

BLOOD AND STONES

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BY

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"Ajanta is the eternal source of inspiration for India's art. . . . There is nothing like it in this world. . . . Even Englishmen and Americans are rendered speechless here. . . . These caves are fifteen centuries old. It took eight hundred years to dig and carve them out of this hillside, to paint these gigantic frescoes and to make these thousands of statues. . . . Look at this idol of the Buddha. . . ."

The well-worn voice of the official guide rose, sharp and clear, in the vast hushed cave and echoed back from the lofty ceiling. In return for a monthly salary of twenty-eight rupees and a couple of rupees tips, he repeated this same commentary several times every day of the year. Repeated it mechanically, unvaryingly. The same thing over and over and over again. Like a trained parrot. Or a gramophone! To Nirmal the guide's voice seemed like the steady hum of a spinning wheel or the buzzing of a bee. Never-ending, meaningless, soulless!

But Bharati, who was an art-lover as well as a specimen of art herself, was listening to the guide with rapt attention. She wanted to merge herself in this hallowed shrine of ancient art. Every painting, every statue, every pillar

and cornice inspired her, provoked her to burst out into loud exclamations of joy and wonder. "Nirmal, look at this. . . . Nirmal, look at that. . . . Look, what a divinely peaceful expression on the face of the Buddha! . . . Look, what a strange *coiffure* this *apsara* has! . . . How sweet! . . . How wonderful! . . . How utterly beautiful! . . ."

Nirmal was silent. He was not listening. Neither the mechanical hum of the guide, nor Bharati's exclamations of joy made any sense to him. His eyes were no doubt on the frescoes but he saw nothing but dim meaningless patches of colour. . . . He didn't even know in which cave he was or which painting he was supposed to be admiring.

The interminable, meaningless commentary of the guide went on. "... Look at this painting. Here is Mahatma Buddha, in one of his earlier incarnations, delivering a discourse to his disciples. And this is a court-dancer who is listening to the Exalted One. . . . She is late for her dance at the palace and when, from her, the rajah learns of this strange mendicant and his strange preachings, he goes to test the Blessed One. . . . 'Who are you?', the rajah demands to know, 'And what do you preach?' . . . The Buddha replies that he is Nobody and that he is discoursing on Truth and Peace.

... Hearing this the rajah orders his executioner to cut off the hands, feet, nose and ears of the *sanyasi*. . . . But every time the executioner's sword came down, the Buddha said, 'But Truth and Peace are in my heart, not in my hands or feet, nor in my ears or nose.' . . . Look at his wounds, how the blood. . . ."

Blood!

Out of the interminable, meaningless harangue of the guide, only this one word made sense to Nirmal.

Blood!

Like a hammer-blow this one word struck at Nirmal's subconscious mind.

Blood!

The stone walls of the Ajanta caves suddenly melted into nothingness. Now there was nothing there—neither frescoes nor sculptures, neither Bharati nor the guide, neither green hills nor the picturesque little stream. Art and History, Religion and Ethics, the Buddha and the cruel rajah of Benares—in an instant everything and everybody had melted into nothingness.

Blood!

Streams of blood! Rivers of blood! An ocean of blood! And, carried on the crest of these bloody waves, Nirmal was flung back on the shore of Bombay. The same blood-stained Bombay from which he had escaped to

these caves, three hundred miles and fifteen hundred years away. . . .

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The first of September. As usual, after finishing his day's work, Nirmal had gone to his friend Vasant's office in Girgaum, so that both of them could go home to Dadar together, when someone brought the news that a communal riot had broken out in the city. Pushing their pens, pencils and typewriters aside the whole staff started discussing the situation.

"Don't you worry. This riot will be brought under control in no more than a few hours. The Government is fully prepared for all emergencies this time. . . ."

"But how did the trouble start today? The Muslim League black flag demonstration was announced for tomorrow. . . ."

"This is all due to the news of the Calcutta riots. . . ."

"I hear the Police has unearthed several thousand knives and daggers. . . ."

"I hear that some Muslim was trying to place a garland of old shoes round a portrait of Pandit Jawaharlal near Gol Pitha. . . ."

"Don't you worry. The Hindus are not going to sit quiet this time."

Just then the clanging bell of an ambulance van was heard from the street below and everyone ran to the windows. Some riot casualties were being taken into the Harkishen Das Hospital across the road. A shortish, stout man who was wearing a striped shirt, dirty *dhotie* and black Maratha cap, went up to the gatekeeper of the hospital and enquired: "Who were they? Hindus or Musalmans?" The gatekeeper, who had already contrived to peep into the ambulance as it went in, replied: "One Musalman, two Hindus." . . . And immediately agitated, excited voices began to whisper in front of the 'Hindu Hotel'.

All the shops along Charni Road were closed by now. Even the 'Hindu Hotel' had put up its shutters—only the iron grill that protected the main entrance was partly open. The last empty tram had clattered away an hour ago. No cars. No taxis. No buses. The road was deserted. But clusters of people leaned out of upper floor windows—waiting, watching, grimly, silently expectant. There was a peculiar tension in the atmosphere, like a tightly stretched drum waiting to be beaten into a fearful tattoo.

Suddenly footsteps were heard approaching from the Sandhurst Road side. Silently, automatically, almost simultaneously, all the pairs of eyes turned round in that direction. It was

a thin young man in *kurta* and *pajama*, walking along at a carefree pace, looking quite oblivious of the bloody happenings in the city.

"Look at this bastard—walking along merrily as if it was his Bhendi Bazar!", hoarsely whispered one of the crowd in front of the 'Hindu Hotel' and immediately the smallish, stout man in the black Maratha cap, started looking for something under his shirt.

The young man was now passing under the window of Vasant's office. Nirmal could see him from quite close quarters, as he went by. Darkish complexion, sensitive, intelligent-looking face. Thin, very thin. One could almost count his ribs sticking out under the muslin shirt. Some student or, maybe, a clerk. He didn't know why but Nirmal felt like shouting aloud a warning: "*Miyanbhai*, look out as you go along. These are very bad times." But no sound came from his lips. And in a flash he knew it was already too late to issue a warning, as a sharp, long knife rose in the air, catching the rays of the sun on its shining blade.

The next moment the knife had plunged into the young man's back—right up to the hilt. Automatically the poor wretch raised his hands—perhaps to protect himself against the cowardly attack—but the next moment he reeled and fell to the ground. And a low moan

escaped his lips which was at once a cry of protest and his death-rattle.

“*Haai Bhagwan!*”

And there was consternation among the group in front of the ‘Hindu Hotel’.

“*Aray!* This seems to have been a Hindu!”

“Don’t you worry—the bastard must be pretending, hoping to save his life.”

“How can a Hindu be wearing a *pajama*?”

“Open his trousers and see if he is circumcized.”

The knife was still in the young man’s back but, not worrying about it, several of them went ahead turned the body over. One of them pulled at the *pajama* cord.

Nirmal turned away his face out of shame. He felt polluted as if someone had rubbed his face into a pile of filth.

When he looked again, the examination was over and the murderer was calmly pulling the knife out of his victim’s back after restoring the body to its original position.

“*Mishtake hogaya!*”, he said and tearing a strip from his dirty *dhotie* he began to wipe off the blood from the blade of the knife.

As the knife emerged from the wound, Nirmal saw a little stream of red-black blood spurt — out of the wound, and, giving a splash of

colour to the dead man's white clothes, spread over the tarred road.

* * * * *

Blood!

"Blood and hate and strife—how far they all seem in this quiet and peaceful haven!", Bharati spoke softly, tenderly, placing an affectionate hand on Nirmal's back. With a violent jerk a tidal wave swept him out of the sea of blood.

"What—er—what did you say, Bharati?"

"I was saying that in these caves we seem to be far, very far, from the bloodshed of Bombay and Calcutta. Thousands of years distant! I am sure here at last you will be able to forget all those horrible things you have seen in Bombay. . . ."

* * * * *

Poor, naive Bharati! Bharati who was a lover of beauty and a beauty herself! How much she bored him! How empty was her head!

She dearly loved Nirmal and could not bear to see him unhappy even for a moment. The very day the riots started she knew that Nirmal's delicate and sensitive mind would not be able to bear the ghastly sights. After the murder on Charni Road which he had witnessed with his own eyes, for three days he could

neither eat nor sleep. It was as if he had been struck dumb. A vast oppressive silence had descended on his mind and heart. Afraid of being dubbed a sentimentalist, he had not confided the reason for this to anyone. But he always unburdened his soul in Bharati's presence. And he related to her the entire sequence of horrors. "I can still see that thin, young man throwing up his hands in his last futile gesture of self-protection. His desperate scream is still ringing in my ears. That agonized look of his haunts me day and night. And even when I sleep I dream that he is drowning in a sea of blood and I cannot go to his rescue."

And gently, affectionately caressing his mass of wavy hair with her soft, tapering fingers, Bharati said: "My poor Nirmal!"

How assiduously she tried to soothe her tormented friend! But everything—the cinema, the radio, music, even her conversation and her love—failed to distract his mind from the remembrance of the ghastly spectacle he had witnessed. Nirmal had suddenly lost all his former liveliness, his famous sense of humour, his keen and intelligent interest in all the multifarious aspects of life. He came, as usual, to see Bharati every day. But for hours he just sat mute without uttering a single word, his horror-stricken eyes fixed on some invisible spectres.

She would say, "Nirmal, my darling, I know your sensitive soul has been deeply wounded. But, for God's sake, don't let yourself drift into a morbid state. That Charni Road episode was horrible, no doubt. But you *must* try to forget it."

And he would say, "Yes, it is better to forget." And to himself he would add, "If only one could forget!"

Nirmal Kumar was gifted with a sensitive and imaginative mind. He was a poet as well as a prose-writer of some distinction among the younger men of letters. His verses, lyrics, essays and stories appeared in the leading literary magazines of the country. Bharati, daughter of a millionaire and a connoisseur of art and patron of artists, was a great admirer of Nirmal's literary genius. If she could, she would have got a pretty little bungalow made on the top of a pine-covered hill, far from the madding crowd, away from the intrusions, disturbances and excitement of life, and in that Olympian retreat enshrined her literary god to communicate with the Muses, undisturbed by anyone. But to Nirmal this ivory-tower conception held no appeal. He was a reporter in a daily newspaper. Bharati often said that for a promising writer on the upgrade it was criminal waste of talent and time to

adopt journalism as a career. But Nirmal held that in present-day India, creative literature was a luxury which few could afford. Journalism was at least some sort of a profession, even if it was so poorly paid. Moreover, as a reporter, he came face to face with life in all its significant and dramatic aspects. In courts and police stations, in strikes, processions and public meetings, he got an opportunity of observing and studying humanity and human character both in its collective and strictly individual manifestations. And it were these observations which his creative instinct later transformed into essays and verses and stories which were distinguished by their awareness, and truthful depiction, of the basic realities of life.

As a reporter, Nirmal had to roam through the city, even during curfew hours.

Sandhurst Road.

Bhendi Bazar.

Pydhonie.

Byculla.

Parel.

Dadar.

The whole of Bombay was an armed camp, seething with hate and violence. Stabbings and murders were being reported from everywhere. Here a Muslim bakery-man was killed!

There a Hindu milkman was fatally stabbed by a Muslim! Here a Pathan was done to death! There a *Poorbi bhayya* was murdered! Here someone cut the throat of a ten-year old boy! There a lad of eleven knifed a pedestrian!

The whole city was partitioned into 'Hindu Bombay' and 'Muslim Bombay'. No Muslim dared pass through Pydhonie. No Hindu ventured into Bhendi Bazar. Pakistan and Akhand Hindustan! At last they had been achieved!

Along with other reporters, Nirmal often went on rounds of the 'affected areas' in police or military lorries. One day a White Sergeant said to him, "So you Congressmen didn't want Pakistan. Well, today, does a Pakistan exist in Bombay or not?" Next day a young English 'Tommy' taunted the group of reporters: "You shouted to us: *Quit India*. Now that we are ready to quit, why do you all run after us, pleading with us to stay? The Hindus want us to save them from the Muslims, the Muslims want us to defend them against the Hindus. But both are agreed that they depend upon us, our guns and planes for their safety. Today they both shout: **DON'T QUIT INDIA!**"

And to Nirmal it seemed as if the magnificent edifice of Indian freedom had suddenly — crumbled like a house of cards, as if all the

patriotic traditions of a hundred years had been betrayed and defiled.

The first confused bloody upheaval of 1857.

The agitation against the partition of Bengal.

Non-co-operation and Khilafat. Swadeshi and Boycott. Gandhiji and the Ali Brothers.

The memorable martyrdom of Jallianwala Bagh. The mingling of the blood of the Hindu and the Muslim and the Sikh in the common cause of freedom.

Bhagat Singh and his brave comrades. Satyagraha and Civil Disobedience. A flag going up on the banks of the Ravi.

All national songs and all patriotic slogans.

India's Unity. India's honour and self-respect.

Indian art, Indian literature, Indian music and poetry and painting and sculpture.

Everything great, everything noble and inspiring, had been trampled into dust.

* * * * *

"Trampled into dust through the centuries—and yet Ajanta shines like eternal gold." The guide was still rambling on.

"Ajanta is the imperishable masterpiece of Indian art and literature, poetry and painting", Bharati was gushingly enthusiastic.

But in that dark cave, even in the circle of light thrown on the wall by the guide's torch,

Nirmal saw nothing but a few dim, meaningless blotches of colour. Neither beauty nor art. Neither meaning nor message! Nirmal's heart was heavy with unfathomable anger, a terrible frustration. If he could he would have liked to shout aloud:

“Why all this—. . . These caves, these sculptures, these frescoes, this art, this endeavour? Why? What for? It was all a colossal waste of human effort! A stupid and meaningless episode in the long story of man's evolution! It would have been better far better if, instead of wasting so much effort on carving images out of stones, it had been used towards humanizing human beings—so that they would not be killing each other today like blood-thirsty beasts of the jungle! India has never learnt anything from Ajanta except the lesson of escape. Escape from the world, from reality, from truth, from life! Ajanta is not only a monument of futility but a Great Lie, a forgery and a fraud. . . .”

Meanwhile, oblivious to the dangerous trend of Nirmal's thoughts, the guide continued to rattle off his commentary. “Look at this fresco. . . . The Buddha, mounted on a white horse, is passing through the street. How serene he looks! And look at these women. How devotedly they are watching the Blessed One. . . .”