



# SO MANY HUNGERS!

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# 1

A meek, measured voice, wingless. A voice too bleak for passion, fire. History had yoked it to its purpose, though, with a sudden urge that made it dynamic. The Prime Minister, Rahoul knew, was a bitter-hearted prey of logical circumstance. Yet Rahoul, rapt, held in a spell, felt the far, flat voice cast across ether pound, as it were, on his ears. He felt a tingling through his nerves, down his spine, down to the knee-pits. Tautness knit him. But he shook himself free and rushed to the door as a sari-clad figure passed, slow-foot, along the corridor.

'Mother!' And Rahoul moistened his lips, 'What is it mother?'

She turned, saw his misery. Sentimental boy! Her glance lay warm on his face. Would he not fit himself into the hardness of life?

'Nothing yet,' she moved her head faintly and said, quiet, 'the moment is near. Not ten minutes between the pains.'

The cool words hit him a blow. He winced, he had to clutch the door frame.

'Hard, heavy pains, as it should be. Another half-hour, Rahoul, and all will be well. You will hear the jewel of jewels screaming.'

Another half hour. Ages. But he pulled himself to calm, soothing inflamed thoughts with joyous vision.

'She will cry as soon as born?' His voice seemed

to yearn. He could see her, his daughter, tiny fists clenched, legs drawn up in the one known posture, face crumpled with new-found screaming.

Mother smiled at the boyishness of her son. 'He will, with the boom of his thin fist of a throat. But you won't hear him, Rahoul, unless you hush that chatter machine.'

His eyes flew back to the machine, and he listened for some moments, the clean-cut lines of his face absorbed.

'And she steps right into War! Mother, you have heard?' He turned, his voice shaking a little, the words tumbling out: 'Great races who took centuries to grow will be caught in the blaze. Vast struggle and suffering. Worth while, if it puts an end to the evil that has tried to strangle civilized living. And—oh!' he gulped because of his excitement—'Right into this she is about to be born.'

Mother felt worry. 'War? It has started, then? Why, we must buy rice and mustard oil, a half-year's supply, before the grocer has an inkling. Prices will touch the sky.' She paused, dipping into memory. 'Strange! You too came in war-time, Rahoul. The Great Killing was just on its way. It was —'

'Mother, I couldn't time it so well, I was born in mid-Aswin,' Rahoul interrupted. 'Weeks late. Look at this one coming today!'

Mother smiled again and went on: 'Sugar too. Clothing. I remember the old days. We had no English goods, not even clothing, until our own mills set up a business. I must get white English drill for Father and you two boys. And tinned butter, tinned fish. Strange tongues you fellows have. The rivers of

Bengal choked with fish, every kind, large and small, still the year-old shapes packed in tins you fancy, both you and Kunal. The strong smell!’

The son in his exalted mood could not share Mother’s worldly wisdom. His ears were back to the broadcast. His eyes behind the thick-rimmed glasses were keen and alight. Mother turned, passing down the corridor.

*For the second time in a generation Great Britain is at war with Germany—*

Pay the evil well, for there is no stronger spear-head of reaction—Rahoul mused, ironic. Pay well—with the freedom of faraway people of whom you know nothing. And so he pays, at the expense of those others—then how History mocks him! Rahoul too was full of mocking, lips dipping in the corners, pressing tight as he laughed in his silent inward way.

Even as he glimpsed in his mind the far fire-burst, his eyes lay resting in a strain of anxiety upon the wide marble-floored corridor that stretched past this room toward the grey-green mosaic stair leading to an upper floor. A housemaid went by with a steaming bucket of water. Could it be—his heart thumped. No—barely five minutes gone out of the half-hour. Ten minutes between the pains, so close, the hard, heavy pains. Earlier, at daybreak, he had seen one, and it had burned into him, and yet it couldn’t have been so hard and heavy then. . . . . It goes flaming through her and makes her first clench all of herself, then shudder and break to pieces. She groans, utterly exhausted, she screams and gasps, and sweat breaks on her face with each scream and gasp—

*We expect every Englishman to do his duty.*

Atmospherics made an instant explosive response, and Rahoul with absent hand turned the knob, across snatches of studio music, downpours of speech, off to Zeesen. A Fascist voice, strident, bullying the world. Rahoul made a face of disgust. A great nation committed under gangster discipline to a programme of world disruption. War had become vital to its being, so it seemed to think, for defeatism was heavy on its chest, suffocating, and somewhere on the corpse-stiffened battlefields of Europe would it find back self-respect. The delusion! Defeat—the only hope of German survival. Let England's reactionary forces destroy their Nazi kindred. Then would Germany live again.

England, too. England, lifted from the pit of human decency into which she had been pushed by diehard politicians, England cleansed, with new enlightened leadership—

So Rahoul, in that hour of world crisis, mused in his heart.

A door slamming somewhere. With a violent start he choked off the machine. The street door. A voice greeted him—'Halt!'—as he rushed out to the corridor, nerves on edge. Kunal, tall, slim, athletic in flannels, came striding with a tennis racket in his hand. 'Salute!' he ordered himself, and heels clicked, right arm shot up smartly.

'Dada, be introduced to an officer of His Majesty's armed forces. Cavalry.' His arm dropped, his voice lowered. 'Maybe you have not heard the news? In you scholar's sanctum the petty affairs of this world—' Rahoul grinned.

'Haven't I? What's more, Kunal, today's *dramatis*

*personae*—I've seen them in the flesh. I heard the Prime Minister address the House. India Debate. In Berlin I had a glimpse of mankind's enemy number one. In the Chamber of Deputies—'

Kunal was waving a hand as though he had heard enough.

'There you beat me. Four—five—years in Europe. Cricket at Lord's; Wimbledon; Olympics in Berlin. All the good things of life. What luck! Now it's my turn. Captain Basu leads his armoured spearhead against a strong point in the Siegfried Line, liquidates the enemy and gets mentioned in despatches—'

'I had an idea Lieutenant Basu belonged to the cavalry—'

'Captain Basu, please. One gets promoted, after all, if one has the stuff in him—Captain Basu happens to belong to a mechanized unit. In the old days he would have been a horseman. Today he rides a 30-ton tank. *Dada*, I am dead serious. I'm going to see my O.C., Major Bird of our University Training Corps. I shall get a commission, I believe. I have had some training, haven't I? Under-officer and all that.'

Rahoul was silent, brows knit in thought. Kunal, with his practical mind, had sprung into decision, untroubled by theories of right and wrong. The War would be a great adventure. The aims of War did not count. It was a matter of chance that Kunal would find himself in the armed forces of democracy. But he, Rahoul, holding inside him a weighing machine for the finer values, felt the same swift urge to take an active part in democracy's war against Fascist aggression—had he not, in the years past, longed for this struggle?

'I too might join up—' the voice sounded strangely

like pleading!

'You?' Kunal stared, shook his head. 'Oh no. A great professor of Astro-Physics. Cambridge D.Sc. And then—'

Rahoul knew the unspoken words. How many minutes more had ticked away from the half-hour? If only he could go to the corner room upstairs and see what was happening! Monju getting thin and pale since her fifth month. She had needed a tonic, calcium. She had refused it, though—calcium, she had heard, was bad for baby's complexion! And month by month she had grown thin, she had let her strength ebb away. Oh, if only—Rahoul ached—if only he had insisted that she should take calcium!

'You have your work. One day you will discover some unknown sunbeam, or is it starbeam? You will expound a startling new theory. You will surely become an F.R.S.' Compassion softened the strong statuesque lines of his face. He stepped closer. He was two inches taller than his elder brother. 'You will be all right, *dada*. No, you can't join up. Anyhow, sister won't let you. As for me, I want action, enterprise, speed. To think I might have been doomed to a desk job! Father has been pulling a hundred wires.' He paused a moment, listening. 'He will be home in a minute. I passed him at the street corner as I cycled up—I never saw him walk so fast. He too must have heard. I must rush off.' He paused again, his eyes flying up the stairway, and his voice came low: 'Give my love to the young chap when he turns up.'

'The girl—' said Rahoul absently. The War had receded. It was Monju again. She moaned, and tears



dimmed her eyes. Earlier that day, she had accused him, clutching his hand, gasping, 'It's all your fault. If only you had told me not to have a baby!' But she had to have a baby. The urge of motherhood was insistent in her blood.

'The girl?' breathed Kunal, taken aback. Then his voice burst in an excited shout. 'Dada!' he clutched his brother by the shoulders and shook him, crying: 'Why didn't you tell me? The baby's come! It's great! I've been so worried. Poor sister—'

Rahoul loved his brother, then. Whoever thought that Kunal would worry about such things! Rushing about all day, pursuing a thousand interests. He had no eye for what was happening at home. And he had no time—how could one be concerned with petty household affairs when, down there on the *maidan*, Bannerji was making his heroic innings?

'Not yet. Only I've been expecting it will be a girl.' He smiled shamefacedly as he saw his brother's eyebrow lift. 'Mother came down and said the moment was near.' The smile sagged. 'Monju will be all right. She is in good hands. Only, it's all so painful—'

'I hate pain,' said Kunal with sudden feeling. 'Pain in a woman. Let men suffer; they are strong. Not the women—the mothers and sisters and wives.' Kunal stopped short, flurried by his outburst. 'There comes Father, and he may have some good advice for me!' His tennis racket swung as he fled.

Father was near-fifty, thick-set, with shrewd eyes in a broad heavy-jowled face under greying close-cropped hair—a physical type that showed no kinship with his two sons. He wore ill-fitting English clothes,

shiny-black alpaca coat, black bow-tie and white drill trousers tight on his paunch, stopping short an inch above his ankles. A thick gold watch chain gleamed on his chest.

'Then it is War?' He paced, slow, up the corridor, turned round.

'War.' Rahoul, his heart brimful, had need of speech. 'They've had their hands forced. Moral obligations! With one hard-worked phrase wipe off Munich! The fact is, the Nazi has trod on their sacred imperial interests. The Kaiser's dream has been re-dreamed.'

'Dynamite!' said the other with a shake of his head. 'How long can you play with dynamite?' He paced ahead, turned again at the corridor's end, paced back. 'How long will it last, you think?'

'Till the new epoch is born,' Rahoul flung his answer as though he was thinking aloud. 'The imperialist war will grow into a war of ideas, values. The die-hards will have to use slogans they hate and release forces they fear most.'

'Gold or Steels?' broke in Samarendra, his eyes narrowing. He too was thinking aloud.

Rahoul stared, perplexed.

'War feeds on both—'

Samarendra shook his head with impatience.

'Don't you see? Gold bars or steel shares—which shall I buy?' He spoke in a low, earnest tone. 'Tomorrow there will be a storm in the share market. The bulls will carry all before them, as never before, the bears will be nowhere. Steels will rise steeply, so will gold—which to choose? The chance of a life-time—'

Kunal was pleased with the War for one reason: so was Father, for another. And you too? Rahoul

asked himself in his heart. Kunal going to be a soldier. Father going to buy shares, and Mother rice and mustard oil. You?

The half-hour was almost over—that one thought beat meanwhile through all else. The approaching moment on which lives hung, a great weight on a frail thread. If something happened to Monju—no! In these years together she had become part of his inmost being. Hard to imagine himself alive and she gone forever. Yet, had he not neglected her often? Sunk in his work, had he not denied her many little pleasures—a walk together on the Ganges bank, a meal at Firpo's, a cinema show? Fool! Never again. She would have all she needed of him, all. If only she would live, happy in her motherhood, fulfilled.

A conch shell startled him with its auspicious *oom oom!* At the bend of the stair stood Mother.

'Come, both of you. Stand by the door and have a good look at the newcomer—she has just been bathed. Big eyes, rose-and-milk complexion, the very image of her mother.'

'If she has the looks of her mother, she is lucky indeed,' said Samarendra, beaming. 'We shall not lose our sleep looking for a groom!' He laughed loud with his satisfaction. 'Rahoul, you go first and see the pretty one. I am coming in a moment. Must ring up my stockbroker. Gold or Steels. Don't you see?' He squared his shoulders with the unspoken thought: Why, at a moment like this, with a great War on and a lovely grandchild born, you have to be a Napoleon of finance. Don't you see?

'Mother, Monju?'

She smiled a bit. 'You will see her in a while.

She is tired but happy. Let the lady doctor finish her work.' And she went along to bring the child.

The scream! The thin, helpless, persistent scream of a newborn one! Rahoul stood rooted. The elation that made his heart swell! Two exciting things had happened to him this autumn day. The Prime Minister had declared war on the Swastika. Monju had given birth to a baby girl. Either event was a profound experience that made his emotions vibrate, as though he had achieved some personal fulfilment. It seemed symbolic somehow that his child should be born at the propitious moment when the reluctant voice of a politician, loving the old and decrepit world order, commanded that world order to dig its own grave.

Yes! In the blood bath of war much else would be drowned besides the Swastika. A million youths would not die in vain.

## 2

The new day, bright herald of the new epoch round the corner, broke in through the window panes and touched his waking thoughts with wistful expectation.

He had slept well, freed from the awful strains of the night before: Monju twisting in agony; her wide eyes haunted by fear—and the evil omen of a cat moaning eerily in the dark street, close to the house-door, made the fear a certainty—that she would not live to see her child. Oh, she would hate to die so young, just over twenty, and possessing all that a woman could dream of. With advancing pain, clutching her husband's arm, pressing his arm hard against her bosom, she made her gloom flow out into his nerves, till he felt in him the whispered echo of her premonition, and he edged close to her and took her head in the crook of his arm, enveloping her, shielding her from some mortal hurt. He saw the pupils of her eyes dilate, stained with deepening dread, as though Yama had tramped out of the night and stood at her bedside, in his hand the soul-holding tube into which he slipped life-sparks as he collected them, bits of phosphorescence. And Rahoul, watching with concern, felt the body between his arms stiffen. And the cat at the house-door was moaning, moaning. "That beast!" muttered Rahoul, and he stirred as though he would go and drive the cat away, but Monju held him tight, breathing in alarm. 'Nah!' And he lay back, in a

burning of rage for the animal of ill-omen.

The nightmare hours had dragged off. Monju a mother, baby the image of joy! All was well.

The Allied Powers were forced at last to make war on the Swastika. Strong in moral grandeur, backed by the civilized conscience of the world, they would root out the scourge of the Reich and free its soul from a deathlike stranglehold.

Fortresses would fall, and not in Germany alone. The idealism the Allied Powers would invoke against the enemy was a two-edged sword striking at the rot of one, striking back at the rot of the other. Yes, all would be well.

All would be well with India, too? India's people would take up arms for the democracies? The people, Rahoul knew, were anti-Fascist to the core. The British henchmen of the Swastika had sickened them. So for a moment the feeling might race round: Let the proud ones go down in defeat and learn a lesson. But the feeling would die of shame, the fever ease. Deep at heart India still had great goodwill for Britain's people. And India hated the life-pattern of the hooked cross. India would fight. It was her war.

Rahoul jumped out of bed. He could have shouted or sung for joy; but contented himself with a sharp whistle! World forces were dancing to his tune. Had he not, often in his fancy, mobilized a great international brigade of freedom-seekers and declared war on Fascist plague? Humanity crusading to save from destruction all that was worth living for. Rahoul washed, shaved. He felt the voice of India echo in his blood throb.

In the background of his thoughts was Monju,

fretting to come to the fore. Rahoul hurried up the stairs. The bedroom he used to share with her had been turned into a maternity chamber. Custom cast a new mother into isolation, so that she could not leave the room where her child was born, for three weeks if it was a boy, a month if it was a girl. Poor Monju! Her world would shrink painfully. Hindu taboos, odd-seeming and fast dying off, revealed often an inner purpose if you looked beneath the surface. Good for Monju, after all. She needed complete rest. Rest would hasten recovery.

He paused at the door, listening. The helpless scream! He had almost forgotten he had a child of his own, a little baby girl! Voices. . . . . Mother urging, persuasive. . . . . Monju pleading it hurt her. And the child yelling—she had strong lungs for her puny size. What could be hurting Monju? The yelling ceased all at once. Silence. Rahoul, curious, opened the door a crack, peering through. In an instant he drew back, lips pressed together, laughing in his inward way. The grace of a new mother! The wonder of a young girl turned mother!

Down the stairs to his study. A servant brought tea and the papers. His eyes rushed over the columns. Then he sat back pondering, absently pouring out a cup of tea. The point of view was plain enough. Indian opinion was at one with progressive forces the world over. Those forces had been betrayed after the last War, avowedly fought for democratic freedom. Victory achieved, the Powers had cynically broken faith. If the Allies were more sincere this time, India would offer them whole-hearted co-operation. But India would be the true test of that professed sincerity.

How could a people step out into a war said to be waged for democratic freedom so long as that very freedom was denied them? India in bondage asked to fight for world freedom!

But the bonds were breaking, breaking in that great hour, Rahoul saw, his eyes gazing and fixed in a dreamy smile. Freedom went blowing across the frontiers of Europe from land to land and across the oceans to Asian lands. In the agonies of War the soul of mankind would be cleansed. Mankind after the War would not be the mankind before.

The door opened and Mother stepped in slowly. Turning, Rahoul saw the woe in her face and he cried in alarm, 'Monju? No complication?'

Mother shook her head. 'She is well. The child cried a little at night, not much.' Pause. 'Your tea'—she felt the cup—'it's gone cold.' She emptied the cup into a wash basin and refilled it from the teapot. 'Drink your tea before it gets cold again.' She sat down on a divan with a tired sigh.

'There's something on your mind, Mother. Tell me.' He moved his chair closer.

She nodded. 'Yes. It's Kunal.' She mused for a time before she went on. 'Kunal taps at the door of the lying-in room at night and when I come out he breathes, "She is well? And the little girl?" And then he says, "Mother, I have something to tell you." And his face is hot as if he has done some wrong and he takes me to his room and hands me a chair and he sits down on the floor at my feet, his head in my lap, and he says, "Mother, I am going to War. You mustn't say, No." I feel stunned. "Kunal," I tell him, "when I am dead you can go anywhere, I shall not be here to



forbid you. Wait, till then." He lifts his face, he says, "Mother, you want to keep me stuffed up with cotton-wool? You will only break my heart." I ask him, "What have they done to you, the German people?" And he says, "I have no high-sounding ideals to serve, Mother. I am going to War to serve myself, to find an outlet for my spirit, as it were—" And he springs to his feet and paces the room, restive, and his heart seems to shine on his face, and then I know I must not be in his way, I know I must not hurt him within, so I tell him, "Kunal, do the right thing. You have my blessing, my son." He stands still, as if dazed, and he sinks at my feet and drops his face in my lap and his eyes are wet and he says, "Mother, I'll be all right. Do not fret yourself on my account." And he lifts his face excitedly again and says, "Why, at this very moment a million mothers the world over must be sending their sons to War."'

He was like that, Kunal, thought Rahoul, unhappy because of Mother's misery. Prompt in decision, that boy. No hesitation in his nature. That was his strength. His weakness, too; even if he took a wrong track he wouldn't turn back, he would press on, persistent, purposive.

And you? Rahoul asked himself for the tenth time. Research could wait. In the great drama that had burst upon the world he had his part to play. What the press said was true. But the people of England were more than the politicians of England. The people meant what the politicians often lip-professed. The people were growing to value freedom as much for others as for themselves. They would now grow faster. Would they let the ideals