



Crimson Spring

by

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INDIAN WRITERS

Chapter 1

Nine Lives on a Strange Baisakhi Day

Baisakhi Day. 13 April 1919. Amritsar was shut. Anger, hostility, and fear had strangled into sullen silence this bustling trading centre that stood on the Grand Trunk Road connecting Delhi to Lahore and Peshawar.

A persistent premonition that something terrible could happen any moment hovered over the city, on both sides of the railway line. On one side lay the crowded walled city with its twelve gates, its sinuous lanes becoming narrower and narrower as they snaked into its crowded interior. Its flat-roofed houses squeezed onto each other, their balconies almost touching, shutting out the light, until the sky was just a sliver above. The suffusion of strong smells, pleasant and not so pleasant, added to the sense of things closing in. At the heart of the old city was the Golden Temple. It sat in its gilded serenity in the sarovar, a pool of water in which the pilgrims bathed. On a normal Baisakhi day, the temple would be teeming with people; baptism with the doubled edged dagger on that day would be of special significance, for on that day the Khalsa, the brotherhood of Sikhs with a clear identity, had been born, two hundred and twenty years earlier.

Beyond the old walls and on the other side of the railway lines were the leafy green areas of the cantonment and the Civil Lines, the preserve of the British colonial rulers. Here there were lawns with flower beds, neat hedges, straight roads, the courts, the club, the church and even a golf course.

A two-lane carriage bridge and an iron footbridge over the

railway line connected these two worlds. It was on these bridges that three days earlier, on the tenth of April, the tension that had been building up in all of Punjab for months, had erupted. On that day, Dr Saifuddin Kitchlew and Dr Satyapal, leaders of the spreading protests against the Rowlatt Act, had been deported to Dharamsala under orders of Sir Michael O'Dwyer, the haughty Lieutenant Governor of Punjab. Crowds gathered on those bridges wanting to cross over to the Civil Lines and appeal to the DC, the Deputy Commissioner, to release their leaders. The authorities panicked and opened fire, killing several people. The angry crowd spilled back into the city's lanes, setting buildings on fire and killing five Europeans who fell into their hands. Marcella Sherwood, a supervisor of the city's mission schools was attacked in a side alley off the narrow lane, Kucha Kaurianwala. More soldiers were rushed to Amritsar. They marched through the lanes and set up pickets. Water and electricity to the city were cut off. Amritsar retreated into an uneasy silence. Its inhabitants were angry; this was no way to celebrate the Baisakhi festival of spring, the success of the harvest, the coming of the New Year.



Maya Dei had managed to pray at the Golden Temple on Baisakhi morning, in the ambrosial hour before dawn. Every day, for the last fifteen days, she had woken up while it was still pitch dark, bathed, and walked barefoot to the gurudwara through the narrow lanes that led from the home of Lala Sunder Das, adjacent to Jallianwala Bagh, where she and her husband Joga Singh were staying. Each day, particularly after the firing and violence of the tenth, it had got more difficult; the police and military were everywhere, many lanes were barricaded. But Bisheshwar, the Lala's younger son, only fourteen years old, was her ally. He would guide her by a new route each morning; waif-like, he could dodge every barrier, criss-cross through private houses, find ways

across roofs. No matter what the risk, the boy had got it into his head that he had to help her fulfil her vow to Waheguru that she would pray at the Golden Temple for forty days. And then He would grant her the only boon she wanted: a child to make her happiness complete; otherwise there was nothing lacking in the life she and Joga Singh had created for themselves in the village of Parhi, on the other side of the river Jhelum, over a hundred miles to the north-west of Amritsar.

For the last three years, without telling her husband, she had tried whatever the older women in the village had suggested, eating what they said, praying in the direction they pointed to, but nothing had worked. Then someone had told her the ancient story of Dani, the wife of a Sidhu peasant from Ferozepur who had been blessed with a son by Sakhi Sarwar Pir twelve years after marriage. Maya made the same pilgrimage that Dani had made in that legend, joining a group going from Sohawa to the Baisakhi mela at the pir's shrine at Nagaha. She bathed in the stream that ran below the shrine at the feet of the Sulaiman mountains and then climbed the steep steps to pray, breaking her overnight fast only when she came down. She tied sacred threads on the dead branches of the tree to which the Pir had tied his mare many centuries ago. The next year she had gone to the annual fair at Gujranwala and the next to the famous Jhanda Mela at Peshawar. Joga Singh did not go with her; he did not believe in these pilgrimages. But he didn't stand in her way.

But this year she had decided that she would not go to any of the Sakhi Sarwar shrines. Her husband's face had lit up when she told him first thing one morning: 'This year for Baisakhi we will go to Amritsar. I dreamt of Harmandir Sahib this morning and they say that if you dream of something just before you wake up then it means something special.'

That was why they had locked up the house with the red, yellow, and blue glass windowpanes and taken the lorry to Jhelum

and then a train that helped them cross the Jhelum River on an incredibly long bridge and brought them first to Lahore and then to Amritsar, the Guru's own town. Lala Sunder Das had welcomed them warmly. He was a rich coal merchant and an old friend of Joga Singh who had moved from Rawalpindi to Amritsar in search of better business. That his business had prospered was obvious from his well-furnished three-storey house, the narrow back windows of which, with their painted iron bars, looked over Jallianwala Bagh.

Long after Maya Dei had returned from the Golden Temple and distributed the prasada to the entire household, Joga Singh stood looking down into the Bagh from those windows. Preparations were underway for some sort of event. Some men were hastily fashioning a platform with planks. Slowly, in ones and twos, people began to come through the only real entrance, from Queen's Bazaar. Several children were small enough to be carried on the shoulders of their fathers and grandfathers. Joga Singh's eye caught a strange sight: a smart, tall man of soldierly bearing wearing an army tunic and neat khaki turban was walking in with two bulls. He headed towards the large peepul tree near the samadhi and let the bulls loose to graze in the far part of the Bagh.

Someone tested a megaphone. There would be speeches, Joga Singh realized. Speeches no doubt against the Rowlatt Act and appeals for satyagraha. Gandhi's idea of hartals was catching on and Joga Singh was intrigued. On an impulse, he decided he would step down into the Bagh and listen.



At the Golden Temple, Ralla Singh hadn't slept well at all; a strange disquiet had been gnawing at him all night. Finally, when the clock on the tower across had struck four, he had rolled up the light wool shawl with which he always covered himself, even during summer, and gone to sit cross-legged by the holy pool,

eyes closed in meditation. By the time he finished reciting the Japji, the stars had begun to dim and the first gentle rays of light were making their way across the night sky and bowing their heads at the golden walls of the temple, as if seeking Waheguru's blessings for the day to come. The lamps were being extinguished one by one in the bungalows around the sarovar and the pilgrims who came to stay in these hospices funded by the rich and powerful Sikh chieftains—the Majithias, the Attariwalas, the Sukerchekias, the Ramgharias, the Ahluwalias—were beginning their morning rituals. From the Harmandir, the strains of a rabab made a tentative foray into a classical raag.

Ralla feared that this disquiet was the harbinger of some bad fortune. All he could pray for was that he would still be able to meet his brother-in-law, Mehtab Singh, and nephew, Kirpal, later that day. Kirpal was back from the Great War; he had survived the bullets of the Germans and Turks.

'With Waheguru's blessing,' Mehtab Singh had written, 'we will meet in the gurudwara on Baisakhi. Kirpal will also come there. God willing, he will get leave from his regiment.'

The thought of meeting young Kirpu, the son of his sister Jindi, now dead so many years, warmed Ralla's heart. The boy had inherited Jindi's sunny smile and wide-open light eyes, their innocence heightened by a random pattern of tiny brown dots. He was a young man now, not a little child for whom Ralla used to get on all fours and pretend to be a horse. But this morning, the idea of just meeting up at the Golden Temple on Baisakhi no longer sounded so straightforward.

He tried to shake off his misgivings. Moving to the bathing area, he undressed down to his long breeches. With his dagger still worn across his chest, as indeed it had been since he had been baptized by the Sant of Alibegh, he stepped into the still cold water of the sarovar until it covered him to his shoulders. The dip made him hungry and he went to the hall where the

early morning fires of the langar were being stoked. He took two rotis from the previous night's stock and ate them with a couple of pickled green chillies along with a glass of steaming hot sweet tea; at that moment it seemed to him a meal fit for a prince.

Then, just as the early magic of dawn was on the verge of descending into everyday ordinariness, he started walking towards the Baba Atal, the tallest tower in Amritsar. In his hand, he held his favourite cane with the silver lion head. He was very fond of that cane, its shiny black paint, its supple strength, the mystery of the foreign insignia on the lion head. He didn't know what it signified; nor had the shopkeeper, deep in a narrow Amritsar bazaar, who had sold him the cane.

Angrezi hai, is all that the shopkeeper had been able to tell him. But that applied to nearly everything in that shop, overflowing with second-hand goods discarded by the British—metal trunks, wooden cabinets, belts, boots, umbrellas.... For some reason, perhaps because of the lion head insignia, the cane had a reassuring feel for Ralla Singh.

He knew he was lucky to still have it. Pilgrims coming to the Golden Temple over the last two or three days had been searched by British soldiers at the pickets that had suddenly sprouted all over the city. Sticks and canes of any type were instantly taken away: they were seen as potential weapons in a protest.

He hurried up the nine floors of Baba Atal tower. Each floor, he knew, signified a year in the life of the child Atal—son of the sixth Sikh Guru, Guru Hargobind—who had renounced his life at that spot. It was a good place from where to look down into the lanes around the Temple complex. But even as he leaned over the parapet and looked around, his unease only deepened at what he saw.



Though Ralla was not to know, by noon that day his brother-in-

law, Mehtab Singh, was not too far away. He was standing in Hall Bazaar chowk, caught by surprise by a column of military officials headed towards Hall Gate. Instinctively he stepped aside, shrinking as far as he could under a tarpaulin awning outside a shop selling spices, even as the shopkeeper was trying to shut the folding doors. Mehtab had no desire to be part of any trouble.

At the head of the column were two Indian police officers on horseback, followed by a horse-drawn bambookat in which sat the naib tehsildar and the town crier with a drum on his knees. Behind them came troops on a slow double, rifles in hand and then a motor car with two British sahibs in it.

‘That’s the new jarnail, Dyer sahib, next to the Dipty Commissioner,’ a young man standing close to him said to no one in particular, pointing with his eyes and a raised eyebrow to the ruddy faced military man who sat in the car. ‘Came from Jalandhar night before last and brought all those soldiers with him.’

Behind that motor car was another with two police officers followed by two armoured cars with machine guns fixed on them. Mehtab had never seen guns like that before.

Deputy Commissioner Miles Irving raised a hand and the procession stopped at the chowk. The town crier stood up in the bambookat and beat his drum. The naib tehsildar then read out the proclamation loudly, first in Urdu and then in Punjabi, pausing after each sentence and looking around: ‘No inhabitant of the city is permitted to go out of his house after 8 p.m. Persons going out into the street after 8 p.m. will be liable to be shot. No procession is permitted at any time in the bazaars or in any part of the city or at any place outside the city. Any such procession or gathering will be considered illegal, and will be dealt with accordingly and, if necessary, will be dispersed by means of arms.’

There weren’t too many people listening—only those who, like Mehtab, had been caught by surprise in the lane. The others

had moved back into their homes or shops and even away from the windows and the balconies. The shooting on the railway bridges, just three days ago, had brought fear to every doorstep. The charred building of the National Bank, not far from where Mehtab stood, was a grim reminder of how the crowd, angry at being fired upon had set it on fire and killed the English manager and assistant manager.

Instinctively Mehtab's hand went to the small kirpan that hung around his waist, its thick black cloth strap stretched across his chest. It had always been part of his person ever since he could remember, a sign of his baptized belief. Would they take it away now? But no, he had already been permitted to keep it: Sikhs were permitted to keep kirpans. And he was very obviously a Sikh, a most proper Sikh with his neatly tied black turban, its careful folds each equidistant from the other, and rising out from a pinpoint in the exact centre of his forehead, showing the deliberate nature of the man. There was not a careless flourish, not a loose end in his appearance or his thought. His beard, now flecked with grey at forty-six, was open but not untidy. It covered his jaws and chin in regular curls that stayed neatly in place during the day, having been oiled and pressed down with a tight cloth band for half an hour every morning. His spectacles with their round metal frames gave him a serious, thoughtful look; his well-ironed black cotton waistcoat, the crisp white long shirt under it, its sleeves folded to the elbow, and the English fountain pen tucked into his breast pocket heightened that look. His gaze was clear and determined, that of a man who knew his mind; however, every once in a while, a troubled shadow flitted furtively across his eyes, as if he feared that everything that he had, all he had worked for, could be taken away in a minute.



One of the British soldiers sitting behind Brigadier General

Reginald Dyer in the column was Sergeant Nicholas Williams, his bodyguard and ADC. His thin face was red from the heat, his light hair plastered on his forehead with sweat. He hadn't had time to breathe ever since they had driven in from Jalandhar two days ago. Dyer drove everybody hard, especially when, as now, he was possessed by a sense of mission. He had no patience for any trouble by the Indians; all protests had to be crushed with a hard hand. Dyer had been itching to get to the scene of the action and now that he was here, he had quickly taken matters into his own hands and Williams had been kept busy. Two marches through the old city of Amritsar in two days through sullen, silent streets with barred windows and shuttered shops. Past the burnt-out skeletons of the National Bank and Alliance Bank, past the places where five Europeans had been killed, past the railway bridges from which the soldiers had opened fire. Then, the setting up of a military headquarters at Ram Bagh while the rumours swirled around like sticky summer flies: railway lines had been uprooted somewhere; a huge, mutinous mob was headed to Amritsar; Lahore Fort had been taken; the Lieutenant Governor was dead. Each rumour was scotched by a counter rumour as soon as it was heard.

Williams had spent a tense night, not even taking off his boots, his rifle next to him. The orders were that equipment was not to be removed at all; anything could happen at any time. Whenever the buzzing of mosquitoes had awakened him, he had glanced towards Dyer's sleeping quarters where the lamp had burnt late into the night; he worried that this would be the second night that the boss would go without a good night's sleep. And now, they were out again this morning for the announcement with the town crier.

Williams saw people ducking away into side alleys. The few who stood in the lanes tried hard to keep their faces free of anger and scorn. A wine-seller who wanted to keep his shop

open came up to Dyer's car with folded hands and the police dragged him away. Then another man who pleaded repeatedly that he had come to meet his soldier son was also taken away.

Soon Dyer turned back towards Ram Bagh, his face burnt red from the sharp sun. Williams knew they hadn't covered the entire city, been nowhere near the Golden Temple. But in that yellow burning heat, it didn't seem to matter. All he wanted, like Dyer, was to take the shortest route back to the shade of the mango trees and get out of the sun that was searing the back of his neck.

Just then a CID man stepped forward to the column and whispered something to Superintendent of Police J. F. Rehill as the police officer's car turned a corner. Rehill jumped out of his car and, catching up with Dyer's car, told him that a big gathering was to be held in Jallianwala Bagh at four-thirty that afternoon.

Sitting behind Dyer, Williams felt the General stiffen.



Lance Naik Kirpal Singh had not come to Jallianwala Bagh to listen to any political speeches. On the other hand, he was keen to get to the Golden Temple, meet his father and uncle, and go home. The prospect of ever seeing home again had been so distant all these years of the Great War that it had become part of a fairy tale, the kind that one thinks of before falling asleep, the kind that one embellishes and breathes life into, the kind that one knows all along will never come true, at least not in the shape that it has been imagined. He had kept that impossible thought alive in the rat-infested, water-logged trenches of Europe, through the devastating shriek and thud of shells, amidst the burning heat of distant desert sands. He had fought enemies he did not know he had; he had won and lost territory that was never, and would never be, his; he had saved, and been saved by, strangers. All that since he had been recruited while wrestling. Wrestling, ah yes.

He would never have learnt to wrestle if it had not been for his maternal uncle, his Ralla mama, taking him to Bhima Pehelwan, and that would not have happened if his father, Mehtab, had not taken him to Tibba, his late mother's home, in the first place. So many things were connected and one had to respect these connections, thought Kirpal. These were cosmic connections. One began to believe in them when one lived a door away from death for so long; the only thing you could rely on was your destiny, on what was written. Otherwise, men were just playthings of the gods.

It was just such an unexpected connection that had brought him here, to keep an eye on the two bulls that belonged to the farmer Kahan Singh. When the train that Kirpal had been travelling on could go no further since the tracks had been uprooted by protestors, the farmer had given him a ride in his bullock cart. For a day they had travelled together to the Baisakhi cattle fair, along with the two spare bulls that Kahan Singh needed to sell. But the fair had been shut down unexpectedly early at two in the afternoon and nobody had bought those bulls. Kahan Singh needed to go to meet some traders who owed him money for several months and Kirpal had offered to look after the bulls while he conducted his business. The bulls could graze or rest in the Bagh peacefully. There was nowhere for them to go; the place was enclosed by brick walls and the exits were too narrow or shut. Kirpal could keep an eye on the narrow passage that came in from Queen's Bazaar as he rested against the peepul tree. He would wait here for Kahan Singh; he owed him that much. Only after that would he head to the Golden Temple.

Slowly, the Bagh began to fill up with people. Evidently there was going to be a meeting. A picture had been put up on a wooden platform. Someone pointed it out as a portrait of Dr Kitchlew. A few boys were arranging drinking water for the crowd. Many young children were rushing around, excited to be

part of the activity. Hawkers and peddlers were setting up their cane baskets for an afternoon of business. Kirpal looked around at the crowd. It was obvious that many knew about the meeting and occupied spots as near the platform as they could. Many others, like him, just happened to be there. If there was some tamasha happening, then a lot of people liked to be part of it. There were some suspicious looking men too, asking questions, making notes, drifting away. That did not surprise him: informers and detectives in plain clothes were everywhere these days. Then, the speeches began. Kirpal could only hear snatches; the crowd had grown very large. Somebody was recalling the events of the tenth which had led to violence and killings; another man recited a poem. Yet another man started introducing resolutions. Then Kirpal heard the unmistakable drone of an aeroplane overhead.



Sucha stayed back in the shadows as General Dyer's column passed through Hall Bazaar after making the announcement. Then he continued quickly on his way to Kucha Peshawrian to the home of the young Vakil sahib, Gurnam Singh Gambhir, the limp from his bad right ankle scarcely noticeable. He slipped quickly through the lanes, sensing the presence of soldiers and avoiding them; it would not do to be detained on any pretext. What Bisheshwar, the Lala's son, had learnt by growing up in these lanes, Sucha had learnt by hard work during his few months with the Ghadar revolutionaries, those impassioned men who had come from America to sow rebellion against the British government.

In his kurta pocket were a few doses of powdered medicine rolled up in rectangular pieces of paper and a small corked glass bottle with a dark red liquid, all of which he had prepared himself. He had always been a fast learner and in the time that he had been with Dr Hardit Singh, he had learnt to grind and mix medicinal compounds with the same dexterity that he had

displayed in mixing chemicals for bombs four years earlier. He could stitch and bandage wounds with the same clean hand that he had shown in snipping wires and fixing charges. The doctor was happy with him; he was as good as any trained nurse. Largely confined to his home on account of his own weak health, the doctor found Sucha useful for other reasons too: the times were troubled, the talk of political reforms had faded, protest was in the air, and Sucha always had valuable political information. He kept his nose close to the ground and sensed coming events as if he could read the wind; his time with the Ghadar revolutionaries had not been wasted. Their conspiracy to overthrow the colonial masters may well have been betrayed and many of them were now in prison or had been sent to the gallows but Sucha, their faithful foot soldier, was still waiting for the revolution.

Three days ago, Sucha had seen with his own eyes how Gurnam had risked his life, rushing on a white horse between the unarmed crowd on the bridge and the police pickets. From that moment on, Gurnam was a fellow fighter in Sucha's revolution. When word had reached the doctor that the pleader was down with high fever, Sucha had quickly prepared the medicines that he was now carrying. He would hand them over to Bhagwan Singh, the vakil's old, loyal retainer who took care of the young man with the same devotion that he had given for years to Bishen Singh Gambhir, Gurnam's father. There was no one else in the house: the old man had died in Bhagwan's hands, very soon after his retirement as an inspector in the police, as if heartbroken by the separation from his uniform, the thana, the salutes; Gurnam's mother had died years ago after delivering a still-born baby girl, when Gurnam had been only five.



For three days Gurnam Singh Gambhir burnt with fever and the dreams came with a vengeance. Scalding dreams, flaming at the

edges, threatening to drown him in incendiary waves. At times, as he tossed and shivered, he knew they were dreams and he a helpless observer; at other times he was part of the horror. He dreamt of the big snake again, the snake that had haunted him for thirty years, whenever he was at his most vulnerable—like in the days after his father's death. In this dream, the shimmering black snake would go down a long lane, turning several times to look at him, accusing him of causing its untimely death. Gurnam would try to explain that he had not killed the snake, only pointed it out as it came out of an old crumbling mud brick wall and it had been someone else, someone with a long lathi who had killed it, and then the bigger boys of the lane had covered its shining body with old rags and set fire to it right there. But the words stuck in his throat and the effort to make himself heard woke him up, sweating.

Bhagwan Singh had not left his side. When the fever rose to a burning pitch, he sat by his bed, dipping a thick cloth in iced water, and placing it on Gurnam's forehead, then wiping his hands and feet with another cold cloth. Patiently, gently, the old man watched over him day and night, sleeping beside the cot on a mattress he had thrown on the floor, getting up if Gurnam so much as coughed or turned on his side.

On Baisakhi, too, the fever that had smouldered all night rose again at dawn. The bones of Gurnam's skull throbbed. He feared the touch of the cold compress on his forehead even as he knew it was good for him.

'Baisakhi today,' he heard Bhagwan say faintly, as if from a mile away. 'Strange Baisakhi...'

Then, in the half sleep, the dreams returned. The familiar dream born of a faint memory of his mother. Her hair open, freshly washed and oiled, and combed back, a wooden clip holding back the curls, a slight puff over the forehead. And the smile, warm and forgiving, understanding without a word being said, happy

despite the unfair life she had lived. He held on to that dream, not wanting her to go away into the dark void again.

When next he woke up, it was midday. A slight wind was stirring the long maroon curtain that hung in the door that opened into the inner quadrangle of the house. A sharp sun reflected off the grey cement floor outside; soon that floor would be too hot to step on with a naked foot.

He could hear voices, Bhagwan's and another. With the clarity that comes sometimes when we are most debilitated, Gurnam recognized that it was Sucha, the medical assistant at Dr Hardit Singh's clinic who had once been involved with the Ghadari babas. He could hear snatches of their conversation.

'Announcement...help this man...Ram Bagh...'



Hugh J. Porter, Esq., sat at his desk in Lahore, just thirty miles away from Amritsar. Usually, he had much time for the pleasant view from his office, particularly in the mornings. The sunlit lawn with its glorious beds of pansies and agapanthuses smiling benignly in the gentle breeze was a soothing sight. On the right was the classical portico to which the buggies and garis carrying visitors rode up. He had the advantage of seeing the visitors even before they were announced; he could then prepare his face and mind accordingly.

The mornings were also his favourite time to muse. On what had happened yesterday, or even on what had happened ten or twenty years earlier. The years between leaving Trinity College and reaching this station in Lahore where his name was inscribed in white paint on a long wooden board above his chair, the last in the list of illustrious men who had governed Punjab as Chief Secretary, always of course under the guidance of the Lieutenant Governor of the time.

Hugh J. Porter, Esq., Mar 7, 1919

His name appeared now on several such boards across Punjab. Sub-divisional Officer, Gurdaspur; Assistant Commissioner and Sub-judge, Rawalpindi; Deputy Commissioner, Montgomery; Deputy Commissioner, Rohtak...and now he was and he would only ever say it to himself—the master of all Punjab but for Sir Michael O’Dwyer, the Lieutenant Governor.

This Baisakhi morning there wasn’t much time for musing. Bad news was coming in from different parts of Punjab. In fact, there had been no good news since Gandhi had launched his charade of satyagraha. Passive resistance, Porter arched an imperial eyebrow at the thought: a unique way indeed to fight the Crown. Now India was a mess. Almost daily protests with speeches and resolutions against the Rowlatt Act and disturbances in Delhi, Lahore, and Amritsar.

Gandhi had been kept away from Punjab but not without considerable effort; the chief agitators, Satyapal and Kitchlew, had been deported to Dharamsala. That had brought about more agitation. In Amritsar, the military, under General Dyer, had taken over.

Porter took off his new glasses and cleaned them carefully with the soft cloth that he kept in the top drawer of his desk for this purpose. He did not like these glasses; the bad tidings had started with their arrival. Besides, they left a red ridge on his nose and gave him an annoyingly persistent headache if he wore them for too long. He didn’t want to change them immediately; that would appear an unseemly indulgence. But discard them he must; to his mind they had brought bad luck.



Three months before Baisakhi and soon after returning from Basra and Baghdad after his stint in the Great War, Udham Singh had slipped out of Sucha’s room with the banned copies of *Ghadar-ki-Goonj* hidden safely under his big brown shawl, with

the feeling that he was finally doing something worthwhile. All he had managed to do in the war was lowly carpentry work and odd mechanical jobs with the Pioneers. There had been no glory to be had in that, no medals to be won. Nothing that would make the Central Khalsa Orphanage proud of the Kamboj boy who had lived there since he was five. But distributing those speeches, poems, and fiery articles by the Ghadar leaders in Punjab's villages, even though their conspiracy to sow rebellion among Punjab's soldiers had fizzled out, was still work with a large enough objective: the freedom of the country. This could make him a revolutionary, enable him to live up to the orphanage's motto—*Be a Man. Make Your Way. Make Us Proud.*

But that assignment for the Ghadar had proved to be a solitary glimmer. Nothing more had turned up in the following weeks and once again he needed to get a job while he waited for his big chance; the two hundred rupees that he had from his days in the army would soon run out. Odd jobs at the Lahore railway junction kept him going for a while but the work was not steady—a couple of weeks at a time—and the wages were low. The feeling that had enveloped him in Basra was getting to him again—he was wasting his time, frittering away his life. If he had to achieve something big, then this was not the way. Daily, he tried to hold on to the conviction that something would turn up, something had to turn up.

A small signboard on the Mall Road in Lahore intrigued him. 'Uganda Railway Company' it said in black painted letters on a pale green background. An arrow below pointed towards an office up a short flight of wooden stairs.

An Anglo-Indian man with jet black hair brushed back, and a clipped moustache, sat at a small desk. The small wooden nameplate on his desk said: P. H. Andrews. He gave Udham Singh one long, appraising look.

‘Job?’

‘Yes,’ Udham Singh replied. ‘But not coolie. Carpenter, other railway work. Army experience.’

Mr Andrews asked him a few desultory questions.

‘Where are you from?’

‘I was born in Sunam, small town about a hundred miles away. I’ve grown up in Amritsar.’

Mr Andrews was not interested in details. He had already made up his mind; he wasn’t going to miss a chance of hiring a strong, young man with army experience for the Uganda railway.

‘You can come and sign the papers tomorrow. You have to work with us at least three years. Salary is good, very good—two hundred and forty rupees every month—you won’t get that here even if you become a superintendent. A place to sleep, food allowance also. We can pay for your ticket but then no salary for three months. Better you pay. For the rest, it’s Africa.’ Mr Andrews ended with a shrug of one shoulder.

Udham knew what that shrug meant—Africa: jungle, wild animals, disease, and very hard work. You had to be tough to survive. Udham grabbed the offer. For him it was more than a job—it was a way out into the world, where destiny might have other plans for him. A month later, he had drawn his first salary from the Uganda Railway Company and sent much of it for safekeeping to Jiwa, a relative in Sunam. But mere distance would not save this dark-eyed gypsy spirit from the pain of that Baisakhi in Amritsar. And it would take a lifetime to discharge its bloody burden.