



# *The Far Pavilions*

Indian drama in five acts

after M.M.Kaye's novel with the same title,

by Christian Lanciai (2009)

*The Characters :*

Akbar Khan  
Hilary Pelham-Martyn  
Isabel, his wife  
Ashton Hilary Akbar Pelham-Martyn, called Ashok or Ash  
Sita, his foster mother  
Hira Lal  
Koda Dad Khan  
Yuveraj, the young becoming rajah of Gulkot  
Anjuli, his half sister  
Zarin, Koda Dad's son  
Belinda Harlowe  
her mother  
a reconnoitrer  
a colonel  
a major  
Wally Hamilton  
an aide-de-camp  
Princess Shushila  
Raja Jhoti, her elder brother  
Kaka-ji Rao, uncle of the princesses  
the Rajah of Bhithor  
his minister  
Captain Crimply  
other officers  
Norson  
Doctor Govindas  
Sarji, Ashok's servant  
Aunt Begum  
Colonel Wigram  
Sir Louis Napoleon Cavagnari  
Doctor Rosie  
Gul Baz

The action is in the Northwest of India and Afghanistan during the years 1857-1878.

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Act I scene 1.

*Akbar* What kind of a wench is that you have happened to, Hilary?

*Hilary* Don't blame me, my good friend. She just turned up, and there is nothing wrong with her. She is a good sport and rides well and is quick in action. I guess she wanted to get away from personal problems at home in England or perhaps just wanted some adventure and had a brother in India, so she came here by boat. The brother proved a puritan bore and his wife even worse, so she started to look around.

*Akbar* I think she came here just to find herself a man. She is good-looking.

*Hilary* She couldn't just sit locked up at home with the puritans, so she started looking around the officers and other young lions from England and thus acquired that reputation to be looking for a man, but what extrovert and smart young lady isn't?

*Akbar* But how on earth did she get stuck on you?

*Hilary* Good question. No old bachelor is attractive, but she felt safe in my company, and I liked her style, so I decided to test the marriage state.

*Akbar* She could have been your daughter.

*Hilary* Honestly I look upon her as something of a favourite daughter.

*Akbar* And she got pregnant. How on earth did that happen?

*Hilary* I wonder that as well. It couldn't be you, could it?

*Akbar* I am also far too old.

*Hilary* But you have so much better looks. No offence. Even if it happened to be you and not I, it is still my son, if there will be a son, and if it will be a daughter you are welcome to take her.

*Akbar* A daughter would hardly survive our camp life. If he wants to survive it will have to be a son.

*Hilary* We can both love him, Akbar, since we are close friends.

*Akbar* And have always been.

*Hilary* Here she is. How are you, my girl?

*Isabel* I never felt better. I am sorry that I got pregnant, Hilary. It wasn't intentional. I hardly know myself how it happened.

*Hilary* You mean you slept only with half the regiment?

*Isabel* Don't be silly. You know very well that I only know the two of you.

*Hilary* And that is why we will take well care of him, if it will be a son. If it will be a daughter, we shall leave her to you.

*Isabel* Will you leave me in that case?

*Hilary* Never in my life, but we can't take responsibility for a girl in the regiment. It has to be a son, so that we at least could make a good soldier out of him.

*Isabel* It shall be as you wish. I don't mind getting a son.

*Akbar* Neither do we.

*Hilary* Then we are agreed as usual. You are a great sport, my girl. That's why I like you.

*Akbar* We will bring him up as our own.  
*Isabel* I never expected to get married when I came to India, but when I was, I never expected to have two husbands at the same time.  
*Hilary* We have always been inseparable. Once married to me, you had to accept Akbar as well.  
*Isabel* He will be the best possible godfather for your son.  
*Hilary* No, Isabel, he will have two fathers.  
*Isabel* Good of you to at least not fight over it.  
*Hilary* That's the only thing we never did together, isn't it, Akbar?  
*Akbar* Not as far as I can remember, and still we have both lived for long.  
*Hilary* Come now, Isabel. Let's have a beer at the canteen.  
*(They go out all three together as the best of friends.)*

## Scene 2.

*Little Ash* But how did it happen when they all left me?  
*Sita* They died, poor little Ash. Your mother died when she gave birth to you, and your father and his friend Akbar were both lost in the cholera epidemic. You and me were almost the only ones who survived in the camp. The others who survived took whatever they could and fled. That's why we are all alone in the whole world.  
*Ash* But how could they die?  
*Sita* They didn't die, little Ash, they were just brought away on other journeys. They didn't want to leave you, and perhaps they are still with you today although we can't see them, since they have become blessed as spirits. Perhaps you can see them and feel them by your unsullied childhood soul, if you try. You could maybe find them in the full moon or in the stars, when their brightness is clear. Wherever they are, little Ash, you can always associate with them, for no one who ever gives a child to the world could ever abandon that child in her spirit.  
*Ash* Tell me where I can relocate them.  
*Sita* There is always a valley beyond the mountains where you always can recover anything. It could be difficult and impossible to find, it could be inaccessible and not even located on the map, but it's always there waiting for you until your love one day will lead you there.  
*Ash* And that's where mother and father and Akbar are?  
*Sita* I shall also be there, if I have left you before then.  
*Ash* You must never leave me, Sita. You are the only one I have.  
*Sita* I will never leave you as long as you need me, but your father and Akbar decided that you would become an honest soldier, and I must fulfil their wish. I must let you become a man, little Ash, and that you will be among other men and not with me.  
*Ash* But you will always remain, Sita.  
*Sita* Always as long as you need me.

Ash           When will we arrive?  
Sita           I don't know.  
Ash           Why don't you know?  
Sita           I know nothing at the moment, little Ash. That is why we must hide and walk on all the time. The whole country is in turmoil, and I don't know what is happening.  
Ash           Is that why we have seen so many dead?  
Sita           Yes, little Ash, that is why.  
Ash           Who has killed them?  
Sita           My people have killed them, and the gods know they had reasons for it, but they went too far and also killed innocents, like you and I, women and children in hundreds just because they weren't Indian, and that is why we must be careful. That is also why your name must be Ashok and nothing else. It's a royal name to be proud of, for the greatest king of India was called Ashok and ruled over all the lands from Afghanistan to Burma with all the mountains and valleys in between, and that is why you are called Ashok. And you are my son and no one else's, until there will be order in the country again and I can find your own.  
Ash           My name is Ashok and I am king.  
Sita           Yes, little Ash, you are my Ashok, my little king. (*embraces him and cries. He also cries.*)

### Scene 3.

Hira Lal      What shall we do with him? He is far too honest.  
Koda Dad Khan   That is why the crown prince has so much confidence in him. He saved his life, you know, even if it was accidental, and that the young Rajah will never be able to forget.  
Hira Lal      But he treats him badly.  
Koda          Who is he not treating badly? He is the heir, you know.  
Hira Lal      How many attempts has his stepmother already made against his life?  
Koda          Against Ashok or the crown prince?  
Hira Lal      Both.  
Koda          At least three, two poisonings and a cobra.  
Hira Lal      If we include the attempt that gave us Ashok, it is four.  
Koda          Yes.  
Hira Lal      Is his mother capable of standing on her legs?  
Koda          Yes, she can ride, so if I give them a horse they can escape.  
Hira Lal      That would be the best thing. The stepmother can't forgive him that he averted so many attempts and will never stop trying until he is out of the way, so that she then also will be able to get the young Rajah out of the way without complications. But if Ashok and his mother are gone, she will not be able to reach them while she still must fear them as long as they are alive, since Ashok knows too much.

*Koda* The problem is the heir and the young princess. No one wants to let him go, since he is the favourite of both.

*Hira Lal* The young princess knows he must escape to save his life. She is the one who has persuaded him to do it.

*Koda* Then the prince is the only problem.

*Hura Lal* Here he is.

*Yuveraj (enters)* Where is Ashok? Why is he never here? Is he out running with my little sister again?

*Koda* Your highness, the more you restrict his freedom and insist on keeping him imprisoned in your castle, the more he yearns for liberty. His life is among men, among tiger hunters and horsemen who hunt with falcons. He is a young eagle like yourself who can't be kept in the cage which you insist on keeping him in.

*Yuveraj* He is the only one I can trust. He is the only honest person in the entire court and my only playmate. All others are corrupt flatterers and spies, kept and paid by my stepmother.

*Hira Lal* Don't say it that she might hear.

*Yuveraj* She hears everything anyway. All she wants is to get me out of the way to make room for my bastard brothers for the throne, while it's only mine by right! He is the only one who can protect me.

*Hira Lal* That's why she also seeks to murder him.

*Yuveraj* Is it true?

*Koda* We just discussed the matter, your highness, Hira Lal and I, and we have arrived at the conclusion, that the best thing for your own safety would be to let Ashok have his freedom.

*Yuveraj* Never!

*Hira Lal* Your stepmother has tried to murder you and knows that Ashok has seen her through and knows too much about her. The English have been here. If Ashok is allowed to go, she would never dare to touch you from fear that Ashok would tell what he knows about the court to the English, who easily remove intriguing tyrants.

*Yuveraj* Never! I need him!

*(Ashok enters with Anjuli, holding each other's hands like brother and sister.)*

*Koda* Here they are.

*Yuveraj* Ashok, from now on you must never leave the palace again without armed escort until you return!

*Ashok* My lord, you command and I must obey, but it's hard for a disciple of Koda Dad Khan to be constantly more locked up.

*Yuveraj* I have spoken! I will never release you! *(stalks out)*

*Koda* You must escape tonight, Ashok, with your mother. As long as you remain at court, both yours and the young Rajah's life is in danger. We will help you. Can your mother travel?

*Ashok* If she must. I hope the departure might be momentary. You have been like another father to me, Koda Khan. You taught me everything about horses and

hunting and are like a younger brother of the old godfather I once had, Akbar Khan, who gave me one of his names.

*Anjali* We will all meet again. Father is old, so my brother will be the next Rajah, and there will be better order when our stepmother grows old and ugly. We'll meet again, Ashok.

*Ashok* Or else I could never leave.

*Koda* That's settled then. We must let you down outside from the wall, for the gate is too well guarded. Do you know any place where it could be done without being noticed?

*Anjali* The balcony.

*Hira Lal* The balcony?

*Anjali* The secret balcony, which I found the way to and which no one has used for 30 years. No one knows of its existence.

*Koda* That sounds good. Could you show us?

*(Ashok and Anjali bring Koda Khan and Hira Lal to the secret balcony.)*

*Anjali* Here we often sit and dream about the eternal mountains. Over there somewhere beyond everything there is a secret valley in which we will build a home of our own and plant a beautiful garden with almonds and apricots.

*Ashok* There is no place in the palace where you could see the mountains better than from here. That was probably why the balcony was constructed once.

*Hira Lal* But the palace intrigues made the courts forget about the mountains.

*Ashok* We have found them again.

*Koda* That will be an excellent way of escape. Come, Hira Lal. We must plan every detail perfectly. *(The two of them leave.)*

*Ashok* When do you think we will see each other again, Anjali?

*Anjali* We must. I have tied you to my life and fate as my foster brother. We are born on the same day, and on the same day you arrived with your mother to Gulkot, which means we have the same destiny. We can't separate even if we wanted to, and even if we try, it can only be temporary.

*Ashok* That sounds good, since we don't want to separate.

*Anjali* Your destiny is to always look after me and protect me by your manliness, and my destiny is to always watch over you with my spirit. Are you sure your mother is fit for travelling?

*Ashok* She must. I can't leave her, and she can't do without me. I will never let her down.

*Anjali* She has been forced to hard labour here in the palace.

*Ashok* I know. That is why she is worn out. Your stepmother is to blame, who has been suppressing her for my sake.

*Anjali* Evil and meanness are always self-consuming and vanish like smoke rings with the wind leaving nothing behind.

*Ashok* But it is fatiguing to have to fight it, and it constantly gives you trouble.

*Anjali* That's what you men are made for to manage.

*Ashok* My little sister, when we now separate we will always be able to associate even if we don't see each other. We will think of the mountains over there, and there we will always find each other.

*Anjuli* The mountains that make our destiny to always return to.

*Ashok* I think it is a good destiny.

*Anjuli* I think so too. (*removes a small necklace with a medallion, out of which she takes a small gem which she breaks. She gives half of it to Ashok.*) Here is the seal of our union. Always wear it, and I will always wear my half, until we can rejoin them and unite again.

*Ashok* I shall never separate from it until I see you again.

*Anjuli* Then we know, my great brother, for sure that we shall meet again.  
(*They embrace and sit down to contemplate the snowclad mountains.*)

#### Scene 4.

*Sita* I can't make it any longer, my beloved Ashok.

*Ashok* I can't leave you, mother.

*Sita* You must. Our persecutors are still after us.

*Ashok* I am so sorry, mother. I thought we could easily get away with the great lead we had. I could never imagine they would keep pursuing us outside the confines of Gulkot.

*Sita* How that queen must hate you, Ashok.

*Ashok* Only because I refused to accept injustice and saw through her cunning.

*Sita* It's a heritage from your father. Both he and your foster father Akbar Khan instructed you constantly to never accept an injustice. It is time, my son, for me to give you up to your inheritance. Before your father died I had to promise him to entrust you with the English, his own people, and he gave me your identification papers and a small reserve of money. I have protected them with my life all these years and especially during our years as refugees. I couldn't give you over to the English in the stormy times of the great mutiny, for then there were almost no Englishmen left. That's why we ended up in Gulkot. Now the times have calmed down, and I can safely entrust you with the English.

*Ashok* You were always like my only real mother. I could never regard you as anything else.

*Sita* It was I who was given the care of you when your real mother died. I suckled you and nursed you and loved you like a real mother would have done. Before you I had four children of my own, four girls, who all died. My joy was therefore the greater when at last I had someone I could call my son.

*Ashok* Mother, you must rest. Don't exert yourself.

*Sita* I have rested enough. I am ready for the last journey. I will watch over you, my son.

*Ashok* Mother! Mother!

Sita           Hurry. Don't tarry. Escape from all the injustice, so that you can fight it like a man. *(dies)*

Ashok         Mother! Mother! *(buries his face in her beautiful sari.)*

Scene 5. Mardan. A campus tent.

*scout (enters to Zarin)* Here is a strange beggar outside who claims that he knows you.

Zarin         What is his name?

Scout         Ashok.

Zarin *(gets up in a leap of joy)* Ashok! *(rushes to the entrance)* Come on in, Ashok! *(The same, in rags and a bad condition, enters and is immediately embraced by Zarin)* At last! I knew you would turn up sooner or later! How is your mother?

Ashok         She is dead, Zarin. We became refugees.

Zarin         What happened?

Ash           The palace intrigues thickened. My few friends persuaded me to escape to save both my own life and that of the heir to the throne. Your father helped me in my escape. My mother followed and would have made it all the way here, if the guards of the stepmother and queen had not constantly harassed us and forced us to lead them astray. First we made it towards the north, because we knew they would seek us in the south, but when they couldn't get us, they continued chasing us beyond the confines of Gulkot. One day my mother couldn't make it any more. She sat down under a tree and died on the shore of Jhelum. I remained there for a day to bury her. I sent her floating on the river to the sea, for that was the habit of her mountain people – the long last voyage from the mountains down to the sea.

Zarin         I am sorry. So my father is involved.

Ash           Yes. He gave us a horse, which we then could sell.

Zarin         No one must know that you are here, Ashok.

Ash           I am not Ashok any longer, Zarin.

Zarin         Who are you then?

Ash           When my mother died she gave me my father's heritage. *(presents his heavy money belt and a few documents)* Here are my identification papers. I am an Englishman, and my name is Ashton. Unfortunately I can't read or speak English, but a copyist helped me to identify the address of a letter of recommendation, which happened to be your place of assignment.

Zarin         We have just returned from a campaign. There is always war along this frontier against the Afghans. You are incredibly lucky. We must immediately get in touch with the colonel. Get me an officer, Safir, anyone will do. *(the scout vanishes)*

What you have been through, Ashok! So you are a perfect Englishman, although you are perfectly Indian. This is sensational. *(The scout returns with the colonel.)*

Colonel       What's this about a British boy having arrived?

Zarin         He has a letter of recommendation for his uncle William Ashton.

*Colonel* William Ashton is dead since last year, fallen in battle. May I see the letter. (*receives the letter*) And this boy is supposed to be an Englishman? (*reads*) Great Scott by all the pains of all the gods! Hilary Pelham-Martyn's son! Heavens above all miracles! (*to Ash*) And you are Ashton Hilary Akbar Pelham-Martyn?

*Zarin* He doesn't know English, but he can ride and is an accomplished Guide.

*Colonel* He will not immediately be a Guide among us, but with time he could reach any qualifications. So he doesn't know English? Then we'll just have to send him home to England to his relatives to get him some education first of all! He must be able to read and write, you know!

*Ash (understands)* Only Hindi and Pushtu.

*Colonel* That's good for a start. (*sits down at ease on the edge of a table*) I knew both his parents, a very odd couple, he an old professor who preferred examining flowers and she a striking young lass who loved adventure and wild parties. They were contraries but suited each other perfectly maybe just because of that. She died when you were born, Ashton, but it wasn't your fault nor anyone else's. Your father died in cholera together with his best friend, who never really could figure out who really was your true father, but legally you are Hilary's son, and that's what counts. They never fought over it but rather became only better as friends because of the uncertainty. Your mother wasn't quite clear about it either.

*Zarin* I always thought his mother was Sita.

*Colonel* The wet nurse, who took care of you when your mother died.

*Ash* She was my only real mother.

*Colonel* I understand you, since you had no other. Where is she now?

*Zarin* They had to escape from Gulkot to save their lives. She died in the hardships.

*Colonel* Then you really have been through a great deal already, my son. Escaping on foot from Gulkot? That Rajah has much on his conscience since we never could reach there to bring them some proper order. Well, now you are here and identified as an Englishman, which no one can take away from you. How does that feel?

*Ash (to Zarin)* Obviously I have been accepted.

*Zarin* Your homeless years on the run are over, Ash. You have found a home – the army.

*Ash* It remains to be seen if it will be just another prison or really something you could trust.

*Zarin* You'll manage and are safe. That's the main thing. And you can go to England.

*Ash* England? Where is that?

Act II scene 1. On board a ship.

*Ash (now fully grown)* You are the only one on board that I have heard saying anything good about India. All the others and especially your mother are only horrified, complaining of the dust and the dirt, the extreme climate with burning dry seasons and long seasons of pouring rain, the dangerous animals and the unreliable and insidious Hindus, while you challenge them all by praising the beauty and the colours, the splendour of their beautiful clothes and flowers, the perfumes and the spices and the intensity, just looking forward to get out there again, although it's home, just like for me.

*Belinda* There is something mystic and intriguing about you, Ash, which is both irresistible and awesome. We don't know anything about you, but my mother immediately accepted your proposal.

*Ash* Is it just because I am a Pelham-Martyn with a baron for my uncle, an officer's commission and a relatively good position?

*Belinda* No, Ash, it's not just that, at least not for me. We were both born in India and therefore know the country in a different way from other Englishmen, but you have come much further than I. You have suffered in India and felt its extreme hardship and poverty, you were here during the great mutiny and was forced to live on the run for years, you had an Indian wet nurse who was more of a mother to you than your own mother...

*Ash* My mother died when I was born.

*Belinda* That's what I mean. Your mother's milk was that of India, and you didn't even know a word of English when you first came as a teenager to England, which you never really could find acceptable.

*Ash* I was stuck for years as a prisoner at the court of a Rajah as his heir's playmate and closest servant, I was not even allowed to leave their castle during certain periods, but I became much more of a prisoner in England, where everyone all the time kept commanding me what to do and not to do. In India I lived as a prisoner, but in England I was guarded as a prisoner.

*Belinda* I can't stand the hypocritical English society either with its conceit and prejudice, the racism and self-sufficiency, the pretending Christianity and the illusion of superiority, which is only vanity and sickly self-deceit. I want to break loose in India, the wild and beautiful land that I was born in with all its dangers, and therefore I am so glad to have found you, who want to take me with you to the most dangerous frontiers of the wild country of bandits.

*Ash* I had no choice. I was utterly at odds with the English society. My only possibility to get back to India was as an officer in the army, and thus war became a profession.

*Belinda* I settle for that.

*Ash* If your mother knew that my parents hardly even got the chance to touch me, and that all my education and childhood was with Hindus, she would never accept me as your husband.

*Belinda* No, she probably would not, but now she doesn't know, and it's quite enough that I know about it.

*Ash* Yes, it is. Do you really love me?

*Belinda* Like I never loved anyone else. Have you had anyone else?

*Ash* Only temporary associations. I was seduced by one of my uncle's kitchen maids. She wanted to show me that she could sit on her hair when she was combing it, and suddenly it ended up in bed. After six nights it was discovered, and she was dismissed. Then there was never anything worse or more serious with anyone else. I think you are the first one I ever fell in love with.

*Belinda* Then we fit each other, and I long to investigate your bottomless depths.

*Ash* We have all the future. We aren't even twenty yet. We had better go inside. Your mother will be sure to wonder where we are. *(They go inside.)*

## Scene 2. Bombay.

*Zarin* He doesn't know that I have come and stand waiting for him. Will I recognize him? He will probably wonder the same about me. Seven years is a long time, we have both grown older and more mature, and we can only hope that the other one hasn't changed. Could that be him, standing by the railings, the tall dark one with the serious emaciated face? That must be him. But what's that lady next to him? Has he married? Does he bring a memsahib to India? He didn't write anything about that sort of thing. He wrote many things in many letters but never anything about any woman.

*Ash (outside, has seen him from the railings)* Zarin! It's you! *(comes rushing ashore and embraces Zarin candidly and spontaneously)* You could have written and told me that you intended to meet me!

*Zarin* I didn't want to take any chances. I didn't want to trouble you. I wanted to surprise you and first see if you still were the same and if I could recognize you. But I did immediately, and so did you!

*Ash* My best friend! How is your father, my guardian and first tutor?

*Zarin* He has retired from his service with the Rajah, and Hira Lal is dead. We know nothing about that court any more.

*Ash* Nothing about Anjuli?

*Zarin* Nothing.

*Belinda (has come ashore)* You seem to immediately have found your friends, Ash. One could believe you were brothers – the same facial colour, the same black hair, and what hugs!

*Ash* This is my oldest and closest friend, Belinda, Zarin, whose father brought me up to be a rider and hunter with bow and arrows, sword and guns, and who took care of me when I had lost my foster mother.

*Zarin* He is like a younger brother to me.

*Belinda* Yes, you can see it. Did he also have your foster mother?

Ash Belinda, don't be angry with me now just because I have come home and feel free again among old friends! We have seven years to catch up with, Zarin!

Belinda Yes, just get lost now for seven years with your friends, and then you can buy my engagement ring afterwards.

Ash Belinda, you have no reason for jealousy.

Belinda No, but you have never embraced me like that!

Zarin She is English, Ashok. Why did you bring her to India?

Ash She was actually born here.

Zarin It doesn't show.

Belinda's mother (*comes forth*) Come, Belinda, and leave your betrothed for his Indian brothers, or is it half brothers?

Belinda Don't make it worse, mother.

Mother Could it be worse? He abandoned you at the embarkation to immediately throw himself into the arms of a native!

Ash He understands what you are saying, Mrs Harlowe. Don't insult Indians for nothing if you wish to avoid further mutinies.

Mother Who is insulting whom? Come, Belinda! (*brings Belinda out*)

Zarin Memsahibs and their prejudice released the Indian mutiny. Still they have learned nothing.

Ash There are exceptions, Zarin. Come, we have much to catch up with and a long journey ahead.

Zarin And your memsahib?

Ash She will come along. Or else it would not matter. I am at home now, and no one will be allowed to disturb my joy delirium of being set free again, not even any daft memsahib.

Zarin I immediately recognized you, Ash. You are completely the same but even better.

Ash How I long to get out at large with you in arms again, Zarin, preferably far up into the mountains.

Zarin The mountains are still there, Ash. They have been waiting for you.

Ash And I have been longing for them. In England there is not a single real mountain! Only small ignominious hills. I will not be really at home again until I may see the mountains again.

Zarin You will see them in Mardan, Ash. And the wild Afghans will be waiting for you beyond them.

Ash In brief, Zarin, life starts again at last! (*embraces him again, and they leave together in each other's arms.*)

Scene 3. A camp in the night.

*Zarin* I should have warned you before you left, but I didn't realize the danger. We never had any problems with the English before the memsahibs arrived. We were friends, and they accepted Indian wives and mistresses and learned that way our language and dialects, so that we were on the same level. They could understand us and associate with us as friends and as good people as they themselves. But the memsahibs could never understand us. They pointed at us and said: "Fie!" and refused to accept us as people, as if they were better than our girls, who at least are beautiful, but the memsahibs are usually plump and swollen with pride, they wore clumsy and unpractical clothes, they are in a bad condition and can't take anything, least of all a joke. They are worse than ignorant. They don't want any knowledge. Now tell me about your problem with your memsahib.

*Ash* The problem is very simple. I love her, and she loves me, but we can't have each other, because her father says no, and her mother says, like you said, "Fie!" to me. She has not come of age and is not free to decide for herself.

*Zarin* Just as well perhaps. Officers who marry young usually don't become good officers. They get stuck too early in problems of triviality and are cleft asunder by a young spoilt and beautiful wife's demands of him and those of the army, which are incompatible. And thus they never become any proper officers. The best officers are bachelors. They have understood the point of being in good standing with everyone without favouring anyone or getting stuck in any conceit.

*Ash* Quiet, Zarin. There is someone there in the dark.

*Zarin* Yes. He has been waiting a long time.

*Ash* Can you see him?

*Zarin* I can see him.

*Ash* Can you see who it is?

*Zarin* I know who it is.

*Ash* Step forth, whoever you are, so that we may know you.

*(Koda Dad Khan steps out of the darkness.)*

Koda Dad Khan!

*Koda* I didn't want to miss my probably last opportunity to see you again, my son.

*Ash (embraces him tenderly)* The last one I was hoping to see again, and still the one I most wished to see again! Did Zarin know about it?

*Koda* He knew about it. I am here to speak seriously with you, my son.

*Ash* Speak. I was always your most obedient disciple, since you were the one I learned most of.

*Koda* You are not our Ashok any longer, Ash. You are an Englishman and officer. Have you realized what that means?

*Ash* Responsibility above all.

*Koda* Exactly. And as a responsible British officer you can no longer be familiar with us natives. You and Zarin may be like brothers, you grew up together and I trained you together to superior horsemen and hunters, but you can't be

brothers any longer. He is your subordinate, and you are his superior. You can no longer openly display your intimacy with him or with any of us Hindus, for your fellow officers would observe it, and that could complicate things for you as an officer.

*Ash* Do you ask me to deny that I was born in India, had an Indian mother whom I never deserted before she died, that my first mother tongue was Hindi and Pushtu and that really my whole positive life was only in India?

*Koda* Not deny it, not forget it, but hide it. Have you never understood why you were chosen as officer in the most advanced elite troupes of India? You know the country by heart and have it in your blood. You are one of the people, and you love them. You understand them better than any Englishman. But you are an Englishman, both your parents were British, and your vast knowledge can only benefit India if you are and remain an Englishman. Do you begin to understand?

*Ash* I begin to understand.

*Koda* The consequence is, no more intimacy with Zarin nor any native. You remain one of us, but officially you are not one of us but our leader. As such you can be of immense use both to us, to the English and to India.

*Ash* You ask me to be two persons and to conceal the one I am more for the other to be able to benefit the more from the first – a kind of double role to play.

*Koda* The keyword is responsibility. It's only a matter of living up to your responsibility. The double mentality makes your responsibility the greater and more important.

*Ash* Thank you, Koda Dad, for your instruction. I have received it with understanding.

*Koda* You were always a receptive disciple. Let me now embrace you one last time. I don't think we shall ever meet again. *(They embrace.)*

*Ash* And you know nothing about Gulkot and Anjuli?

*Koda* Nothing. The young Rajah's stepmother went at any length in her selfish intrigues and excesses, but by your getting away I don't think she has ever dared to touch the young Rajah's life.

*Ash* But Hira Lal is dead.

*Koda* Yes, he was got out of the way. Just like you I pulled out before I was got out of the way. Farewell, my son, and live well. All India relies on you. Therefore make yourself the more reliable even as an Englishman.

*Ash* I will do my best, father.

*(They embrace one last time, and Koda Dad disappears into the darkness again.)*

You will stay in touch with him, won't you, Zarin?

*Zarin* Always. But from now on we are no longer foster brothers, Ash, but only warrior brothers.

*Ash* Still nothing can alter the fact that we only the more always will remain brothers. *(pats his shoulder, and they return to the camp.)*

Scene 4. Mardan.

*Major* What shall we do with him?

*Colonel* There is nothing to do. We just have to wait and see.

*Major* But one day he will go too far, and then it will be too late to do anything.

*Colonel* But as long as he hasn't, we have no reason to stop him. Are you jealous of him, major? Because he is more popular among the natives than any other officer?

*Major* That's not the case, but the question is if we can trust him, if there really is a tricky situation.

*Colonel* Explain what you mean.

*Major* Suppose there is a conflict between us and the natives, such a one that released the great mutiny and which almost led to the extinction of all whites in all India. On which side would we find him then?

*Colonel* We have no such situation, major, and until it occurs we have no reason to anticipate it, especially not if like today there are no real risks.

*Major* I can't help it, but I am worried about him. Everybody likes him, but he has a tendency to overreact, to act first and think afterwards, to take action in advance, in brief, to be rash.

*Colonel* But he hasn't so far.

*Major* And then it's the matter of his broken engagement.

*Colonel* It shouldn't have taken place at all.

*Major* But now she has accepted another, a rich old widower who could have been her father who gives her two stepdaughters in her own age, and whom she seems to have chosen all by herself against the express will of her parents, just because he has money, while poor George Garforth, who was as much in love with her as Pelham-Martyn, has shot himself.

*Colonel* George Garforth, that clever dancer, with whom she was constantly out dancing, has he shot himself?

*Major* After two massive bottles of whisky straight in the temple, not so much for the sake of her engagement as for her revelation of his false background...

*Colonel* He was a half blood, wasn't he?

*Major* He was known as half Greek with a Greek slave for his mother, but she was just an Indian bazaar lady.

*Colonel* But it was Pelham-Martyn's engagement, not his.

*Major* But if he could do such a thing, what then would not Pelham-Martyn be capable of?

*Colonel* Still he hasn't done anything.

*Major* And then there was the case of the runaway soldier, who stole two muskets, after whom you sent five of his friends to get them back or never come back themselves any more.

*Colonel* Yes. Pelham-Martyn complained of my severity, but the others say I was right about it. It's the only way to get the muskets back and to save the honour of the regiment.

*Major* The thing is, that those you sent away were Pelham-Martyn's best friends, and they had nothing to do with the deserter and thief.

*Colonel* They were related with him.

*Major* But they were at odds with him.

*Colonel* So what?

*Major* For all this Pelham-Martyn takes on the responsibility with or without right, and it could make him react.

*Colonel* What do you want me to do? Relieve him of his duties? He has managed impeccably well and made himself indispensable. Even if he is our greatest security risk, we couldn't spare him. – Yes, what is it?

*Zarin (has turned up and makes the salute)* Sir, major and colonel, Pelham-Martyn is missing.

*Colonel* Explain.

*Zarin* He has left without a trace.

*Colonel* Bring him back.

*Zarin* We have tried. He has probably crossed the border.

*(The major and colonel look at each other.)*

*Major* He has left for Afghanistan to help Malik Shah and the others to return the stolen muskets.

*Colonel* At his own risk and at a very great risk. We have no business whatsoever on the other side of the border. Do everything you can to trace and find him!

*Zarin* He has left his uniform behind and assumed the dress of an ordinary mountain warrior.

*Major* I am afraid we shall never see him again.

*Colonel* Shut up, major! If there is anyone who is certain to always return from a mission no matter how difficult it is, that man is Ashton Pelham-Martyn. It could take some time, but he will be back.

*Major* He takes on the punishment and responsibility for the shortcomings of others.

*Colonel* All right, Zarin. Keep us informed. *(salutes, Zarin answers and leaves.)*

*Major* I knew it would happen.

*Colonel* You felt it coming but you didn't know what. Now we know what, and it's nothing that could harm him or anyone else. On the contrary, with time it could only serve his merit and honour – if he succeeds.

### Act III scene 1. Several years later.

*Ash (older and more mature)* You are far too naïve and romantic and idealistic, Wally.

*Wally* Am I wrong to be so? Aren't we all from the start? Isn't that what we all wish to be at heart most of all?

*Ash* Your affair with that wench who betrayed you for an old propertied Croesus should have cured you, as it cured me.

*Wally* Still you ventured out on the adventure of your life as a result, lived two years among the Afghans and returned the two lost muskets of the regiment.

*Ash* It cost three lives, Wally, and two of them were among my best friends. And all I got for it in gratitude was retribution.

*Wally* You were spared court martial, which would have been the only correct measure.

*Ash* But was transferred here to Rawalpindi as far away from the front and border as possible, where all you can do is to study and get mouldy.

*Wally* Nothing has happened in the northwest for five years now. You would have been equally out of action there.

*Ash* But there at least I had the mountains and Kashmir! Here in the plains there is only dust and dirt, heat and illness, it's sheer Limbo, the most boring place of all! In hell there is at least always something going on!

*Wally* We can read books and play polo.

*Ash* And that's all. What did my superiors really think of me, Wally? Have you heard anything? Do you have any idea?

*Wally* They consider you dangerously indispensable. Your men adore you and would gladly follow you down to hell, but to your superiors this only increases your security risk. Several wanted you court martialled when you returned after two years for taking leave without permission, which would have been the only right thing, but your knowledge and your alertness needed constant access to in case of emergency, which was why the court martial was altered to a transfer. You are laid on ice to at any moment be available when needed, like a well concealed and preserved whisky.

*Aid-de-camp (enters)* Lieutenant Pelham-Martyn, you have been assigned a mission.

*Ash* At last! What is the deal?

*Aid-de-camp* You are to escort two princesses to a wedding at Bhithor.

*Ash* Bhithor! Two princesses! Down deep in the stifling south! More dust and heat and dirt! Right in the middle of the desert of Rajahstan!

*Wally* They still think you are dangerously close to the Afghan border.

*Aid-de-camp* Don't complain, lieutenant. You will at least have something to do while the rest of us must stay here and suffer and endure the unbearably boring and murderous peace. And I have heard that the princesses are something quite extra in beauty and delicacy.

*Wally* Something for you, Ash.

*Ash* I thought I had endured enough torture from women already. There is nothing more troublesome. They make demands on your life and force you to slow down to an increasingly slower march towards death while they incessantly create problems for you.

*Wally* It's an order. Make the best of it.

*Ash* Thanks, Wally. I will do my best to protect them against themselves and their irresponsibility, chase snakes and scorpions for them, rise in the middle of the night to save them from a mosquito or wayward bird that lost its way, be courteous

to damnation and constantly satisfy their childishly ridiculous caprices. What a mission for a mountain warrior!

*Wally* It will pass, and you will get over it.

*Ash* I hope so too. Who are the princesses by the way?

*Aid-de-camp* Two sisters of the maharadja of Karidkot to Rajputana. The major is expecting you.

*Ash* Thanks. I'll be there. *(to Wally)* I will be back, Wally, sooner or later, to the mountains and the corps.

*Wally* Undoubtedly, Ash. Good luck.

## Scene 2. The tent of the princesses.

*Shushila* We hope Sahib has no objection to paying us a visit.

*Kakaji Rao* He is obliged to. He is your British protector.

*Anjuli* They say he is a woman-hater. He will probably regard us only as a nuisance making troubles.

*Kakaji Rao* His main task is to deal with troubles. That's what's he is here for.

*Shushila* So we will only be in our right to make more trouble for him all the time.

*Kakaji Rao* The monsoon flood was not your fault. That trouble was natural, as most troubles are.

*Anjuli* He actually saved our lives. Shushila would not have been able to swim, and our main driver drowned.

*Kakaji Rao* Here he is. *(rises as Ash enters)* Welcome, Sahib. The princesses only wish to thank you for saving their lives.

*Ash* It wasn't that dangerous.

*Anjuli* But our main driver died.

*Ash* I am sorry.

*Shushila* No, we are too sorry to only have caused Sahib more trouble every day. Now I am not quite well, why our onward journey has to be postponed a day or two.

*Ash* As your highness wishes.

*Kakaji Rao* He can't foresee nor anticipate all troubles you will meet on the way, princess Shushila. Your indisposition is not his fault. He can only alleviate your long difficult journey to the degree it is possible for him with his human limitations.

*Shushila* Of course. And we are grateful for everything he does for us, especially for the fact that he saved our lives today.

*Ash* Your lives were not in danger. Your elder sister could have saved both of you. I just helped you back on land.

*Shushila* And ruined your clothes into the bargain.

*Ash* For an officer there are always new ones. By the way, you probably lost this, princess Anjuli. *(offers a small thing to carry around the neck)*

*Anjuli* Thank you, it really is mine. *(accepts it but is consterned when she feels that she already has her medallion around her neck)*

*Shushila* What is it, Anjuli? Aren't you feeling well?

*Anjuli* No, and neither are you. Uncle Kakaji, will you please escort princess Shushila out of my tent to her own? I need to know more exactly where captain Sahib found my medallion.

*Shushila* Come, uncle Kakaji. I need some rest and attendance. (*leaves with her uncle*)

*Anjuli* Where did you find this medallion? I gave it many years ago to my best friend, who escaped from our palace at Gulkot eleven years ago. I have never learned anything about them since then. Do you know anything?

*Ash* What could I know? I thought it was yours, and you said it was yours.

*Anjuli* Don't pretend anything, captain Sahib. You know too much. I can see it on you. I don't know anything and must know more.

*Ash* So this worthless medallion concerns you?

*Anjuli* To the highest degree. It is only half. It was intact from the beginning, but I gave one half to my foster brother, the only friend I ever had. How did you come over it?

*Ash* I found it.

*Anjuli* So you know nothing about the boy and the mother and their fates? He promised to come back to me and to Gulkot, but he never did. I have been alone since then. With the years I got used to regarding them as dead, and then you presented a startling evidence of the contrary. I demand to know what you know.

*Ash* The mother died not long after their escape. They were pursued by your stepmother far beyond the confines of your country. She was scared to death of the prospect that the boy should tell what he knew about your court to the English.

*Anjuli* She was finally poisoned herself by her own fruit after having poisoned the entire family. The boy has nothing more to fear of her. He should be grown up now. Do you know what might have become of him?

*Ash* He became me, Anjuli.

*Anjuli* Don't play any tricks with me.

*Ash* I could never lie.

*Anjuli (appalled)* But you are a Sahib, a British officer!

*Ash* I am Ashok, who called Sita my mother, for I had no one else. When she died she gave me my father's inheritance, which she had kept all our lives, with English identification papers and a letter of recommendation to my uncle, who made me a British soldier and officer. It's a fairy tale, Anjuli, but it is true.

*Anjuli* Life is playing with me and deceiving me! Ashok was totally Hindu!

*Ash* I still am, Anjuli. I can never be anything else. Don't let my appearance and my clothes deceive you.

*Anjuli* But you are a British officer and an English Sahib!

*Ash* Try to accept me as such, Anjuli. I am back but dressed up in a fancy masquerade, disguised in the vain authority of power.

*Anjuli* Ashok! This is too much! You are here to escort us to our wedding!

*Ash* I didn't know then who you were, but I recognized features of Yuveraj in Jhoti and became suspicious and researched everything about your state and court. I regret that your stepmother finally succeeded in murdering poor Yuveraj.

*Anjuli* She grew to be so hated that there was finally almost no one who didn't want to and tried to murder her. Still she died of her own medicine, when by mistake she had some grapes she herself had poisoned. But all that is past, and now I am sent away to be married, and you will escort me to my wedding. This will not do, Ashok.

*Ash* What will not do?

*Anjuli* That I don't find you until when I am sent to my wedding. (*cries*)

*Ash (embraces her)* Don't cry, Juli. I am back. I will never let you go again.

*Anjuli* There is no way out from my own wedding!

*Ash* You are still not married.

*Anjuli* It is unavoidable! The state and the family demand it!

*Ash* Nature always has the last word. We have found each other again, Juli. That's the only matter of real importance. Your medallion is whole again. I brought it back to you as I promised, though under circumstances that none of us is to blame for. We can't have each other now, but we already have each other. I must return to my tent, before your people start believing they are getting material for gossip. Let us sleep on it. Now at least we know where we have each other. Farewell, Juli (*kisses her and leaves*)

*Anjuli* After eleven years he returns, for my wedding, and as an English officer and Sahib! How far can destiny really be allowed to drive us people? Out of our minds and even further? That's how it seems. Ashok, our life as children was not easy, but it seems to only grow more difficult because of that we still continue to know each other... (*hides her face in her veil and cries quietly*)

### Scene 3. Ash alone in the desert. Night.

*Ash* How is it possible? After eleven years she comes back into my life whom I thought I had lost forever, but under what circumstances? I am to escort her to her wedding in Rajahstan as one of two wives for an old outlived Rajah! How often have I not been thinking about her during these eleven years and loved her as the sister she was to me then, and then she returns as not only a mature women but beautiful as well! What was poor Belinda and the other parentheses of love to this? She is the only one I have loved and the only one I will ever be able to love, for I am as much Indian as she, regardless of genes and ancestry, for my only real mother ever was Sita, even if she was not the one who gave birth to me.

And must I then be obliged to give her up, when she at last has returned, for an arranged wedding which none of the princesses is willing to? I can't let her go now, when destiny finally has brought us together again, as if it insisted on the fact that we were meant for each other, but neither can I run away with her. My reckless Afghan mission almost cost me my position, and if I absconded again it would be

inevitably lost. No one would protect us, and she as a princess would never be able to get away in India. None of us wants to go to England. O destiny, what a terribly intricate dilemma you have brought us into! We love each other perhaps more than any other loving couple, but we have no chances of getting each other. She must be the wife of an old Rajah and at best be the mother of his children, and I have to return to Rawalpindi after having completed the mission of delivering her to the Rajah. What could possibly be the meaning of such a destiny? No, I can't get anywhere in this mystery. All I can do is to go on suffering through sleepless nights as long as this crazy mammoth wedding march through all India continues. Back to camp, before the dawn breaks.

*(He turns and starts walking back, when a bullet is fired at him.)*

*Ash (throws himself down)* Damn a thousand devils! Don't shoot! It's captain Pelham-Martyn! *(Another shot is fired, and the shot is heard to reload.)*

*Ash (on edge)* He really tries to murder me! Why? What have I done to him? And why the attempt against the prince, Anjuli's half brother? What is going on? Who is intriguing against whom and why? The plot of the mystery is thickening. Well, he missed, and I survived, but there will be a sequel to this. And Anjuli must know more of what is going on than I, the only Englishman in this entire Indian circus. *(wriggles out of the way)*

*(In the dark storm winds start howling, and you can hear a sandstorm blowing up.*

*Ash and Anjuli come staggering into a cave, completely lost in the storm.)*

*Ash* We are safe here, Anjuli. The desert storm will not reach us here.

*Anjuli* But we can't go back.

*Ash* No, we can't.

*Anjuli* What will Shushila and uncle Kakaji Rao say when we don't come back?

*Ash* They must have found protection. They did not get as far as we did. They fell behind. And it is not our fault, Anjuli. This storm will take everyone by surprise and not just us. The whole camp will be brought to chaos, and neither your uncle nor your sister will even think of returning before the storm is over.

*Anjuli* And when will that be?

*Ash* Probably some time during the night.

*Anjuli* So we are stuck here all night.

*Ash* Yes, Juli, we are, and it is not our fault.

*Anjuli* It's nobody's fault, except maybe mine.

*Ash* Why would it be yours?

*Anjuli* I wished it. I wanted it. Why do you think I sat up with you every night watching over you when you lay unconscious in fever and broken limbs when you had saved Jhoti's life at the risk of your own?

*Ash* It was my own fault. I shouldn't have tried to save the horse. As a result I lost my own horse as well and a week of hospitalization, and for what? Because someone tried to take Jhoti's life!

*Anjuli* So it was an assassination attempt?

*Ash* Indeed it was to the highest degree. Someone had hidden an insidious thorn under the saddle and cut the saddle-girths half way. At a bolt the saddle had to give way, and with such a thorn a bolt was unavoidable sooner or later.

*Anjali* The palace intrigues at home are pursuing us all the way down in Rajahstan.

*Ash* Can you understand them and what might be lying behind?

*Anjali* My friend, my brother, don't underestimate me. Why do you think I am still alive when so many of my family have been disposed of? Because I learned the art of surviving. The most important knack was to keep out of any intrigue and never take part in them, preferably not even know about them, and if that was impossible, to at least seem not to know about them. Hira Lal was a master in making everyone believe that he knew nothing although he always knew everything.

*Ash* But even he was murdered.

*Anjali* We don't know. He disappeared without a trace, and one single bloody piece of clothing is hardly any evidence of his certain death. He probably escaped to survive and found it safest to seem dead and be dead officially.

*Ash* So you also know everything.

*Anjali* No, Ash, it's safest for us all that I know nothing. You will never learn anything about this from me. If you learn anything from others you will understand the importance of no one knowing that you know.

At the moment we are wrapped up and hidden away by a smokescreen of the tempest, and no one knows where we are, for all the others are probably as lost in the storm and out of all orientation like ourselves. I have been waiting and longing for this opportunity, Ash.

*Ash* When did you realize who I was? Was it already before I gave you the missing piece of the medallion?

*Anjali* No, but I already loved you before that. That you then proved to be Ashok himself came as my life's greatest surprise, for he was the only one I ever loved.

*Ash* I also loved you already as a child, Juli, but then we were innocents as a brother and sister. Now we are grown up.

*Anjali* I waited all my life for you, Ash. I was still waiting when Nandu decided that I should marry the Rajah in the south as a wife together with Shushila. When nothing could avert this I gave up. I was to be married against my will to a dirty old man, who would have the right to take my virginity and get children of his own by me, and I would then never learn of any other love than base selfish abuse, until a British officer saved me and my sister from a sinking cart. Then I saw a possibility to perhaps have some experience of some real love before it was too late. And then it was you, Ashok himself!

*Ash* I would probably never have recognized you if I hadn't recognized that slimy weasel Birchu the scorpion, Jhoti's tutor as he was Yuveraj's, who also had constant threats to his life and was subject to various attempts until one succeeded.

*Anjali* Has he recognized you?

Ash           No. But your brother has already been exposed to two attempts on his way here.

Anjali        I know. But I am even more responsible for Shushila. I have promised never to abandon her. She has no one else. I am both her only sister and like her mother. That's why I must marry the Raja, – but you come first, Ash.

Ash    Shall I then live in the knowledge that you are being used by others and forced to give birth to the children of others, although you always only belonged to me?

Anjali        We might only have this moment, Ash.

Ash        I can never let you go.

Anjali        I will never let you go, Ash. I never did so far. I thought I did when I felt myself in the arms of the British officer when he saved us from the river, but destiny provided and wanted it to be you yourself.

Ash        Run away with me, Juli. Let us leave everything.

Anjali        I can't leave my sister. And you would be chased all over India by the army until you would be punished and disgraced for life. Such a fate for your part I will not make myself guilty of, Ash.

Ash        You are right. The storm has given us maybe the only breathing space of our lives, and we must avail ourselves of it, or else providence would never forgive us. I can't control myself, Anjali. I have to take you.

Anjali        Take me, Ash. That's all I was made for.

*(They sink down together in an embrace while the desert storm increases.*

*It goes on for a while, and then suddenly everything is quite still.*

*When Ash and Juli become visible again they are quite exhausted.)*

Ash        The storm is over, Juli. We have to get back.

Anjali        Destiny offered us maybe this single chance. Ash, we took it, and we did right. Now I know what real love is, and I will always carry it with me. No one can take it away from me, not even an old beastly libertine like the Rajah.

Ash        The risk is that there might be a great scandal. A princess escorted to her wedding should not be left alone with a man, least of all an Englishman.

Anjali        You are my brother, Ash, my foster brother, whom I have bound to me for life. Nothing can separate us now any more, for we will always have each other within ourselves. I might even have a child with you.

Ash        If the Rajah discovers you are not a virgin on his wedding night, you might get into deep trouble.

Anjali        Don't worry. There are tricks. Any woman can fool any man and especially an old foolish Rajah. I am more worried about Shushila. She wanted this even less than I. Her greatest terror in life was always to be forced to a *suttee*.

Ash        It's illegal and impossible.

Anjali        India is greater than the Raj, Ash. You don't reach down everywhere, and both Karidkot and Bithor are out of your reach, as is most of India. You think you are in control, but it is only formal. Politically you take good care of India and have a tight grip of her, but nineteen of twenty Hindus will never get in touch with

any Englishman. The burning of widows has always been practised in both Bhithor and Karidkot, and the Rajah is thirty years older than Shushila.

*Ash* Most of all I would like to save both of you.

*Anjuli* It's impossible. You are born with your destiny and can never evade it, only learn from it. Consider our life a trial, Ash, one of our many journeys together in many different lifetimes on many different adventures. This will just be yet another one, and even if the challenge will be difficult, it will be our task to manage it and survive with our love. Do you know who tried to murder you and Jhoti?

*Ash* It could only be Biju Ram, the jackal, the scorpion, who also murdered Hira Lal and Yuveraj. He is out of your brother Nandu's favours, and to make it up to him he has taken on the issue of getting Jhoti out of the way. When I managed to stop him, he tried to also murder me. But he doesn't know who I am.

*Anjuli* And if I get caught with you I will be mutilated, maybe have my nose or my feet cut off, and I will be sent home in disgrace without a wedding, where my brother Rajah Nandu will hardly show me mercy. What threats we are living under! And it only seems to get worse.

*Ash* We must reach Bhithor in safety. Under the protection of the old Rajah, no one could wish you any harm any more, while I will be obliged to escort Jhoti back to Karidkot. Maybe Nandu then has been got out of the way, so that little Jhoti will be Rajah, but under my protection no assassin will be able to get at him, now when I know who the murderer is.

*Anjuli* Are you sure?

*Ash* Positively.

*Anjuli* I think we will always be safe, you in me and I in you, since our sacred relationship as brother and sister will provide as a manifestation a mutual protection which no one can infringe on or importune.

*Ash* And at last we have at least been able to love each other for once in this life.

*Anjuli* A night as eternal and endless as infinity. It will always keep us going on.

*Ash* It all suddenly grew so quiet, as if we all of a sudden had landed outside reality and time.

*Anjuli* It's the calm after the storm. It will be back. It is out there among the people, among the desperate mistakes of the hysterical crowd trying to manage their lives in ignorance of the power of destiny and its wondrous ways of machination, which is the only and perfectly unpredictable ruler of our lives in its unfathomable karma. All efforts to evade and avert and abscond it will only lead to hell.

*Ash* We haven't yet reached as far as hell.

*Anjuli* We never will, because we are the children of destiny and the karma of providence in eternity after eternity, by constantly new incarnations to always renew and develop our love and thereby consistently recreate and make the world more beautiful and noble in our service to the truth. That is why we are here.

*Ash* That is why *you* are here.

*Anjuli* That is why *you* exist.

Ash           The great miracle is that we found each other at all and that we obviously did that before and therefore probably will go on doing so again and again.

Anjuli        That is why we live. That's what love is.

Ash           You never stopped surprising me by your instruction although you are so much younger than I.

Anjuli        You were born before. I came afterwards and looked you up.

Ash           We have reached our blessedness, discovered it and acknowledged it, so that we may keep it all this life no matter what happens. But now we must return to reality. The dawn will soon break.

Anjuli        For some reason I am not worried at all.

Ash           Neither am I. We have become each other's talismans. Let's keep each other and meet the terrors and turbulence of the world, its follies and insanities, sticking to each other as an untouchable and inviolable security.

Anjuli        One more thing before we break up, Ash.

Ash           Well?

Anjuli (*takes out her part of the medallion*) You gave your part back, so that they were reunited. Now I give you my part. Keep it and preserve it, as you did all these years with the other one, so that they both always can be reunited again. And even separated they will always remain one unity.

Ash           Thanks, Juli. It was always my only invaluable property.

Anjuli        And mine. Now we both own it together.

Ash           As we always did.

Anjuli        And always will do.

Ash           One last kiss before we leave our freedom and storm retreat...

*(They kiss and then walk to meet the dawn together with arms around each other.)*

*(They reach the ruins of Kakaji's tent.)*

Kakaji        No one could identify you as a princess and an English sahib and officer. Have you been flying around with the storm winds all night?

Anjuli        Something like that. It was difficult to find any shelter.

Kakaji        Thank the powers of destiny that you are still alive.

Anjuli        Where is my sister?

Kakaji        She was blown away. No, not quite, but we were all totally taken by surprise by the desert storm. We couldn't leave you out there, so I and a few more stayed on, while I compelled the others to immediately bring the little princess to security in the main camp. I think they made it, but the entire camp will probably be all upside down. By all sacred elephants and monkeys, how could you manage alone out there?

Ash           We found some rocks by which we could find some occasional lee.

Kakaji        You can't return to the camp like that. You have no clothes to speak of. You look like ragged nomads of the plain. Juli, do immediately what you can to restore yourself, and you, sahib, must borrow some clothes from me. You must not appear like that.

*Ash* Who can withstand nature?

*Kakaji* True, the gods ravished us all in the blast, but you have never spent the night alone. Is that understood? You returned to me the moment before the storm broke out, and you have been here with me all night. Is that clear?

*Ash* Perfectly clear.

*Kakaji* We will have enough troubles with all the havoc caused by the storm among horses and goats and elephants and tents in the camp without additions of unnecessary talk about adventures of the princesses carried away by the wind. Now make yourselves as presentable as you can, and then we'll hurry to the camp, where your maids, Juli, will take well care of you so that you never again will be seen out at liberty before your wedding, which we can't afford to miss for anything in the world. (*Juli is taken care of by chaperons and is swiftly brought out*) Look into my eyes, sahib. I don't want to know anything, so whatever has happened, it never happened.

*Ash* Of course. Nothing has happened.

*Kakaji* The Rajah must on no conditions cancel the wedding.

*Ash* Princess Anjuli is perfectly clear about that. She will never give any reason for any complaint about anything.

*Kakaji* Only one thing amazes me. How could you survive out there?

*Ash* As I said, in spite of all the wildest forces of nature, we got help from nature herself.

*Kakaji* It must have been a terrible night for you. Little princess Shushila was completely in hysterics in her fear.

*Ash* Good for her that she wasn't with us.

*Kakaji* She thought she had lost her sister and just wanted to go home and forget all about the wedding.

*Ash* That danger is over now.

*Kakaji* I hope so, sahib. Now go and wash and dress yourself, so that you don't look like a wayward Hindu lost in the wind.

*Ash (to himself, as he leaves)* If there is anything I feel like, that's the very thing.

#### Scene 4. Bhithor, the palace.

*Rajah* So they are here at last, the whole caravan, both princesses and eight thousand followers led by a hopeless Englishman. Well, now they are here, so they will not get away. We have them trapped! Show them in, that fool of an uncle and that ridiculous Englishman.

*A minister* They are not as stupid as they may appear, maharadja. During their long journey there were two attempts against the lives of the princesses, but the Englishman caught the perpetrator who was left on the way.

*Rajah* Who was he?

*Minister* The notorious courtier Biju Ram, who was suspected of many murders within the family by the order of Rajah Nandu's mother.

*Rajah* How did he die?

*Minister* Probably poisoned by a snake bite.

*Rajah* That used to be precisely the end of Biju Ram's victims, poisoned or dead by accident. Well, let's have a look at those two knaves.

*(Ash and Kakaji are shown in.)*

Rajah Nandu has broken all agreements. There will be no wedding.

*Ash* No, Rajah, you are the one who has broken all agreements by receiving your becoming wives with hostility and demanding extra dowries.

*Rajah* I only wanted one of them. Rajah Nandu demanded that I should also take the other.

*Ash* And therefore he paid you well with extra instalments besides the dowries you already were agreed on. You have no right to demand even more.

*Rajah* But I do, and no one can stop me. There will be no wedding until I have received an extra double dowry. If you are discontent you can go home with both your princesses and your entire caravan back to Karidkot and Rajah Nandu, who will probably receive his sisters even more unfavourably than I.

*Ash* You have no choice, Rajah. I have contacted my command, and if you break your deal with Rajah Nandu's court, the British army could interfere and remove you and give your throne over to someone else, who does not break his agreements.

*Kakaji* Rajah Nandu has given you everything, and you must receive it or accept the consequences.

*Rajah* Wait a moment now. Let us sort out all our misunderstandings. I have no disagreement with Rajah Nandu.

*Kakaji* Why then do you wish to break your agreement with him?

*Rajah* I am not the one who breaks it! He is the one who makes trouble! I only wanted one dainty bride, but from the beginning he demanded that I couldn't have the one without also accepting the old worthless and ugly one. Then I compiled my terms.

*Kakaji* Which he accepted and fulfilled.

*Rajah* But I am not satisfied! He must give me more!

*Ash* The princess Anjuli is 22 years and a mature beauty of great wisdom and accomplishments and much better than little Shushila.

*Rajah* 22 years is too old.

*Ash* How old are you yourself?

*Rajah* 39.

*Ash* You look like 59 or more. Isn't that too old for two so young and fine princesses?

*Rajah* A man is never too old for a wife!

*Ash* But obviously a wife is too old for a man no matter how young she is. What do you want then? Small girls? Babies?

*Rajah* Don't fool around, but let's come to an agreement.

*Ash* Then you must first withdraw your cannons and carbines aimed at us and our camp.

*Kakaji* Maharadja, you can't afford to make trouble. The English have removed many Rajahs like you.

*Rajah* I don't want to make any trouble. You are making all the trouble.

*Ash* Who was the first to turn his weapons against the other?

*Rajah* I have given orders of disarmament.

*Kakaji* And the wedding? Yes or no? Both or no one?

*Rajah* I could keep the other one as a spare, if little Shushila should turn too hysterical. She could take part in Shushila's attendance in the meantime. A princess always needs many slaves.

*Kakaji* A double wedding then?

*Rajah* Yes. Rajah Nandu can take it easy. No extra charges for him. He has paid for the largest and most expensive wedding train in the history of India, just to boast, I presume. That way he made me believe he had more money.

*Ash* We call your procedure extortion.

*Rajah* I call it business between maharadjas for the sake of peace between their families. But why did he want his sisters to be married as far away as possible?

*Kakaji* A maharadja does not desire the immediate presence of another maharadja as a brother-in-law.

*Rajah* Yes, I guess that is the case. We can't get rid of that wedding then, can we?

*Kakaji* That's the spirit, maharadja.

*Rajah* It's quite unnecessary to call in the British.

*Ash* Yes, maharadja, if you just marry as you promised and were paid for.

#### Scene 5.

*Jhoti* Anjuli, I have asked you to come, because I have terrible news for all of us.

*Anjuli* What could be worse than our wedding?

*Jhoti* I know. Neither you nor Shushila wanted it, Shushila least of all, but now it is too late.

*Anjuli* What has happened?

*Jhoti* Nandu is dead. An accident. He had a passion for fire weapons. He managed a carbine carelessly, and it backfired. He got the whole load in his face and died instantly.

*Anjuli* Didn't you learn about it until now?

*Jhoti* Yes. I must get back. I am now the new maharadja of Karidkot. If it only had happened one week earlier, I could have averted your wedding.

*Anjuli* Without captain Pelham-Sahib we would have been married anyway at even more costs with bribes and dowries. Thanks to him we could keep the Rajah to his agreement, so that we at least did not get shot or made into enslaved serfs.

*Jhoti* I have asked him to come.

*Anjuli* Does he know about it?

*Jhoti* He should have received the news at the same time as I.

*Anjuli* Exactly a week too late. If we had had the news one week earlier we would all have been free, and Shushila and I could have returned home with you as free princesses! (*cries in Jhoti's arms, who comforts her.*)

*Jhoti* I am sorry. Everything is too late. Our only comfort is that it is not our fault.  
(*enter Kakaji and Ash*)

*Kakaji* I am very sorry, Jhoti and Anjuli. I will stay here with you and Shushila, of course, Anjuli.

*Anjuli* Thanks, uncle.

*Jhoti* Captain Pelham-Sahib, I presume you know everything about what has happened.

*Ash* I have orders to escort you back to Karidkot and make sure you are properly installed.

*Jhoti* Who could imagine that big brother Nandu, who had so many assassinated, suddenly would go off himself so quickly.

*Ash* Juli, I am sorry.

*Anjuli* Me too. You can't imagine how much.

*Ash* I am equally so.

*Anjuli* We couldn't guess.

*Ash* No.

*Anjuli* All this enormous wedding march through half of India, this abominable double wedding, this revolting old toad of a maharadja, all his efforts to use us and press us for money, all in vain, and everything could have and should have been avoided.

*Ash* I must leave you here, Juli, with Shushila. You are now the wives of another man. And I must get back. But you can take care of each other. And uncle Rao will watch over you.

*Anjuli* Why is destiny so unfair, uncle Rao? What have we done to only deserve slavery and adversity? Why is chance so cynically and outrageously cruel?

*Kakaji* I don't know, my child. No one knows. Our only protection is patience. If destiny is cruel we can only endure it until it turns, and it always turns, like the weather.

*Anjuli* Poor comfort for Shushila and me, who live and are young for now but bound in slavery to a mean old pimp of a goat.

*Kakaji* I am sorry, Juli, but as long as I am here I can add to your protection. And don't forget that your little brother now is the maharadja of Karidkot.

*Jhoti* I shall keep watch of you and keep in touch with you. At the least bad news I will immediately come with support, and you must keep close contact with me.

*Anjuli* The only real suffering victim of this is love. (*throws herself in Ash's arms, who hugs her tenderly*) But from this torture it will only grow stronger.

*Ash* I will be back, Juli, my only beloved.

*Kakaji (wakes up)* Not until now I see and understand. My children, had I even suspected anything I would consistently have hindered you from seeing each other at all. Now it is too late, and what is worse, the harm is total and irreversible.

*Ash* We are aware of it, uncle Rao, but must live with it.

*Anjuli* I will endure, Ashok, until you get back.

*Ash* Call on me at any time when you need, and I will come at once.

*Anjuli* My beloved!

*(They embrace again.)*

*Jhoti* Come, captain Pelham-Sahib. We have to go through some preparations for our departure.

*Ash* Yes, maharadja. I am your servant and brother in arms until we are back in Karidkot. *(leaves with Jhoti after one last look of farewell to Anjuli)*

*Kakaji* The ways of destiny are unfathomable. Anything can happen and has happened. I will take care of you. Don't worry.

*Anjuli* Shushila's greatest fear is of what could happen if her old phoney husband dies.

*Kakaji* Anything could happen, my child, but at least we can always keep ourselves prepared. *(leaves with Anjuli, who cries quietly.)*

#### Act IV scene 1. Rawalpindi.

*Crimply* That damned snooty devil Pelham, now he has gone too far again!

*Officer* Since you can't stand each other, why then do you share the same bungalow?

*Crimply* Because there is none other! Nothing is vacant! Our punishment for not standing each other is that we are forced to live together!

*Officer 2* What has he done now?

*Crimply* He teams up with the kitchen personnel and associates with them as if they were his equals and speak their own cursed language!

*2* Is that a criminal offence?

*Crimply* No, but damned impertinent! Who could know what he discusses with them? Perhaps he abuses the whole regiment in front of them or instigates a new mutiny!

*Officer 1* Pelham-Martyn always goes too far along the lines of honour and honesty. He makes too much effort and goes to extremes but only in the service of justice and honour, never in the opposite direction.

*Crimply* Yet someone ought to teach him a lesson!

*Norson* Perhaps I would be the right man, who sees everything here in India from the outside.

*Officer 2* Here is your chance, for he has just entered.

*(Ash has entered the club but moves instinctively away from Crimply.)*

*Norson* Lieutenant Pelham-Martyn, a word with you.

*Ash* What can I do for you?

*Norson* It has surprised me that we Brits here in India have almost no contact with the common people. You associate gladly and freely with their leaders and representatives, which you place under your protection so that they will keep the country going and in order, but besides that you only associate with servants and slaves. Couldn't it be risky to treat the middle class as if it didn't exist?

*Ash* We have no problems with them and leave them in peace, like they under mutual respect leave us in peace without causing us any trouble. There is no need for anything more.

*Norson* But if you don't ensure good contact with them, how could you then expect the British rule in India to be permanent?

*Ash* You should know even as an all-knowing tourist, Mr Norson, that nothing is permanent in this world. We do what we must and perform our duty, and no one can demand more of us than that.

*Norson* But isn't that slightly narrow-minded and snobbish?

*Ash* Why?

*Norson* You hardly make yourselves popular that way in this country, and wasn't it that snob attitude that led to the great Indian Mutiny?

*Ash* You really seem to know everything then, Mr Norson, although you are here for the first time and haven't been here long. It wasn't the middle class that started the Indian Mutiny, but it was incompetent leadership that abused native recruits until it went too far, so that these, who served under the British crown directly, backfired with a vengeance. The middle class only wants to live in peace and don't really care who rules them since it doesn't really matter who they are since they know that all rulers always are equally corrupt.

*Crimply* Do you mean to say, lieutenant Pelham-Martyn, that the British establishment in India is corrupt?

*Ash* The one that triggered off the Indian Mutiny was corrupt.

*Crimply* So you seriously mean that it was the fault of a Brit that a Hindu started the Indian Mutiny by gunning down a British officer?

*Ash* No, captain Crimply, it was the fault of many Brits.

*Officer 1* Don't argue with him, Crimply. You know he is a hopeless case.

*Crimply* Yes, so hopeless, that I can't stop wondering in amazement that he at all was accepted in the army and given an officer's rank for being able to fraternise with any enemies.

*Ash* You are not fair, captain Crimply, and you know it. You know that I willingly suffered two years in Afghanistan just to retrieve two carbines for the Corps of Guides from the "enemy".

*Norson* What irritates captain Crimply, lieutenant Pelham, if I as an outsider understand the issue correctly, is your attitude and personality, which presents a permanent questioning of the British presence in India.

*Ash* Let us then have a look at it from the other side. Suppose it was India, that occupied Britain. Suppose that Indian militaries in England decided all our

politics and established and kicked out ministers as they wished. Suppose they took care of all the British economy of the state and took care of all the resources and surplus of the country and used them for their own purposes. Would you as an Englishman be content with such a situation, associate with such uninvited guests, invite them and treat them as your equals and praise and admire them for their supremacy? Wouldn't you rather wait for the right moment to start a British rebellion against such presumptuous invaders?

*Crimply* Lieutenant, you are going too far!

*Ash* Can honour, justice and truth ever go too far?

*Norson* Lieutenant, there is after all some difference between Englishmen and Hindus. We have outgrown animalistic superstition and polytheism, a majority of us don't live in huts of straw and clay, we are a cultivated people with a great literature and authors like Shakespeare, doctor Johnson, Dickens and Thackeray to boast of, we have developed the art of navigation to be able to chart all the world oceans, and what have the Hindus accomplished? They never even learned to navigate!

*Ash* So you mean they are less human beings than we?

*Norson* No, but their inferiority in knowledge and cultivation gives us a certain responsibility for educating them. That's why we are here, as I see it. The higher cultivation, development and knowledge in a human being, the greater is his responsibility to help his less cultivated brothers to reach up to his level.

*Ash* You are quite right, Mr Norson, and that's our only excuse for being here. Unfortunately we use our position to not just develop but also to exploit and use the country to make ourselves rich while it remains poor, which quite logically and humanly enough could lead to occasional Indian Mutinies.

*Crimply* Your entire argument and attitude is high treason, captain Pelham-Martyn.

*Ash* It is fools like you who make our presence in this country doomed from the start, by indiscriminately firing at innocent crowds without trying to understand them and not giving them a chance of explaining their situation.

*Crimply* Innocent crowds! Who methodically undertake to extirpate all Europeans from India!

*Ash* Your language is to fire blindly without listening and negotiating. My language is to listen and diplomatize to reach an agreement. Is that wrong?

*Officer 1* Stop it now, boys. You are getting nowhere. You are hopeless cases both of you. We don't want a fight in here. Go home and calm down and try to bear with each other.

*Crimply* Impossible.

*Ash* Your one-sidedness makes it impossible.

*Crimply* No, it is your unreliable duplicity that makes you hopelessly untrustworthy and incalculable for the army. Never count on ever being readmitted to the Corps of Guides. *(leaves in anger and bangs the door behind him)*

*Officer 2* Try to tolerate him, Ash, even if he never will be able to tolerate you. It's your only chance.

Ash           The problem is precisely that I tolerate him and have to do it, although his sort only ruins our cause and position in India.

Norson       The problem is rather, that we normal Brits understand too little, while you understand too much. Be our guide, lieutenant, for us who wish to understand more.

Ash           I am doing as well as I can. Pardon me for sometimes losing my patience.  
(leaves politely)

Officer 1     Do you think he could ever be readmitted to the Corps of Guides?

2             That's the question. At least not in a couple of years.

1             It grieves him that he misses Afghanistan. After all, he knows that country well.

2             Yes. He would have been needed there, but that could never someone like Crimply understand.

(outside)

Ash           Doctor Govindas! What a wonderful surprise! How glad I am to see you! Is something wrong since I find you here? Has Kakaji Rao sent you?

Govindas     I come from Bhithor.

Ash           How are the princesses?

Govindas     Only well.

Ash (gives a sigh of relief) Phew! Thank heavens!

Govindas     I went here at the request of the princess Shushila because her old husband the Rajah was sick. The ordinary symptoms of a stagnated life of too much comfort: chronic colic and debilitation, bad circulation, gout and podagra, headaches and arthritis, and the little princess was pregnant.

Ash           Pregnant! Has she given birth?

Govindas     Yes, for the third time. The first two were miscarriages. She was too young and sensitive and was negatively affected by the circumstances, when her own private chamber maid from Karidkot was poisoned or murdered and even her old wet nurse...

Ash           But the third child survived?

Govindas     Yes, a daughter.

Ash           And Anjuli?

Govindas     Out of grace with the Rajah from the start. He never wanted her.

Ash           Another relief!

Govindas     But you haven't heard the worst of it yet. The princess Shushila fell in love with the old dying Rajah.

Ash           That's just like Shushila. She would always go to unreasonable emotional extremes preferably in the wrong direction.

Govindas     The Rajah is dead.

Ash           You only bring good news then. Then both princesses are free and can return home!

Govindas     Unfortunately not. The dying Rajah demanded both of them as *suttees*.

Ash           Impossible!

Govindas     But true.

Ash           It is illegal!

Govindas Bhithor can not be reached by British laws.

Ash But that is terrible!

Govindas To put it mildly.

(Norson comes out.)

Norson Lieutenant Pelham-Martyn! Congratulations!

Ash (to himself) What does that fool think he has to congratulate me for? My only beloved's death by burning as a widow?

Norson We just got the news. Haven't you heard?

Ash (stupidly) What?

Norson You have been recalled to the Corps of Guides in Mardan!

Ash That was not too early but almost too late. – We will meet again later, doctor Govindas. Are you on your way back to Karidkot?

Govindas Yes, and I don't think I will be summoned any more to Bhithor.

Ash You have to give me all the details before you go on. – Norson, is it true?

Norson Everyone seems to know it except you.

Ash And they are naturally happy to get rid of me.

Norson That's how it looks.

Ash (to himself) But I will be free and can take leave for a few months before entering the service in Mardan. So I could save Juli. Everything else becomes unimportant. – Thank you, Norson. Then I will at least be rid of captain Crimply and his likes. I will be more happy for that than you to get rid of me.

Norson Perhaps we will understand you better in fifty years. You are too advanced for us.

Ash Then it will be too late, Norson. The English have their empire now and their only chance to manage it right so that it will not get lost now and not in fifty years, and they already forfeited their opportunity by making incompetent bullies like Crimply their leader and administrator. I already regret this already lost British empire, Norson. (leaves)

Norson (alone) And the worst thing is that he is probably right.

## Scene 2.

Officer 1 Have you also had an attack of Pelham-Martyn?

2 He has assailed me in a frenzy that could match that of Alexander the Great. What's the matter with him really? Is he a psychopath?

1 No, just mad. He is easily possessed with fixed ideas, that could drive him to any extremes, but this is his worst spell so far. *Suttee?* In our time? In British India? He is an obsessed fantastic.

2 But shouldn't we at least investigate the matter?

1 We have no influence in Bhithor, no British representative and no interest at all in interfering there.

3 So it could be true.

1 Not even the most anachronistic and demented old Rajah would be that stupid. It would be making trouble with us directly, and that would finish his small reign.

2 But Pelham claims he is dead.

1 Unconfirmed information. He has occasional spells of malaria, and according to the latest news he is having such a spell now. Old tough libertines as Rajahs don't die that easily, and this one is exceptionally tough.

2 So what shall we do about Pelham and his hysteria?

1 I shall tell you what we should do. He should be investigated and examined for a recommendation of expulsion from India as not suitable as a British soldier.

2 But he knows all India by heart and speaks a number of local languages fluently and faultlessly.

1 That's just the problem. He is too intimate with the people we are here to control and fetch down from their trees. We are not here to climb those trees and become like them.

2 Aren't you married with his former fiancée?

1 What has Belinda got to do with it?

2 Aren't you slightly partial?

1 That's how I got to know him. He was quite hysterical. It was from mad love of her that he absconded to Afghanistan and risked his life and future on Russian roulette, when she ditched him.

2 But he also knows Afghanistan. We could still need him.

1 He is an incurable adventurer and fanatic troublemaker.

2 That's why he suits Afghanistan. Haven't the Corps of Guides requested his return just for Afghanistan?

1 Yes, but he is lost again. No one knows where he is.

2 My guess is Bhithor, just because we refused to take his reports seriously.

1 We will do nothing about Bhithor as long as we haven't heard that the Rajah has died. If then his wives voluntarily burn themselves on his funeral pyre, it's entirely their own affair, and we can do nothing except regret it afterwards and then by means of the law dissolve its government.

2 In that case we shall never see Pelham-Martyn again.

1 I hope so. He knows too much about both us and India.

2 I am beginning to think that we have made a mistake.

1 A good one in that case. *(2 rises and leaves)* Hey! Godfrey! Come back!

### Scene 3. In Bhithor.

*Govindas* It must not be true.

*Sarji* It is true.

*Govindas* Is he completely out of his mind? He risks many more lives than his own!

*Sarji* He is here.

*Govindas* Do you think he could save the princesses?

*Sarji* I think he intends to try it.

*Govindas* It is a collective suicidal effort!

*Sarji* Try to persuade him not to.

*Govindas* I refuse to see him.

*Ash (enters perfectly disguised as a Hindu)* Doctor Govindas, you don't have to see him. I am Ashok, born and brought up a Hindu.

*Govindas* Sahib! Your madness transcends all limits!

*Ash* I have done everything for them and made myself responsible for their lives. I can never betray a responsibility.

*Govindas* You betray yourself!

*Ash* That issue is secondary.

*Govindas (calms down)* Sahib, the Rajah is still alive. He is in coma and is not quite dead yet but will probably finally die tonight. No one can touch the princesses as long as he is alive, and no one can save them when he is dead, not even you. Please save yourself, and you will also save all the lives of those who are misfortunate enough to know that you are here.

*Ash* No, doctor Govindas. If the princess Anjuli has to die, I must at least die with her. We are foster siblings and have loved each other since we were children. Nothing can alter that destiny, not even death.

*Govindas* But it is forbidden! You are an Englishman! She is Indian of the highest royal caste! An Indian caste must on no condition be mixed up with non-Hindus.

*Ash* Wrong again, doctor. Her mother's father was a Russian. She is half blood and already racially corrupted, and so am I, who very well could have had an Indian illegitimate father. That issue has never been settled, as nothing in it is certain.

*Govindas* Sahib, sahib, sahib, you go from one exaggeration to another in your folly! What intentions did you have? Get into the palace in your disguise as my assistant? I am not allowed there any more. After the Rajah went into a coma and the princess lost her child...

*Ash* Has she lost her child?

*Govindas* Yes, the poor girl had small chances to survive. It was when she died that the decision of the sacrifice of the wives as *suttees* became inevitable. He has appointed a male heir, a distant relation, a boy of six years, why the wives have to follow him and at least end up as childless saints. The entire people are expecting to witness the display. No one is let out of town to be able to spread any news. That's why the British authorities don't know how very much dying he is.

*Ash* They refuse to believe it. They think I am delusional. That's why I had to come alone.

*Govindas* I understand. You are pressed into dangerous despair.

*Ash* Yes.

*Govindas (sighs)* Well, neither can anyone do anything about that you now are here and still can't get out of town. The only sensible thing for you to do until the Rajah is

dead, since up till then nothing can happen, is to at least get some food and sleep and take it easy in the meantime, perhaps you could even come to your senses and manage to get out some way and by that eliminate the risks for all the rest of us. But nothing can save the princesses, unless...

*Ash* Unless what?

*Govindas* Nothing is impossible, sahib. Miracles do happen and exist for that reason, which is why they sometimes occur. Destiny brought you here. Perhaps the same destiny could help you and the princesses. You are now a Hindu, a member of the great anonymous mass, and can easily inspect the city with all its exits, markets and places of execution for bodies and *suttees*. The funeral pyre is already being built. Take it easy and be observant. That's all you can do at the moment. (*takes both his hands*) Take it easy and relax, my friend. In spite of all there are higher powers than that of any man. Go now. (*to Sarji*) Take care of him and put him to rest.

*Sarji (to Ash)* Come, my friend. (*They go out.*)

*Govindasa* Poor miserable lost and raving sahib! He has never known what he has done, but he has always done it, like a blind sleepwalker of destiny itself, when he should be in Afghanistan! There he could make himself useful, but here he can only disappear into the black hole of destiny. (*sighs and retires*)

#### Scene 4. In the palace.

*Shushila* No, Anjuli. You must not say no. You have done everything for me. I could never do anything for you. You always spoilt me and took care of me. Let me now at last pay you back something of my debt to you.

*Anjuli* I don't want to leave you alone, Shushu. I never could. You were always my little sister and my only sister. I never had anyone else, except my foster brother, whom I have lost.

*Shushila* He is still out there somewhere waiting for you.

*Anjuli* If he isn't dead.

*Shushila* You mustn't think like that. He can't be dead. If he were, we would have felt it.

*Anjuli* We can't be separated, Shushu. We have always been together and belonged to each other. We always needed each other and loved each other.

*Shushila* It is fair, Juli. We didn't want to be married, it was my life's greatest terror, but I have grown into my destiny and learned to accept it. I have learned to love him, Juli. I have given him three children, and it doesn't feel more than right that I should follow him also in death. But you are still untouched as a virgin. He never wanted you. Then it would be outrageously unfair that you would also be forced into solidarity with his mortality. He only loved me, and he is the only one except you who has loved me. So I will be faithful to our mutual karma by escorting him into next life; but you were never loved by him, you just followed into the

bargain by our cruel Rajah's inhuman arbitrariness, while there is another one out there who loves you. And most important of all: you also love him.

*Anjali (pleading)* Shushu, I can't.

*Shushila* You must. I command you as a senior queen. Listen to me now. Last time uncle Kakaji's doctor was here he told me, that Ashok is still there asking questions about us. Both uncle Kakaji and he has provided him with information, and doctor Govindas greatly feared that he would try to get here to Bhithor. He was hoping that the English would interfere before the Rajah died and save us from the *suttee*, but they haven't. They will never interfere until it is too late. Our only hope then is Ashok, and if doctor Govindas at all hints at such a possibility it means, that he knows or feels that it will happen. Just in case for safety he has provided us with six bodyguard costumes if someone would need to get out of here and save his life by some emergency. So if Ashok comes he could also manage his way out disguised as a bodyguard, since they can move around at random without having to be identified, since they are masked as harem ladies in black burkhas but male ones. And if Ashok comes, my beloved sister Anjali, it is your duty to me and to life to escape with him. (*Anjali wants to protest.*) You have to. I have decided on it.

*Anjali* And you, beloved Shushila?

*Shushila* We'll meet again in next life, perhaps as sisters once more, perhaps in more fortuitous circumstances. Destiny has not been kind to us as women, sister, but it's the same for most women.

*Anjali (hugs her tenderly)* Beloved Shushu, I always regarded it as my life's primary task to take care of you and protect you, but instead it's now the other way around.

*Shushila* It's destiny. It is our karma. We will keep following it in next life and out into eternity. Go now, sister. I have informed doctor Govindas, and he is waiting for you with a male burkha. You must escape with or without but at least to Ashok. You have him to live for. I will have no one until next life.

*Sarji (appears through a secret door dressed in black bodyguard outfit with only his eyes visible, but he immediately unveils his face.)* Doctor Govindas is expecting you, princess. Hurry.

*Shushila* Go.

*Anjali* Who is this?

*Shushila* Ashok's servant. Hurry, my love. Hurry to your love and love him. Hurry to your life. We'll meet again in eternity.

(*Anjali has no choice, embraces Shushila in a last long and tender hug and disappears with Sarji through the secret door. In the same moment a gong starts tolling ominously, monotonously and darkly.*)

Now he is dead. Then there is only the pyre and eternity left. It's time to prepare for another overwhelmingly hard effort of the eternal journey. (*immediately pours some opium in a glass of water and drinks voraciously.*) It doesn't hurt, if you don't feel anything. Get lost, my body, and leave me alone with my soul. (*drinks*)

(*Then she pulls a string to a bell, the shrill sound of which transcends that of the gong, and several maids enter from different directions.*)

*Shushila (stretches out her arms)* Now dress me up and adorn me as the queen of eternity I am, for I am ready for my husband's last embrace.

*(They start dressing and adorning her quite exquisitely in splendour and beauty.)*

Scene 5. The gong is still resounding. A dark place.

*Ash* Where are you taking me, Sarji?

*Sarji* Don't worry. Someone said, that if you succeed in saving one human life, you have saved the entire world. Doctor Govindas is waiting with another one to be saved.

*(He comes forth, opens a door, and there Govindas is waiting with Anjuli, both like Sarji and Ash completely covered in black as bodyguards.)*

*Ash (stops short, benumbed, as soon as he sees Anjuli's figure)* Juli!

*Anjuli* Don't look at me, Ashok, and don't unveil my face, because you will not recognize me.

*Ash* Juli! *(advances and performs this very act, backs down)* What you have suffered, Juli!

*Anjuli* I warned you.

*Ash* Does this emaciated face belong to a queen? Are these stains of sorrow on the cheek of my sister? Are these cried out eyes without lustre and with dark rings those of my beloved? You must have cried out oceans, Juli!

*Govindas* We have no time, Ashok. We must go on.

*Ash* Juli, are you alive? You seem so callous and cold. It's me, Ashok!

*Anjuli* My sister is about to be sacrificed, Ashok. I will go nowhere without her.

*Ash* Whatever do you mean?

*Sarji* She has promised Shushila to remain until her death.

*Govindas* If you can persuade her you are clever, Ashok. We got her this far but no further.

*Ash* Juli, every second is invaluable.

*Anjuli* Yes, for they are the last seconds of Shushila's life. I am responsible for her life, Ashok, until she dies.

*Ash* You owe her nothing. You have tendered her all her life.

*Anjuli* But now she has saved mine, and I can't save hers.

*Govindas (to Ash)* She succeeded in saving Anjuli's life at the price that she be interred for life in a widow's prison with her eyes cut out. That's the tradition of Bhithor. Only that way the council could grant Shushila's wish. We managed to attack and put out her guards and executioners. It's just a question of time until Anjuli's escape is discovered, probably as soon as the burning has been carried through, for now everyone is busy about that.

*(The sound of an approaching procession with bells, music noise, drums, triangles and things like that is being heard.)*

*Anjuli (rushes to a small aperture)* It is she! She is coming!

Ash Juli, her death will be terrible. You can't be serious about wishing to watch it.

Anjali I don't mean to. I know about the plans you had, Ashok. You wanted to stay to see me die on the pyre so that you could send a bullet through my head before the pyre was set on fire to then send another bullet through your own head. In that way you wished to save me and follow me. You can now save Shushila, and I ask you to do it.

Ash Shoot Shushila?

Govindas A shot would attract much attention. A miss or just a damage would demand a second shot, which would identify the source. A third shot none of us would survive.

Anjali You know how to aim, Ashok, and hit the target if you must. She is not ready for death and does not know what it is about.

Ash Behold, she is coming, as upright and straight-backed as a queen. She seems more than well prepared.

Anjali She is drugged and moves like in a dream. She has tried to benumb herself out of reality, but when the flames start licking her, she will feel the pain and start out of her mind in terror. A shot in this din would not be heard. *(The noise of the music and drums and concussions has constantly increased.)*

Ash *(collects himself)* Juli, I will do as you say, if you then immediately will follow us.

Anjali Be it as you wish. Save her. Let her get away. Or else I will never get away.

Ash *(takes out a pistol and starts aiming but hesitates)* I can't shoot her. She is only sixteen. I would be an executioner. I would have shot myself after having saved you from the supreme barbarity and injustice, but to just shoot her down and run away would be against everything I stand for. I am sorry. I can't do it. She is too awake and aware and prepared.

Anjali You have to, Ashok. Or else you would lose me and sacrifice all of us.

Govindas Sahib, you actually have no choice. It's the only way out.

Sarji One shot is enough, sahib.

*(The din constantly grows reaching unbearable force of volume. People make much noise, and the din almost becomes painful.)*

Govindas You have to, Ashok, before the music stops and the pyre is set on fire.

Sarji Now she is brought up to the dead one.

Govindas She will light the first flame to her husband's funeral pyre herself. Then is the right moment.

Anjali Only you can save her, Ashok. Do it, or I will follow her.

*(Suddenly all the noise stops. The total silence is broken by a heart-rending scream from the whole congregation, when the pyre is set afire and the light of flames reflect on the four.)*

Ash *(lowers the gun)* She made it. Not one flame touched her. Now both the corpses are burning in oil and fat. Come, Juli. *(takes her brusquely by the arm. All four get in a hurry.)*

Anjali Thanks, Ashok. Or else I could not have lived on.

*Sarji* The horses are waiting! Hurry! *(All four of them hurry out.)*  
*(The scene is filled with the din of the people when the nightmare scene outside us completely filled with the flaming inferno of the funeral pyre.)*

Scene 6. A camp in the dark.

*Ash* Anjuli, my love, don't be so shy. What's the matter with you? You are as insensitive as a stone, as if I had lost you although you are alive. We are in safety now out in the desert. They are not pursuing us any more. We can let all tensions go.

*Anjuli* I am no longer the one you knew, Ashok. I am ashamed to at all exist, and it would have been better if I had not been saved.

*Ash* How can you say that? We couldn't have acted differently than we did. We saved the lives that could be saved. Your sister's life could not be saved.

*Anjuli* I know, and I was the one who murdered her.

*Ash* No, Juli, it was I.

*Anjuli* It was my fault. I made you do it. If we had left earlier, several lives could have been saved, especially doctor Govindas's and Sarji's.

*Ash* What is done is done, Juli. We did as best as we could.

*Anjuli* If we had let Shushila be burnt alive, more lives could have been saved.

*Ash* Would that have made it better? Would that have made you thought less of her? On the contrary! Then you would only have had even worse traumas of remorse because of her!

*Anjuli* Traumas of remorse? Do you think that is my problem?

*Ash* What else could it be?

*Anjuli* Ashok, I was buried alive at Bhithor. She was just like her mother, who did her best to persecute us all to death. She was a monster, Ashok, and Shushila was of the same kind, but I didn't realize it until it was too late. How do you think I became that mummy buried alive that you fished out of the dungeons of Bhithor? Do you think it was voluntary? No, Ashok, Shushila buried me alive from jealousy, to keep me away from the Rajah, whom she loved only for the power that her position gave her as his first wife. They didn't love each other. They were perverted in each other, and my only luck was to be able to avoid having anything to do with him. Instead I was buried alive in the cellar of the palace, where I was bereft of everything except the simplest possible clothes, which I wasn't even allowed to wash even less than myself. I was treated like a leper, Ashok, during my two years as a queen, and it was a miracle that I survived at all and didn't catch leprosy under the circumstances. I tried to take my life, but I was even kept from that, since Shushila always wanted me in reserve in case of possible need. Her two miscarriages were entirely her own fault, while only I could assist her in her third childbirth, a healthy and handsome girl, whom she killed herself when she heard she was a girl and not a son.

*Ash* So it was to make sure that she really was dead before we left, that you demanded me to shoot her?

*Anjuli* She tricked me and used me all the way. When we met the last time and she bid me farewell, she only acted a role play and pretended to save my life, and not until afterwards I learned that my eyes were to be put out by red hot irons and I to be banished to a permanent life in blind slavery as soon as she was burnt. Fortunately I had got in touch with doctor Govindas. Or else what she ordered would have passed.

*Ash* My love, why didn't you tell me all this before? You were like a lifeless stone, and I presumed you were burdened by feelings of guilt for your sister! Now I understand. You were just a broken soul, shattered to pieces by your own half sister.

*Anjuli* She dug her own grave during all her spoilt life, and my last sisterly duty was to make sure she was laid in it thoroughly dead.

*Ash* She couldn't have been more thoroughly dead. We have left her behind us, but the future belongs to us, the living.

*Anjuli* But you must return to your soldier's life and the war in Afghanistan.

*Ash* Yes, I must, but as we have survived so much that we already have gone through, I think we could survive a little bit more. We must marry to begin with, Juli.

*Anjuli* We are both half caste. Neither your masters nor my religion will allow us.

*Ash* There are other ways. We could be married by a captain I know out at sea. No one could make objections or ask any questions.

*Anjuli* Ashok, I am so sorry for all the trouble and all the worries I have caused you.

*Ash* It wasn't you, Juli. It was destiny, and we are both victims of it. It's just to make the best of it. The point is that we love each other. If only we stick to our love, nothing can harm us. Do you love me, Juli, like I have always loved you?

*Anjuli* You were always my only love, Ashok, and it was so great and burning and consuming, that there was no room for any alternative.

*Ash* Let us then go on escaping, my love, away from all our pursuers and the world of injustice and prove that it never can touch us, for we are at last now liberated from being forced to be without each other. Destiny is not always unfair, which is proved by the fact that we suddenly have won the greatest prize, that is, to have won each other. And we were awarded this not to lose it.

*Anjuli* But you have to go to war in Afghanistan.

*Ash* A petty parenthesis like all others, an insignificant nonentity and vanishing piece of dust in the universal eternity of love.

*Anjuli* Love me then, Ashok. I give you permission.

*Ash* I have always loved you and never anyone else and always will, and that true love is eternity itself, for there is no other eternity.

*Anjuli* Let us never let go of it.

*Ash* I will never again let you go, Juli.

Act V scene 1. The villa of Begum.

*Begum* Make yourselves comfortable, gentlemen. Lieutenant Ash will receive you any moment.

*Wally* At last you will meet his wife, the loveliest widow in India.

*Wigram* No matter how beautiful she is, it is not for her sake we have come here, *Wally*, but rather to get 'captain Ash' away from her.

*Cavagnari* I really hope he has some time for us in spite of his wife.

*Wigram* Or else he might just as well resign from the Corps of Guides at once.

*Wally* He never will.

*Wigram* No, because we need him.

*Cavagnari* Is it correct that he actually married a Hindu widow and legally?

*Wigram* Unfortunately it is quite correct, but he did it smoothly and discreet to avoid publicity and attention, and he has hidden her here where no one will poke his nose except such a leading lot as we in only extremely special affairs.

*Cavagnari* But how could he get married in secret? A British officer does not marry an Indian woman without causing a scandal in all British and Indian quarters and being put out of service.

*Wigram* Tell them, *Wally*.

*Wally* He had a good friend who was a captain. They married at sea, a formality of five minutes with a minimum of witnesses but quite legally and on international waters.

*Cavagnari* I say! His sense of discretion could be extremely useful to us.

*Wigram* That's what I mean.

*Wally* Here they are.

*(Ash dressed as a Hindu enters with Anjuli in white sari, more beautiful than ever.*

*The gentlemen rise at once.)*

*Cavagnari (first greeting Anjuli)* Your beauty, madam, surpasses all the wildest legends about you. *(kisses courteously her hand)*

*Anjuli* Tales of that sort is what we most of all have tried to avoid. I hope you don't contribute to any rumours.

*Wigram* I assure you, Mrs Pelham-Martyn, that we are as discreet about the knowledge of your existence as your husband, who by his discretion has succeeded in bringing you this far across all kinds of obstructions.

*Ash* I assume it's not for her sake that you have arrived here.

*Wigram* Quite correct, lieutenant. May we speak privately with you?

*Ash* Juli, I will tell you later what it is all about, if it concerns us.

*(The ladies understand and retire. Begum goes out with Anjuli.)*

*Cavagnari* This elderly intriguing lady, is she some kind of a relation to your wife? Can you trust her?

*Ash* Implicitly. She is the aunt of Zarin of the Guides, my best and oldest friend, whose father Koda Dad Khan was like my foster father. He taught me everything. But to the point. Is it about Afghanistan?

*Wigram* Unfortunately so it is, Ash. Things are gathering for a new war.

*Ash* Didn't you learn anything from the old one forty years ago, the worst massacre on Englishmen before the Indian Mutiny?

*Wigram* That's why we are here. The emir of Kabul is making friends with the Russians, who already have devoured all the Central Asian kingdoms. We can't let the Russians have Afghanistan. That would threaten the security of all India.

*Ash* What business would the Russians have in Afghanistan? It's a rugged wilderness of only mountains and deserts where no army could get through without devastating losses. I don't think the Russians would be as stupid as to desire it.

*Cavagnari* Not even for strategic reasons? Who controls the Khyber pass could easily spread terror across all the northwest of India, as the Afghans always have done.

*Ash* The Afghans have enough of their own problems. There is a tribal war going on there. They are a people of professional warriors who never did anything else of their lives. They can die, but they can not be vanquished.

*Cavagnari* Alexander the Great did.

*Ash* That was then. There were no firearms in those days, and only Alexander the Great was a greater warrior than the Afghans. What is it you really want?

*Wigram* We want to know what the Russians really are up to. Major Cavagnari here has his spies, but we can't entirely rely on their reports, since the risk is that they only report what they think we wish to hear. That's the mentality here, say whatever as long as it pleases, while no one wants anything to do with unpleasant truths.

*Ash* You want me as a spy behind the lines.

*Wally* You have been there before, Ash, and know the country, and you know the art to join in as a native without any risk of getting exposed.

*Ash* I must go alone in that case.

*Cavagnari* No back-up, no contact man, no security network?

*Ash* That's the safest way.

*Wigram* What we need to know is what the Russians are doing. We have had information that the emir invited a Russian mission. If that is true, all our worst misgivings could come true, and then we must do something about it. If the information proves false or exaggerated, war can be evaded, which everyone is hoping for of course.

*Ash* War can always be evaded.

*Cavagnari* Not if another starts it. Not if the Russians march into Afghanistan with 80,000 men.

*Ash* Is that your information?

*Wigram* You see, Ash, it's important for us to have reliable information. We do nothing without having pertinent reasons for it.

*Ash* Then I am on. I am your man.

*Wally* You are the best one, Ash. You will manage it splendidly.

*Ash* With that reservation, gentlemen, that like the last thing the emir wishes is any tug-of-war about his country between alien powers, I will also try to contribute

to the evasion of that. But I will deliver all relevant and factual information about the situation.

*Wigram* That's all we need.

*Wally* Good luck, Ash! See you in Afghanistan!

*Ash* Don't be too sure.

*Cavagnari* Take no risks, lieutenant, and you can trust us with not taking any either.

*Ash* We with our empire live only on taking risks, major Cavagnari, which you if anyone are very well aware of.

*Wigram (rises)* Come, gentlemen. We are agreed, and we will go through the details later. Lieutenant Ashton must now go through some difficult discussions with his wife.

*Cavagnari* How old is she, lieutenant? You can't believe she has been a widow.

*Ash* She is twenty-two.

*Wigram* Come now. You don't discuss a woman's age, especially not with her husband.

*Cavagnari* Pardon the importunity, lieutenant, but you realize of course that this conference must remain secret?

*Ash* Of course. (*shows the gentlemen out*) See you, Wally, and hopefully not in Afghanistan.

*Wally* You will make it, Ash.

(*The gentlemen leave. Ash sits down in an armchair with a worried look.*)

*Ash* These damned empires! Why do politicians have to ruin the world?

*Anjuli (enters)* Is it Afghanistan?

*Ash* Yes, my love, it's Afghanistan. I have to go there as a spy for the English.

*Anjuli* I want to follow you.

*Ash* It is too dangerous.

*Anjuli* Do you mean to go alone?

*Ash* Yes. That's the only safe way, my love. I know the country and the language and can act as an Afghan. As long as I am alone I am safe.

*Anjuli* And if you don't come back?

*Ash* I will come back. My mission will be to save the lives of others, Afghans and Englishmen. If I succeed I will be able to avert a war, and if I don't succeed, no one can avert it.

*Anjuli* You have to succeed.

*Ash* I am aware of it.

*Anjuli* I am with you wherever you are and will protect you with my prayers.

*Ash* Thank you, my love, you are the best protection I could have. Unfortunately that is not enough for all these imperialistic Englishmen and Russians who don't understand what they are doing at all.

Scene 2. In the mountains.

*Cavagnari* Where is he, my brave spy, the only one who knows what's happening and who gives us useful information?

*Wigram* He thought he could avert the war and actually believed he could and tried to do it. Well, he has failed completely. The war is a fact, and we might have lost our best man in the bargain, who perhaps was the only one who could view the situation soberly.

*Cavagnari* The young veteran will not get lost so easily. He has scouted all Afghanistan with success and given us invaluable information that no one else could have produced, and would he then just run away from a war? No, he will not let his corps and his calling down so easily.

*Wigram* I fear that we are watched.

*Cavagnari* Here in this night among these wild hills? Impossible.

*Wigram* Isn't that an Afghan hiding over there?

*Cavagnari* I can't discover him. Are you sure it is an Afghan?

*Wigram* What else could it be?

*(enter Ash as an Afghan.)*

*Cavagnari* Lieutenant Ash, we took you for an Afghan!

*Ash* That was the intention. In this country I am an Afghan. What's the purpose of your invasion? How could you start a war without notice?

*Wigram* The emir gave us no choice. He never answered our ultimatum.

*Ash* And what right did you have to give him an ultimatum? Is he your vassal perhaps? Well, he is gone now, so it doesn't matter. You can recall the invasion army.

*Cavagnari* Gone?

*Ash* He has fled out of the country and left his throne for his son, his worst son, to whom he never wanted to give it over, but he lost his zest when his best son died. Do you understand what that means? There is no reason for any war any more, since the viceroy's excuse for a war was that England had a quarrel only with the emir, not with the people.

*Cavagnari* We are not giving orders, lieutenant. We only obey orders, and that's for you to do as well.

*Ash* My mission is discharged as the invasion has taken place. My mission was only to collect information within the reign and domains of the emir. He is gone now, and by the fact of your invasion there is nothing more I can do for maintaining peace and balance. If the British forces don't immediately leave Afghanistan, I request permission to return to my regiment.

*Cavagnari* Granted. We don't know what this will lead to, but the fact that his son has taken power does not alter the situation. The Russians still have 80,000 men by the border.

*Ash* But they have never crossed it and never will. The Tzar has promised that and asked the emir's son to negotiate peace with the British.

*Cavagnari* We only obey orders, lieutenant Ash. But I will forward your views and reports to higher ranks.

*Ash* If you move one step further into Afghanistan, I am afraid you will not come out again.

*Cavagnari* I have to obey orders.

*Wigram* Return to Mardan, lieutenant, and await further orders there. You are dismissed until further.

*Ash* You mean that I can go back to Mardan when I please?

*Wigram* Yes.

*Ash* I wish I had warned you enough, because now I can't warn you any more. (*leaves*)

*Cavagnari* What do you think, major? Are we stuck in Afghanistan?

*Wigram* We have taken Jalalabad, and I hardly think we can afford to let it out of our hands. Lieutenant Ash knows what he knows and what he is speaking about, but the government in Shimla does not know who he is, and they will rather act than listen. I am afraid they will force us on all the way to Kabul, and last time we were there, hardly anyone survived.

*Cavagnari* That was forty years ago. We have learned more efficiency since then.

*Wigram* But Afghanistan hasn't changed.

### Scene 3. A primitive lodge in Kabul.

*Ash* I don't like it. It all stinks. It's too good, because it's too quiet, like an ominous calm before an eruption of cataclysms. And the British just keep blundering on in good faith as the incorrigibly naïve gentlemen they are without being able to imagine what black holes and abysses the Muslim mentality could keep concealed. No, I definitely don't like it. (*A delicate knock on the door.*) Someone dares to knock on my door. It's too soft a knock to be one of ours. Have the Afghans finally found me out? (*at the door*) Who is it?

*Anjuli (outside)* Your wife.

*Ash (flings the door open with all force and embraces Anjuli with all his heart so that she is lifted from the ground)* My heart! At last! How could you? What risks you have taken! Are you alone?

*Anjuli* I told you I could pass as much as an Afghan as you. I have learned Pushtu and almost speak it as fluently as you. You are mine, Ashok, and I couldn't let you be without me any longer!

*Ash (puts her down)* But come in then! We haven't seen each other for almost a year! What a blessing someone brought me by sending you here!

*Anjuli* It was only myself.

*Ash* I know. Be blessed ten times more for that!

*Anjuli* Everyone tried to stop me. Gul Baz tried to lock me up. Aunt Begum placed guards around the villa to catch me if I tried to get away. Everyone dissuaded

me and forbade me. Then I threatened to starve myself to death. Then aunt Begum finally understood that nothing could stand between us in our love. I have come back to you, Ash, to never again leave your side, which is the only appropriate place for every faithful wife: as close to her husband as possible for ever.

*Ash* You are right. I have missed you. Every night has been hopeless and comfortless. We have many nights to catch up with.

*Anjuli* Why did you never come back? I thought you would return when major Cavagnari gave you notice.

*Ash* So did I. But others needed me here for my services as a scout and observer. There is no other Englishman who can merge as well as I into the local people. I am called the chameleon by those who know me, and with my easiness for changing tongue, mentality and appearance I am perfectly safe, until someone would betray me, which is hardly likely. I am after all a brother with all Afghans like with all Hindus and Englishmen, no matter how much English I am and how much I was brought up a Hindu. No one tried to avert and interrupt this war as intensively as I, but it just goes on.

*Anjuli* I heard that our friend Wigram had fallen.

*Ash* Yes, he fell in the decisive battle, whereafter the young emir surrendered and let us have our mission in Kabul. It's on its way here now under the command of major Cavagnari.

*Anjuli* And Wally?

*Ash* It was very much to his credit that we prevailed at Fatehabad. He took over when Wigram fell, and if he hadn't dared to take that initiative, the affair would have ended in a bloody defeat, but a bloody victory could be worse than a bloody defeat, since it could lead to an even bloodier defeat next time. That's all I am waiting for. The Afghans now keep quiet and still not to give suspicions of bad weather. Zarin is of the same mind. He feels that something is coming.

*Anjuli* And major Cavagnari?

*Ash* He just carries on marching like another Napoleon against Moscow. He is a French Irishman and is called Louis Napoleon just like the deposed emperor and appears to have learned nothing from the Napoleonic delusions. He is a romantic idealist and is floating in the blind faith that fair play always must lead to success by simply being respectable, but the ideal world does not exist in Asia. I fear that he is leading us blindly straight into a worse trap than that of 1839.

*Anjuli* Do no warnings help?

*Ash* The generals give orders, and if they are not obeyed, you are replaced by such who rather obey orders and die than think of themselves and common sense. There is always more of cannon fodder and suicidal candidates, both among Brits and Afghans. I have tried to talk sense to those accountable, Juli, during all my thankless activity as a spy here I have only been able to go on living through it with the sole aim of saving as many lives as possible regardless of nationality. And now it feels as if I had failed utterly, since the British invasion only has trampled deeper all

the time in this mud pool of meaningless troubles and atrocities with no bottom to its hollow hell of chaotic misery.

*Anjuli* But the Afghans have given way. They have granted a British mission here in Kabul. They haven't let in a single Russian.

*Ash* It's just pretence, Juli. The Afghans will never give way, and pretend to give way only to the more efficiently be able to strike back. They hide to be able to murder more insidiously. All their tactics are only about that since a thousand years as mountain warriors. Not one Englishman will survive.

*Anjuli* Ashok, you are not an Englishman.

*Ash* But I don't want to be here when it happens. Alas, Juli, my task here felt just hopelessly and completely wrong all the way, until you arrived, but now at least I have you here to live for.

*Anjuli* We have many sleepless nights of loneliness to remedy and catch up with.

*Ash* Come to me, Juli, and stay there. Never let me go again.

*Anjuli* That is why I am here.

*Ash* You need a meal. Let's have some food to transport us into some good mood, and then immediately go to bed together.

*Anjuli* I am here to spite the whole world just to obey the only one who stands above me.

*Ash* That's the spirit. Come! (*They go out together.*)

#### Scene 4. A room in the mission.

(*Cavagnari lies wounded in his head on a bunk, a doctor attending him.*)

*Rosie* Take it very easy, Sir. You have done all you could.

*Cavagnari* How are they doing out there? Will madness then never desist?

*Rosie* We are fighting as well as we can, and so far we have beaten back all attacks.

*Cavagnari* Under Wally's command. Pity about such a good soldier. We should have listened to the warnings. Now it is too late.

*Rosie* Here he is.

*Wally* (*enters, all dusty directly from the gunsmoke but unharmed*) Sir Louis! How is it with him?

*Rosie* (*puts a finger to his lips. Wally rushes up to his bedside.*)

*Wally* Sir, we are fighting like heroes. We are one against fifty, but we are beating them back again and again.

*Cavagnari* No help from the emir? No answer?

*Wally* We have sent four messengers to him appealing for support. No answer.

*Cavagnari* Then Lieutenant Ashton was right.

*Wally* I am afraid so, Sir.

*Cavagnari* And we were mad who would not listen to him. He suggested that we should pay them off, so that they would be satisfied and go home, but I refused to give wild Afghans British money because they had made war on us. What I can't

understand is how they can be so mad. They are dying like flies, is it ten or twenty who fall for every one of us going down, and still they continue sacrificing themselves for nothing, against all sense, against their own law and the Quran, utterly self-destructively, purely, as it seems, of hatred for us Englishmen, because we don't want to make worse off than the Russians. They allowed a Russian mission which could leave again with honour without the loss of one man – why then not an English one of much smaller compass?

*Wally* They feel cheated of their soldier's salary, which the emir refused them, why they have demanded it of us instead in the belief that we had money, which we refused them, and thus they go berserk in all Kabul. We are outsiders and strangers, the infidels and unbelieving intruders, on which they therefore focus all their fury. They are blinded by mass hysteria.

*Cavagnari* Yes, they are no longer human but worse than animals. They are next to locusts, who devour and destroy everything on their way. Least of all they are Muslims. We were no more than a diplomatic representation, who were here on a peaceful mission on behalf of our and the Afghan government as nothing less than an embassy, which they attack without right, without sense, without motive and without any reason at all. Is this war? No, it's a hopeless struggle against barbarity, which the barbarians seem to be winning only by force and the right of violence and bloodthirst. What did we do wrong, Wally?

*Wally* Ash warned us from the start. We should have learned from the previous Afghan war. He did everything he could to avert a new one, and he prophesied that we would all perish if we went into Kabul.

*Cavagnari* We have not all perished yet.

*Wally* We haven't fought to the last man yet, but we are well on our way.

*Cavagnari* How many are left?

*Ally* Some twenty against several thousand.

*Cavagnari* And the emir makes no move?

*Wally* Nothing at all. He is scared to death of the mob. Perhaps he is writhing his hands. We have sent four messengers to him. At least two must have reached him. We saw one being lynched by the mob although he flourished a Quran. That Quran was destroyed with him.

*Cavagnari* If he really does nothing, the British mission in Kabul is done for. He allows a diplomatic representation to be lynched to death without moving a finger. That's supreme cowardice. Who fired the first shot, Wally? We or they?

*Wally* They did. My order was to keep peace at any price.

*Cavagnari* Then we are innocent, and the entire responsibility falls on the reckless perpetrators of violence, worse than animals, worse than locusts, none of them worthy of their own life. Should we have listened to Ash? Should we have accepted his suggestion to pay off this crowd of murderers for them to leave us in peace? Do you think they would have in that case?

*Wally* This is the land of Cain, the fratricide's country. I don't think they would have left us in peace anyway. Neither do I think they would have let the Russians remain if they had pleased to.

*Cavagnari* So our mistake was to regard these soulless creatures as human beings and believe that they could respect human dignity as much as we?

*Wally* You could view it that way.

*Rosie* Let our ambassador have some rest, Wally.

*Wally* How is he?

*Rosie* He has been shot in the belly.

*Wally* I thought it was just a scratch in the head.

*Rosie* It was at first. The second hit went deeper.

*Wally* How much time has he left?

*Rosie* An hour at most. All I could do for him was to give him opium against the pains.

*Cavagnari* It's not over yet, Wally! What are you doing here? Get out and fight with the others! Don't bother about me! Each one of us who falls on his post will be avenged a hundred times!

*Rosie* Go out, Wally. I am the doctor here, and he is my dying patient. You are well and unharmed and have no business here. He is right. Go out and fight with the others.

*Wally* Someone has to survive. Where the devil is Ash? (*goes out*)

*Rosie* Are you in pain, Sir?

*Cavagnari* Not much longer. I will soon be ready, doctor. Then you can also go out and fight. (*falls asleep*)

*Rosie* Sleep well, Sir. You are out of the worst. (*closes his eyes, takes his weapons and runs out to the firing, wild screams and gunsmoke of the final battle.*)

## Scene 5.

*Anjuli* They ask me not to worry, Gul Baz, but how could I not? My life is nothing without him, and the whole town must hear how the wild barbarians are gunning down the mission to shambles and ruins, and he is there!

*Gul Baz* He is not there. He is an Afghan and accepted as such. He can take care of himself.

*Anjuli* Why then doesn't he get in touch? Why doesn't he give any sign of life? Why may we not know that he is alive?

*Gul Baz* There is only one reason. He can't because he is too busy. But you as his wife should be able to feel better than I that he is still alive.

*Anjuli* But the uncertainty! Yes, I feel that he is alive, but not much more than that. He must be under extreme duress for not getting in touch for such a long time.

*Gul Baz* Only a few days have passed.

*Anjuli* No, an eternity, for I am without him!

*Gul Baz*      Quiet! Did you hear?

*Anjuli*        What?

*Gul Baz*        Listen! *(Both listen breathlessly.)*

*(Suddenly the door opens very quietly and discreetly, you don't see who it is at first, but then Ash enters, staggering, wounded, dirty to irrecognizability and significantly aged. He manages to stagger up to Anjuli, falls on his knees before her, lies his head in her womb and starts crying desperately.)*

*Gul Baz*        I knew it.

*Anjuli*        Ashok! You are alive!

*Ash*            It's over, Juli. They fought to the last man. In the end they were out of weapons, while the Afghans gunned them down with cannons. They are all dead, the best and finest soldiers of India and Great Britain, 77 of them, against perhaps eight thousand Aghan savages, intent on murdering them to the last man just because they were there and existed, but their fanatical leaders also went down.

*Anjuli*        Ashok! I am so happy that you are alive!

*Ash*            I couldn't help them. I was blocked. I was locked in. Not until in the last fight I could break out through the floor and help them, but it was too late. It was in that fight the last and the best men went down, Wally among them, my beloved Wally, who led the Guides in four attacks against the total superior force and beat them back every time... *(bellows)*

*Gul Baz (to Anjuli)* I will go out and make some preparations. I'll be back. *(vanishes)*

*Anjuli*        Ashok, my love, you are alive!

*Ash*            I shouldn't be. I shouldn't have been allowed to. I could see everything from my window. I was locked in. My friends used force to block me from taking part.

*Anjuli*        How did you manage?

*Ash*            I received a blow in my head and landed under some of the corpses, so that I couldn't move. When my friends were to release me I was no longer there. They found me among the corpses and took care of me. I was a corpse myself, Juli, a living corpse who had outlived myself...

*Anjuli*        It's over now, Ashok. You are alive. We are alive. We have a future. Everything has a meaning. You have survived to be able to tell the tale.

*Ash*            The emir did nothing to help us although we were just a diplomatic representation advocating peace. He just shut himself up crying from fear of getting dethroned himself, which nothing can prevent. There will now be an emir in friendship with the Russians instead...

*Anjuli*        It is over, Ashok. I am here.

*Gul Baz (enters again)* Everything is ready. We must leave Kabul tonight.

*Ash*            I have still much to do here, Gul Baz.

*Gul Baz*        There is nothing to do. The mob is plundering the dead and devastating the entire mission. There will not remain a trace of the British mission or of anything of the bodies. They all wallow in their orgies of desecration. They are all total

martyrs, all your dead friends. You must save yourself and your wife while they are still at it. Then it will be too late.

*Anjuli* You must live to tell the story, Ashok.

*Ash* And you too. What have you done, Gul Baz? Are you coming with us?

*Gul Baz* Of course, as far as Kashmir. Then you will have to manage on your own.

*Ash* You will have a salary for the rest of your life, Gul Baz, for all that you have done for us. You mean that you have arranged everything with horses and packs and all?

*Gul Baz* I had nothing better to do while you just kept on firing at each other. I thought some way of escape could be needed when the worst was over.

*Ash* Thank you, Gul Baz. Are you ready, Juli?

*Anjuli* You shouldn't ask that of me. Are *you* fit to ride to the border?

*Ash* For you I could put up with anything.

*Gul Baz* But where shall you go? Do you have anywhere to go? Ashok has no place in the army any more.

*Anjuli* There is a valley beyond the mountains. Have you forgotten it, Ashok? We always talked about it as children, the valley of our dreams, where the most beautiful mountains always would gild our days with their beauty for our hard lives in the heart of nature with a goat and a donkey and a garden, where we would grow everything ourselves, and where nothing would limit our freedom, no religious obligations, no politics, no wars, no fanaticism, only freedom and tolerance. It was your foster mother who gave you that valley to always wish for and return to. Have you forgotten it, Ashok?

*Ash* No, I have never forgotten it, but I got used to considering it a distant myth from my childhood.

*Anjuli* It is there, Ashok, and waiting for us. At last it is ours, and we can reach it. It must exist since we can dream about it. Everything that you can dream about, consider and imagine is always manifested in reality.

*Ash* We will search for it until we find it and there at last grow our own garden.

*Gul Baz* We had better start at once.

*Ash* Good faithful Gul Baz, you are the last one we have. All the others we have lost.

*Gul Baz* Forget them and the world. You have yourselves.

*Anjuli* Can you make it, Ashok?

*Ash* For you I can manage anything. – Then our last journey begins. Here we leave everything that we were and become something new. I never thought we could get this far. Come, my beloved. The eternal white mountains are waiting for us to be able to show us the way to their secret valley.

*Anjuli* It was always reserved for us, for we were the only ones who knew about it.

*Ash* Come then, Juli. We actually seem to get each other at last.

*Gul Baz* It's about time. Kabul is burning.

*Ash* Our love is burning higher, and it will bring us to security. The whole world with all its politics is just a bad joke to laugh at with scorn, like Sir Louis Cavagnari despised his eight thousand murderers. They will vanish like desert dust to the sand storm, and no one will ever be able to recall any single one of them by name, while not one of my sacrificed comrades ever will be forgotten. Come, Juli. Like Gul Baz said, it's about time – for our too long postponed but now finally released and liberated eternal love.

*(Gul Baz opens the door, Ash lifts Anjuli in his arms and carries her out, and Gul Baz follows. He puts out a light before he finally is the last one to leave, and everything becomes all dark and quiet.)*

*The End.*

*(Darjeeling 19.11.2009,  
translated 4.11.2020)*



*Post script*

M.M.Kaye's magnificent novel *"The Far Pavilions"*, published 1978 when she was 70, on which she worked for fifteen years in the 1960s and 70s, is in all its details an epic masterpiece that on principle is impossible to dramatize, since a dramatization unfortunately has to exclude the grandiose epic perspectives with all their sumptuously splendid and extensive circumstances. However, there has been made an excellent screening of the novel of 1200 pages with actors like Sir John Gielgud (as Louis Napoleon Cavagnari), Omar Sharif (as Koda Dad Khan), Rossano Brazzi, Robert Hardy, Christopher Lee, and Ben Cross and Amy Irving as the young couple. In this film of five hours, the chronology was shifted, so that the princess Shushila's departure became the last act of the film, which didn't at all detract the film and which actually was the only thing that wasn't quite according to the book. In a dramatization, which I couldn't resist after a rereading after fifteen years, by which I found the novel even more rewarding than the first time, I chose to maintain the chronology of the novel. Therefore like the novel my dramatization ends with a question mark leading out into nowhere, which ending has too striking a similarity with the end of James Hilton's *"Lost Horizon"* not to have been influenced by that. His novel is also about a valley beyond the mountains, and it is too obviously a logic idea of consequence to take for granted that James Hilton's and M.M.Kaye's *"valley beyond the mountains"* actually could be something of the same valley.

Darjeeling 19.11.2009

