

Section III

Chapter I

Five more years had been added to the life of Jeewan “Niwas. Its lime walls were darker; the wooden doors more “patchy and the marble more yellow; the filigree around the “scalloped balcony was broken in more places, destroying the “continuity of the design. A portion of the haveli was shut. “There weren't enough servants to do the dusting and “sweeping, many of them had died and hadn't been replaced. “Pari looked more shrunk; but still her mind was alert and “her memory as vivid as ever. Gokul could no longer sweep or “clean but he never let Bhagwat Singhji feel his incapacity. “His sons did what he could not, though they were not “servants of the haveli. Gangaram's leg wobbled more and his “pock-marked face had an unhealthy leathery look. Dhapu “had become a grandmother. Vikram was in school; Geeta “had had another son to the delight of the family; Bhagwat “Singhji's wife looked frail but she was as active as ever. She “still continued to receive people with joy and never tired of “talking. She had moments of worry for she realized that the “haveli expenses could not be kept up in the same manner and was reconciled to the mouldy exterior of Jeewan Niwas. “When she reflected on its condition, she thought of the days “when, on Diwali, Jeewan Niwas was whitewashed and “repaired by the personal order of the Rana.

In those days Jeewan Niwas stood out among the other “havelis and every child in the gullies knew that it belonged to “a minister of the State of Udaipur, a loyal and devoted “servant of the Maharana. But even now, though there was an “air of decay in its appearance, the old respect for the haveli “had not lessened.

Ajay Singh had accepted the appointment in the Udaipur “University. This had quietened the women from gossiping. “They were a little surprised, for ever since Geeta had come as “a bride they had taken bets among themselves that she would “persuade her husband to leave Udaipur. They were sure that “with all her apparent docility she hated being in purdah and “would not for long stand life in the haveli. Through the “years they had come to admire Geeta's capacity to listen to “their chatter, but still they knew that deep down she did not “enjoy their company. They had detected that something gay “and spontaneous had gone out of her life.

But Geeta no longer felt trapped in the haveli. She found “that she too had changed.

She had seen the value of kinship “ties and wanted to preserve the ancestral dignity of the “haveli. She still did not like the rigidity with which the “women held on to old customs. But what irked her most was “the ill-defined nature of her role in the family. She could not “become one with the haveli women nor did she want to. The “tension between her and them, though muted, remained. “But it no longer preoccupied her thoughts nor did it trouble “her. Her in-laws had given her enough freedom within the “haveli to keep her occupied in the manner that satisfied her. “The classes that she had started had given her great pleasure. “Ravi, after being taught by her for three years, had been sent to school. She felt proud of him as he did well even in a class “of older boys. Some of the young girls could now read and “write; but there were others who found it impossible to “master the alphabet. For them Geeta had started sewing “classes and engaged a woman to teach them to cut and “embroider. Bhagwat Singhji was interested in what Geeta “was doing and encouraged her. He had given her two sewing “machines and had instructed the accountant that all “expenses for the classes would be paid from his personal “account.

Geeta knew that some of the maids were forced to leave “the classes, but even those havelis which tried to threaten or “discipline their servants encouraged their own daughters and “daughters-in-law to go and learn something useful from the “classes.

In the last years the etiquette that completely separated “her from her father-in-law had been relaxed. She was now “allowed to sit in his presence when no outsiders were present “and even talk to him directly. The years had ingrained in her “a shyness that she found difficult to overcome. But the more “she saw him the more she admired him. He saw more than “the ordinary eye and felt more than the normal heart.

On a day in mid-winter, Bhagwat Singhji's wife, Geeta “and Kanta sat in the sitting room, talking with other “relatives who had come to pay them a visit.

'I don't know where everyone has disappeared today,' “said Bhagwat Singhji's wife making a movement to get up. “Hukkum, don't trouble yourself. We are fasting today, “it's the eleventh day after the full moon,' said one of the “elderly women putting a restraining hand on the mistress. “Just as well you are fasting, because there isn't even one “maid here today,' said the mistress with an exaggerated air “of grievance.

'Kaki Sa, thanks to Binniji, would you believe it that my maid's daughter is earning a hundred rupees as an ayah in a “school?' the woman said. Her dark timid eyes rested “affectionately on Geeta.

Kanta added, baring her tobacco-stained teeth, 'The “other day my one-eyed maid who has never raised her voice “in all her thirty years, lectured me about the benefits of “education until the smell of burnt chillies choked her.'

Bhagwat Singhji's wife wiped the smile off her face. She "did not want to remind Kanta of the day she had come with "Manji and Nandu to plead their case to stop the classes. "Instead she called out to one of the servants' children and "said sternly, 'Go and tell Dhapu, Ganga, Champa, the "whole lot of them, that they needn't come up. They can stay "in their quarters and sleep. I don't need them. I can still work "with my own hands.'

Before the little boy had left the courtyard, Pari, hearing "the mistress's words, came limping in. 'Kanwarani Sa,' she "said from the middle of the courtyard, 'the maids are with "Gangaramji, he has visitors from his village; they have "brought a proposal for Sita.' She spoke excitedly. The "mistress forgot her anger and looked inquiringly at Pari.

'There are two proposals, Hukkum. Gokulji and Khyaliji "are talking to the first party; they look well-to-do. They "have four boys and three unmarried girls. They are looking "for a wife for the eldest boy who is seventeen but has never "been to school.'

'Pariji , you know Sita would never be happy living in the "village; you women have spoilt her and now you want to "throw her to the first boy that comes,' said the mistress "raising her eyebrows. The other ladies nodded in agreement.

Before Pari could explain further, Dhapu followed by the "other maids hurriedly came in panting and sat down on the "cold floor at the edge of the carpet.

'Kanwarani Sa, our little Sita has not one but two proposals,' Dhapu gasped. Then once she had got back her "breath, she added: 'Here I thought we would have to bribe "someone to marry her; instead people are coming to our "doorsteps asking her hand in marriage. Her stars must be "very strong for her face is certainly not her fortune.'

'Dhapu, don't you women rush into things. I want to "know who these people are before I give my consent,' said "the mistress hastily.

The elderly visitors muttered behind their veils. It was "indeed an intriguing situation; they knew from experience "the sleepless nights they had to spend trying to satisfy the "demands of the parents of a suitor for their own daughters. "It was not normal for boys' parents to ask for a girl directly. "They thought to themselves there must be some deep reason "behind this extraordinary situation.

As the women sat talking and speculating, they heard the "horn of the car. Moments later Vijay came running into the "sitting room, 'Bara Bhabhi, I was selected to be on the "badminton team of the school,' she said her face glowing "and confident.

Bhagwat Singhji's wife looked at her lovingly and then "seeing her swallow something, she asked, 'What are you "eating, my child?'

'Oh, Sita gave me one of the ladoos that the old woman "gave her,' and she opened

her fist to show the other half of “the laddoo. 'It is delicious. I wish you would also get laddoos “like this, Bara Bhabhi.'

The relatives knew that Bhagwat Singhji's wife liked to “feed and fuss over her grandchildren when they came back “from school and got up to leave. The mistress was glad to get “rid of them; she had too much on her mind to continue “chatting with them.

As soon as the side door was shut, the mistress went to the “kitchen and sat down. Ganga and Dhapu followed her.

'Who could this kind woman be? I wish we had found out “when Sita first brought laddoos home,' she said to them, “taking her head in both hands.

'Hukkum, I inquired from the supervisor in the school.

She said she is a widow who has no one in the world. They “say she is a little out of her mind. She has no children and “likes to watch the girls at play,' replied Dhapu blandly.

'Just imagine what she must think of this haveli. Our “children accept puris and laddoos from a poor woman, and “we don't even take the trouble to find out who she is or “where she lives. How disgraceful. We can't let this go on,' “said the mistress decisively.

No one had a solution and a heavy silence fell in the “kitchen, which was broken by a shrill cry from the front “courtyard of the haveli.

'Come out and see my little monkey, he can talk, he can “sing, he can do a hundred things you never saw before,' “chanted a man to the accompaniment of a little drum.

The children in the courtyard heard the familiar singsong “with excitement. Dhapu shouted, as she saw Vijay shut her “book, that he was a hoax and that his monkey was lame. “Bhagwat Singhji's wife always wanting to indulge her “grandchildren said, 'Let them see the monkey dance if they “want to. He'll only ask for a rupee.'

As the children rushed out they bumped into the cook, “who was absorbed in his thoughts, and didn't see them in the “doorway.

'So, Khyali, what more have you found out about the “marriage proposals for Sita?' said Bhagwat Singhji's wife “nonchalantly as if she were deciding which sari to wear.

At first the cook seemed almost to ignore the question “from the mistress. He stoked and blew to revive the kitchen “fire; he rummaged in the vegetable basket, carefully selected “some cucumbers and sweet corn and put them on a plate and took it out to the verandah and placed it before the ladies. “Only then, as if he had enough time to sort out his ideas, did “he lift his bushy brows, fold his arms ceremoniously, and “say, 'Hukkum, there are two families; both are well-to-do, “and surprisingly, both seem anxious to settle things with “Gangaram.'

'What's so surprising about that?' said Pari, irritated "with Khyali's unnecessary procrastination. 'They may be "talking to Gangaram but they know the haveli is behind "him.'

'Even if they are well-to-do and show an interest in "Sita, we must be careful. After all Sita is a daughter of "the house,' said the mistress, more loudly than she had "intended.

'Hukkum, we have already politely told the first group "which came in the morning to leave, saying we will think "about it. After talking to them, Gokulji and I detected that "they were only anxious to know how much dowry the haveli "will give Sita,' said the cook. Then standing erect and with "an air of exaggerated self-importance he went on, 'Hukkum, "the second party which came later seems very suitable. The "father is the headman of the village. They never talked of "money or boasted like the first group. The boy is in the tenth "class. If you permit, I will call the women so you can see for "yourself what kind of people they are.'

The mistress nodded and the cook pushed the thali of cut "vegetables to the side and got up. Dhapu and Ganga quietly "went out of the kitchen with him.

In the background could be heard the sound of the "monkey-man's drum beating faster and the excited voices of "the children.

A group of women entered the courtyard all at once "accompanied by Dhapu and Ganga. Some were thin, others "were young and plump but all the faces were heavily veiled.

Their silver bracelets jingled as they bent down and touched "the feet of the mistress, then shyly sat down on the floor.

'Kanwarani Sa, this is Shivram's mother; these are two of "his aunts; one is his mother's sister and the other his father's "sister,' said Dhapu. Three young girls that were with the "women looked around the courtyard with bewildered eyes "while Dhapu made the introductions.

'How much land does Shivram's father own?' asked "the mistress, coming to the point directly without any "fuss.

There was a moment's silence and then with folded hands "the eldest of the women spoke. 'With your blessings he has "five acres, a well, two bullocks and a brick house.'

The mistress trying not to sound pleased asked in a "business-like manner, 'Is Shivram going to continue in "school or not?'

'Shivram is in the tenth class; he has never failed so far; "the rest is God's will,' replied the woman modestly.

'How soon do you want the marriage?' asked the "mistress; her voice was softer than before.

'Hukkum, Shivram's grandfather is bed-ridden and I am "getting old too; what more can I say?'

Bhagwat Singhji's wife having got the essential information about the family had nothing more to say. She got "up with her usual composure, delicately brushed her skirt "with her hand and then with Kanta and Geeta left the "courtyard. She knew they would not talk freely in her "presence.

As soon as Bhagwat Singhji's wife had left, the maids "broke into a loud chatter. The older women lifted their saris "from their faces, they talked freely about their village and "Sita. Pari coaxed them to have the savouries that had been "brought. The women shook their heads politely, saying that "they were full, but the maids persisted; they knew that village women were proud and would not eat and drink "unless they were properly persuaded.

'Bara Bhabhi, Bara Bhabhi,' shouted Vijay as she and "Sita came running into the courtyard. 'The man wants "money! The monkey can do a hundred tricks! We have asked "him to come again.' She looked around to find her "grandmother.

'Bai Sa, the man is a crook,' said Dhapu holding Vijay "fondly in her arms.

'No he isn't, you should see his monkey dance before you "talk. He is not lame either,' replied Vijay angrily.

'Bai Sa, you go inside, I will pay him,' Pari said putting "her hand in her blouse pocket.

'No, give me the money,' insisted Vijay, stamping her feet "impatiently.

'Bai Sa, what will you do when Sita gets married?' Dhapu "teased as Vijay stood scowling at Pari.

Sita quickly ran out of the courtyard, a bundle of giggles, "and Vijay ran after her.

'These two children are inseparable,' said Pari to the "prospective in-laws, her eyes full of adoration. The women's "eyes lighted up when they saw how Sita was treated by the "granddaughter of the haveli.

Before leaving they went to Bhagwat Singhji's wife to "thank her for her graciousness and beseeched her to give Sita "to them for Shivram. Knowing that no reply is given "directly, they touched her feet and left. Pari accompanied "them out as they left by the side door of the courtyard. As "soon as the sound of the women's anklets faded Bhagwat

“Singhji's wife left Geeta in the sitting room and went to the “kitchen. An air heavy with the aroma of spices drifted out of “the kitchen.

'A boy who is in the tenth class will never work in the “fields,' said the mistress as she sat down in the verandah. She added, 'Khyali, naturally they wouldn't discuss the dowry “with me, but how much will they expect?'

'Do you think, Hukkum, they would dare haggle with us “over money?' the cook said. He grinned ingratiatingly, as if “he had arranged everything.

'That's all very well, but don't be too sure. Remember “Sita is not beautiful and the havelis are not what they were,' “the mistress said a little anxiously.

'I told them we would feed the bridegroom's party but “not more than fifty people,' said the cook decisively, as if he “were the man to dictate the terms.

'Don't believe what Khyali says, Kanwarani Sa,' butted “in Dhapu giving the cook a scornful look. 'Even when “my daughter got married there were seventy to eighty “people in the bridegroom's party and they were town people. “These are village folks. They can't afford to displease “their caste community; we will have to feed at least two “hundred.

'Two hundred?' repeated the mistress with consternation. “We will do our best of course, but Dhapu, don't forget the “times have changed. When your daughter was married, “Kanwar Saheb was a minister,' said the mistress in a sad voice

'Kanwar Sa will never change no matter what he is. He “will always remain generous where his servants are con- “cerned,' replied Dhapu, proudly.

'Hukkum, don't worry about the expenses. Why do you “think that a family with land, bullocks and a brick house “have come knocking at our doors?' said the cook, as if he “were the only one to understand the real motive behind the “proposal. 'They want a girl who can read and write. “Shivram is the first boy in their village to have gone beyond “the primary school. They want to find a girl in their caste “who has gone to school. I can tell from what they said to me that they will accept anything you give them. They will “make none of the customary demands.'

Geeta came out of the sitting room. She had on purpose “remained inside once the village women came. She had “vaguely heard the questions and answers and wanted to “know more. Bhagwat Singhii's wife looked at Geeta fondly “and said humbly, 'Binniji, you will be blessed. It is all your “doing. I am glad you did not listen to us ignorant women. “We could never have arranged a match like this for Sita.' “Geeta looked away embarrassed.

Pari seemed deep in thought as she came back into the “courtyard after seeing the

women up to the haveli gate. She “sat down on the edge of the verandah and said with unusual “force, ‘These are really good, simple people; they are not like “most villagers who say one thing and mean another. They “are really not after a big dowry. But Binniji, they insist only “on one condition.’ Then she stopped as if what she were “going to say was very important and that Geeta should “understand that. ‘They don’t want Sita to continue going to “school.’

‘But that’s absurd. Why shouldn’t she continue, while she “is still with us?’ said Geeta impetuously.

Then, ignoring Geeta, Pari turned to Bhagwat Singhji’s “wife and said bluntly, ‘The aunt took me aside and begged “that Sita stop going to school as soon as she is engaged to be “married. As it is, the village elders criticize them for “educating the boy instead of putting him to work in the “fields. It’s enough for them to have a girl who can read and “write. But a prospective daughter-in-law who is attending “school would never be accepted by the elders and even the “family would think she was lacking in modesty.’

“Kanwarani Sa, don’t let this boy slip out of our hands.

We won’t find another like him,’ said the cook avoiding “looking at Geeta and addressing his remarks to the mistress.

‘I don’t understand what difference it makes to the village “elders if Sita continues with her studies,’ Geeta snapped. “‘They can do what they like with her once she is their “daughter-in-law but not before. Don’t those stupid people “realize that once she has passed the tenth class she could earn “a hundred rupees?’

‘Binniji, you should know by now that it would be an “intolerable disgrace to have a daughter-in-law earning a “wage. Money is not the only thing that matters to the poor, “it is keeping to family customs that matters most,’ Pari “replied, in a gentle, coaxing voice as if she were talking to a “child.

‘Bhabhi, let Sita continue in school. It’s good for her “future,’ Geeta pleaded, looking at her mother-in-law as if “she was the only person who would understand the importance of education.

But Bhagwat Singhji’s wife kept silent, her face sad. She “knew this time Geeta would not succeed in persuading even “her father-in-law. Then in a heavy sorrowful voice Bhagwat “Singhji’s wife, looking steadily into the dark anxious eyes of “Geeta, said, ‘Binniji, you have made Sita’s life. We have all “been proved wrong. But now we must accept their con- “dition. Marriage is the only security for women. It is you “who have made it possible for her to be married into a family “with land, with a well, a brick house and bullocks. Don’t “insist further.’

Chapter II

The news that Sita was going to be engaged spread within “hours of Bhagwat Singhji giving his approval. Jeewan “Niwas was visited by a stream of inquisitive women. They “came in groups at all times of the day and asked a hundred “and one questions. Who arranged the match and how? What “was the dowry? How did the haveli explain Lakshmi's “disappearance? The women listened to the discreet answers “from the maids, but when no one was looking they “exchanged incredulous glances with one another. It was too “good to believe that for a dark, thin girl with a mother “whose whereabouts were not known, a family with land, a “well, a pair of bullocks and a brick house would come “begging.

The women left unconvinced, muttering among them- “selves. In fact, some said that the boy was blind in one eye; “others that the family was heavily in debt and that the haveli “had agreed to pay off the debt. They said the mistress was “obliged to do this for Sita; after all, it was a servant of the “haveli that had ruined her mother's life.

Meanwhile, the haveli got busy thinking about Sita's “engagement. There were not many days left before the saris “and jewellery would have to be sent for the engagement “ceremony.

Bhagwat Singhji's wife and Pari sat in a low-ceilinged “room about ten by twelve feet. Ganga opened the big tin “trunks that were lined along the wall and took out the old “clothes that were buried in camphor.

'These four old saris when dyed will look as if they were “new,' said Bhagwat Singhji's wife, putting them aside. “Pari, how many saris in all do we need?'

'For the present at least six new sets of clothes for the “women; four sets for the men and two for Sita. Then we “must start thinking of her trousseau.'

'Kanwarani Sa, this girl deserves nothing; just look at “her,' said Dhapu dragging Sita by the hand in front of the “open door of the room. 'She has been sitting under the “banyan tree sobbing.'

'Leave her alone, Dhapu,' said the mistress gently. 'Why are you crying, Sita? Has Vijay again been mean to you?' “Hukkurn, let me go to school,' stuttered the girl between

“sobs.

'Who has said no to you, but today is Sunday, child; there “is no school. So why do you cry?’

In order to distract Sita, Bhagwat Singhji's wife took out “a four anna piece from her blouse pocket and gave it to Sita “and said, 'Now wipe your face and go get the salted peanuts “you like so much.'

'Only a mother-in-law will put her right,' said Dhapu “acidly. 'She has got used to an easy life; that is why she likes “school. Who wouldn't? It's better to be opening and “shutting books than sweeping and cleaning.'

The mistress heaved a vast sigh of relief as Sita wiped her “nose with the back of her hand and left.

'Dhapu, where is Binniji, is she still upset about Sita?' “inquired the mistress anxiously.

'I don't know, Hukkum; but today Binniji sent the “women away and said that she was not well and would not “take the classes,' said Dhapu almost in a whisper.

'I am glad she did that. These classes have given her “nothing but headaches. Pari, did you notice the other day, “how Nandu Bai Sa and the rest avoided talking to Binniji?' “said the mistress in a troubled voice.

'Whatever anyone may say, Binniji has changed the lives “of these girls, Hukkum; most of them now can read and “write; they can get work, they don't have to depend on the “havelis,' said Pari.

'Yes, that may be so, Pari, but our life is with the women “in the havelis; we can't afford to displease our own “community beyond a point. I have noticed a change in them “even towards me,' said Bhagwat Singhji's wife with an air of “self-righteousness.

Pari lowered her heavy wrinkled eyelids and took out her “snuff box, inhaling a pinch. She added after a little “reflection, 'What are these ladies from big havelis com- “plaining about now? Their own daughters and daughters-in- “law come and sit for hours with Binniji. It's only the poor “that they prevent from coming,' said Pari with bitterness. “Do you know, Hukkum, that Kanta Bai Sa's sister-in-law “has threatened her maid that if her daughter comes here once “more she will take all her jewellery away? Many women are “really afraid. Soon, no one who is poor will be able to come “to the classes.' Pari spoke with unusual force, her sunken “cheeks flushed with anger. She had forgotten her initial “objection to the classes. Besides, her deep loyalty to the “haveli always came to the surface when anyone was critical “of her mistress.

Bhagwat Singhji's wife knew better than to contradict Pari when she was defending

the haveli. But the mistress had “also noticed that fewer maids from the havelis were coming “to the classes. She had not asked Geeta about it as she “thought it would ‘only ignite her simmering anger.

While the mistress and Pari were silently putting away the “clothes, they could hear that there was excitement in the “kitchen. Even across the courtyard the cook’s voice, de-“liberately raised, sounded authoritative. ‘The astrologer has “given only three days as auspicious. The boy’s family want “the first, which falls at the beginning of next month. This “gives you women only three weeks to get everything ready. “As for Gangaram, he sits and smokes his bidi. He has not “even arranged for the four hundred rupees, the minimum he “will need for the engagement. The haveli cannot give him “everything. He thinks money is like dry leaves on a tree that “fall when you shake the branches. But he is not the only one “who thinks I have money buried in the ground; they keep “borrowing but never bother to pay me back,’ the cook “added, unable to conceal his pride in the fact that he was the “only servant who had money to lend.

Dhapu looked at the cook with icy contempt; she knew “the last dig referred to her.

‘Don’t shout so loudly, don’t you know that Kanwar Sa “has visitors?’ said Gangaram coming into the courtyard. His “gait was unsteady and his walk slow, but his voice was “strong.

The cook did not finish the sentence he had started. Instead he looked menacingly at Gangaram and said, ‘Just “remember that there are three weeks left for you to make all “the arrangements. Get some money from somewhere.’

The mistress came into the kitchen. But Pari sat on where “she was; she felt tired and weak.

‘Dhapu, go up and take this hot glass of milk for Binniji. I “know she is depressed, but this time nor even her father-in-law can help her,’ said Bhagwat Singhji’s wife, handing the “silver tumbler to the maid.

Geeta was lying on the mattress idly turning the pages of a “magazine. Sita sat curled up in a corner and cracked open the “peanuts she had bought for herself.

‘Binniji, drink this; Kanwarani Sa is worried about you,’ “said Dhapu sitting down on the floor.

‘Leave me alone,’ said Geeta sharply.

‘Binniji, you can kill me but I won’t leave until you have “drunk the milk,’ said Dhapu as she raised the glass to Geeta’s “mouth.

Geeta took it and gulped down the milk and handed the “glass back to Dhapu, but still she showed no signs of leaving. “Instead, she said to Sita, 'Go and play with Vijay Bai Sa. She “has been looking for you everywhere.' Sita for once obeyed. “She gathered up the remaining peanuts in her hands and left, “leaving the door ajar.

Seeing Dhapu's droopy face, Geeta said, 'Now what are “you grumpy about? You should be happy; soon there will be “enough commotion in the haveli to keep you satisfied for the “next six months.' Geeta drew up her knees and rested her “chin on them. Her thin nostrils were distended; her face “tense, but after all these years she had learned to keep her “emotions under control.

'Do you think I care what happens to that wretched girl?' “said Dhapu. 'Ever since she was born she has caused nothing “but trouble.' Her face seemed darker than usual.

'No, of course you don't care, now that you have “succeeded in crippling her future.' Geeta could not contain “herself. 'What is the idea of stopping Sita from continuing “with school when she is going to remain in the haveli for “another two years even after she is married?'

Dhapu did not react. She caught hold of Geeta's feet and edged near the mattress. 'Forget Sita, Hukkum. Kanwarani “Sa has already told Sita that she can go to school tomorrow. “But, Binniji, I have something more important to tell you.'

'Now what have you discovered?'

Dhapu drew in her breath and said in a whisper, 'I heard “Khyali telling Gokulji that perhaps the woman who gives “Sita ladoos is Lakshmi.'

Geeta moved forward in astonishment. She pushed back “the wisps of hair that fell over her face and said eagerly, “When did you hear this?'

'Two days ago, but I waited until I could get it “confirmed. It was only late last night that I could get a word “alone with the cook. He was furious that I had overheard “him talk. He said it was a secret and he didn't want women “interfering; above all he warned me not to mention a word “to the mistress.'

As Dhapu took a deep breath, Geeta stood up and “defiantly said, 'Who is the cook to determine who should “know and who should not? Tell me where Lakshmi is and I “will myself go and get her.'

Dhapu looked at Geeta with frightened eyes and her voice “shook as she pleaded. 'No, no, Binniji, don't do anything in “a hurry; Lakshmi is not going to come back whatever you “do, and if you try and see her, I can tell you, she will shut the “door in your face.'

'But why?'

'Khyali has found out that she is now staying in the house "of a tongawalla, whose wife is in the village. Before, she had "worked for a tailor, so you see what she has become. But "now her mother's heart aches to see her child.'

'That is why I say, let us bring her back; she won't then "have to work for all these people.'

'Binniji, you don't understand; the cook has already made inquiries through a friend. Lakshmi is happy and doesn't "want to change her life.'

'I don't trust any of you; I want to find out myself,' said "Geeta ignoring the heavy tears falling down Dhapu's cheeks.

There was silence; neither of them spoke. But when "Dhapu had mastered her emotions she turned gravely to "Geeta and said in a controlled voice: 'Binniji, don't do "anything just now. If you do, Sita's life will be ruined "forever. She will never find a boy, let alone a boy who will "one day become a teacher. I beg you, let her get married and "then you can do what you like.'

Geeta sat down as abruptly as she had got up. She knew "there was no question of her going out in search of Lakshmi. "She felt defeated and yet this time she understood Dhapu's reasoning and accepted it. .

Chapter III

As soon as the first rays of the sun came up, Sita quietly “slipped from under her quilt, rolled up her bed and stacked it “in the corner of the room. She left Vijay and her two little “brothers sleeping, and came down to the courtyard. She “quickly washed her face and put on her best frock. Then she “combed and plaited her hair with the special red nylon “ribbon and went into the kitchen verandah. The cook was “already in the kitchen blowing hard into the fire to get it “going. He looked at Sita and gave her an affectionate pat on “the head. She took a roti, and a tepid glass of milk, and “quickly munching the roti, gulped down the milk. Then she “went to the outside verandah and sat down on the cold “marble floor. She saw some village women swiftly walking “past with balanced bundles of firewood and vegetables on “their heads to the accompaniment of clanging anklets and “jingling bangles. Men, pedalling to work, hunched over “bicycles, rang their bells to warn the women to make way. “But Sita paid little attention to the street's coming awake. “She was preoccupied with the things she had made to give away as presents in school. 'I will give the crochet bag to the “woman who gives me ladoos. But what if she never comes “again?' She dismissed that possibility, drew a deep breath “and reflected again: 'The bead fan I will give to Renu-my “real friend. The embroidered handkerchief I will give to my “class teacher.' She was so occupied with her own thoughts “that she didn't hear the courtyard door open and Pari emerge “limping.

'So you are sitting here dreaming while poor Vijay Bai Sa “is frantically looking for you in every room. Come inside; “Kanwarani Sa wants to see if the anklets are the right size for “you.'

Sita got up obediently but looked at the old maid with “cold, menacing eyes for having disturbed her in her reverie. “They bumped into Vijay at the entrance of the courtyard. “Where have you been?' said Vijay, catching hold of Sita's “hand and turning her around.

'Bai Sa, leave her alone for a minute,' said Pari. 'Bara “Bhabhi wants to see her in her room.'

Vijay accompanied Sita and Pari to her grandmother and, “impatient at the delay, snatched an anklet from Dhapu's “hand and fastened it on Sita's foot. 'You see? They are all “right,' said Vijay standing up. 'Pariji, you don't understand. “I have my monthly test. I

can't be late to school today.' "Vijay took Sita's hand and pulled her along. 'Come on, you "can take it off in the car.'

Pari stood quietly but watched the two little girls leave. "Well, there she goes to school again; Vijay Bai Sa treats her "like a sister; nobody can stop her,' she observed affection- "ately.

'Let her go today, Sita knows that she cannot continue for "long,' said Bhagwat Singhji's wife getting up. She went to "the kitchen; Pari followed her.

'How times have changed. If I had run around like this, Bhabha Sa would have chained me to her bed,' said Pari "with a slight tinge of regret.

'There you are again talking about the past; thank your "god that you don't have much longer to live. What the girls "will do in the future will be much worse than anything you"see now,' said the cook with an air of great wisdom.

'You are right, Khyali,' said the mistress with a sigh and "sat down in the warm kitchen. 'Pari, you forget how Bhabha "Sa scolded me if I even looked out of the window with my "face uncovered, once I was thirteen. Pari, neither of us have "known what it was to be young and carefree but don't let us "talk of the past; it makes me sad,' said Bhagwat Singhji's "wife. Then as if to get out of her reminiscent mood she "turned to the cook and continued in an even voice, 'Khyali, "leave the cooking to Ganga and go to the silversmith. The "anklets are all right but get four more bangles and. two "bracelets. '

Just as she was explaining the details of what kind of "design she wanted, there was banging on the outside door. "The mistress rose quickly and hurried across the courtyard "and went into her room. She didn't want to be seen in her "old sari and skirt by outsiders.

'Now who has come at this time of the day?' said Dhapu "throwing the broom in a corner before she went to open the "door. She took two steps backwards with surprise when she "recognized the visitors were ladies from Daulat Singhji's "haveli, the most prestigious haveli in the city. She immedi- "ately bent down and touched their feet.

Pari saw the ladies enter from the kitchen verandah and "got up, and walked towards them. With folded hands she "said, 'Welcome, Hukkurn, to the haveli.' The women "accepted her greetings as they followed Pari and Dhapu to "the sitting room. The maids accompanying them sat in the "verandah as the ladies went in.

There was an awkward silence as the women sat down. Even Pari seemed at a loss for the appropriate words to "say.

Daulat Singhji's wife lifted the sari from her face as she "sat down on the thin mattress and looking at Pari affection- "ately, she said, 'I am sorry to disturb you but you know how

“it is in the havelis, my time is not my own. I had a little time “today and so we came unannounced. I hope Kanwarani Sa is “not busy.’ Before Pari could reply, Bhagwat Singhji’s wife “entered the room. The younger women got up instantly, “bent down and touched her feet. Daulat Singhji’s wife stood “up too. The formality over, Bhagwat Singhji’s wife said in “a well-modulated voice, ‘Please sit down, Hukkum. You “should not have taken the trouble to come. It is for me to pay “my respects to you, especially when you have trouble “walking,’ she said addressing her remarks to Daulat “Singhji’s wife. ‘Pains and aches are part of old age, but if I took to my “bed, who would look after the haveli?’ replied the senior “lady with an affected air of melancholy.

‘You are right, Hukkum, so many people are dependent “on you that you can’t afford to be ill but still you must take “care of yourself,’ replied Bhagwat Singhji’s wife a little “distractedly. Then she looked at Dhapu who took the hint “that she must get refreshments for the visitors.

‘No don’t trouble yourself; on Monday we eat only once a “day,’ said Daulat Singhji’s wife as she saw Dhapu get up to “leave the room.

‘You have honoured us with your presence; how can you “leave without having something?’ said Bhagwat Singhji’s “wife beseechingly.

‘We have eaten and drunk in this haveli as in no other, “Hukkum. Who can ever forget the past splendour of Jeewan “Niwas? The names of Kanwar Sa and his forefathers are written in the annals of Rajasthan’. The younger women nodded as the elder lady spoke in an extravagant manner.

Bhagwat Singhji’s wife flushed deeply; she clasped and “unclasped her hands nervously. She looked into the dark “brown eyes behind the gold rimmed spectacles to fathom the “meaning behind the flow of words.

Daulat Singhji’s father had had a grudge against Sangram “Singhji, which he had passed on to his son. They, as a “family, had done their utmost to poison the reputation of “Jeewan Niwas to the Maharana, but when they failed they “had tried other means to undermine the standing of Sangram “Singhji. It was well known among the havelis that nothing “gave Daulat Singhji’s family more pleasure than the “misfortunes of Jeewan Niwas. On every occasion they were “the first to come and condole with the family especially “when Sangram Singhji had problems with the palace.

But in spite of all this, Sangram Singhji and then Bhagwat “Singhji were never amiss in showing them the highest “courtesy due as one of the oldest families in Udaipur. This “attitude only further infuriated them. Daulat Singhji could “never forget that once the ministers of Udaipur were chosen “from his family. This honour had been taken away from

“them and given to Sangram Singhji's father and remained “with his family until the Rana lost his powers and the State “of Udaipur was dissolved. Daulat Singhji's family were still “the richest family but they resented the prestige enjoyed by “Jeewan Niwas in the last two generations.

'Where is Binniji?' asked the wife of Daulat Singhji. “Hukkum, you have been blessed with many things but your “daughter-in-law is the haveli's greatest ornament.'

'You have always been generous in your praises for this “haveli,' replied Bhagwat Singhji's wife with customary “humility.

Just as she had finished her sentence, Geeta came in “and silently bent down and touched the feet of the veiled “ladies.

'May you always wear red and may your sons carry on the “illustrious name of this haveli,' said Daulat Singhji's wife “putting her hand on Geeta's head.

Outside in the courtyard the chatter was getting louder. The maids of the two havelis were exchanging news. Dhapu “and Ganga had cut the fruit and were impatiently waiting “for the boy they had dispatched in haste to the bazaar to buy “the milk sweets.

Bhagwat Singhji's wife was getting a little restless; she “knew that her guests had come for some special reason and “their polite small talk made her, for once, impatient and “nervous. Daulat Singhji's wife was not one of her favourite “women. She was arrogant and carried herself with a “forbidding dignity. Her face was strong and determined. “There was little gentleness in her expression; it seemed she “never wanted others to forget that her family was the richest “in Udaipur. Bhagwat Singhji's wife looked at the enamel “necklace round her neck and recognized it as the gift of the “Maharani to her on the occasion of the birth of her son. “After a few more exchanges Bhagwat Singhji's wife was “getting inattentive, she looked relieved when Ganga came in “with the silver tray and plates.

'Hukkum, why did you take so much trouble?' said “Daulat Singhji's wife looking over her gold rimmed glasses “and surveying the tray.

Geeta got up to serve the guests. Daulat Singhji's wife said with the practiced dignity, “Hukkum, our children are growing up and we must think of their future before we are too old. While we are alive we “must try everything to preserve our traditions and maintain “the position which we have inherited from our forefathers.'

Then she shifted her weight from one leg to the other “and continued, 'You know Vir Singh, my son, has just “passed his B.A. with a first class. We are grateful to God, but “you know my father-in-law is getting old; his last wish is to “see his only grandson engaged before his eyes in a family of “equal status.'

At last the purpose of the visit had become clear to “Bhagwat Singhji's wife. Her eyes lost their nervousness; she “tried to conceal her joy and satisfaction. But she kept silent; “she wanted the proud Daulat Singhji's wife to spell out every “word.

'Vijay Bai Sa is also growing up; she must be turning “thirteen now,' Daulat Singhji's wife said. Then she hesi- “tatingly cleared her throat, hoping that Bhagwat Singhji's “wife would meet her halfway but when she picked up a “piece of the milk sweet and put it on her plate, Daulat “Singhji's wife continued, her voice sweet and mellow: 'Bai “Sa, I have come today to ask you to give us Vijay Bai Sa. One “day I want to hand her the keys to the haveli safe; if I knew “she were coming into our family, my happiness would be “complete.'

'You honour us by this proposal, but Vijay is still a child “even if she is nearly thirteen years old,' said Bhagwat “Singhji's wife lightly. But she managed to keep her voice “steady. She did not want Daulat Singhji's wife to think that “a proposal from that family was automatically acceptable to “her.

'I know Binniji is not like us, she won't approve of early “marriages; but Vir Singh is going to England for higher “studies. We only want to have his engagement ceremony “before he leaves; marriage can wait and meanwhile Vijay Bai “Sa can continue her education,' said Daulat Singhji's wife “looking at Geeta who sat erect, her lips twitching with rage “and her hands tightly clasped around her knees.

Bai Sa, you are wise to settle Bapu Vir Singh's marriage “before he leaves for a foreign land. I am told women there “are very different from ours,' said Bhagwat Singhji's wife “with an air of great wisdom.

'Hukkurn, convey our desire to Kanwar Sa. I need not tell “you that your child would be in want of nothing in our “family. What more can I say?' said Daulat Singhji's wife “with feigned modesty.

'Who can doubt the comforts that a daughter-in-law “would enjoy in your haveli? Then to have a mother-in-law “like you, what more could a mother want for her daughter?' “replied Bhagwat Singhji's wife using equally exaggerated “terms.

'Hukkum,' she said after insisting that Daulat Singhji's “wife eat another piece of fruit, 'we must first see if the “horoscopes match; I will send for the family priest as soon as “possible.' She knew that astrologers provided the most “polite way of declining a marriage proposal. No one ever felt “slighted if a proposed marriage was not accepted because the “stars foretold misfortune.

Pari and Dhapu offered the ladies sherbet with greater “attention, their faces visibly happy. The ladies pleaded that “they had eaten enough. Daulat Singhji's wife's face beamed “with contentment as she got up slowly; her knee joints “cracked and she winced a little.

After an elaborate exchange “of praises for each other's havelis, the ladies finally left. “Bhagwat Singhji's wife and Geeta escorted them right up to “the back door of the haveli.

As soon as Dhapu closed the door behind the ladies, she “came running into the courtyard shouting: 'So at last the “great Daulat Singhjis have come begging to us; who “wouldn't for my lotus-faced Vijay Bai Sa?'

Ganga and Champa were going round and round hitting “the back of a thali with their hands, laughing with joy.

Geeta walked slowly back into the courtyard; the corners of “her mouth sagged as if she were about to cry.

'Binniji, you can't leave without giving us something,' the “maids said surrounding her. But as they saw their mistress's “flushed smouldering face, they quietly shrank away. Geeta “followed her mother-in-law into the room.

'What do you think of the proposal?' said Bhagwat “Singhji's wife lightly, as she sat down exhausted, and then as “if it were pleasant to reminisce she continued, 'All these “years they have resented your father-in-law's position in the “State and his prestige in the community. However, they are “not only wealthy but among the three or four families who “have produced ministers and enjoyed a special place in the “Maharana 's court. Anyone would give their daughter to that “haveli.' Half suspecting that these arguments would not “appeal to Geeta, Bhagwat Singhji's wife added, 'What we “want is a good boy for Vijay. Vir Singh is a clever boy and he “will come back from England as educated as my son I am “sure. Even your father-in-law won't reject the proposal out “of hand.' Bhagwat Singhji's wife knew that was the only “way to impress her daughter-in-law.

'Bhabhi, whatever happens, Vijay can't get engaged “at this age,' blurted out Geeta. Bhagwat Singhji's wife “looked up surprised. This was the first time that Geeta “had spoken in a raised voice to her. Then as she saw Geeta's “eyes darken and her pale face turn hard and stern she kept “silent.

After the outburst, Geeta went up to her room and lay “down on her bed. She saw the faces of the heavily bejewelled “ladies in the morning and was once again filled with hate “for all that Udaipur stood for. 'What a mistake I made to “stay on here; I could have easily persuaded Ajay to leave. “This had to come sooner or later. Now I am really trapped “and cannot escape. But on this point I will never give in, whatever happens. If I have ruined my life, the children “are not going to ruin theirs.' The violence of her thoughts “sent shafts of pain through her head. Her lips were pursed “together and her body was taut. The maids dared not go “up. They knew that their chatter would only make Geeta “more furious. This was a serious consideration and they “knew that their young mistress would not stand nonsense “from them.

Geeta lay on her bed engulfed in a cloud of emotion which “she did not try to dispel. It was late in the afternoon when Ajay Singh came up to her room. ‘So you are upset with all this talk of marriage?’ he said “sitting down on the bed.

Geeta sat up, her hair dishevelled and her eyes red, her “voice trembling with anger. She said, ‘I have put up with “enough in your family, and I am not prepared to bend any “more. I won’t ever agree to this criminal act of deciding who “Vijay will marry when she is still a child. I know exactly “how these things work in this place. First they will only “want an engagement and no sooner has that been done, “they’ll start talking about marriage. You are all a bunch of “hypocrites. In order to get the girl you want you make any “promise, agree to anything. Don’t I know the smooth “velvety language of the havelis. Well, Ajay, let me tell you “that I don’t care what family Vir Singh comes from or how “much money he has buried in the ground. I will never agree “to engage Vijay to a boy who is still in college. Who knows “what he will be like when he is a man?’

‘But why are you getting so worked up? Who has ever said “that Vijay will be engaged? After all, if a proposal comes for “our daughter, should we drown ourselves in disgrace? Now “get up and answer me,’ said Ajay Singh seriously.

His complacency infuriated Geeta even more. She said, “her voice quivering and her eyes moist with tears, ‘Don’t think this time I am going to be taken in by your smooth soft “words. I was a fool, I now realize, not to have insisted that “you leave Udaipur. But don’t think that I can be fooled “again. I know nothing matters more than money and “prestige to you all. I know your mother is happy that at last a “rival haveli has been humbled by us to come begging for your “daughter.’

‘Geeta, before you jump to all these conclusions, just “listen to me,’ said Ajay Singh stretching his legs on the “bed. ‘Do you really think we would marry Vijay just for “money? And have you ever seen my father do anything “for the sake of money? He too could have mounds of gold “had he not cherished principles of integrity and honesty “above everything else, and now when it comes to his “granddaughter’s happiness, you think he will “exchange her” “for gold.’

Geeta gulped down the words that were on her lips. She “wasn’t thinking of her father-in-law when she attacked her “husband, but the women in the haveli. ‘All right, then you tell me what you think of the proposal,’ said Geeta sharply, trying to keep her voice down.

‘I haven’t even given it a thought,’ said Ajay Singh “carelessly. ‘When you have a girl like Vijay, hundreds of “proposals come, otherwise her parents send out a hundred “proposals and wait and see which family accepts their “daughter. How did your parents find a husband for you? “Have you forgotten? I don’t understand why you have made

“yourself sick over this visit. Now get up and stop wasting “your energy on trivial things. Cooped up in the haveli, I “think, you have lost your sense of humour. In the evening “when no one can see you, I am going to take you out for a “drive round Lake Pichola.’ He gave a little pat on Geeta’s “shoulder and then pulled her to her feet.

‘There you go again trying to appease me. No, I am not going out alone with you; the whole of Udaipur will be “talking the minute we are out of the gate. They are just “waiting for a chance to attack me,’ said Geeta defiantly.

‘Why do you care what the others say about you? As long “as I am with you, no one dare lift a finger against you,’ said “Ajay Singh resolutely.

Geeta got up; her husband’s words had calmed her. His “assurances to her were not mere words. He knew the strength “she got from him was real. She straightened her hair with her “hands and sat down on the easy chair.

‘Now tell me, who told you I was upset? Was it your “mother?’ she asked finally breaking into a smile.

But before Ajay Singh could reply the door opened with a “bang and Vijay burst in shouting. ‘Bhabhi, Pari says Sita “can’t go to school again; that today was her last day. She is “an awful bully. I hate her. Sita couldn’t even give all the “presents she had taken with her. The old woman with the “ladoos, for whom Sita had especially made a bag, never “came today. Please let Sita go to school tomorrow.’

‘Vijay, you are a big girl now,’ said Geeta gently, drawing “Vijay to her side, ‘You know Pari is doing this in Sita’s “interest, when she says she must not go to school any more. “We must prepare for her engagement. If you love her, then “don’t make it more difficult for her. From now on she can “join my classes and you can help her to go on with reading “and writing.’

But Ajay Singh, thinking Geeta was giving in to Pari in “her present temper with the haveli, interrupted and said, ““No, there is no reason to stop Sita from going to school. “Pari is not the one to decide everything. Vijay, you go and “tell her that Sita will go to school as long as Bhabhi thinks “right.’

Geeta looked at her husband full in the face and said in a “firm, determined voice: ‘Pari is right. In three weeks Sita is to be engaged; the condition is that she gives up school. The “boy is smart and we can help him to go on with his studies; “he is already in the tenth and comes first in his class. We “must not interfere. This means a life of happiness for Sita. “But Sita cannot continue with school.’ Both Ajay Singh and Vijay kept silent.

Chapter IV

The next morning Geeta came down especially early and “sat with the children while they drank their milk. She saw “Sita's drawn face and was afraid that the child might burst “out crying any minute. Her eyes were misty and she looked “forlorn. Sita stood silent behind the pillar while the other children “ate. Vijay too was sad. She didn't finish her milk nor her “halva. Since her mother had taken her into her confidence, “however, she didn't say anything. Then when she heard the “horn of the car she said bravely, 'Sita, you stay with Bhabhi; “don't be unhappy. I will buy you the pair of earrings you “liked in the corner shop. It won't be long before I am back “and then we will do something exciting.'

As soon as Vijay and her brothers were out of the “courtyard, Geeta took hold of Sita by the hand and sat her “down beside her. She told her that once her engagement “ceremony was over she would give her lessons every day. She “assured her that she would not permit the maids to give her household work; she had nothing to be afraid of, that her “life would remain the same. After all, one could learn just as “well at home as in school.

Sita smiled. She was pacified by what the young mistress “said to her.

Geeta then got up and sat in the verandah. She called “Ganga to bring the skirt and blouse that had to be tried on “Sit a. Sita willingly put them on. She neither cried nor made “a fuss. She did as she was told. After Sita had tried on all the “clothes Geeta took her by the hand and went upstairs to “dress for a visit to Daulat Singhji's haveli. Pari looked on “with wonder at the sudden change in Sita's mood. Ganga “seeing her so docile was about to say something to provoke “her, when she heard the loud coarse voice of the cook.

'What a day. I must have seen an unlucky face first thing “in the morning.' Then, as he came into the kitchen and saw “the mistress, he lowered his voice and said, "Kanwarani Sa. “Sita's future uncle-in-law is here.' He looked agitated.

'Khyali, the poor man must have come to borrow money “from you. Everyone knows you are rich,' said the mistress “with a little laugh.

'Hukhum, what he has to say is important,' replied the “cook gravely. The mistress

stopped measuring out the rice “for the servants and waited for him to go on.

'Sita's grandfather-in-law is ill and the family wants the “marriage in place of the engagement. They have already “consulted the astrologers and found that the next full moon “is the most auspicious day for the marriage scopes.' The “cook having finished, sat down holding his head in the “palms of his hands.

'The way you looked, Khyali, I thought the marriage was “off,' said the mistress with a sigh of relief. 'I was afraid that “someone had raked up the past and the family had changed “its mind.'

'If they did that now, I would knock their teeth in. We “have hidden nothing from them. They dare not insult the “haveli at this stage,' said the cook, proudly pushing his “shoulders back.

'Khyali, forget about knocking people's teeth out,' said “the mistress with a smile. 'I suppose we must agree to having “the engagement and marriage together. We would have got “ready for the engagement in two weeks, but to be ready for a “marriage is quite another thing. You know Gangaramji. He “can't be depended upon for anything.'

'And Khyali,' added Pari, with a businesslike air, 'buy the “sugar, get the wheat and oil, engage the cooks. Last minute “arrangements cost more.' Then she paused a moment as if “probing her memory and said thoughtfully, 'Send someone “to the village to warn Dhapu's husband that he will have to “come here in ten days. Gangaram without Lakshmi can't “preside over the marriage ceremony. Dhapu and her husband “will have to do that.'

The mistress nodded her head appreciatively. As Pari “talked the mistress thought of the saris that were already dyed and ready. She remembered she had some old silver “ornaments which she could have melted and made new for “Sita. She was not unduly worried. She had got ready in less “time than two weeks for some of her maids' and their “children's marriages.

There was the jingling of anklets. Dhapu came into the “kitchen looking worried; she said, 'Kanwarani Sa, have you “forgotten today we have to go to Daulat Singhji's haveli? “Their maids have come twice to remind us.'

The mistress got up wearily and went to change her “clothes. All of a sudden, she felt apprehensive about going to “Daulat Singhji's haveli. Were it not for Geeta's reaction to “the marriage proposal, she would have looked forward to “spending a morning in that haveli. In spite of being arrogant and reserved as she was with most other women, Daulat “Singhji's wife had always been open and gracious with her. “But today Bhagwat Singhji's

wife was uneasy. She had not “forgotten Geeta's sharp retort to her after Daulat Singhji's “wife's visit. Bhagwat Singhji's wife was proud and sensitive “and did not want to broach the subject again to Geeta. She “did not even want to tell her that nothing is gained by openly “showing one's feelings to others. She secretly hoped that “Geeta would be civil to the ladies.

Geeta sat ready in her room waiting to be called “downstairs. She felt a certain emptiness within as if she no “longer had the strength to play a part. But still there was a “strange calm within her that comes from being sure of “oneself. She was not afraid of facing the domineering “personality of Daulat Singhji's wife. Geeta knew this time “she would never give in.

'Binniji, do you know Sita is not going to be only engaged “but married in two weeks?' said Dhapu excitedly coming “into the room.

'Just as well. This will save a lot of money. What “difference does it make to Sita? She will continue to stay “here anyway,' replied Geeta. 'Bai, when do we have to leave “for the haveli?'

'We are already late and I haven't yet changed my sari, but “it won't take me too long,' said Dhapu, going into the “children's room. In a few seconds she was out dressed, “looking very satisfied with herself.

'Bai, why all this gold? Are you going to attend a feast or “what?' said Geeta, surprised to see Dhapu in her best red sari “and her gold earrings and bangles.

'If Daulat Singhji's maids come here all dressed up, in all “their finery, do you think I am going there in my faded sari? “No, not me.'

Geeta smiled and then all of a sudden the confidence she had had a few minutes before left her and she asked “fearfully, 'Bai, will they discuss Vijay's marriage? What am “I to say? How I wish I had high fever. I hate going to that “huge haveli.'

'Binniji, why do you worry about things that don't “concern you? As long as your parents-in-law are alive, you “don't have any problems. Vijay Bai Sa is the eldest “grandchild, the first daughter in the family after forty years. “They'll never marry her unless they are absolutely sure of “everything. Don't worry. Leave it to your elders to decide “what is best for Vijay Bai Sa.'

'My daughter's marriage is my concern. I will never agree “to Vijay's engagement like this, no matter what happens. “Even if it were the son of Maharana of Udaipur, I wouldn't “agree,' replied Geeta as if she had thrown all restraint aside.

Dhapu looked at her mistress with startled eyes. She “had never heard her speak so firmly, clearly and decisively. “She silently accompanied Geeta downstairs. There were “moments when Dhapu did not know how to approach her “mistress.

Bhagwat Singhji's wife was ready and sitting quietly in “her room. She got up when she heard the sound of anklets “and walked with Geeta slowly out to the car. Pari and “Champa got in front with Heeralal. Dhapu sat with the “ladies in the back seat. Sita managed to squeeze in next to “Dhapu. She was delighted that she was going to the haveli “that one day might belong to Vijay.

Geeta was so preoccupied with her thoughts that she did “not notice the happy faces of the people, nor of the children “who peeped into the car when it stopped to let a pack of “donkeys move off the road. She did not even mind the “obnoxious smell of the open drains as the car turned into a “narrow gully. She only came to life when the car stopped in “front of the mammoth gates of Daulat Singhji's haveli.

The maids were already waiting outside the courtyard “gate to escort the ladies to the inner apartments.

Daulat Singhji's wife, who sat with a group of women, “got up as soon as Bhagwat Singhji's wife entered the large, “rectangular room. The walls and ceiling were distempered in “pink. From the ceiling hung enormous blue chandeliers. The “floor was thickly carpeted and the divans were covered with “gold embroidered velvet.

Daulat Singhji's wife greeted her with folded hands while “the younger women touched the feet of Bhagwat Singhji's “wife.

'It is truly gracious of you to come, especially when you “are so busy preparing for Sita's marriage,' said Daulat “Singhji's wife effusively.

'Pariji is managing everything. I don't have to worry, and “in any case, it will be a simple marriage,' replied Bhagwat “Singhji's wife.

Geeta's impassive face became at once tense; she knew “that talk of Sita's marriage would lead to Vijay's engage- “ment. She sat rigid, her hands tightly clenched in her lap. She “knew that the question would be posed to her and she was “trying her best to take control of her emotions to be ready to “answer.

Daulat Singhji's wife got up as the maids came in with “trays full of refreshments; she personally served Bhagwat “Singhji's wife and Geeta. The women talked while they ate. “They exchanged news about other havelis and seemed to “enjoy themselves recounting tales of the grand old days.

While the women were busy talking, Geeta looked slyly “through her veil around the room. The walls were painted “with beautiful murals of hunting scenes, the doors carved “heavily and studded with brass knobs. The room was richly “decorated, though overcrowded with an assortment of brass, “china, swords and guns.

Just as Geeta fixed her eyes on an old stone sculpture that “stood in the corner, Daulat Singhji's wife said, 'Binniji, “what a blessing that Bapu Sa has decided to stay on in “Udaipur.' Then looking at Bhagwat Singhji's wife, she said, “Hukkum, I can't see you without your grandchildren “around you. They are the joy of the haveli.'

'Yes, that is so,' she said. 'But very soon Binniji will have “to take over the running of the havcli. Every day I feel “weaker. My eyes are also giving me trouble,' said Bhagwat “Singhji's wife, sounding a little pathetic. She was a great one “at pretending when it suited her convenience.

'Don't say that, Hukkum. No one can take your place in “the haveli. It is because of your graciousness that rich and “poor alike flock to Jeewan Niwas,' said Daulat Singhji's “wife with genuine appreciation.

The maids of Jeewan Niwas: had finished eating. Pari “came into the room and stood silently for a while. This was “an indication for Bhagwat Singhji's wife to take leave of the “ladies.

Bhagwat Singhji's wife gathered her skirt and said, “politely, 'Hukkum, we have taken a lot of your time. We “must go now.'

Geeta was surprised that no one had hinted about the “engagement. It was on everybody's mind, but the haveli was “proud and had its codes of restraint and behaviour. They had “the confidence that they did not have to implore anyone for “a girl for their son.

But as they were getting up Daulat Singhji's wife said, “Just a minute, Hukkum. You can't leave without giving Vir “Singh your blessings.'

While Daulat Singhji's wife was talking, one of the ladies “got up and went out of the room. Geeta sat up as if someone “had prodded her in the back. Her half-parted lips froze and a “cold shiver went through her body. The dreaded moment had at last come. But she hadn't expected to be confronted “with the boy. Before she could sort out her feelings the door in “front of her opened.

Vir Singh came into the room full of women. His face was “a little flushed, but otherwise he was quite composed. Geeta “looked at him through her veil. He was tall with clear cut “features, his complexion was light. His long limbs had still “the awkwardness of

youth. But there was a certain dignity in “his demeanour. As he bent down in front of Bhagwat “Singhji's wife, she said, 'God bless you. We are proud of “your success. May you continue to excel in your studies.' “Then, after a pause, she added, 'Bapu Sa, you are soon going “away into a foreign land, but wherever you are, don't ever “forget the traditions of your haveli.'

Before Vir Singh moved away, Bhagwat Singhji's wife, in “the customary way, took out a five rupee note from her “blouse and gave it to him. Vir Singh accepted it in both “hands and stood aside, his head slightly bent in respect to his “elders.

'Yes, remember this, Bapu, never give up what is ours. The old can only give you their blessings. The rest is in your “hands; Daulat Singhji's wife repeated.

After the formalities of taking leave were over, the ladies “and maids of Jeewan Niwas quietly stepped out of the room “accompanied by the women of Daulat Singhji's haveli.

Heeralal was battling with a group of little urchins who “had gathered round the car. He threatened them with his “clenched fists but they still crept up from behind and “touched the car from all sides. As soon as he saw the ladies “approaching, he opened the door of the car. The women got “in and as Heeralal started the engine, the children scattered “in all directions in fear that he would run them over in “revenge.

Bhagwat Singhji's wife drew her sari lower than usual over her face and sank back in the seat. She did not speak, “nor did Pari. Dhapu, sensing the tension, kept quiet even “though she was bursting with all the questions she wanted to “ask. Sita too kept quiet as she sat crouched near the “mistress's feet.

It was after midday by the time the ladies returned to “Jeewan Niwas. The courtyard was full of servants' children. “A marriage meant special excitement for them. They were “sure of fun whenever a feast was being arranged. The cook “sat in the verandah, telling the children all that he still had to “do. He warned them that they too would have to help or else “he would see that they were not given any ladoos.

Bhagwat Singhji's wife walked into the courtyard and “without saying a word to the children or to the cook, went “to her room. The cook looked on, puzzled. Usually after a 'visit to a haveli, the women returned full of gossip and sat “down and talked to him before going in to change. He “wondered what had gone so wrong that even the talkative “Dhapu was silent.

Geeta went up to her room. Sita was the only one who “was all smiles. She immediately joined the children and “began telling them about the big haveli.

Once in her room Geeta took off her sari, her jewels. She “was distracted; she was not prepared for such a morning. All “her fears had proven false. Daulat Singhji's wife had “conducted herself with dignity. There was no vulgar display “of affectation. She was haughty and proud, of that there was “no question. But still Geeta had not been offended. There “was something arresting about her personality. She was not “one to beg or implore anyone for anything,

After changing into lighter clothes, Geeta sat down on her “bed. There were no signs of displeasure on her face as she “thought of Vir Singh. He was tall and handsome and he had “the reticence and shyness of a well bred young man. Geeta had had only a glimpse of him. She was now sorry that she “had not looked at him more closely. But she was so tense “when he came into the room that her eyes were glazed. She “thought: he is going abroad; he is clever; he will do well. “Then she tried to wipe out the memory of Vir Singh from her “mind. 'I cannot agree to the engagement. It is too early. “What if he does not turn out as well as he looks? My Vijay “would languish in that vast haveli,' she said vehemently to “herself.

Another part of her mind thought of her own marriage. Her mother had been on the lookout for good boys for her “and her sisters as soon as they had entered their teens. She “was always ready to see prospective husbands for her “daughters, and at last had selected Ajay Singh. And the “reason was that he came from a good family and was “considered by others who knew him as a man of character.

Geeta remembered with a shock that she, too, had not “known her husband before her marriage. She had been “married by her parents with the hope that their judgement of “Ajay was right.

Her thoughts disturbed her. She didn't want to dwell on “the subject any more. She was confused. She got up from her “bed, took a book from the shelf and began to read.

Chapter V

Sarju the midwife came to stay in the haveli three days “before Sita's marriage. Her presence was essential. She had “to perform the purification rituals before the actual “ceremony. Sita had to be bathed in various aromatic herbs, “her hair washed with various kinds of sweet smelling “shampoos, then oiled. On her body perfumed paste was “rubbed so that the skin would be soft and radiant. Sarju had “performed these ceremonies for thirty years and knew “exactly what to do. She was careful in the ingredients she “used even though it was only Sita who was to be married. “She knew that the mistress would compensate her gene- “rously for her work. While Sarju went on with her grinding “and pounding the other maids, in between their work, “talked to her. The mistress sat with Pari, in her verandah. “The bundle of old saris made to look like new had just been “brought in by one of Gokul's grandsons. Pari opened it and “put the bright coloured saris beautifully starched before the “mistress, who looked pleased. No one could tell that once “the saris were stained and faded. They looked as if they had been bought from one of the most expensive shops in the “bazaar.

Vijay, for the last week, had got ready early and sat with “her grandmother till she had to leave for school. She was “interested in the new clothes and jewellery that were being “made ready for Sita.

'Bara Bhabhi, when I get married will you also give me so “many saris?' asked Vijay. Her striking dark brown eyes with “long curled eyelashes unwinkingly gazed at the heap of saris.

'My darling child,' exclaimed Bhagwat Singhji's wife, 'if “I live to see you married, I will give you the choicest of silks “and brocades. There will be such rejoicing in the haveli that “no child of Udaipur will ever forget your wedding.' Then she “looked at Vijay, her eyes full of adoration, and added in a “low, sad voice, 'But child, I am getting old. Who knows “whether I will see you married.' There was a catch in her “voice. She stopped and turned her face away to hide her “tears.

'And, Hukkum, I will dance and sing for days and nights. No one, not even Parijiji will be able to stop me. And, “Hukkum, once my Vijay Bai Sa leaves the haveli, I will leave

“too. I will go and stay with her,” said Sita, her eyes sparkling “with excitement.

Vijay got up embarrassed. She shouted to Vikram to “hurry up with his milk.

‘Sita, go to school with Bai Sa. In all this confusion I “completely forgot to send word to your teachers. What must “they be thinking of us? Go quickly, change. Invite your “friends and teachers and don't forget to ask your principal. “Pariji, even you didn't remind me. I hope they will forgive us “calling them at the last minute,’ said the mistress with “sudden misgiving.

Sita quickly went into the little storeroom where she kept “her clothes. She put on her best frock, smoothed her hair on top, then stood on the stone grinder and reached on the shelf “for the crochet bag, which she had made for the old woman “but had not given it because the day she had gone to school, “the woman had not come. Sita hoped that she might see her “today and give it to her.

‘Bara Bhabhi, today we will be back early from school,’ “said Vijay as she held Sita's hand and walked out of the “courtyard. Bhagwat Singhji's wife smiled; there was a “faraway look in her eyes when she spoke.

‘Pariji, if only Binniji wasn't so prejudiced against the “havelis, today we would be preparing for Vijay's engage- “ment. What an engagement that would be. But it is not my “fate to see even my granddaughter engaged,’ sighed the “mistress.

Pari nodded sadly. ‘Hukkurn, if Vijay Bai Sa is destined to go to Daulat Singhji's haveli, she will. Not even Binniji can prevent that,’ “said Sarju with conviction.

‘Come, let us not waste any more time talking about “something which is in God's hands,’ said Bhagwat Singhji's “wife philosophically. ‘Show me the new saris we have “brought for Sita. Gangaramji must not feel that because Sita “hasn't a mother, we have neglected her trousseau.’

Pari winced a little. She resented the mistress's remarks, “but didn't say anything. She continued to arrange the saris in “different piles. She did not want to remind the mistress that “she, too, was anxious and had not slept for ten days so that “everything was done properly and inexpensively.

The maids had sat up late into the night stitching blouses “and skirts for Sita. Their eyes were sore from tacking on the “silver trimmings to the saris. All this they did to economize; “they knew that Gangaram without Lakshmi could not “manage.

Khyali was exhausted from his many trips to the silversmith who was busy with the

big orders; the small “orders did not interest him. It was the marriage season and “all the silversmiths were working overtime to make what “profit they could. Khyali needed all his skill of persuasion to “get Sita's anklets and bracelets in time. Everything was in “short supply. The prices had gone up. The children had to go “miles to buy hooks and buttons at the cheapest possible “price. The mistress, Pari felt, had no need to remind the “servants of Gangaram's predicament. Before making her “remark she should have known that the servants too had “feelings that could be bruised. Even Sarju was surprised and “wondered if there was a deeper meaning to what the mistress “had said, but in the presence of Bhagwat Singhji's wife she “could not question Pari.

Sarju carefully sorted out the different saris, according to “their quality, and the trimmings on them. The best ones she “gave to Pari to put aside for Sita and her immediate in-laws. “The second best were for distant relatives. Once the saris “were tied up in bundles, the mistress got up. The rest of the “trousseau was in her room. It, too, needed sorting. Bhagwat “Singhji's wife, though prepared to spend on Sita's trousseau, “did not want to be too lavish. At the same time she did not “want even Pari to guess what was going on in her mind.

Only Gangaram seemed to go about doing his work as “usual. But his eyes had lost their dreamy look. They were “heavy with black shadows around them, as if he hadn't slept “for weeks. When he finished his cleaning and sweeping of “the haveli, he would join Gokul for a quiet smoke. It was “then he would share his worries. Even though the mistress “was paying for the clothes and jewellery for Sita, the feeding “of the guests was his responsibility. He had borrowed four “hundred from the cook but he needed more money. Gokul “advised him to ask the master, but he hesitated to do that. “He knew he would not be refused but he did not want to seek further help from the haveli. He was grateful that the major “share of the expenses were being paid by the master. At the “same time, he did not want the bridegroom's party to feel “that he had not entertained them in a befitting manner. He “was prepared to borrow at even four rupees interest on every “hundred, but not let the master know his worry.

Geeta was already in Bhagwat Singhji's wife's room. She “waited there for Dhapu to give her Sita's ornaments to put in “the safe. 'Binniji, I want a pair of bracelets just like these, “but in gold. But remember, I will accept nothing but pure “gold for Vijay Bai Sa's marriage,' said Dhapu, her eyes “dancing with joy.

'Bai, by the time Vijay gets married you will be an old “woman, toothless and wrinkled. Gold will no longer suit “you,' Geeta replied with a mischievous glint in her eyes.

'Wrinkled or not, I will wear my gold bracelets so "Binniji-' she didn't finish her sentence. Instead, she put a "finger on her mouth to warn Geeta that the mistress was coming.

Bhagwat Singhji's wife came in with Sarju and sat down "on a mat Dhapu spread for her. Sarju immediately got down "to work. She untied the bundle of skirts. Then she picked up "the red embroidered skirt and said, 'Hukkum, in this skirt "Sita will get married.' Then with a deep sigh she added, 'I "am still haunted by the day when she was born. I often get up "in the night, especially on a rainy night and hear her "mother's accusing voice, "Who do you think I am that you "neglect me like this?" If only I had known that her stars were "against her, that she would never know the joys and sorrows "of motherhood, I would never have scolded her. But, "Hukkum, I will never forgive myself for being harsh to "Lakshmi. Poor girl. What a price she has paid for her stupid "pride.'

'Yes, she has paid heavily for something which was not even her fault. But, Sarju, don't blame yourself. She was "destined not to see her daughter married. Otherwise, why "should she have run away in the dead of night? She knew I "would never have pointed a finger at her,' the mistress said in "a hoarse voice full of remorse and regret.

The mention of Lakshmi cast an immediate gloom on "everyone. There wasn't a person who hadn't thought of "Lakshmi in the last weeks. But no one had the heart to talk "of her openly. Dhapu was especially careful. Since she knew "that Lakshmi was in the city, she, in particular, had never "mentioned her name. Once or twice when the mistress had "broached the subject, Dhapu had quickly found an excuse "and left. For the first time in her life, she had kept a secret "without whispering it to others, after extracting an oath of "secrecy from them. Hearing the mistress and Sarju talk, "Dhapu looked at Geeta with troubled eyes.

There was silence in the room. No one wanted to talk.

Sarju, having selected the wedding skirt, turned her "attention to the jewellery. Pari counted the close relatives on "the knuckles of her fingers. The mistress looked on as the "maids sorted out the women's clothes from those of the "men.

'Hukkum, I must go to the bazaar immediately,' "announced the cook from the courtyard. He breathed hard "for a moment, then dropped his hands helplessly to his sides "and added, 'That cloth merchant whom I have known for "years has cheated me.' He held the white cloth in his hands "for the mistress to see. 'Just look at these turbans. They are "not worth two rupees each and I paid for the best quality "cloth. He thought I wouldn't

check but he doesn't know me. 'I am a hundred times more cunning than he is.'

'Khyali you are right. We can't give these to the "bridegroom's party," said the mistress fingering the, cloth "carefully. 'Go and change them in the afternoon, but not now. The children will be back early today,' said Bhagwat "Singhji's wife wearily. She sat down and leaned against the "stone pillar. The memory of Lakshmi had shattered her calm "and enthusiasm. She pushed aside the bundles of saris and "got up and went to the kitchen verandah. There she knew she "could always find something to occupy herself. She opened "the cupboard in the wall and took out a tin of wafers to see if "they were getting mouldy.

Ganga and Champa came into the courtyard with the "washing. They sang while they hung the saris and skins out "to dry. Dhapu was pounding the turmeric pods into powder "for the ceremonial bath before the marriage. Geeta came and "sat down next to her, leaving her mother-in-law in the "kitchen. Bhagwat Singhji's wife's silence made her fidgety; "she was not accustomed to seeing her sit quietly.

It was midday when the familiar sound of the horn was "heard again. The mistress's face immediately lit up; her "voice got back its strength and she told the cook to put the "halva on the fire.

'Bara Bhabhi, we had such fun in school today,' cried "Vijay as she burst into the courtyard. 'Bara Bhabhi, we did "not work at all. The whole morning we rehearsed the play "we are giving at the end of term.' Sita came behind Vikram "and flopped down on the kitchen verandah.

Seeing Sita, Vijay said excitedly, 'Bara Bhabhi, all Sita's "friends are coming. They have brought presents for her. Even "her teachers are going to give her gifts. Bara Bhabhi, they "were just waiting to be invited.' Vijay tossed her hair back "from her face and then as if she had forgotten to report the "most important event of the morning, said, 'Sita, where is "the package the ayah gave you?'

'Oh, I carried your books and so forgot the bundle in the "car,' replied Sita casually.

'Then go and get it; I am curious if you are not.

Remember your promise that I can take what I like from "your presents,' said Vijay.

Sita nodded her head and then got up reluctantly and ran "out of the courtyard. In a second she was back, holding the "package in her hands.

'That is what the ayah gave me,' she said, as she put the "wrapped up bundle in front of the mistress. There was "consternation on every face, but no one dared to speak.

'I hope there are some ladoos in it. I love them,' said Vijay "as she undid the knot.

'Was the old woman there?' asked the mistress in a "hushed, frightened voice.

'No, Hukkum, the ayah said she came three or four times "till she told her I would not be coming to school again "because I was getting married. Then three days ago she came "again and left this bundle. Had I not gone today, the ayah "was going to bring it herself. I wish I had seen the old "woman. I wanted so much to give her the crochet bag I made "for her,' said Sita a little sadly.

'Did you ask the ayah where the old woman lived?' asked "the mistress in a low, urgent voice.

'No, Hukkum, I didn't but the ayah said that the last "time the woman came she sat and cried. I am so glad that I "wasn't there to see her! As it is, the girls in the school teased "me about her. Each time she came they would surround her; "make faces at her, try and lift the sari off her face, then she "flung her arms around like a mad woman. This frightened "the girls and they would scatter, calling her names and "throwing things at her. Hukkum, I am glad I wasn't there to "see her. I don't know why she cried because even I was afraid "of her when she lost her temper. She wasn't a bit afraid of "the girls.'

'Oh look, Sita,' said Vijay, who had opened the package. "Look, there is a beautiful sari for you. This time there are no ladoos. What a pity. Oh, here is a red skirt, too,' said Vijay, "lifting a tinsel embroidered skirt in her hand.

Suddenly Pari put her head in between her knees; Sarju turned her back; and from Bhagwat Singhji's wife a sob escaped.

Sita looked around in utter amazement. She could not "understand what had happened. She was frightened and "bewildered.

Geeta took the open package from Vijay and put her hand "in it to see if there was anything else. She picked up two "silver toe rings, a small box filled with red kumkum powder "and then a pair of silver anklets.

Before she could put them on the floor, Bhagwat Singhii's "wife said, in a husky but steady voice, 'Come here, child. Sit "near me. Listen. These are the auspicious symbols of "marriage. They come from your mother,' Bhagwat Singhii's "wife said in a solemn voice. Then her eyes closed and her face "wrinkled up in pain.

'My mother? That old woman my mother?' stuttered Sita "unbelievably.

'Yes, child, that good woman who gave you ladoos is no "one else but your mother,' replied Bhagwat Singhji's wife, "opening her eyes and looking with infinite tenderness at "Sita. 'I should have known that from the day you got ladoos. "But I didn't think; I was misled. I thought Lakshmi was not "in Udaipur.'

Sita looked at the mistress with wide open eyes as if she "did not quite understand what the mistress had said. Then "suddenly she put her head in Bhagwat Singhji's wife's lap "and burst out crying. 'That was my mother?'

Vijay quickly put her hand on the little girl's head and "repeated helplessly, 'Sita, don't cry. Please don't cry. Sita, "listen, I will give you anything you want, but please don't "cry.'

Chapter VI

Pari and Dhapu were apprehensive about Sita after seeing “her cry piteously, once she knew that the old woman was her “mother. They were prepared, to cajole her, soothe her, “explain to her, anything to help her to forget her mother. But “Sita went about the haveli as usual. Her greatest regret was “that she hadn't given the crochet bag to the woman. To her “she remained the woman who gave her ladoos. She could not “believe that the woman was her mother. She had not known “a mother's love and did not miss it. Her world remained “secure. Nothing had changed in it to disturb her peace of “mind. Pari, Dhapu, Ganga and Champa were all there. It “was from them she had received love and to them she “continued to look for love.

It was the day of Sita's marriage. The drummers were playing in the servants' quarters. The women singing. The servants' children were running in and out of the haveli courtyard. Manji, Nandu and Kanta were “talking to the mistress. Other relatives were scrutinizing the “trousseau. Geeta talked to Sita's teachers. The haveli ladies had come from the morning. Though it was only a servant's “child getting married, it was still a family occasion. For two “days, the maids of Jeewan Niwas had danced and sung late “into the evening. The courtyard was full of activity. But the “mistress had watched the simple festivities with a sad heart. “She could not forget Lakshmi, especially now that she was “certain that she was somewhere in the city. Bhagwat “Singhji's wife wept quietly, hiding her tears even from Pari. “She knew that on the day of a marriage tears were “inauspicious, and- she was relieved to see that Sita, after her “first outburst, was cheerful as before.

She drew comfort from her decision that once the “marriage celebrations were over she would go personally and “get Lakshmi back. But she kept her thoughts to herself; she “did not want to cast a shadow on the day of Sita's marriage.

Sita sat in the mistress's room, bewildered and resigned “after her bath. Her hair had been massaged with scented oil “and plaited. Her hands were bright red with henna. The “mistress had insisted that she wear the skirt and sari that “Lakshmi had sent, though they were not as good as the one “the haveli had made for her.

As the auspicious hour drew near Vijay helped Sita to put “on her bridal clothes. She fastened the bracelets on Sita's “wrists, slipped the bangles on her hands, tightened the “screws of her anklets.

Once she was ready, Sarju carefully covered Sita's head “and pulled the sari over her face. Her head bent, Sita walked “slowly to where the mistress sat watching. Manji and “Nandu looked at the little bride and quietly wiped the tears “off their cheeks. Then as Sita bent down to touch their feet, “they put a five rupee note in her hands and blessed her. “Bhagwat Singhji's wife coughed to hide her feelings. She “could not speak. Instead, she put her hands on the bride's “head. That conveyed more than words.

Vijay looked on perplexed. The change in Sita was so “complete that she hardly recognize her as the same girl “who, a week ago, pushed Vikram in his car around the “courtyard and shrieked with joy as the maids, frightened she “might run over their feet, got out of her way.

The servants' quarters were lit with a row of coloured “lights. The light became brighter as the evening became “darker. The astrologers had set the time just after sunset for “the arrival of the bridegroom. In the front yard of the “servants' quarters a square was marked by four uprooted “banana saplings that held the canopy under which the sacred “fire would be lit. It was gaily decorated with flowers, “balloons and paper streamers. The priests were already “there, making sure that they had all the auspicious “ingredients to perform the marriage rites.

The time for the bridegroom to arrive was drawing near. Dhapu had changed into a bright pink sari and skirt. She was “wearing all her jewellery. Her anklets jingled as she brought “in a silver thali in which there were a little lamp, a coconut, “five silver rupees, red kumkum powder, a lump of gur, and a “spray of incense sticks. The faint sound of a band came from “a distance. The women were alerted that the marriage “procession with the bridegroom was on its way. The “children ran out of the courtyard and stood outside, on the “verandah.

Gangaram, in a green and red striped turban with a clean “white kurta and pyjama, stood with Gokul, Khyali and “Dhapu's husband at the gate to receive the guests. Then, as “the sound of the four piece band became louder, Dhapu lit “the butter lamp and the incense sticks. She drew her sari over “her face. The singers broke out in a loud chorus. They sang “of the separation of a daughter from her mother, the pain of “parting, the travails of motherhood. The ladies got up. No “one spoke. The memories the song evoked silenced them.

The group of women, still singing, walked to the entrance of “the courtyard. Ganga and Champa, with the other maids of “the haveli, formed a semi-circle around the bride and “Dhapu. As the sound of the band grew louder, they moved “forward escorting the bride out to the steps of the verandah “to meet the bridegroom. Dhapu’s hand gently directed Sita “whose head was bent low. She walked cautiously. She could “hardly see. The tinsel in the sari blinded her. She was not “confused, she was not thinking, she did as she was told.

The women continued singing in a plaintive voice as Sita “stood still with Dhapu and Ganga on either side of her, “evoking the blessings of the gods on the bride, beseeching the “goddess to protect her from evil, reminding the deity that she “was about to leave her parents’ home and enter a new “family. They asked the goddess to give her strength and “wisdom, never to falter, never to hesitate in serving her husband and his parents.

The bridal horse with the bridegroom sitting on the silver “edged saddle came to a halt in front of the haveli gate. He “stood docile while the crackers went off near his hooves; he “knew that the sound was harmless; he had carried many “bridegrooms on his back and seemed to neigh only from “boredom. The band started playing a marching tune, the “children screamed with joy as they came near the bejewelled “horse, they threw flowers and confetti on the bridegroom. “He remained seated, waiting to get instructions. He held the “reins tightly in his hands as the children stood on tiptoes “trying to see him. After clearing the children from his way “Gangaram stepped forward and embraced Shiv Ram’s father “and his brothers and their relatives. Gokul and Khyali with “great ceremony welcomed the elders and invited them into “the yard. After the welcome formalities were over, the “bridegroom was helped to dismount. Shiv Ram’s face was “not clearly visible; strings of silver thread and flowers fell from a band tied around his yellow turban. He walked “between his father and uncle in his light pink achkan, that “did not exactly fit him, to the verandah steps, where Dhapu “and Sita stood ready to perform the first ritual. He was of “medium height; there was an awkward grace in his walk; “from in between the hanging strings over his face one could “see his eyes with a searching look of a young boy as he stood “before Dhapu and Sita.

The women sang while Dhapu encircled the bridegroom’s “head three times with the lighted butter lamp. Then she put “flowers at his feet and a red kumkum mark on his forehead “and five silver rupees in his hand. After Dhapu had put the “symbols of prosperity and happiness on the bridegroom, she “withdrew a little and handed a garland of flowers to Sita. “Sita’s hands trembled as she, without lifting her head, put it “around Shiv Ram’s

neck. While the bridegroom was being “propitiated, Bhagwat Singhji and his son came out and “briefly talked to Shiv Ram's father and his relatives. This “gesture was enough for the village people to feel proud and “to know that the haveli supported the marriage. The faces of “Shiv Ram's relatives showed they were satisfied; they “nodded their heads to confirm that Shiv Ram's father had “chosen wisely. The exchange of garlands over, Dhapu and “her husband led Sita to the marriage altar. The priests had “already started chanting the vedic hymns. Sita sat on the left “of Shiv Ram and next to her, on a wooden stool, were “Dhapu and her husband. They acted as the temporary “parents of Sita. Gangaram alone could not give away his “daughter.

The marriage ceremony started. The sweet smell of “incense filled the air. The voices of the priests rose, though “not above the noise of the children laughing and people “talking. The sacred fire was lit and the priests poured melted “butter into it while they chanted the sacred verses three thousand years old. As soon as Bhagwat Singhji's wife saw “from the balcony the priest tie Sita's hands to those of Shiv “Ram, her tears fell freely on her cheeks. Pari stayed with the “ladies of the haveli on the balcony overlooking the servants' “yard. As a widow she had no place where prayers were “sanctifying a union of two people: Tears trickled down her “hollow cheeks. She did not have the strength to wipe them “off.

'Don't cry, Bai Sa,' said Manji, putting a comforting “hand on Bhagwat Singhji's wife's shoulders. 'This is a day “all mothers pray for. What more could you have done for “Sita? You brought her up and have now put her in charge of “her husband. You have fulfilled all the obligations of a “mother. The rest lies in God's hands.'

Geeta's eyes were blurred as Sita followed Shiv Ram “around the sacred fire. This was the seventh and the final “round. From now on they would be considered as man and “wife. Vijay clung to her mother sobbing. She didn't know “why she was crying, but the tears seemed to flow out of her “heart into her eyes and down her face.

Chapter VII

The morning after Sita's marriage, the mistress got up “when it was still dark. She crept out of her husband's room “and went to her apartment. The courtyard was quiet. The “only sound that came was the regular, heavy breathing of the “maids who slept in the verandah. Instead of waking up one “of them as was her habit when she couldn't sleep, she quietly “went into her room. As dawn gradually began to dispel the “darkness, the cocks crowed and the birds twittered. The “maids got up rubbing their eyes still heavy with sleep, rolled “up their beddings and stacked them away. It was in semi- “darkness that they went down to the servants' quarters to “wash and get ready for the day ahead.

Ganga was the first to come into the courtyard. She had “to get the things ready for the mistress's bath before she “woke up. Ganga went to the kitchen, took the cup of curd, “mixed it with gram flour, took the bottle of camphor oil “from the shelf for the massage and went to the room to “spread the mat for the mistress to lie down on. As she opened “the door, she was surprised to see the mistress standing by the window looking out on the yard below. Bhagwat “Singhji's wife's smile reassured Ganga that it was not she “who was late but that the mistress was early. Ganga “massaged her with the oil first; then rubbed it off with the “gram paste.

Bhagwat Singhji's wife, having bathed and got ready, “went to the kitchen. She looked at Khyali who, with swift, “strong strokes, churned the curd into butter. The morning “activity had started; Dhapu put the milk to warm for the “children and on the other fire placed the pot of water to boil “for the master's tea. There was the usual morning bustle, but “there was not the same cheer on the faces of the maids. After “a celebration big or small, there was an air of emptiness in “the courtyard. The maids and their children went around as “if they were exhausted and needed rest. They were also sad. “Sita had gone to her husband's village for two days. She had “to worship their family deity and pay respects to her mother- “in-law before she could return to the haveli. The maids “missed her. This was the first time since her birth that she “wasn't lurking around the kitchen verandah and asking “them for a roti and pickles.

The only person who seemed to have no worries left was “Gangaram. Instead of

resting as the mistress had told him he “worked as usual. He had lost his harassed look. Even though “he hadn't slept the whole night, his eyes were bright and his “legs seemed to have got new strength, they wobbled less. The “money he had borrowed at an exorbitant rate of interest did “not bother him. He was pleased that the bridegroom's party “left with praises for his hospitality; he was glad that for once “he had not listened to Gokul or Khyali to give only one sweet “instead of two. He was proud that he had been lavish. The “villagers were impressed; no one in his community had been “so generously entertained. It had cost more than he could “afford, but he was still happy. The village people felt honoured. Gangaram had heard that they were surprised to “get dhotis and turbans of the finest grade cloth. Shiv Ram's “father had chosen Sita because she was in school. He was “poor and in debt. In fact, his community had advised against “the marriage because there was no talk of a dowry. When “Sita wore gold bangles, earrings and a ring, they were sure it “was borrowed just for the marriage ceremony. But when she “kept the jewellery on as she left the haveli, they were “impressed. Shiv Ram's father only expected to get silver “jewellery for the bride. Gold was beyond his hopes.

Gangaram thought of the last few days and was filled “with joy. He came into the kitchen with an unusually big “load of firewood and dumped it in ,the kitchen verandah “with unusual force. The mistress lifted her face as she heard “the thud. She was so preoccupied with her thoughts that she “did not notice that instead of two spoons of sugar Khyali “had put three in each cup of tea for the servants.

'Khyaliji, tell me, where is Lakshmi?'

He did not answer as if he had not heard the question. He “kept stirring the tea. Then quietly he said, 'Kanwarani Sa, “she is living in the tailor's house in the gully at the other end “of the city near the old railway station.'

'When did you know she was the woman who visited the “school?'

'Three weeks ago, the day I went to the bazaar to change “Sita's silver anklets. There I met Hari the panwala. You “remember, Hukkum, it was in his house she first rented a “room when she ran away from the haveli. He is a bad character but he knows what's going on in the city. He told “me that he had often seen Lakshmi at the temple. He “couldn't believe that she had all of a sudden become “religious; so he observed her. Hukkum, he saw her buy the “ladooos and puris and this further intrigued him. He knew “Lakshmi couldn't afford to buy the special ladoos, so he decided that they must be for a special friend.' Khyali took a “deep breath and then continued, 'Hukkum, Hari one day “followed Lakshmi and saw her enter Sita's school. His evil “mind immediately concluded

she was going to see his friend, "the watchman of the school.'

The mistress gave a deep sigh and looked sadly at the "cook. She didn't speak. The cook half rose, took a log of "wood from the corner and put it in the fireplace. The wood "crackled before going up in a steady flame. Bhagwat "Singhji's wife turned her gaze to the fire and then asked the "cook, 'Khyali, why didn't you tell me? I am sure Lakshmi "waited at the school for us to come and get her. Poor girl!'

'Hukkum, I did not tell you purposely. For once even "Dhapu kept her mouth shut. You see, Hukkum, I was afraid "you would try and get Lakshmi to come back. This would "have caused a scandal. Once again, everyone would have "been curious. A hundred questions would have been asked. "What was she doing all these years? How had she lived; with "whom? It was one thing for Shiv Ram's people to have "accepted the fact of Lakshmi's disappearance from the "haveli, but quite another for them to know that she lived in "the house of a panwala, then a tailor and that too in "Udaipur. Kanwarani Sa, now I can tell you, till the last "minute-even after the bride and bridegroom were under "the marriage canopy. I was afraid, you know. Marriages "break even after the couple have taken the first round of the "sacred fire. Hukkum, I don't have to tell you that for Shiv "Ram's father to have known that Lakshmi was in town "would have meant the break of the marriage. He could not "have stood the humiliation in front of his relatives.'

The mistress nodded her head in acceptance. She felt a "strange peace within; Khyali at last had made her under- "stand that for Sita's happiness it was better that Lakshmi "did not return to the haveli.

Pari sat in the verandah opposite, with neighbours. The "sun was still pleasant, though the summer winds had started "blowing. This was the time when the grain for the year was "bought, cleaned and stored, though the cleaning and "winnowing of the wheat and maize was usually done in the "afternoon. Pari decided to open the sacks in the morning "that day. She gave the women the winnowing basket. They "talked while they separated the husks from the kernels. The "mistress came and joined them. She felt at ease after a long "time. She listened absent-mindedly to what the women said. "They told her how pleased Shiv Ram's people were with the "marriage. They had gone back full of praises for the haveli. "Even those who had first opposed the marriage were silenced "by what they saw and received. But Bhagwat Singhji's wife "was not interested any more in Sita's marriage celebrations. "Her thoughts were on Daulat Singhii's haveli. Nandu had "told her that proposals were pouring in from all parts of "Rajasthan for Vir Singh. Parents were offering big dowries. "A well known family from Jaipur had even brought their girl "with them.

Nandu had heard she was fair, tall with chiselled features “and large, almond shaped eyes. Nandu had been told that “Daulat Singhji's wife liked the girl and had given her “horoscope to be examined. Even Manji, whose opinion “Bhagwat Singhji's wife valued above everyone else's, had “said that Daulat Singhji's family would not wait “indefinitely for an answer. As it was, their pride had been “hurt because they had not received immediate approval of “their son by Bhagwat Singhji. Manji, who did not judge “people by their wealth alone, had said Vir Singh was the “only suitable boy in all the havelis for Vijay. He was “extremely intelligent, but, at the same time, modest. She “had urged Bhagwat Singhji's wife not to let Vijay's age come “in the way of her engagement. In fact, all the relatives were surprised that the engagement date had not been announced. “They could not understand the delay. It was a risk that no “other haveli would take.

Bhagwat Singhji's wife knew that what Nandu and “Manji had said was true. She did not want to tell them that “she could not assert her authority as a mother-in-law. She “did not want her relatives to know that Geeta was not like “their daughters-in-law, obedient and willing to accept what “the elders thought right. She was too proud to concede that “as a mother-in-law she only had limited power over Geeta. “Even Bhagwat Singhji had told her she was not to mention “the subject of Vijay's engagement to Geeta. He would talk “to her himself. But now, three weeks had elapsed and he had “not mentioned the subject to Geeta. She knew that a proud “family like Daulat Singhji's would not wait much longer for an answer. But she kept her anxiety to herself.

Bhagwat Singhji's wife was so absorbed in her thoughts, “she did not notice Geeta touch her feet and sit down next to “her. Dhapu joined the women cleaning the grain. She was “still in an elated mood. She was delighted with the gold “earrings that the mistress had given her for Sita's marriage. “She knew she would get something special for taking “Lakshmi's place at the marriage, but she never expected to “get gold earrings, a new sari and skirt.

The cook looked anxiously at the women talking, but he “could not join them. He had still to knead the dough. He “was about to call Dhapu to help him, when Gokul came “hurriedly into the courtyard and said nervously, 'Khyali, “Daulat Singh and his brother have come. Get the refresh- “ments ready. Don't look at me like that. Hurry! Yes, it is “Daulat Singhji himself who has come.'

As soon as Bhagwat Singhji's wife heard Daulat Singhji's “name, she got up. The maids put the thalis down and Geeta, “too, hurried to the kitchen.

Bhagwat Singhji's wife took out a bottle of special “sherbet. Khyali put oil on the

fire. Pari opened the cupboard “and took out the halva and other special savouries that were “meant only for Bhagwat Singhji and his son. The women “worked in silence, trying to keep their hands steady. In the “midst of all the preparations, Dhapu slipped out of the “kitchen. Geeta looked at her and smiled. She guessed what “she was plotting to do. As soon as Gokul and Gangaram “took the trays out of the kitchen, Khyali sat down and put “his hands on his knees and told the mistress that the big “merchants in the bazaar had already started going to Daulat “Singhji's haveli. They took with them the finest Benares “silks and brocades. The goldsmiths were trying to bribe the “accountant to place the jewellery order with them. The “halwais were sending their fanciest sweets and savouries to “the haveli as samples. Everyone in the bazaar talked of the “forthcoming engagement when the two biggest havelis of “Udaipur were about to be joined by marriage.

The mistress only half listened to the cook. She was “silently praying that what the merchants were hoping would “come to be. This was also her deepest wish.

'Kanwarani Sa, Kanwarani Sa, the horoscopes tally,' said “Dhapu in a hushed voice coming into the courtyard on “tiptoes. 'I heard Daulat Singhji say that Vijay Bai Sa was “born under a unique constellation of stars.' She was still “holding on to her skirt so that the folds wouldn't rustle as “she heard the two men talk from behind the half-opened “door.

Chapter VIII

It was late in the afternoon. The mistress, as usual, sat in “the verandah surrounded by visitors and relatives. The “wheat and maize were ready to be stored. They had been “winnowed and cleaned by the women. Sita, who had “returned from the village, was the centre of attraction. The “minute she had entered the courtyard there wasn't a trace “left in her of the shy coy bride of a few days ago. Her head “uncovered and her hair flying all over her face, she ran “around as if nothing had changed in her life. Vijay was “delighted to have her back. The women tried to get her to sit “down and tell them of her reception in the village. Was the “house really made of brick? What had she received from her “mother-in-law and grandmother-in-law when she touched “their feet? But Sita was like a dove that had been released “from captivity, prancing around the courtyard. Dhapu and “Pari pestered her with questions; Ganga teased her; Champa “reminded her she was married and couldn't go around just in “a skirt and a blouse. But Sita paid no attention; she did as she “liked. When the mistress asked her about her house in the village, she giggled and ran away. No one could get a word “out of her about her two days in the village.

The verandah was humming with the chatter of the “women; as usual they were full of juicy gossip. Their “children sprawled all over the verandah as the little ones “slept undisturbed by the flies that sat on their soft cheeks. “The elder children were in the backyard with Vikram flying “kites. Their screams could be heard from the verandah. The “mistress looked happy. She did not mind the children “dirtying the verandah nor was she disturbed with the “confusion they caused. She liked company. But even in the “midst of entertaining news no one ever forgot the master. As “soon as the sun lost some of its warmth, Ganga got up and “went to the kitchen to put the pot of water to boil for “Bhagwat Singhji's tea. Khyali lay stretched out in the “kitchen verandah snoring loudly. She did not want to wake “him up. The maids recognized that he worked hard and “deserved rest.

Geeta had come down to the kitchen to see that tea for her “father-in-law was sent in time. The tray was ready to be “taken out by Gokul. But when he came into the kitchen, “instead of picking up the tray, he said in an anxious voice, “‘Hukkum, Kanwar Sa doesn't want any tea today. He “doesn't feel well. He has a pain in the stomach.’ He left “without giving any more details.

The mistress got up immediately; Geeta stood up and “followed her out of the courtyard. Pari fumbled for the keys “round her waist and went inside to open the medicine “cupboard. The women silently picked up their sleeping “children and left. Pari took out the herbs, the roots, the “powders she knew were effective for a stomach pain. Khyali “was on his feet. He sat down to grind the roots and boil the “herbs.

Bhagwat Singhji lay on the couch, his eyes closed and his face pale. A servant was rubbing oil on one foot and Gokul “was doing the same on the other. As the mistress came in, the “servants got up and Gokul coughed. Bhagwat Singhji sat up, “his lips parted in a smile as Geeta bent down and touched the “ground before him. Bhagwat Singhji's wife looked at her “husband anxiously and then whispered to Gokul to ask Pari “to hurry up.

The master of the haveli did not speak for a moment; he “looked at Geeta's covered face with a deep and loving “intensity. Then in a low, weak voice, as if it were difficult “for him to talk, he said, 'Binniji, I have waited to talk to “you. I wanted to be sure of my own feelings, before I spoke “to you.' He paused, took a deep, long breath and then “continued with a little more force. 'As you probably know “Daulat Singhji and his brother came the other day; they “again urged for Vijay's engagement to their son. -The “horoscopes match perfectly. Our child has been born under “the most auspicious constellation of stars. But I was not “waiting to hear what the astrologers had to say before “talking to you. Binniji, I have been agitated for the last few “weeks. I have looked at the proposal from every angle. I am “still not quite sure whether it is right to engage a girl as “young as our Vijay. But a girl has to marry, if not today, then “tomorrow.' Then he closed his eyes as if to reflect a little “more before he spoke again. Geeta could see that his face, “usually so calm and serene, was troubled. She desperately “wanted to tell him he had no need to worry, that she loved “and trusted his judgement, that he should get well. She “wanted to ask him what she could do to relieve his stomach “pain. But she could not bring herself to express her feelings.

'Your mother-in-law and I have talked over Vijay's “engagement for hours. She is the Lakshmi, the goddess of “prosperity of my household. She is very precious to us. But “even so, she must leave us one day. No one can ensure anyone's future happiness. As parents, all we can do is to “find the best family for our child. I like Vir Singh. He “appears to be a boy of character. He isn't arrogant; money “hasn't given him a false sense of his own importance. “Binniji, you know how children are pampered in the havelis. “I have seen so many good boys ruined because of that. But “somehow Vir Singh has escaped.' Bhagwat Singhji's voice “suddenly rose and he said with unusual vehemence, 'I have “told Daulat Singhji that under no circumstances would I “permit Vijay to be taken out of school.

I am against early "marriages. Girls must study; they cannot be kept ignorant." "As if the exertion were too much for him, he fell back on the "couch and closed his eyes.

The mistress got up alarmed and went and stood beside "him. Geeta was too frightened to move; she lifted the sari "from her face and saw that the pallor on Bhagwat Singhji's "face had deepened. He breathed with difficulty.

Pari came hurriedly into the room holding a cup in her "hands. She looked at the master and then at the mistress and "her sunken cheeks lost the little colour they had. She waited "till Bhagwat Singhji opened his eyes and then she gave him "the cup of herbal tea.

'Don't worry, Pari, I will be all right. I have a little pain "in the stomach. It will pass, especially after I have drunk "your mixture,' said Bhagwat Singhji, trying hard to sound "cheerful as he handed the cup back to Gokul. He looked at "his wife and then said in a soft voice, 'I will rest a little now.'

The women left the room as the master of the haveli sank "back on his pillow and closed his eyes. The mistress went "straight to the little prayer room and with folded hands "before the little image of the goddess, took a vow that until "her husband got well, she would not eat any cereal. She then "sat down in front of the image and prayed.

The atmosphere in the courtyard had instantly changed. The kitchen fire was not lit. Khyali sat with his head buried "between his knees. Dhapu cleaned the roots. Ganga soaked "the herbs. Geeta lighted the earthenware lamp in front of the "sacred tulsi plant.

Chapter IX

It was the third day since Bhagwat Singhji had had his first “spasm of stomach pain. The herbal tea, the essence of roots, “the pungent oil massages did not bring Bhagwat Singhji “relief. In the past, these homemade medicines, the recipes of “which had come down from generation to generation, had “always been effective. But this time, not even the powder of “crushed pearls and silver dust mixed with saffron given by “the head priest of the temple had any effect. At last the “mistress agreed that the doctors be called in.

Ajay Singh listened to the diagnosis with stunned “disbelief.

'It can't be a heart attack, doctor,' he said in a dull voice, “he has never before complained of pain in the chest.'

The doctor looked at him sympathetically and nodded his “head sadly.

The news that Bhagwat Singhji was ill spread within “minutes of the doctor leaving the room. Visitors started “coming. Nandu and Manji came prepared to stay in the “haveli. Kanta had already come. The courtyard was never empty. There were women at all times of the day enquiring “after Bhagwat Singhji's health. Geeta received the guests, “but her heart was heavy as she sat and answered questions. “The mistress was no longer able to sit and talk to the “women. She was too agitated to stay still in one place. She “only waited for the men to leave her husband's room so that “she could be with him. Ajay Singh's face had lost its “youthful, carefree look. He moved among the men visitors “silently and tried to hide his impatience with their words of “comfort. He wanted to be with his father, but he knew he “could not be abrupt with those who came to call at the “haveli. He was conscious that the elders in the family were “assessing him even as they comforted him. They were “looking to see if he measured up to his father.

The courtyard had lost its lustre. Its walls did not echo the “laughter of the maids, nor their songs.

In the sitting room Geeta sat and listened while the “women talked, but her thoughts dwelt on what her father- “in-law had said about Daulat Singhji's house. 'I like Vir “Singh; he is a good boy and not spoiled. A girl sooner or later “has to get married.' Geeta realized

the wisdom of his words, “but still she felt uneasy. But she was no longer sure of herself. “She remembered the handsome young face of Vir Singh, and “thought perhaps he was what he looked, straight and “honourable. But then as if to dissuade herself she reasoned “that Vir Singh like her husband would never go against his “parents' wishes. 'His parents will want an early marriage. “Vir Singh will not be consulted. He is young, he will listen. “No, I can't have Vijay marry young, times have changed. She “must study.' But some part of her unconscious mind was not “convinced. She was troubled. She thought of her own “marriage. Her parents had chosen the right man for her; she “was happy; she had not gone to higher studies. Geeta was glad that no one could see her face and guess the agitation “and uncertainties of her private world.

It was early in the afternoon. The visitors had left. Nandu, Manji and Kanta had stretched out in the sitting “room with the mistress. They were all tired of sitting the “whole morning with the visitors. Geeta had gone up to her “room for a little rest. The courtyard was quiet; the servants' “children no longer came up to play. Vijay sat outside “Bhagwat Singhji's room quietly learning how to crochet “from Sita. She waited for him to wake up and then would go “and sit with him. She was no longer interested in her books “or running round with Sita. Vikram followed his father “around as if he were afraid to leave him alone.

Pari, with the other maids, sat outside on the verandah “talking in low voices. No visitors were expected as they “usually came late in the afternoon. Dhapu pricked up her “ears; she thought she heard a knock on the outside door. “Then, when it came again, she quickly got up and went to “open the door. Ganga went inside to wake up the ladies. “Champa ran across the courtyard to the stairs that went to “Geeta's room.

Daulat Singhji's wife and her relatives quietly entered “the courtyard. Dhapu ushered the ladies in silently to the “sitting room. After a few moments Manji and Nandu “entered with Bhagwat Singhji's wife and with the usual “formality greeted the ladies. Geeta slipped into the room “and touched the feet of Daulat Singhji's wife and sat down “beside her mother-in-law.

'I cannot believe that Kanwar Sa has had a heart attack,' “said Daulat Singhji's wife with genuine concern. 'But don't “worry, Hukkum, he will recover. There isn't a man in “Udaipur who isn't praying for him. He has been a friend to “the poor and an example to us in the havelis. Hukkum, you “are not alone in your anxiety. We are all with you.'

Bhagwat Singhji's wife did not reply. She acknowledged “the words of sympathy with anxious eyes. Words that had so “easily come to her in the past stuck in her throat. Daulat “Singhji's wife then turned and looked at Geeta. The “diamonds in her ears and

nostril flashed as she said with "great tenderness, 'Binniji, look after your mother-in-law. "She is already frail and now she has given up eating.' Her "voice wavered as she said, 'Binniji, don't look so sad, your "father-in-law will soon be well, and then the haveli will be "full of laughter again.' With these words Daulat Singhii's "wife and the ladies that accompanied her got up. Geeta, "Manji and Nandu saw them to the door.

'Binniji, let's go up to the terrace. You need a little fresh "air,' said Manji softly, putting her hands on Geeta's "shoulders and walking up the stone stairs. The two women "looked across the terrace. The air was refreshing, neither hot "nor cold. The cows in the yard were munching the hay. The "little calf nestled up to its mother's side as if frightened to "stand alone. The stray dogs wandered aimlessly, their noses "to the ground, trying to smell out the food from the rubbish "heaps. Three small naked children played in the dust under "the neem tree. A woman came out of her thatched hut, her "body was emaciated, her skirt torn and her sari in shreds. "With quick, long steps she went up to where the children "were drawing circles in the dust. She caught hold of two of "them, one in each hand, and dragged them behind her. The "third got up and ran after them.

For a time Manji and Geeta silently watched the scene "below. It was soothing to see life outside the haveli. Then "Manji gathered her muslin sari round her and looked "intently at Geeta's covered face. Her black eyes were full of "warmth as she said, 'Binniji, I don't want to alarm you, but "you must face reality. Your father-in-law has had a severe heart attack. We all pray he will recover, but think what joy "it would give him if he could see his granddaughter engaged.' "Bua Sa, how can anyone think of an engagement "ceremony when he is seriously ill?' replied Geeta, taken "aback by Manji's suggestion.

'Binniji, it is because he is so ill that I urge you to tell him "that you agree to Vijay's engagement to Vir Singh.'

The sound of clanking anklets diverted Geeta's attention. Ganga had come up to tell them that more guests had "arrived. Manji and Geeta went downstairs.

Bhagwat Singhji's wife had just come from the men's part "of the haveli. Her face was drawn. She looked exhausted and "worn out. When she saw Geeta, she said, 'Binniji, don't tire "yourself out. Visitors will constantly be coming. Manji and "Nandu Bai Sa can receive them. There is no need for you to "sit with them all the time. My sister-in-law is also now here "to help. You go up and rest. You are not used to staying up "for such long periods. You must not fall ill.'

Chapter X

Bhagwat Singhji lay on his wooden bed propped up by “pillows; his face was sunken and looked haggard. His hands “lay limp on the silk coverlet. Gokul sat beside the bed, his “ears alert to the slightest noise. He had slept in the master’s “room since the day he fell ill. No amount of persuasion or “threats had any effect on him, He refused to leave the room “except for his meals. His eyes dimmed with age and his legs “unable to support him, he continued to keep guard over his “beloved master whom he had served for over fifty years. He “fanned Bhagwat Singhji and woke up several times in the “night to see if he was covered. Gokul was not concerned that “Ajay Singh was there all the time to administer to his “father’s needs or that other servants, younger and more agile “than himself, were more useful,

The doctors had come and gone. There was nothing that “they could do but prescribe new medicines and insist that “Bhagwat Singhji take complete rest. Ajay Singh followed “their advice with meticulous care. Manji, Nandu and Kanta “looked at Bhagwat Singhji’s fever-stricken eyes sadly. Geeta and her mother-in-law sat with their faces covered. It was “not for them to show concern in front of others, even though “they were close relatives.

‘Manji Bai Sa, why don’t you go home. I am not so ill “that you and Nandu Bai should leave your homes and stay “here. It will take time before I get up, but there is nothing to “be anxious about,’ said Bhagwat Singhii in a low, calm “voice, trying to cover up his own fears about his state of “health.

While Manji and Nandu talked, Geeta was lost in “gloomy thought. She felt she had added ten years to her age. “She saw herself no longer as the daughter-in-law of the “house but its mistress. She felt a sudden shiver run through “her body as she looked at her father-in-law’s pale face “drained of all its vitality. He won’t recover, she said “despairingly to herself. Everyone in the family had passed “away quickly and silently, with no fuss, no complaints. She “saw her husband sitting beside his father’s bed. His chiselled “features looked sharper. It seemed to Geeta that he had aged. “Even as his father lay on his bed Ajay Singh was now in “charge. He had taken over from him. He was no longer the “Bapu

Sa that everyone indulged, but from whom no one “demanded conformity. Her mother-in-law now did “nothing before consulting him. Geeta thought of the time “before Bhagwat Singh fell ill, how her mother-in-law would “say, 'Don't disturb him. He has work to do.' 'There is no “need for him to pay a visit to another haveli, his father has “already done so.' He was sheltered by the presence of his “father, who abided by the traditions and customs of “Udaipur, leaving Ajay Singh free to follow his interests.

Geeta glanced at her husband from behind her veil and “felt sorry for him. He didn't know the customs of the “family. How would he discharge his responsibility? He “didn't even know the havelis. He had been allowed to be carefree. She would be of no help to him. She followed her “mother-in-law's instructions without going into details. “Who would help him? The relatives would criticize him. “They would blame his indifference on her because she was an “outsider who was never really interested in the customs of “Udaipur. They would say the traditions of this ancient “family would die for lack of someone worthy to carry them “on. With these thoughts, she grew indignant and her face felt “warmer. The blood seemed to race through her veins faster, “but there was a sinking feeling in her heart.

Manji told Bhagwat Singhji about Daulat Singhji's “wife's visit and how gracious she had been and how anxious “about his health.

Bhagwat Singhji looked at Geeta and then at Manji. His “eyes gleamed with pleasure as he said confidently, 'Let me “get well and then we will give proper thought to my “granddaughter's future.'

Chapter XI

But a few days passed and there was no improvement in “Bhagwat Singhji’s condition. In fact, he was getting weaker. “The doctors came three or four times a day. There was no “need to call them, they came of their own accord. Bhagwat “Singhji was not only a patient to them, but someone they “loved and revered. Ajay Singh kept his despair hidden from “the gaze of others. He received the guests with dignity and “composure. The visitors had become fewer. Only the close “relatives remained in the haveli. The courtyard was dead. “The servants moved silently and the maids spoke in “whispers. They sat after the day’s work was over, waiting to “hear that the master was better. The butter lamp burnt “continuously in front of the tulsi plant. The mistress was in “the prayer room whenever she was not with her husband. No “one asked her what to cook or showed her the rations for the “servants. Geeta now had all the keys to the storeroom. Pari “helped her, but even her heart was not in supervising the “details. She followed the mistress around in a daze.

Bhagwat Singhji had awakened from his afternoon sleep. The family was around him. His grandchildren sat on his “bed. Vikram told him all about the airplane he had put “together. Vijay showed him the scarf she had knitted for “him, while he sipped a cup of tea. His eyes looked brighter “and his face seemed less pale. He breathed more easily. Then, “as she handed his cup to Gokul, he asked him to call “Gangaram.

Gangaram came in, his head down, as if someone had “beaten him over the head. He bowed low to the master but “did not dare lift his eyes.

‘Gangaram, I am told you are satisfied with how the “marriage went off,’ said Bhagwat Singhji with a smile. ‘Of “course, you servants never listen to advice. You go on “following your old customs and get deeper into debt. Gokul “tells me you have borrowed money at a very high rate of “interest. This time I am going to forgive you for having been “so foolish. I have told the accountant to pay all the debts “that you incurred for Sita’s marriage.’ Having said this, he “was forced to take a deep breath and his head fell back on the “pillow. Gangaram did not move. He seemed rooted to the “floor. He even forgot to fold his hands and bend down to “touch the bed on which the master lay. It was Gokul who “wobbled up to him and shook him by the shoulders to tell “him he could now leave.

Geeta was struck with wonder. Her heart filled with pride “and admiration for the man who was the father of her “husband. All of a sudden, she realized what real greatness “meant. He was like a towering tree under which the family “sheltered. It was from him that everyone got their nourish- “ment. Now that the tree had fallen, the saplings growing up “at its base were exposed. The haveli might never again be as “strong. Something already seemed to be shaking its found- “ations. Geeta clasped her hands convulsively. She did not “know how to contain her feelings. Ajay Singh, seeing his mother's tears fall from under her sari, went and sat beside “her. He tried to comfort her, assuring her that there was no “need to worry. He said his father would get well as the “doctors were pleased with his progress. But she looked at the “bed hopelessly, tears streaming down her cheeks.

It was in the early hours of the night when Bhagwat “Singhji finally closed his eyes on the haveli. He was not “alone when he left Jeewan Niwas. His wife, who had stood “by him for sixty years, was with him. His son and daughter- “in-law stood beside his bed as the light quietly went out of “his steadfast eyes. The servants who served him loyally were “out in the verandah. Only Gokul lay stretched out on the “floor beside the bed.

Ajay Singh pulled the white sheet over his father's face “and touched his feet with his forehead. The master of the “haveli had joined his ancestors.

Before the sun rose, Jeewan Niwas echoed to the wails of “women who poured into the haveli from all sides. The “courtyard was again full. Women in starched, clean saris, “others in shreds, came and sat down together without any “regard to their status. They sat and wailed the passing of the “master of Jeewan Niwas.

Geeta was overcome with grief. Though she had a “premonition of Bhagwat Singhji's death, she could not “believe that the end had really come.

'Where is Bhabhi?' she cried as Manji put a comforting “hand on her head and said consolingly, 'My child, she will be “coming. She is changing.' Then, at last, the mistress of “Jeewan Niwas came out of her room, her shrunken body “draped in black, her hands bare, her neck empty, her feet “naked without the anklets.

Geeta clasped her mother-in-law's frail little body in her “arms and sobbed: 'Bhabhi, what have you done to yourself? I “can't bear to see you in black. What has become of your bangles and necklace? Only a few minutes ago you were in a “bright orange sari. Where have you thrown it?'

Bhagwat Singhji's wife took Geeta's face in her hands. In “a voice that had lost all its strength, she said with infinite “love, 'Binniji, the goddess has taken away my happiness.

She “has left me bereft. God bless you. May you always wear red. “May gold always shine on your hands. Don't cry, my child. “Your father-in-law lived honourably. He has gone, leaving “you the mistress of this house. If you loved him, you will “keep this haveli as a trust for your children. He did his duty to us all. Now it is your turn. Don't weep. If you don't show “strength now, to whom shall I look for comfort? You are all “I have. Everything else has gone.'

Geeta choked down her sobs and hid her despair in order “to devote herself to comforting the noble and indomitable “old mistress of Jeewan Niwas. Together they went to the “verandah of the courtyard. The sound of the wailing women “engulfed the whole haveli.

'Don't cry, Binniji,' said Manji, pressing Geeta's head to “her breast. 'You are now the mistress of this haveli. You “can't forget its traditions in your sorrow.'

GLOSSARY

plunder (v)	: to take wrongfully, to rob, despoil
wrench (v)	: to twist suddenly; pull, jerk
pauper (n)	: a very poor person
slump (v)	: to drop or fall heavily, collapse
urchin (v)	: a mischievous boy
smother (v)	: to suppress or repress
feign (v)	: to make believe; pretend
brusque (adj.)	: abrupt in manner, blunt, rough
retort (v)	: to reply, usually in a sharp way
camouflage (v)	: to disguise, hide or conceal
famine (n)	: extreme scarcity of food
fidget (v)	: to move about restlessly, nervously or impatiently
consternation (n)	: anxiety or dismay at something unexpected
assuage (v)	: to soothe, to make less severe or mild
surreptitious (adj.)	obtained or done secretly or unauthorized
eavesdrop (v)	: to listen secretly to a private conversation
nonchalant (adj.)	: coolly unconcerned, indifferent, casual
haggle (v)	: to bargain in a petty, quibbling and often contentious manner
stutter (v)	: distorted speech, spasms
gait (n)	: a manner of walking, stepping or running

ajar (adj. adv.)	: partly open
droopy (adj.)	: lacking in spirit, disheartened, dejected
commotion (n)	: agitation, noisy disturbance
distended (adj.)	: increased, swollen, expanded
wretched (adj.)	: very unfortunate, miserable, pitiable
wisp (n)	: a handful or small bundle of straw, hair
tepid (adj.)	: moderately warm, luke warm
crochet (n)	: needlework
reverie (n)	: a day dream, fanciful musing
beseech (v)	: to make an urgent appeal
amiss (adj. adv.)	: improper, out of the right course
infuriate (v)	: to make furious, enrage
wince (v)	: to draw back, as from pain or from a blow
taut (adj.)	: emotionally or mentally strained
engulf (v)	: to swallow up, submerge
dispel (v)	: to drive off in various directions, disperse
disheveled (adj.)	: untidy, unkempt, disarranged
forlorn (adj.)	: lonely and sad
bbnoxious (adj.)	: highly objectionable or offensive
mammoth (adj.)	: immensely large, huge, enormous
effusive (adj.)	: unduly demonstrative; lacking reserve
assortment (n)	: the act of distribution, classification
prod (v)	: to rouse or incite
demeanor (n)	: conduct, behaviour, facial expression
languish (v)	: to be or become weak or feeble, to lose vigour and vitality
fidgety (adj.)	: restless, impatient, uneasy

tinsel (n)	: a metallic yarn, usually wrapped around a core yarn of silk for weaving brocade
cajole (v)	: to persuade by flattery or promises, coax
neigh (v)	: to utter the cry; whinny
confetti (n)	: small bits of colored paper, thrown to enhance gaiety of a party or marriage
exorbitant (adj.)	: exceeding the bounds, highly excessive
pallor (n)	: unusual or extreme paleness because of fear or ill health
spasm (n)	: brief spell
waver (v)	: to sway to and fro, flutter
haggard (adj.)	: exhausted appearance
premonition (n)	: a feeling of anticipation of or anxiety over a future event
bereft (adj.)	: deprived

Short Questions :

Answer the following questions in about 60 words each :

1. Why did the girls in the school surround Sita?
2. What kind of weather did Udaipur have in summers?
3. What was the change in the daily routine of the haveli in summers?
4. Who gave ladoos and purees to Sita in school and why?
5. Why was Bhagwat Singhji's wife against the classes taken by Geeta ?
6. Describe Bhagwat Singhji's appearance in the haveli.
7. Give a brief description of Ravi and his past.
8. What did the women tell Geeta after taking her classes?
9. What complaints neighborhood had against the classes?
10. Write names of all the servants working in Jeewan Niwas haveli.
11. Of which state did Bhagwat Singhji refuse Prime Ministership and why?

12. What all possessions did Shivram's father have?
13. What was Geeta's reaction when Sita was denied to go to school?
14. What all things did Sita want to distribute on her last day to school?
15. What proposal did Daulat Singhji's wife bring to Jeewan Niwas?
16. Write down Geeta's reaction when the marriage proposal came for Vijay.
17. Why did Geeta lash out at Ajay Singh?
18. How did Ajay Singh comfort Geeta on the matter of Vijay's marriage proposal?
19. Describe Vir Singh's personality.
20. What did Geeta think about her own marriage?
21. What all things did Lakshmi send in the packet for Sita?
22. Describe the activities in the haveli on the day of Sita's marriage.
23. What reason did Khyali give to the mistress for his not informing her about Lakshmi's presence in the city?
24. What did Bhagwat Singh ji say to Geeta regarding Vijay's engagement?
25. Do you think Geeta succeeded in bringing the desired changes in the haveli?
28. Describe Bhagwat Singhji's wife's behavior towards Geeta.
29. "Geeta fought with the old customs of the Haveli." How true is this statement?

Composition (Questions based on the novel as a whole)

Answer the following questions in about 100 words each :

1. Discuss the lives of the women of the Haveli.
2. Comment on the regional aspect of language of the novel.
3. Examine the life of Geeta as a struggle to hold her identity in a traditional world.
4. Does the novel unveil the mystery of the deep rooted traditions to the outside world?
5. Analyze Inside the Haveli as a novel about the essence of a world which is fast disappearing.
6. Comment upon the theme of the novel Inside the Haveli.

7. Elucidate how the novel depicts the beginning of social change.
8. How does Geeta adjust herself to the life of the haveli?
9. How does Geeta initiate reforms for the women in the ancient havelis?
10. Describe the geography of the Inside of the Haveli 'Jeevan Niwas' in your own words.
11. The novel questions the status of women in post feudal and regional India. Discuss.
12. Examine Rama Mehta's novel as a synthesis of tradition and modernity.
13. How does Mehta's novel redefine traditional values?
14. Discuss Inside the Haveli as a modern classic.
15. How does Geeta adjust and interpret the life of the haveli?
16. Analyse the three phases of Geeta's character; as a daughter, as a daughter in law and as a mother.
17. "The Novel acknowledges modern thoughts valuing traditional root