat Singhji's wife, a few “minutes later when she saw Vijay entering the verandah “alone.

'Bara Bhabhi, she has gone to wash her face in the “servants' quarters.'

'What has come over her today that she goes down there "to wash leaving you alone with all those children?" said the "mistress with annoyance.

'Bara Bhabhi, she was with me till this very minute. I told "her to go," said Vijay, trying desperately to sound "convincing.

'Vijay Bai Sa, I was not born yesterday,' said Pari drawing "Vijay to her side. 'Kanwarani Sa, you forget this is the "mango season.'

The mistress smiled and looked fondly at her grand- "daughter and said, 'Ah! Now I understand. I am old and "stupid and it takes time for me to see things.'

Just as Bhagwat Singhji's wife had finished, Sita appeared "in the courtyard. Vijay wrenched herself free from Pari's "clasp and ran towards her.

'Vijay would do anything for that girl,' said the mistress "with a sigh to Pari. 'I don't know what she sees in her.' "Sita has been born under a lucky star, that's all," replied "Pari, looking at the two children sneaking quietly up the stairs. 'In spite of not knowing the love of a mother, thanks "to your generosity, she has never felt the loss.'

'But, Pari, I often think of Lakshmi. Poor girl, she "must be miserable without a home. She must miss her "child.'

'She is in the city somewhere but no one knows exactly "where,' said Pari with concern as she fanned the mistress.

'I suppose Binniji was right in sending Sita to school. The "girl so far has no fancy ideas. She is obedient and does as she "is told. Education has not done her any harm,' said the "mistress.

Pari nodded her head and then, after a little thought, "said meekly, 'Kanwarani Sa, if you have some extra old "frocks of Vijay Bai Sa's, I would like to give one or two to "my nieces.'

'I am glad you mentioned this, Pari. I have been thinking "of the same thing. Vijay doesn't understand and gives away "all her clothes to Sita. It is for Binniji to look around and see "that there are other children in the haveli too. We can't "forget Dhapu's children or Ganga's. After all, they have all "been born here.'

'You are right, Kanwarani Sa,' said Pari with greater "confidence.

'I have already noticed that the other children resent all "the new clothes that Sita has. They feel left out and then "they are mean and nasty to Sita, It is not her fault. Binniji "should have realized this long ago. I can't keep an eye on "everything,' the mistress said wearily.

'Kanwarani Sa, don't blame Binniji. She doesn't think of "these little things. Her mind is on other things. Were it not "for her Sita would never have been sent to school.'

'I suppose you are right. I should be grateful. An educated "girl like her could so easily have been a total misfit here.

What could we have done, Pari, if she were insolent, or "worse, indifferent? No, she has never raised her voice to me, "and in her own way she is proud of the haveli,' Bhagwat "Singhji's wife said slowly reflecting on each word she "uttered. 'Pari, remind me to tell Binniji to give me all Vijay's "clothes. Instead of finding fault with Binniji, I should have "told her myself.'

Chapter VII

On the last day of school, the two girls' were ready and in "the kitchen earlier than usual. The cook was in good mood. "He hummed while he stirred the milk on the blazing fire. "Dhapu sat outside the kitchen fanning herself and Vikram, "who sat happily in her lap.

'Khyali, here are two annas. Buy some vegetables,' said "Gangaram, coming into the verandah. His little watery eyes "were ablaze with anger, and his face was taut.

'What's come over you? The heat seems to have burned "out your intelligence,' said the cook lightly, thinking that "this was one of Gangaram's bad days.

'See these dry rotis. Even dogs won't sniff at them and you "expect a child to eat them,' Gangaram replied stuttering "with rage.

The cook took the milk off the fire and stood up ready for "a fight.

'Mind what you say to me. There is nothing wrong with "the rotis. They are just dry. You talk as if you had never seen dry rotis in all your life,' the cook mocked turning his back "to Gangaram.

'No child can eat plain rotis every day. Take this money "and buy vegetables,' replied Gangaram, his voice shaking "with emotion. Sita heard her father's angry voice from the "verandah and her heart began to beat a little faster. She "closed her book and sat still till she heard Dhapu calling her.

'Come here, Sita,' said Dhapu as Sita entered the kitchen "with Vijay. Hurriedly, Dhapu put Vikram down from her "lap and took a step forward. 'Do you get plain rotis to take "to school? Speak, don't stand there like a stone image. What "does your father mean by accusing us of starving you?'

'Stop shouting. Look, even the crows have flown away "hearing your shrieks,' said the cook raising his hands to keep "Dhapu quiet.

'What's all this about Sita being starved?' said the "mistress, walking across the courtyard.

'Nothing, Hukkum. I asked Khyali to buy some vege- "tables for me,' said Gangaram.

'Dhapu Bai has a habit of "shouting for nothing.'

Before Gangaram could finish, the mistress picked up the "rotis. She felt them and then confronted the cook and said, "Khyali, is this what you give Sita to take to school? Not "even a beggar could swallow these dry rotis. I know the "haveli is not what it was, but Kanwar Sa is still not a pauper "that you have to starve a child.'

'Don't ask us, Hukkum. Ask Sita, Let her speak. Look "at her standing there silent, making us all look like "murderers-the ungrateful wretch; said Dhapu without "trying to conceal her temper.

'Sita, come here. Tell me what you take to school,' the ". mistress asked in a gentle coaxing voice.

'Kanwarani Sa, I get rotis and vegetables, sometimes "sugar also, but yesterday I ate the vegetables with the puree that the old lady gave me during lunch time. I was full, so I "brought the rotis back home.'

'There you are, Gangaramji. Did you hear that? Now "what do you have to say?' said Dhapu, still furious. "Gangaram did not reply. He just walked away, his head "slumped low on his chest.

'Khyali, I hope Sita is getting milk and not tea in the "morning,' said the mistress.

'Of course, Hukkum. Once I have my orders, why "shouldn't she? It doesn't cost me anything: Vijay hearing "loud voices from her room hurriedly put on her school dress "and came down.

She enjoyed the scenes between her grandmother and the "servants. Her face clouded as she saw Dhapu's severe face "looking at her. 'Drink your milk, Bai Sa,' Dhapu said as if "she didn't really care.

'And Sita, you too drink your milk,' added the cook "sarcastically.

The two girls quickly emptied their glasses of milk and "ran out of the kitchen verandah. The mistress went out to "the storeroom, followed by Pari.

'Really, what a fuss,' said the cook. 'The whole house "now seems to be revolving round Sita. One would think that "our children were not human and didn't need milk too,' he "added maliciously.

'What are you grumbling about, Khyali? Your children "are not likely to starve. You have fields that are fertile. You "are also a moneylender,' said Dhapu in a cutting voice. 'By "the way, this month I won't be able to pay the interest on the "two hundred rupees I borrowed.'

'I don't care. That only doubles the interest for next "month," the cook replied. 'Don't you cast envious eyes on "my fields. If your husband didn't fight with everyone in "sight including his relatives, your fields would also yield enough to feed you. Don't forget, Kanwar Sa gave us all "equal land.'

'Stop insulting my husband. Did you give up an inch of "your land when it came to your own brother's children "claiming a little part of it? No, of course not. You held on to "every inch but you want us to give up our land to strangers,' "lashed out Dhapu in anger.

'Where do you women get all your gossip from? My "brother's children have more land than they can manage. Why "should they want mine?' the cook answered with an air of "superiority.

Someone was banging on the side door. Dhapu looked at "him with disdain and walked out of the kitchen to "investigate.

Manji Bai Sa and Kanta, with her two sons, came in "quietly with a maid. Seeing this, Bhagwat Singhji's wife put "down the thali of rice from which she had been picking out "the little stones and stood up.

'Why do you strain your eyes, Kaki Sa,' said Kanta, "picking up the thali as the women sat down on a mat in the "verandah.

'You know me, Bai Sa, I can't sit still. I must do "something,' Bhagwat Singhji's wife said lightly.

'Where is Binniji?' asked Manji.

'In her room,' said Bhagwat Singhji's wife. 'I don't know "why she wastes her time on those children when there is so "much to do in the house.'

'Mami Sa, is it true that Binniji has started a school in the "haveli,' said Kanta, her betel-stained uneven teeth parted "into a smile.

'I don't know what she has started but all morning there "are little urchins running up to her room. Because of this, I "keep the main door closed.'

'There are not only children. Let me tell you, Bai Sa,' said Manji with a twinkle in her eye. 'I know two women from "my gully who come. Soon you are going to have all the "young maids here. They are all talking about the stories "Binniji tells them and all the coloured pencils they are "allowed to scribble with.'

'Don't blame me, tell Binniji. I am not responsible for "what goes on in her room,' Bhagwat Singhji's wife retorted.

'Don't worry, Bai Sa. No one will blame you. Lots and "lots of women will bless

you. After all, which one of our “daughters or daughters-in-law has brought the gift of “learning to the poor?’ Manji said leaning forward.

‘These are grand ideas, but Manji Bai Sa, when you have “to sit and roll out the rotis next to the fire and your maid is “upstairs listening to stories, then let me see what you say,’ “said Bhagwat Singhji’s wife wistfully. ‘I can already predict “that these classes will bring a bad name to the haveli.’

Manji kept quiet. Bhagwat Singhji’s wife had a point. If “the classes became popular, they could cause a problem for “the havelis, she reflected. All of a sudden a peal of laughter “from upstairs seemed to confirm her worst fears. The three “women looked up to Geeta’s apartment. There was silence “again but as a door opened, the whispers of song and “laughter would escape and then be smothered as it closed “again.

‘Manji Bai Sa, have a slice of the melon. They come from “Dhapu’s village,’ said Bhagwat Singhji’s wife in order to “change the topic of conversation.

Kanta and Manji each took a piece of the melon and “passed the plate to Kanta’s boys. After sipping the cool “sherbet and tasting the juicy melon, Kanta said in a soft, “confidential voice, ‘Mami Sa, is it true that Ajay Bapu has “been offered a big post in Delhi?’

‘With all his degrees he can get any post in India,’ “Bhagwat Singhji’s wife replied more softly than usual.

‘Who can doubt that, but if he leaves Udaipur the haveli “will be empty,’ said Kanta with feigned melancholy.

‘But Bai Sa, who ever told you that he was leaving “Udaipur?’ Bhagwat Singhji’s wife said casually, raising her “eyebrows. She did not want to share her anxiety on this “question with anyone.

‘My maid’s sister, who works in the Vice-Chancellor’s “house, mentioned something like that,’ said Kanta “defensively.

Dhapu exchanged a quick glance with Pari. It was she “who had overheard the conversation between Geeta and her “husband that evening when he had returned from Delhi. She “had not understood everything, only enough to know that “they were both agitated and it was about Delhi that they “spoke.

She had immediately told Pari and Pari had confided in “the mistress. But when Kanta came out with the question “Dhapu was surprised. Her little foxy eyes betrayed a trace of “anxiety and she quickly withdrew to the quiet of the kitchen “to try and solve the mystery of how Kanta knew.

To rescue Kanta from an awkward predicament, Manji “inserted: ‘I too heard rumours that Ajay Bapu may be “leaving.’

‘Women in the havelis have so much time on their hands “that when there is nothing to talk about they fabricate “gossip,’ said Bhagwat Singhji’s wife contemptuously. Then, “seeing Geeta coming down the stairs, she said, ‘Why don’t “you ask Binniji about Bapu Sa’s plans, she should know.’

‘There is nothing to ask. After all, as you said, women “talk. Let them. Why should one take what they say “seriously?’ said Manji dismissing the question. She had “guessed that Bhagwat Singhji’s wife was not pleased and did “not want to dwell on the subject.

Geeta sat down beside Kanta, after touching the feet of the elders. She could tell from the awkward silence that they “were discussing something they did not want to continue in “her presence.

Kanta quietly swallowed the betel nut she was chewing “and said, ‘Binniji, I brought these two boys with me to ask “your advice about what they should do, now that one has “finished school and the other has graduated.’

‘You must also tell me what to do with my nephew,’ said Manji, ‘These days every second boy is an engineer. No “wonder they all sit at home filling in applications for jobs. “Binniji, suggest some other fields so that the hundreds of “rupees spent on their college education are not wasted.’

Geeta kept quiet. She still did not feel comfortable “talking in front of her mother-in-law. The heat made it impossible to sit in the verandah for long. The mild early morning breeze was now hot and full of dust.

‘We must be on our way home before it gets too hot to “walk,’ said Manji, as she gestured to her maid to get ready to “leave.

‘Bai Sa, you can’t leave now. There isn’t anything special “cooked today, but share with us what there is. You are no “outsider,’ said Bhagwat Singhji’s wife, putting her hand “affectionately on Manji, Before Manji could answer, Vijay “burst into the courtyard screaming with joy.

‘Bara Bhabhi, Bara Bhabhi, I am first in class.’ The little “girl’s face flushed with perspiration trickling down on her “cheeks as she flopped into her grandmother’s lap.

‘Coming first is all right, Vijay, but you must also learn to “cook and sew. Don’t become like your mother,’ Bhagwat “Singhji’s wife teased. Then trying hard to conceal her pride, “she turned to Dhapu and said, ‘Don’t forget to burn some “chillies tonight. One never knows what evil spirits may be “lurking around here.’

'Bara Bhabhi, did you know the old woman gave Sita "laddoos and beautiful bangles today. She is going to give me a "few of them,' Vijay said excitedly and wriggled out of her "grandmother's clasp to join Sita who had just entered the "room.

Before anyone had time to react, the curtain parted and "Ganga came in muttering: 'No wonder Sita doesn't eat her "rotis, Kanwarani Sa. Who would if they had laddoos and "puris like these to eat?' Ganga sank down and carefully "opened a little package wrapped in a newspaper.

The ladies sat up and looked at the little girl, who stood "shyly in front of them playing with the red and green bangles "on her wrists.

'This is the second time someone has given her laddoos and "puris and now bangles as well,' Pari said in a thin, cracked "voice as if she were talking to herself.

'It must be an ayah who works in the school. I know these "women. They are clever. She thinks by pleasing Sita she can "ask the haveli for a favour,' said Dhapu shrewdly.

'Sita, was she the same woman who gave you laddoos the "last time?' asked the mistress, a little troubled.

'I think so, Hukkum, but I am not sure,' answered Sita "respectfully.

'What does she look like?' asked Manji.

'An old woman came at lunch time. I don't know what "she looks like. Her face was covered with a thick maroon "sari. She just gave me the packet and these bangles and left,' "said Sita in a halting voice. She had suddenly become afraid "of all the cross-questioning.

'And what did she say to you,' asked Kanta.

'She didn't say anything. She just gave me these things "and went away,' Sita replied impatiently and then quietly "yawned. She couldn't understand why the ladies were "interested in the old woman.

'She must be some unfortunate, unhappy woman who has "lost a child and finds comfort in looking at children at play; "who can tell what makes a heart ache?' said Manji with "sympathy.

Pari shook her head. She was not satisfied with Manji's "reasoning, but kept quiet. Then as the ladies started talking "among themselves, she got up slowly and went out of the "room. Sita, seeing Pari leave, slipped out with her. She was "eager to share the laddoos and puris with her father.

The cook sat in the kitchen grumbling that no maid was "at hand to help him. He had

to cook an extra vegetable and “try and stretch what was already cooked. Pari went into the “kitchen and took down the thalis. She was preoccupied and “didn't pay any attention to the mumbling of the cook.

'Parijiji, I am not a magician. I can't expand the food “cooked for five people to feed an army. And on top of it, you women sit and gossip.'

'If I were twenty years younger you could accuse me of not “helping you, but now I am too old,' said Pari bluntly.

The cook was taken aback by the old woman's brusque “retort. He wondered what had upset her for Pari was the “general peace-maker when everyone around was screaming. “She hardly ever lost her temper.

'Parijiji, don't be cross with me. I wasn't thinking of you. It's all those fat, useless maids who talk from morning to “evening that annoy me,' said the cook as if he were the most “oppressed of the servants.

'Khyali, don't pay any attention to what I say. I am “getting old and my nerves are on edge, that's all,' Pari replied “listlessly.

'Something has upset you. I can tell, Jiji. Has the mistress “been nasty? Remember, she too is getting old and becoming “more and more cranky,' the cook said. Taking the thali Pari “held in her hand, he started to polish it vigorously.

'Oh, no! It's not the mistress. She is always kind, but I “don't like what is happening in the haveli,' the old maid said “and shook her head solemnly.

'You mean the ladoos that Sita brings from school? Don't “let that worry you. I will put someone on immediately to “find out who this woman is. I should have done it sooner, “but you know how busy I am kept here. I hardly get time “to bathe.' Then as Ganga and Champa came into the “kitchen, he thrust his jaw out and said in a cold, sarcastic “voice, 'So, at last you two have found time to look in here. “You can go and oil your hair. I have no work for you. It's all “done.'

'Don't be frivolous, Khyali. Kanwar Sa and Bapu Sa want “to eat. They are in a hurry. Heeralal has already brought the “car out,' Ganga said in a hushed voice.

'Do you think I have been sleeping all morning that you “two come tripping in to wake me up? Go and tell Gokulji “food is ready for Kanwar Sa.'

As soon as Gokul announced that the master was ready to “eat, the ladies didn't even wait to finish their sentences. “They hurriedly came into the kitchen and helped Khyali to “prepare the silver thalis.

A few minutes passed before Bhagwat Singhji clad in a “thin, white muslin shirt over loose white pants came into the “courtyard, followed by his son. The maids got up quickly, “pulled their saris over their faces and bent low and touched “the ground in front of them. Geeta remained in the kitchen “while Manji and Kanta, being daughters of the house, “stepped out of the kitchen and greeted the men with folded “hands.

Bhagwat Singhji talked to Manji and Kanta, while the “two boys sat down to eat from the same thali as Ajay Singh.

Kanta never missed an opportunity to bring her problems “to the attention of her uncle. As Bhagwat Singhji ate, in her usual ingratiating manner she sought his advice about the “future education of her two sons.

Bhagwat Singhji patiently went over the possible colleges “that the boys could enter. He tried to explain to Kanta the “advantages of technical education and suggested that the “boys go to colleges outside Udaipur.

Kanta was reluctant to see her sons leave Udaipur. Without saying so directly, she hinted in a dozen different “ways that her uncle should use his influence to get them into “colleges in the city itself.

Ajay Singh was visibly irritated by her persistence. He “had advised the boys to take science in school but Kanta “had dissuaded them, first on the excuse that she could not “afford the laboratory fees, and then when that hurdle had “been smoothed over by Bhagwat Singhji, she had pleaded “that the boys did not have the physical stamina to do “science.

Ajay Singh looked at Kanta with raised eyebrows that left “her in no doubt of what he felt on the subject. But in the “presence of his father, he exercised restraint and did not “frankly tell her that all she was trying to do was to get his “father to pay for her sons' education. Unlike his father, Ajay “Singh was apt to be brusque with relations who camouflaged their demands and clung to old methods of getting “their ends achieved. His mother had given up telling him to “say things that pleased people. She knew that some of them “thought he was indifferent and proud and contrasted him “with the nobility of his father.

After Kanta had finished talking, Bhagwat Singhji asked “Pari, 'How is Sita getting on in school?'

'She loves her school, Hukhum. Now that it has closed “for the vacations, she keeps asking Vijay Bai Sa when it will “open again,' Pari replied enthusiastically.

'I am glad you are satisfied, Pariji. I was really afraid of you when I decided to send Sita to school,' said Bhagwat “Singhji with a smile.

'But Kaka Sa, have you heard of the school in the haveli?'- said Manji, her big black

eyes glittering with mischievous “amusement.

'No, I know nothing, but that's not surprising. I am the “last to know what happens in this part of the haveli,' “Bhagwat Singhji replied lightly.

'Binniji is holding classes for illiterate women like me,' “said Manji smiling.

'Bai Sa, who would ever call you illiterate? But tell me “more about what Binniji is doing,' Bhagwat Singhji asked “with unexpected interest.

Pari straightened her back and wiped her mouth with the end of her sari. Her face shone with a warm glow. She spoke “with deep emotion, almost with reverence. 'Hukkum, for “the last few weeks Binniji teaches the children from the “neighbourhood. She spends hours and hours with these poor “children. Who else would do this for them?' Her voice “trailed off as she could not keep it steady.

'I am proud of Binniji. Tell her to let me know if she needs any help,' Bhagwat Singhji said in a low voice as he got up “with unusual haste and left the room. He was moved by “Pari's words and wanted to hide his feelings from the others.

Chapter VIII

The classes that Geeta had started came about by “pure accident. One morning Ravi, a young boy, came “into the haveli with the servants’ children. While the “other children helped the mistress with cleaning the “grain Ravi sat and played on his little home-made clay- “bottomed one-string violin. He kept stringing out tune after “tune and the maids stopped talking, nodding indulgently at “him.

Geeta knew all the other little children who came up but “his was a new face. When she questioned Dhapu she learned “that the child’s elder brother had sent him to his uncle Gokul “because their mother had died suddenly of high fever. The “father had died a year earlier of cholera. The responsibility “of feeding the six children had naturally fallen on the oldest “brother. But the burden was too heavy for him, so Ravi had “been sent to live with his uncle. The mistress had agreed to “feed him, but Gokul was looking around to find some work “for the boy.

After the grain had been cleared and put away, the children ran down to the backyard to see if they could find “some ripe mangoes, but Ravi sat on in the verandah. “Have you ever been in a city before?’ Geeta asked the “thin, wide-eyed boy.

‘No, Hukkum. This is the first time,’ replied Ravi. “What did you do in the village?’ asked Geeta. She was “touched by the boy’s sad, vacant eyes.

‘In the morning, I helped my mother to collect cow dung, “milk the cows, and in the afternoon I took the cows out “grazing. My mother was going to send me to school, but “then she got fever and now she is dead,’ said the boy “acceptingly as if there was no point in challenging fate.

‘If you want to learn, come to me in the morning,’ said “Geeta, not knowing what else to say to the boy who stared at “her big diamond ring.

The next day after breakfast the boy stood outside “Geeta’s room and so from that day she started teaching him. “After two days other boys and girls from the servants’ “quarters came up to Geeta’s room with Ravi. The children “sat quietly while Geeta first told them stories and then wrote “out the alphabet and asked them to copy it. No one made a “noise and after Geeta had finished with the lessons, instead “of going home, they sat on practising the letters of the “alphabet.

News of the classes spread like monsoon floods and the “young maids from the havelis came and joined the children. “At first they just listened to the stories; they did not dare to “take a pencil in their hands for they were afraid the children “would laugh at them. But gradually they started to print the “letters and to their surprise found the alphabets were after all “not so difficult to learn. Soon the maids began to recognize “words, the meaning of which they understood.

Their success made them impatient to learn more and “they urged Geeta to go faster. After the morning classes were over the women sat on and talked to Geeta. They told her “about their lives, why it was important for them to abide by “family customs, even if that meant getting into debt. Their “only support came from relatives and if they did not keep up “the traditions they were afraid they would lose the family's approval.

As the children and women learned to read and write “Geeta got a deeper understanding of poverty. She at last “understood that they too had need of fun and they too “enjoyed gaiety. Before their expenditure on propitiating the “gods or on marriage seemed to her irrational but now she “saw that it brought joy into their lives. Geeta now looked “forward to each morning. It was not just that the classes “filled the empty hours but they also offered her a challenge. “She had to think and plan so that her pupils' initial “enthusiasm would not wilt. Though they were eager, they “could quickly turn away if she failed to keep up their interest.

Geeta suddenly loved the large empty rooms of the haveli; “they no longer looked unfriendly and haunted. The cobwebs “that had become a part of their decor were now swept clean “by the boys.

Gokul no longer went around the backyard trying to “guard the fruit trees. There were no children to frighten and “threaten with his stick. Vijay and Sita helped the children “and the women when they were unable to form a new letter “of the alphabet. They felt proud that they knew more than “the others.

The mistress looked upon the classes with benign “indulgence. She confided in Pari, 'Let Binniji amuse herself. “Her enthusiasm won't last long; she will soon get tired of the “women. Then let us see what she starts next.'

The maids of Jeewan Niwas at first laughed and joked “about the haveli being turned into a school, but later they too found excuses to come up to the classes. Dhapu brought “her sewing while Vikram slept. Ganga went upstairs taking “the potatoes to be peeled with her. They sat listening to the “stories that Geeta told her pupils.

Khyali grumbled constantly while he stirred the lentils; he “was not used to working silently in the kitchen, and now “that the maids were upstairs he had no one to listen to his “gossip and no one he could tease.

The mistress continued to tolerate the classes because they “gave Geeta a great deal of joy. Besides, she had nothing to “complain about as her own maids did not neglect their “work. Her life was not affected. The verandah was still full “of chatter and gossip.

But the mistress's unconcern towards this novel activity in “the haveli was short-lived. One afternoon a group of “working women from the neighbourhood came to visit her. “They had barely sat down, when they edged up to Bhagwat “Singhji's wife and one after another started complaining.

'Kanwarani Sa, my niece's husband is already fed up.

Before going to work he has to eat cold rotis left for him “because his wife comes here to listen to stories; is that what a “woman should do?"

Before she had finished another woman said, 'Hukkum, “have you heard that the engagement of my brother's “daughter has been broken off; who wants a girl who is “already defiant? Now her poor mother weeps; she should “have locked up the girl and starved her rather than allowed “her to join these classes.'

Emboldened by what the others had said, another woman “spoke up, 'If these girls are not careful, they will soon find “their men deserting them, and then the haveli will have to “give them shelter.'

The mistress listened in silence without betraying her “disquiet. She sympathized with their complaints, but she was not going to say anything against her daughter in law to outsiders. Geeta did not know of these rumblings and got more and more absorbed in her new interest.

Bhagwat Singhji's wife had not told Geeta what the “women had said to her. She had not taken them seriously. “Anyway, she was sure that the classes would stop once the monsoon came.

Three months passed and the classes became more and “more popular. On a particularly hot day, a thick sheet of “dust covered the sky; the street peddlers were not out on their “afternoon rounds and the ice-cream man had not set up his “stall under the neem tree. Even the cows that roamed the “street sat under the cool shade of trees. The courtyard was “silent; the maids slept exhausted by the afternoon heat. All “of a sudden a loud tugging and clanging of the latch chain on “the side door jolted the maids awake. They quickly got up “and arranged their saris while Dhapu hurriedly went to open “the door. Nandu, Manji and Kanta came in; they waited for “a second, wiping the perspiration off their foreheads, and “without exchanging a word with Dhapu went straight to the “sitting room, knowing that Bhagwat Singhji's wife would “be there. Geeta, who was also resting there, was still drowsy “when she bent down to touch their feet.

'Come in, Bai Sa, how nice to see you. I just this minute "lay down, it's so hot. The rains must come soon or else there "will be famine and cholera,' said Bhagwat Singhji's wife "rather stiffly trying to cover up her unpreparedness to receive "visitors.

"The rains will come; they always do; the question is how "good will they be,' said Nandu in a severe tone of voice. The "maids looked at each other nervously; they guessed some- "thing was wrong; they had not heard Nandu being so "definite before.

Then as Dhapu and Ganga went out to prepare the refreshments, Nandu sat up erect, glared at Geeta for a "second, and then turning to Bhagwat Singhji's wife said, "Kaki Sa, we haven't come here today to sit and chat with "you; I have something very serious to talk to you about.' "The usual flowery introduction to every conversation "was missing; instead, there was surprising sternness in her "voice.

'Bai Sa, I know you are worried about the betrothal of "your grandson. Don't blame me, I had already warned you "the girl is dark and that her parents are poor. But I still "maintain the girl is a jewel,' said Bhagwat Singhji's wife "firmly.

'I did not come to discuss the girl for my grandson. I am in "no hurry to fix his engagement. Today I have come to find "out more about these classes that Binniji holds every "morning,' said Nandu not bothering to disguise the harsh- "ness in her voice.

Geeta was just about to say something when she saw "Champa gesturing to her not to speak.

'Oh, these classes are nothing, Bai Sa,' said Bhagwat "Singhji's wife light-heartedly. 'Binniji likes to teach "children; it's a blessing I can tell you; ask Gokul, he no "longer has to keep guard over the mango trees; at least for a "few hours in the morning there is peace for us all.'

"There may be peace in your haveli, Hukkum, but there is "confusion in ours,' replied Nandu sharply. 'If you don't "believe me ask Manji and Kanta Bai Sa; the young maids are "not to be seen in the mornings at all. How much can my old "maid do? Her daughters used to sweep the haveli; they "washed the clothes, now they disappear for the whole "morning. They come here and waste their time listening to "stories that Binniji tells them.'

Manji and Kanta nodded their heads in agreement. "Pariji, tell me, how would you feel if Ganga, Champa, and the others disappeared, neglecting the household work? continued Nandu aggressively.

Bhagwat Singhji's wife fidgeted nervously with the end of "her sari; for the first time she felt tongue-tied.

Pari tried to lessen the tension by offering sherbet to the "ladies that Dhapu had

brought in. The little break gave “Bhagwat Singhji's wife time to collect her thoughts. Her “face was slightly flushed when she said placatingly but with “a tinge of sarcasm, 'Manji Bai Sa, you are the one who said “learning is a good thing; you were proud of Binniji when she “started the classes. Have you forgotten?’

Manji, too, was in a challenging mood. She replied, “Mami Sa, I still think knowledge is only next to the love of “God, but not the way the lessons are being taught. The girls “come to listen to Binniji's stories, not to learn. You know “any pretext is good enough for them to shirk work. What “Binniji did for Sita was different. She is in a proper school. “She is young, for her it is good but for these girls it is just a “wonderful excuse to get away from work. And this will “harm them in the long run,' said Manji with a sad long- “suffering smile.

‘Kaki Sa, let me tell you also that all the havelis are “criticizing you. They may not say anything to you, but “behind your back they are saying that Jeewan Niwas always “tried to maintain the dignity of your way of life-now this “very haveli is undermining our authority and making rebels “out of our servants. Because you are rich and have many “servants and your son is well placed is no reason why you “should disrupt the havelis of the less fortunate ones.' Nandu “spoke with a passion that betrayed both malice and “defiance.

Kanta sat contentedly chewing her betel. All this did not “really concern her; she had only come to keep Nandu and Manji company. Her maid was old and not likely to attend “any classes.

Bhagwat Singhji's wife listened silently for a moment and “then raising her head she said in a slow and measured voice, ‘I am sorry that in my old age I should merit such criticism. “Even when my husband became the Prime Minister of “Udaipur and the Maharana honoured this haveli by con- “ferring a title on him and gave me the right to put gold on my “feet, no one considered me arrogant. But today, even my “relatives are accusing me of undermining the traditional “dignity of the havelis. My time is obviously over.' Her voice “shook with emotion. It was clear to everyone that she fought “back the tears which swelled in her eyes.

There was instant consternation among the ladies and the “maids. They did not expect the proud mistress of Jeewan “Niwas to break down in such a manner. Manji and Nandu “immediately shuffled up to Bhagwat Singhji's wife ..

Nandu touched her feet and, her voice had lost its “harshness when she said, 'Forgive me, Kaki Sa. I did not “mean to upset you. I just thought you would like to know “what some women are saying. Don't let that worry you. We, “who know you, can never make such accusations against “Jeewan Niwas.'

Bhagwat Singhji's wife was not assuaged, but she kept "still. Meanwhile, Pari sat where she was, tears rolling down "her shrunken cheeks.

'The classes won't last long,' said Dhapu quietly as she sat "down to reassure Manji whose tear-filled eyes were half- "closed. 'It isn't easy to read and write; Vijay Bai Sa has tried "and failed to teach me even one letter of the alphabet. Do "you think those stupid girls, who are already old enough to "have children, can learn? This is all new so they come, but I "can tell you, not for long; already a few have left.'

Dhapu's verdict on the classes seemed to be convincing; "the ladies picked up a piece of juicy ice-cooled water melon "which had been brought in by Ganga.

Geeta burned with rage as she sat with her face covered, "her lips tightly pressed together as if they could not be "trusted to relax. Her anger was making her body tremble. "She wanted to lash out at Manji more than anyone else. She "felt betrayed by her. How dare she say that these classes were "an excuse for the women to shirk work? And what if they "were, why should the young girls help in the haveli just "because their mothers were servants of the haveli? Even "Manji was like the rest, she thought bitterly.

Chapter IX

Geeta could not sleep that night after the visit of Nandu and Manji. Ajay slept soundly beside her; she did not wake him. Her thoughts were in a turmoil but she had no desire to share her anguish with her husband. She was afraid that this time he would not understand her feelings and would be upset. He would be furious with Manji and Nandu; he was not afraid to oppose them. But this was not what Geeta wanted. This time her inner ferment was different. She did not need anyone to fight on her behalf or give her moral support.

She got up early as usual, bathed and dressed, but still she felt listless, as if all energy had been drained out of her. She lay down on the mattress instead of going downstairs. Her thoughts went back, as they had throughout the night, to the afternoon visit. Never before had she heard her mother-in-law speak with such vehemence, weighing every word she uttered. She had, with aristocratic restraint, met the challenge of Nandu and silenced them both.

Geeta felt overwhelmed with gratitude and admiration for her mother-in-law. But instead of feeling happy, she was deeply disturbed. She knew that nothing mattered more to Bhagwat Singhji's wife than the dignity of Jeewan Niwas. She would do her utmost to maintain the untarnished reputation of the haveli. Nothing could have hurt her more than what Nandu had said. In those remarks there was a great deal of truth. The havelis were justifiably critical. Geeta was filled with remorse; she had again acted impetuously without clearly thinking of the consequences of her action. She had no right nor the desire to humiliate her mother-in-law or compromise the name of Jeewan Niwas. And yet this was precisely what she had done. The last thing she wanted to do was inflict pain on her ageing in-laws or discredit their name. From them she had received nothing but love and understanding. Geeta lay thinking, trying to rearrange her thoughts, to sort out her feelings. The desire to change the life in the haveli seemed to have subsided in her. Instead she said to herself, 'How dare anyone say a word against the haveli, these classes are not worth continuing. I will stop the girls from coming.' There was a new fervour in her, which she had not experienced before. She felt indignant as she remembered Nandu's words. For the first time she did not feel that she was the victim of blind prejudice or that she wanted to hit back. There was none of the desperation of being enclosed within

windowless walls that she wanted to shatter. '

'I don't want to leave Udaipur now. The haveli has made "me a willing prisoner within its walls. How stupid I was not "to see all that it holds. Where else in the world would I get "this kind of love and concern? The children must grow up "here. They must learn to love and respect this ancient house.'

Then as she heard Vikram gurgling with delight while "Dhapu bathed him, she felt a new warmth flood her heart. "Her thoughts raced through her mind as if she were being attacked by a swarm of bees; they stung her in every limb and "their pain was acute but bearable. 'Where else in the world "could children be enveloped in such affection? This kind of "devotion is almost superhuman. The servants go hungry if "the children haven't eaten, they go without sleep if a child "has a slight headache. And yet for all this they get so little in "return. But they are always cheerful as if they have their own "secret source of happiness that no one can touch.' Geeta was "so agitated within that she did not hear the quiet opening "and closing of the door.

'Binniii, just look at the sky, it is as clear as Lake Pichola,' "said Dhapu, coming into the room on tiptoes and looking "out of the window. Then she came and sat down at the edge "of the mattress on the floor and said wearily, 'The crops are "already ruined. My poor husband, what can he do if the gods "arc against him? The priests say that this year is bad, that "there won't be enough rain even to dampen the earth. Well, "my hopes of paying back my debt to Khyali are over.'

'Bai, how much is your debt?' asked Geeta.

'Binniji, I am not worried about my debts to the haveli; "it's only Khyali that keeps pestering me for the return of his "two hundred rupees. The way he taunts me one would think "he had made a gift of that money to me. One day I will tell "him he is a blood-sucking moneylender, that's what he is. "He charges two rupees interest on every hundred he lends out "and still he has the cheek to grumble. But I can't afford to "displease him, now. I will need to borrow from him again.'

'Don't, Bai, I will lend you the money,' said Geeta "quickly.

'I couldn't let you do that, the other servants are in the "same predicament as me. They would resent it; as it is, "Kanwar Sa has lent my husband a thousand rupees free of "interest. I can't ask you for more,' said Dhapu touching "Geeta's feet as a mark of gratitude. Then she put her hand on her head, as if all of a sudden she had remembered "something important to tell Geeta. Her eyebrows puckered "and she said in a low confidential voice: 'Binniji, Sarju came "the other day and said there was a gang of thieves from "Jodhpur who don't break into houses but kidnap young "girls. She thought the woman who gives ladoos to Sita may "belong to this gang.'

It was just like Dhapu to change from a serious problem “to repeat gossip. But this time Geeta was not annoyed by the “abrupt change of subject. She sat up and smiled. She, too, “had been curious about the woman who gave Sita ladoos. “Why did she pick on Sita for her charity? Still the idea of a “gang of kidnappers seemed a little exaggerated.

'Bai, you should be able to solve the mystery of the “woman without Sarju's help. You are good at finding out other people's secrets,' said Geeta teasingly.'

Dhapu immediately understood what her mistress was “referring to and quickly said in self-defence, 'Binniji, I “promise on my daughter's life that I didn't tell Kanta Bai Sa “about Bapu Sa going to Delhi. I don't know how her maid “heard of it.'

'But Bai, how did you know about Bapu Sa's plans?' “persisted Geeta. She liked to catch Dhapu in her own net of “intrigue.

Oh : replied Dhapu innocently, 'I happened to be on the “terrace when you were scolding my poor Bapu Sa and so I “just listened for a while, but I couldn't understand every- “thing so I left; if you had not been speaking so fast I might “have stayed longer.' Dhapu looked at her mistress with a “mischievous glint in her eyes.

Geeta laughed out loud. This was not the first time that “her conversations with her husband had been overheard. But “now Geeta did not mind. Today she was more amused than “annoyed by the surreptitious ways of the women to penetrate the privacy of others. She had worked out her own “strategy against those who tried to find out more than she “was willing to reveal. Before she could tell Dhapu that “eavesdropping was wrong, the curtain parted and Bhagwat “Singhji's wife came in followed by Pari.

'Binniji, how do you feel?' said the mistress as Geeta got “up instantly and bent down to touch her feet. Bhagwat “Singhji's wife sat down on the mattress and stared at Geeta “as if she wanted to see her face better through the muslin sari “that fell over her face.

Then, in a soft, loving voice she said, 'Binniji, don't let “Nandu Bai Sa upset you. She is just worked up because her “maids are disgruntled. She has always been a bit of a miser.' “Bhabhi, it's all my fault, please forgive me. I should never “have permitted the girls to join the classes; from tomorrow I “will tell them not to come,' said Geeta with sincerity.

'You will not do that. Once your father-in-law gives his “approval to something then I am not afraid of what the “world says,' said Bhagwat Singhji's wife forcefully. Geeta “just lowered her head. She did not know what to say in “reply.

'But, Binniji, I did not come to talk to you about the “classes. They must continue.' Then she paused a little; her “face became solemn.

'Binniji, I know that Ajay Bapu has been offered a big “post in Delhi. I didn't realize

until Kanta Bai Sa mentioned “it that people outside the haveli had also heard. Bapu Sa has “not mentioned this even to his father. I know him, he would “rather sacrifice his happiness than cause us a moment's pain. “The men in the haveli are like that. Your father-in-law “refused the Prime Ministership of Bikaner because he knew I “would not be happy living outside Udaipur.'

Geeta tried to interrupt, but Bhagwat Singhji's wife “silenced her with an impatient wave of her hand. 'Binniji, listen to me,' she continued gravely. 'I want to tell you that “Bapu should not think of us this time. We are old and our “work in the world is over. But you both are young and the “future is open to you. Bapu should not let an opportunity “like this pass. I am a mother. I want to see my children happy “and fulfilled. You alone can make him see this, you must not “let him give up something that will bring him respect and “satisfaction. There are times when you must not think of the “haveli.'

Geeta burst into tears. She put her head in Bhagwat “Singhji's wife's lap and and sobbed like a child.

GLOSSARY

placid (adj)	: calm, quiet
impetuosity (n)	: the quality or state of taking action without giving thought
relishing (v,pp)	: enjoying greatly
giggle (n,v)	: light silly laugh
defiantly (adj)	: in a rebellious manner
tantrum (n,v)	: an uncontrolled outburst of anger and frustration typically in young child
lentil (n)	: a brown pulse rich in protein
reticence (n)	: the state of being reserved
frivolity (n)	: lack of seriousness
damp (adj)	: slightly wet, moist
dingy (adj)	: gloomy, lacking brightness, dull, dark and dirty
rancor (n)	: bitterness or resentfulness
gaiety (n)	: the state of being light hearted or cheerful
reluctance (n)	: unwillingness
upholding (v,pp)	maintaining ,sustaining
imprudent (adj)	: unwise, injudicious
despondent (adj):	in low spirits, very sad and without hope
nagging (adj)	: constantly harassing someone to do something
hoarding (n)	: accumulating for preservation and future use

glossy (adj)	: shining and smooth
crook (n)	: dishonest person
clasp (n)	: an embrace or hug
sniggered (v)	: laughed at someone in a silly and unkind way
insolent (adj)	: rude and not showing respect
feigned (adj)	: pretended, not real
melancholy (n)	: a sad or gloomy state of mind
contemptuously (adv)	: expressing deep hatred
brusque (adj)	: behaving in a very direct, abrupt and unfriendly manner
listless (adj)	: lacking zest and vivacity
restraint (n)	: a measure or condition that keeps someone or something under control, check
ferment (n)	: excitement
indignant (adj)	: feeling or showing anger
Predicament (n)	: a difficult or embarrassing situation

Answer the following questions in about 60 words each :

1. How was Sita brought up in the haveli by the maids?
2. How did Dhapu present the desire of Geeta before Bhagwat Singh ji to send Sita to school?
3. Relate the incidents that lead to Sita's going to school.
4. Why were maids and the mistress not in favour of sending Sita to school?
5. How did Geeta start classes for poor children?
6. Why did Geeta envy the village women who walked proudly away from the shops in the bazaar?
7. Who was Manji Bai Sa? What was her view regarding education?
8. Who was Nandu Bua Sa? Describe her personality and manners.
9. How did the maids of Jeevan Niwas react to Geeta's classes for the poor?

10. What was Bhagvat Singh ji's reaction when he came to know of Heeralal's misbehaviour with Lakshmi?
11. Describe the conversation between Bhagwat Singh Ji and the accountant regarding Sita's schooling.
12. 'Bhagwat Singh ji was a big man with a big heart.' Comment
13. How did Vijay Bai Sa treat Sita?
14. Explain Geeta's admiration and gratitude for her mother-in-law.
15. The maids were attached to the haveli physically, emotionally and mentally. Comment.