

One

Ashok sat back, letting himself go limp against the cushioning. He breathed slowly and rhythmically for a few minutes, until his mind and body began to partake of a smoother equilibrium, a more unhurried confrontation. He tried inwardly to stand aside, to see himself as if he were a complete stranger, to watch his thoughts ebb and flow, arise and subside. After a while he began framing the question “Who am I?”, seeking to turn the searchlight of his thoughts inwards, to probe the depths of his being and discover the true centre of his consciousness. This was an exercise Swamiji had taught him several years ago, and

it always gave Ashok a deepened inner poise, a curiously energizing detachment that helped him face with greater confidence, the rush and bustle of life. Somehow, an air journey deepened his inner awareness. It was as if, in the clear atmosphere high above the humdrum of daily living, he was able to see life in a more integrated perspective and come closer to that elusive realm of heightened consciousness that so far he had only been able vaguely to perceive in dreams and fragmentary recollections of early childhood.

The drone of the jet engines was soporific and reassuring. The plane was almost full except for two seats in the extreme rear, and the passengers included several foreigners – mostly Americans, guessed Ashok, from their colourful bush-shirts and trademark cameras slung over their shoulders.

Two little blond boys, about seven years old and ridiculously alike, occupied the seats across the aisle from Ashok. They kept getting up and whispering to a young couple – evidently their parents – seated in front of them. Ashok's seat was next to the window, and to his left was a small, dark, bespectacled man who was already absorbed in a

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paperback. Ashok glanced obliquely at the title, and gave a little start when he saw that it was *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. He remembered that at school twenty years ago he and Ramesh had read it together but in secret, because it was an accepted principle that whoever read that book would surely be the most unpopular boy of the term. Ashok pulled a book of his own out of his briefcase – *The Ochre Robe*, written by an Austrian who had become a Hindu monk. The publishers had cleverly splashed a close-up of the robe on the cover, so that the book itself was a striking shade of ochre. He opened it to where he had left off, but Dale Carnegie had revived memories of long ago, making it impossible for him to concentrate on the book in his hands. His school days came flashing back into Ashok's mind, the bittersweet recollections of a time when joy and sorrow wove a strange tapestry in his life. Above all, and still painful though two decades had elapsed, was the memory of Ramesh.

On the opening day at school, when the new boys were shivering with homesickness and apprehension, they had met for the first time. He still recalled vividly that first assembly, the Headmaster tall and forbidding, making a stentorian speech welcoming all the new boys to the

“family of the school”, “school” drawn out so that it acquired a distinctly sinister connotation.

When the Headmaster strode in and ascended the platform he had looked so overwhelming that at least one new boy had failed to suppress a little gasp, which sent a titter of amusement through the assembly hall. Then the names of the new boys were read out, and as each name was called the boy had to step forward. It was, of course, sheer torture, but well-intentioned, the idea being that each boy was individually introduced and accepted as part of the corporate life of school. “Number thirty-six, Ashok Singh, Ashok House.” Ashok had stepped forward to a chorus of giggles. “Number thirty-seven, Ramesh Kapur, Ashok House.”

From that inaugural day at school they became fast friends. They went through the usual first-term ragging and bullying together, deriving comfort from the fact that their misery was shared. They began the painful but exhilarating process of becoming part of a vitally pulsating institution, with its high academic standards and intense preoccupation with sports and physical fitness. Gradually they shed their shyness along with their body-fat, became adjusted to their new surroundings and began talking like

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other schoolboys.

Despite the strict outward uniformity in dress and manner of speech, each boy soon began to develop his own distinctive personality. Ramesh grew to be a fine sportsman; even as a junior he made the school first eleven in hockey and was one of the fastest sprinters in his house. He also boxed for the school, swam like a fish, ran cross-country with credit and excelled in the gymnasium. His studies, however, were average, and he had some difficulty in getting through his examinations at the end of term.

Ashok was almost exactly the reverse. Introspective by nature, and somewhat averse to the rough and tumble of the sports ground. More cerebral than physical, from the very beginning he was a good scholar. His form-master looked upon him as a model student, and his results seldom fell below the third or fourth place in class. Sports and P.T. he had to do, no one in this school could possibly avoid them, but it was always with a measure of physical shrinking, almost revulsion. It was not that he was a coward; in fact, when pressed he could give evidence of unusual courage. It was just that temperamentally he was much happier browsing in the library or in the Music School. Music was his second love, his first being books,

and he sang and played the flute with considerable ability.

This apparent difference between him and Ramesh only made their friendship stronger and more complete. Ashok would help Ramesh with his homework, specially sums and English essays, while Ramesh would instruct Ashok in the finer points of swimming and running. "Hit the pool, Ashok, to discover yourself," Ramesh said. Their personalities dovetailed perfectly, and as they grew older their friendship steadily grew deeper. Ashok used to be an invariable spectator whenever Ramesh was performing in an athletics or sports event, while Ramesh never missed the debating society when Ashok was speaking, or a concert in which he participated. They spent as much time together as they could manage, and found in each other's company a joy that neither experienced with anyone else.

Although Ramesh was a Punjabi, his father, a senior officer of the Indian Civil Service, was for several years posted at Calcutta and it was there that he went during his holidays. Ashok's father had been in the army, and as his postings were erratic Ashok was never sure where he would have to spend his holidays. His home was in Pradhanpur, a small town in the foothills of the Himalayas, picturesquely

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situated amid low mountains rising in the distant North into snow-covered peaks. Once, when his father happened to be home on leave during his holidays, Ashok brought Ramesh to spend a fortnight there. Those days had been the happiest in Ashok's life. He and Ramesh would spend hours roaming the countryside around Pradhanpur, exploring the ravines and nullahs, the river and its hidden pools where the fighting mahseer grew fat and heavy. They would scramble up to one of Ashok's favourite haunts, a pool with a waterfall almost a hundred feet high which was believed to be haunted and therefore left severely alone by the nearby villagers. There the two would sit, gazing at the water cascading over the edge and falling with abandon into the deep green pool below, causing a million glittering diamonds to fly up into the air. They had an almost psychic bond of understanding which made conversation unnecessary. Once, only once, as they were seated near the pool they saw a huge fish jump right out of the water, hang for a moment with its glistening body magically suspended in mid-air, and then fall back with a mighty splash into the pool. They sat enraptured, the happiness welling through their bodies in great surges.

It was in their fifth year at school, just two terms before

they were due to take the school leaving examination, that their idyllic friendship came to a sudden, crushing end. Ramesh, always the more extroverted and adventurous of the two, was occasionally in the habit of breaking bounds from school in order to see a movie or have a really good tuck in one of the restaurants in town. This was a hazardous undertaking, as apprehension meant strict punishment which could amount even to expulsion. Though he tried often, Ramesh was never able to persuade Ashok to accompany him on these escapades. Despite their deep friendship, Ashok felt that the compensations of breaking bounds were not sufficient to justify the risk involved.

On this occasion Ramesh again urged him to come, but he declined. Ramesh then persuaded another roommate – Aftab – to accompany him. The fourth boy in the room was Anil, a quiet, inscrutable chap who secretly hero-worshipped Ramesh and was intensely jealous of his friendship with Ashok.

Ashok had remarked, half in jest, “Look out, Ramesh, you’re bound to get caught one of these days.”

Ramesh had laughed in his carefree, debonair way.

Lights-out was at eight-thirty, and the last show of the

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cinema began an hour later. As usual Ramesh waited for fifteen minutes. Then he and Aftab crept out of bed, put on their “home” clothes used for Saturday night dinners, and slipped out of the window into the darkness. Stealthily they made their way to the back of the house, but just as the main road came in sight they froze in horror as the blinding beam of a powerful torch burst on their faces and Mr. Dutta, the housemaster, clamped a firm hand on Ramesh’s shoulder. As he did so, he said, “So that note was correct after all, we caught both of you red-handed.”

So thin is the dividing line between love and hate that in a flash of humiliation and anger Ramesh assumed that Ashok must have written the note to the Headmaster. His unreasoning anger knew no limits, and his faculty for rational thought went into complete suspension. Mr. Dutta told both boys sharply to go back to their room. “See me at nine-thirty tomorrow morning,” he barked.

In a furious temper Ramesh and Aftab came back to their room. Anil was asleep – or so it seemed – but Ashok was awake. “What happened,” he said, “back so soon!”

Hearing his voice Ramesh’s self-control completely

cracked. He leapt onto Ashok's bed, pulled him up and slapped him sharply on either cheek.

"You ... You," he hissed. "You dirty, mean"

For a long moment Ashok was too stunned to speak.

Then he burst into tears and buried his face in his pillow. He did not say anything; what was there to say when his dearest friend had accused him of a treacherous betrayal? Ramesh flung himself into his own bed saying, "If you say a single word I'll thrash the guts out of you."

Ashok slept fitfully that night. The next morning he had high fever and was delirious. He was removed to the school infirmary where he was confined for several days. Not once did Ramesh come to see him. Ashok was so utterly miserable that he wrote a long and passionate letter to his father asking to be withdrawn from school. Col. Kripal Singh had just been posted to Delhi, where he had been given family accommodation after many years, and the prospect of having his only child with him was a tempting one. He wired to the Headmaster requesting that Ashok be allowed to come. The Headmaster had a long chat with Ashok in the hospital. Behind his forbidding exterior, he

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was a kind and understanding man, and finding Ashok adamant, he finally agreed to discharge him. Within a week Ashok had left the school and reached Delhi.

As for Ramesh, he had been so angry and hurt by what he considered his friend's betrayal that he felt a morbid satisfaction when Ashok was hauled off to sickbed. The housemaster had called him and Aftab to his office the next morning, and given them the severest tongue-lashing they had ever received. In view of Ramesh's athletic record and the fact that it was his first offence, he said, he was being lenient and would not expel him, but he gave him a variety of other punishments including denial of the Saturday night cinema and Tuesday tuckshop for the rest of the term.

When Ramesh learnt that Ashok had left school it confirmed his suspicion, and he assumed that his estranged friend was too scared to face him. It was only at the end of that term when he went to say goodbye to the housemaster that something prompted him to say, "Sir, now that it is all over, could I know what exactly was written in that note by which you caught us breaking bounds?" Dutta began to tell him, then stopped and said, "Wait, I still have the note."

He opened a drawer in his desk, rummaged around and then straightened up.

“Here it is, read it.”

The moment Ramesh saw it a shock went through his whole frame and the blood drained from his face.

“What’s the matter Ramesh, are you feeling unwell?”

“N-no, Sir,” said Ramesh, “except that this is not Ashok’s handwriting.”

“Of course it isn’t,” said the housemaster. “How could you ever think that your best friend would squeal on you? This note was from Anil.”

Ramesh’s head was whirling. His eyes filled with tears, and after mumbling a hurried excuse he rushed out of the housemaster’s office and into his room. Anil was no longer there, having left a day earlier on some excuse.

Ramesh threw himself on Ashok’s bed which had remained vacant since his friend had left at midterm. Great sobs racked his body as he broke under the weight of sorrow and repentance. The face of Ashok rose before his eyes, the thousand and one images of his friend in many moods and places. Of them two were unforgettable: the first when the great fish had leaped at the waterfall and they had locked at each other with wonder and inexpressible joy, the second

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when he had slapped Ashok that night and his friend had stared at him with an uncomprehending horror and shock which would now always haunt him.

When at last he recovered enough composure to get up he rushed straight to the Headmaster's house. Not finding him there he went to the school office and got Ashok's address. At once he sat down and wrote a long letter full of remorse and tenderness, begging to be forgiven for his ghastly mistake.

He wrote again and again from home, but Ashok's father took care to see that no letter reached him. Ashok thought that Ramesh was still angry, while Ramesh assumed that his friend was too hurt and offended to reply.

The voice of the pilot over the loudspeaker snapped Ashok out of his reverie. To his own surprise his eyes were moist, and he blew his nose before looking out of the window at the great Bhakra Dam clearly visible in the foothills. He had been there once while it was being built, and recalled being overwhelmed by the immensity of one of the world's great engineering feats. But from the air it looked tiny and insignificant, the great dam a mere pebble against the sweep of nature's grandeur. He decided to go to the

lavatory. Pushing his book into the pocket of the seat in front he got up and squeezed past the popularity seeker. As he turned down the aisle he tripped over a toy truck that one of the twins had put there, and stumbled straight into the arms of a man who was just coming up the aisle from the lavatory.

“Steady there,” the man said.

Ashok looked up apologetically, then stood rooted to the spot. The man before him was Ramesh.