THE Swamp
By A.K. Srikumar

Children's Book Trust, New Delhi
The Swamp won Second Prize in the category Fiction (above 12 years) in the Competition for Writers of Children’s Books organized by Children’s Book Trust. The other titles by the author published by CBT are Wolf!, Hunt For The Golden Langur, Kuttan, The Shami Tree, Malana, The Fiery Cross, Operation Polo, Stories From Ithihyamala—Fables Of Kerala and biographies ‘Dayanand Saraswati’ and ‘Mother Teresa’ in Remembering Our Leaders series.
"Gosaba? Isn't that the same place where Sir David Hamilton put up a settlement?"

"You do seem to know a lot about the Sundarbans, my child?" said Bharti's uncle approvingly. "More than even many of the natives do."

"You bet she does," beamed Sumanta Mukherjea and winked at his daughter, "She spent hours and hours poring over books at the library back home in Washington. Didn't you, Bubu?"

"But of course Papa!" she exclaimed, "that was the least I could do. But it is so little compared to what Kaka (Uncle) knows and Moloy...or even Sanjib for that matter."

"That is hardly to be wondered at, girl. They live here. Your Kaka has spent a lifetime roaming these waters and forests, eh Kanti?"

"Quite, Sumu, quite," nodded Bharti's uncle. "Haifa lifetime is more like it. I should
like to think that I'll live to be a hundred!"
"Of course you will, Kaka!" Bharti hugged her uncle.
"You run along now, girl," said Sumanta, giving his daughter a paternal shove, "We men have important matters to talk about."
"That's not fair, Papa! Do you mean to say children have only frivolous things to keep them busy?"
"Not at all, my child!" Kanti Kaka mollified his niece, "children are the future of mankind. Nothing is more important than what they feel and think about. That is not what your father meant, I'm sure?"
"Quite, quite. All I meant was...leave us alone for a while, will you, child? Go find Moloy. He will have more interesting subjects to engage you than we can ever think of, I have no doubt."
"I was going anyway!" retorted Bharti, tossing her shoulder-length hair saucily. "But remember your promise, Kanti Kaka? You're going to take us fishing in the Sunderbans?"
"A promise is a promise," and her uncle and laughed.
"Are you serious, Dada (elder brother)?" queried Sumanta when his daughter had marched out of sight. "You yourself said the swamp is a dangerous place."
"That it is. But dare I refuse my dear little
niece? I have not seen her since she was two months old—an infant. How she has changed! She walks and talks like an American."

"She is an American citizen."

"Who would have believed that twenty years ago? That Syamal Mukherjea’s grandchild would grow up in a foreign country...in a strange land thousands of miles away?"

"I wouldn’t have thought it possible myself, Dada, twenty years ago when I first went to the States. Four or five years. That was all. I was certain at the time that I would return. But one thing led to another and... Bharti’s mother, Romola, had grown up there, you know? She never would have been able to fit into this country."

"You can’t blame her, Sumu. To each his own."

"She did so want to come over this time. But the clinic—it is a great responsibility, Dada. Someone had to stay back."

"Never despair, ‘Bonbibi’ will find a way."

"Bonbibi?" Sumanta’s eyes widened behind his dark glasses. He was barely able to suppress his excitement, "Does one still hear those stories? The goddess of the forests..."

"Stories? They’re not stories. We cannot do without Her, my boy. Bonbibi is the mother, the protector of these jungles and swamps, of our people and our ways. We have no one else to turn to..."
"Oh, of course! I know."

"How little these forests have changed. Alas! Life goes on as it always has, for the people of Raidighi. Only...it is a bit harder now, more of a struggle.

"It sounds incredible, Dada. The world has gone on. Science and technology have changed everything, even the way people live and think round the world. But this place..."

"Not here, Sumu!" Kanti Mukherjea sighed, "It is always the same here. The sun, the moon, the forests and the fight for survival. Nothing changes. The tide rises and ebbs as it has for thousands of years. Sometimes 'Dakhin Roy' pounces. And the danger...there is always the danger. We live from moment to moment, at Bonbibli's pleasure."

"When will our people change, Dada? It is time we stopped being so fatalistic, don't you think? Look at me. Do you see the same Sumanta who left Raidighi two decades ago? Haven't I changed? If I have, why can't things be different here? More progressive, more prosperous..."

"You have changed...certainly you have," Kanti placed one hand upon his younger brother's shoulder and looked indulgently into his eyes, "In some ways you are different, Sumu. But here... You cannot understand, brother. You have not lived here."

"I have lived here, too!"
"Not in the way that we have survived. Fighting the elements...the sharks...the tigers... the 'jal dasyus'..."

The older man's eyes wandered wistfully out over the horizon, towards the weakening flame of a waning sun as it lit up the evening sky and the serene waters of the estuary.

'Dasyus? Jal dasyus?' wondered Sumanta, "What are you talking about?"

"Oh, it is nothing, Sumu," shrugged his brother, squeezing one shoulder affectionately, "Don't bother about these matters. You have come back after so long...I do not want to burden you with our problems."

"Why do you say that, Dada? I am no tourist, after all. I haven't come here only to carry back some pretty pictures back in my camera. This is my home also, remember? Everything that concerns you interests me as well."

"My good brother. I would expect no less from you, Sumu. At heart you are still the same. If only times were better. Come, let us get back. I had promised to meet Rash Behari at six this evening."

As they conversed the two men had wandered away from the small settlement, in the direction of the salt flats that spelt, in some ways, the edge of civilization. Raidighi is, in a manner of speaking, the last post. Beyond lies the four thousand and more
square kilometres of alluvial plain, reticulated by the waters of the River Ganga and the Brahmaputra finding their way into the Bay of Bengal.

"I am tired of this game!" declared Bharti, collapsing on her haunches in mock exhaustion, "You always win, Moloy!"

"I am sorry. I'll let you win next time." Two rows of large, healthy teeth shone as Moloy grinned at his cousin, "That's a promise."

"Forget it, mate. I agree with Didi," Sanjib nodded, "I have a better proposition. Let us go hunting crabs on the beach. That is something I know better than any child in Raidighi, right?"

"Naturally, since you have nothing better to do," chuckled Moloy and hopped out of reach of Sanjib's swinging crutch. As the support arched through thin air, missing its intended victim, its owner lost his balance and fell in a heap.

"Serves you right! Serves you right!" clapped Moloy, enjoying his friend's discomfiture.

"Shut up, Moloy!" scolded Bharti, helping their fallen comrade back on his one leg and crutch, "How can you be so cruel?"

"Hear that? What have I done?" complained Moloy, "Didn't you see him try to hit me?"

"You deserved it. Stop teasing him. And I like Sanjib's idea, anyway. I think that will
be a wonderful game. Hunting crabs! I've never done that before..."

"Oh, really, Didi?" Sanjib placed one arm around her shoulders, "Is that so? You mean no one hunts crabs in that place where you live...whatsitsname?"

"Wasingon!" announced Moloy.

"No. W-a-s-h-i-n-g-t-o-n. W-a-s-h-i-n-g-t-o-n. There are no crabs in Washington, Sanjib. Only people..."

"And motor cars, of course," supplied Moloy, knowingly, "Lots of them, eh?"

"How do you know?" challenged Sanjib.

"I've been around, you know."

"Like hell you have! He's a liar, Didi. He's never been out of Raidighi!"

"Speak for yourself, you one-legged-wastrel! I have, too."

"Stop talking like that, Moloy!" chided the girl, "That is no way to talk to someone who has a disability. How would you feel if you were in his place?"

"But everyone calls him that, Didi."

"Don't mind him, Didi," Sanjib shook his head with a wry smile, "he's right, you know. Almost all of Raidighi knows me by that name. I am the one-legged-wastrel."

"But that's awful! It's no fault of yours."

"I've got used to it, now. So don't let it bother you."

"Still..."
She looked wonderingly at the boy. He was almost a head shorter than her. For all his handicap, she had not met a more cheerful child than Sanjib. He was always making them laugh with his antics and his new, wonderful ideas...like this one about hunting crabs. 'Imagine,' she said to herself.../crabs!' "Can I ask you a question, Sanjib? If you don't mind?"
"Of course you may, Didi. Go right ahead and ask."
'How...how did you...?' her eyes dwelt apprehensively on the boy's leg amputated below the knee, and somehow she was tongue-tied.
"How did I lose this, right?" Sanjib's eyes twinkled, almost in anticipation, as he patted the tell-tale stump, "It was a 'kamot', Didi. He was hungry, so there!"
"Ka-mot? What on earth is that?"
"Kamot? Haven't you heard of them? Ever?" Bharti shook her head.
"They are fish. This big," Sanjib gestured with his arms, stretching them wide apart, then bared his glistening teeth, "And they have hundreds of teeth...awfully sharp, too. Don't you have kamot where you live, Didi?"
"There are only people and cars where Didi lives, stupid!" interrupted Moloy with a supercilious look, "Was-ing-ton...right, Didi?"
"Not quite, Moloy. But wait...are you talking
about sharks? Big fish? With a fin here and one here? Long snout and swims like that?" she imitated the sideways sinuous movement of the cetaceans.

The boys nodded eagerly at her imitation of the fish.

"I think you're talking about sharks. Of course I've seen one, but inside a glass cage. It's called an aquarium...they keep fish there. In glass boxes."

"What a strange place!" Moloy shook his head in bewilderment, "Fish ought to be in the sea."

"If Didi says so, it must be so."

"But how on earth did you get attacked by a... a ka-mot?"

"That's what happens when you try to hug and kiss a kamot, huh?" sniggered Moloy and hurried out of reach before his crony could even think of retaliating physically.

"I'd gone fishing once. Long ago. And I fell into the sea. That's what they told me, anyway. I don't remember anything now. I must have been quite small at the time."

"You're eighty now, what?"

"You! I'll ..."

"Stop scrapping, you two!" intervened the girl, "Come on, guys. Let us go look for the crabs that you promised. Sanjib, where do we start?"

"Just follow me, folks!"
Sanjib swivelled expertly on his crutch and hurried off, so fast that the others could barely keep up with him.

The expedition

Sunrise over the Sundarbans, like elsewhere, means the chirping of early risers, the night crawlers' desperate and silent dash for cover, the roseate glow on the horizon and fresh, invigorating air.

But this daybreak was no usual event in Raidighi. Not, at least, for Bharti and Moloy. They were all excitement. For this morning would see the launching of Kanti Kaka's newly acquired trawler.

A trawler might be an inaccurate description for the 'Sonkali', however. It was closer to being a large fishing boat fitted with a motor. The sickly sweet smell of fresh paint was a heady fragrance for the crew—the crew being two of Kanti Kaka's assistants—Kaka himself and the children.

"What is that for, Kaka?" wondered Bharti as her uncle hauled a long barrelled gun into the boat. It was an ancient weapon, from outward appearances probably more useful for intimidation than any real violence. "Are you going to shoot the kamot?"

"Oh, no, child!" her uncle shook his head,
"They are straightforward fellows, the kamot. In any case our nets are strong enough even for them."

"What do we need the gun for, then?"

"It's more of a habit, really. I always carry this when we go out into the swamp."

Kanti Mukherjea obviously did not want to discuss the matter further. But Bharti was unconvinced. She had distinctly sensed the apprehension in her uncle's words, the way he had deliberately avoided meeting her eyes while answering the question. Casting a quick glance at Moloy almost confirmed her suspicion. Something akin to concern had crossed his eyes.

But then her cousin grinned and gesticulated towards the lanes and houses of Raidighi. "I wonder where Sanjib has got to, now. He ought to have been here. Always loitering, that one-legged..."

"Uh-oh!" interrupted Bharti, "not that again. Don't talk like that of him."

"Aw, all right, Didi," shrugged the boy, "But he can be a bit of a pain sometimes, with his freewheeling ways."

"All aboard!" called Kanti Kaka, interrupting their conversation, "Come on in, children. We're all set to go."

"But what about Sanjib?" gestured Bharti, "We had promised to take him along, Kaka."

"That boy! There's no telling about him.
Neither here nor there. Maybe Rash Behari has sent him away on some errand. The sun is up already. We can't wait any longer. Here, girl. Take my hand."

As her uncle hauled the reluctant girl into the boat, Bharti continued to glance in the direction of the village. There was no sign of Sanjib.

"Serves him right," said Moloy, "He can't say we did not wait for him."

Moloy was busy helping his father's assistants with their preparations. Presently, one of them took the wheel and the other the rudder.

"All aboard!" yelled Kaka as he started the motor, "Look to your posts, fellers!"

The engine whined, stuttered, then stopped. There was absolute silence on the boat.

"What's the matter, Papa?" called Moloy anxiously and all the crew, with the exception of Bharti, gathered about the captain. The girl was gazing towards the ramshackle huts of Raidighi, still hopeful.

"Dammit!" cursed Kanti Kaka, "I've paid ten thousand rupees for this boat. Not a penny less. And all of it borrowed from that leech Rash Behari. If this doesn't run..."

"Wait a minute, Kaka," said one of his assistants, bending over to peer closely at the controls of the engine.

"What's wrong, Gayen?"
"Try again."
Kanti did so. The engine sputtered again, then rumbled into life.
"Yay!" shouted Moloy jubilantly as smiles spread all around and the motor settled into a steady rhythm. "We're off..."
"Wait! There he is!"
This time it was Bharti's voice that punctured the morning. She was pointing excitedly with one hand while the other waved at the solitary figure hurrying towards the boat, one whole leg and his swinging crutch propelling him rapidly down the mud flat.
"Sanjib!" called Moloy, "There you are, at last! Come on over, slow coach! Wait a minute, Gayen..."
"Hurry up, boy!" snapped Kaka, "We can't wait here all day!"
"What kept you, eh?" enquired Moloy of his perspiring crony when the latter was safely aboard Kanti Mukherjea's spanking new boat on its way into the still, glistening waters of the estuary.
"Oh...thought I'd never make it, guys," gasped Sanjib, wiping sweat off his brows and digging into the back pocket of the frayed trousers that he wore under his stitched up lungi.
"You're never short of excuses, to be sure."
"Here, this is what delayed me!" Sanjib held
out a contraption that he had extracted from his trouser pocket. "I had misplaced it. What a time to find it missing!"

"Hey, what's this?" Moloy was inspecting the object which he had taken out of his friend's palm, turning it over and over curiously, "A knife, is it? But what about this...this..."

As Moloy spoke, he managed to pry open several folded portions of the elegantly crafted instrument. A knife, a corkscrew, a saw, and many more that he could not comprehend.

"Here, let me see that," Bharti snatched it out of Moloy's fingers. One white cross was embossed on either side of the handle. "Ah, ha! Would you believe this? This is a Swiss army knife, fellas. Don't you know?"

"Swi...Swi...? What are you talking about, Didi?"

"A Swiss Army..." Bharti started to explain, then realized how difficult it would be to explain the origin and pedigree of the instrument to these simple boys. "Where on earth did you get hold of this, Sanjib?"

"Stole it, no doubt!" mocked Moloy and ducked as his friend threw a punch at him.

"Someone gave it to me, Didi. He was a white man, a foreigner. He came from a place called Oorop...Oorop... that's where he said he lived. He gifted this to me."

"Oh, Europe?" nodded the girl, "This is a
wonderful gift he gave you, Sanjib. Do you know how useful this is?"

"It is? I really don't know. I've never used it, in fact. I keep it clean and dry, tucked safely inside my pillow. I only take it out when I have to go out on important missions...like today."

"What good will it do you on a fishing expedition, dummy?" taunted Moloy, "Are you planning to spear a kamot with that little knife of yours?"

"Don't mock, Moloy!" scolded Bharti, "You know nothing about it. Here, Sanjib, keep this safe. You never know when it might come in handy."

Sanjib looked gratefully at the girl, then caressed his possession lovingly and tucked it back into the pocket.

As the children chatted, the Sonkali chugged placidly through the still, translucent waters of the delta. They had left Raidighi far behind. Nothing but the swamp was visible as far as their eyes could roam in any direction. Only the clumps of vegetation dotting the endless expanse of water provided any visual relief. The tide was in and most of the mud flats dotting the estuary were submerged in the salt waters, leaving only tall reeds—'Sundri' to the natives—afloat to stand guard over the mysteries of the swamp.

"What is that?" exclaimed Bharti as the
Outlines of a landmass loomed off to their left, on the far horizon, "I can almost see land there. Is that an island, Kaka?"

"There are dozens in these waters, child. You will see many more before the day is out."

"Who lives on those islands? Are they inhabited at all?"

"Deer and monkeys, mostly. And the wild cats who feed on them, naturally."

"Wildlife!" exclaimed the girl, her features registering surprise and delight. "Can't we visit any of those islands, Kaka?"

"Only the woodcutters and honey collectors go into the forests, Didi!" explained Moloy, "And even they are scared."

"Sissies!" scoffed Sanjib, "I've been in the jungle...lots of times. It's no big deal."

"Good for you that you didn't run into Dakhin Roy," called Gayen from the wheel, "You wouldn't be so cocky if you had."

"More likely he would be his lunch!" guffawed Bidhu, the rudder man.

"Yes, tell us about Dakhin Roy, Kaka," urged Moloy, "You know so many stories about him."

"Cut the motor, Gayen!" ordered Kanti Kaka, gesturing towards the dark waters surrounding the Sonkali, "We'll start laying the nets here. This seems as good a place as any. Get the nets out."

"Who's Dakhin Roy?" queried Bharti of her
uncle when he had finished supervising the laying of the fishing nets.

"He is the Lord of the Sunderbans. As Bonbibi is its presiding deity. All life in these forests revolves around him. In other places he is known as 'sher' or 'bagh'. Here, in the land of the Sundri, he is Dakhin Roy.

"The Royal Bengal Tiger!"

"What did you say, Didi?" Sanjib looked admiringly at the girl, "How do you know about Dakhin Roy?"

"Oh, no! The whole world knows about him, Sanjib. There is a worldwide project to save the tiger. Don't you know? Haven't you heard of 'Project Tiger'?"

"They talk of saving Dakhin Roy," chuckled Gayen, "But who will save them from his wrath? They are fools ..."

"Shut up, Gayen!" Kaka interrupted, "This little girl is better informed than most of us. She is quite right, too. There is danger to these forests...the realm of Dakhin Roy is threatened by the greed of men."

The conversation meandered to other topics. As the sun rose higher into the cloudless sky and a gentle breeze began to waft across the water, the children grew somnolent.

Soon the first catch was hauled in and Sonkali went further on its maiden quest. After they had tucked into the lunch of rice,
fish and vegetable that Moloy's mother had provided for the adventurers, Bharti and her cousin dozed off. Only Sanjib stayed awake, alert as ever, his eyes scouring the waters for he knew not what.

"That's that, boys!" When Kanti Kaka's words announced the conclusion of fishing for the day, the afternoon was far advanced. Moloy and Bharti were fast asleep.

"Isn't it time to wake the sleeping beauties?" wondered Bidhu, taking the rudder.

"No, let them be," said Kanti Kaka, "They're children. Let them rest."

It was Sanjib who spotted the intruders first. He had been leaning against the bow of the trawler, humming a fisherman's ditty to himself.

"Look! Over there!" The boy was ramrod straight in an instant, his whole body tense with anticipation.

"What's up, lad?"

"Out there, Kaka! Can't you see them?"

"Oh, yes!" echoed Gayen, "It's a trawler. And they're following us."

"Chasing looks more like it!"

The boat approaching the Sonkali from off was indeed a trawler. But it was fast, much swifter than the Sonkali. That much became evident in the next few moments as the small outlines of the boat grew rapidly larger.
"Who are they?" called Kaka, hurrying up to Sanjib's side. "Can you figure out? I wonder what they want?"

"They're armed!" was Bidhu's warning shout, "I can see ..."

His words were interrupted by a sudden explosion. A bullet whizzed past the Sonkali, even as the gunshot reverberated between the sky and the still waters.

"They're firing at us, Kaka!"

"Dasyusl" yelled Kanti Kaka, rushing towards the motor, "Hurry! Can't this thing go any faster?"

"They're gaining on us, Kaka. That boat is much too fast for us."

"We must make a run for it...somehow..."

"Go...go...go!" shouted Sanjib, in his excitement losing hold of his crutch and collapsing in a tangled heap over the sleeping children.

"Wha...what's the matter?" groaned Moloy as he extricated himself from his friend's limbs.

"We're being attacked!" Sanjib shouted into his ear.

"Stop yelling like that, you idiot! There, you've woken up Didi too ..."

Bharti sat up, rubbing her sleep-laden eyes. A second gunshot rang out and her eyes flew wide open.

"We're done for!" screamed Bidhu and flung
himself headlong into the bottom of the boat. In fact the bullet had only sliced the air close to his head.

"They'll kill us all, Kaka! We had better stop," Gayen urged.

"Never!"

The next bullet caught Gayen in the back. He gasped and slumped over the wheel sending it spinning and the Sonkali careening wildly off to one side.

"Gayen! They have got Gayen!"

**Pirates!**

"Drop your weapons!"

The barked order was almost superfluous. The only potential 'weapons' on board the Sonkali were Sanjib's crutch, a cleaver and Kanti Kaka's old musket. Sanjib was too preoccupied, trying to hold himself erect in the tossing, swaying boat to even dream of using his artificial support as a defensive weapon. The cleaver, used for slicing fish in normal times, lay under a pile of fish—the day's catch.

As for Kanti Mukherjea's musket, the less said the better. Bharti's uncle had not actually fired the weapon in a long, long while. The results of such an attempt were, therefore, open to speculation. In any case
the assailants gave him no opportunity to try. Before the occupants of the Sonkali could even begin to formulate any kind of defensive strategy, the trawler was upon them. The Sonkali and the larger trawler bobbed gently in the water, cheek by jowl, their engines silent. Some of the unwelcome guests had jumped into the fishing boat.

The attackers were all armed. Large, black kerchiefs hid their identities.

"Don't anyone get any brave ideas!" growled a man with bloodshot eyes.

His bearing said he was the leader. He strode towards Kanti Kaka, realizing who was master of the vessel. The barrel of his automatic rifle jabbed into Kanti's midriff, underlining the threat.

"Who are you?" demanded Kanti, "And what do you want from us?"

"Well! Well! Well! What have we here?" the ruffian ignored the question. Simultaneously his eyes took in all the occupants of the Sonkali in one glance. "An extraordinary catch, I must say!"

"What do you want?" Kanti Kaka tried to keep his voice steady to exhibit a confidence he did not feel.

"Want? Ah! well, now...let's see. What is there on this boat?"

"There's the catch!" snapped Kanti, pointing to the not inconsiderable booty which the
Sonkali's nets had brought in that day. "It's worth a few thousands. Take it all and go!"

"Oh, no! Not so fast!" the masked man shook his head, "What is a bit offish between friends? Actually we weren't looking for only fish today. Look at this...you, you and you..."

The bandit jabbed a finger at the three children. They were all standing silent, riveted by the unfolding drama.

"I'm sure we can get a good price for you," continued their tormentor, approaching Moloy and grabbing the boy's chin so that he squirmed in pain. "Is that your father, boy?"

"You let him be, you..." Kanti Kaka started forward.

"There, there, now. No heroics please." The automatic's barrel jabbed again into Moloy's father's body, driving all the wind out of the elderly man.

"What do you want with the children?"

"Children... they're the wealth of the nation, aren't they? I recognize that fact, my friends. Let us all partake of this wealth."

"You'll pay for this!"

"Not me. You!" The pirates' leader laughed mirthlessly. He turned his attention to Sanjib now, looking up and down at the child, his eyes coming to rest on the crutch, "You, what are you worth? With half a leg?"

"I'm worth two of you, you lout!" shouted Sanjib belligerently and went reeling as the
burly man's powerful palm caught the side of his head.

"Smart aleck, eh?"

Bharti tried not to squirm. It was her turn to be examined by the pirate.

"Well now, my dear?" She tried desperately to hide the fear that welled up like a wave insider her. "Whose child are you? Not this fisherman's, I presume? What do you say, Kaka? She looks far too sophisticated to be your daughter. Where is she from?"

"What is it to you?" snapped Kanti Kaka and regretted his words instantly as the steel tip of the automatic ground into the child's temple. "No! Don't harm her!"

"Another wisecrack like that and you'll wish you hadn't opened your mouth. Just answer my questions, wise guy. And do as you're told. Who is she?"

"My brother's daughter."

"He's not a fisherman...your brother? Not with a daughter like that? Come on...the truth!"

"He's an Engineer. He works in America."

"America? Ah...ha! Hear that fellers?" the pirate nodded to his followers who guffawed. "We have a prize catch today. This is what I call worth my while!"

"Let us go, you..." Kanti Kaka tried to steel his tone. "Take the fish and let us go our way!"

"Go? Just like that?" the pirate snapped his
fingers, "you want me to let you all go just like that? You hear him, boys?" The pirate laughed raucously.

"Ill tell you what, Kaka. Keep your fish. I'll even let you keep this new boat. All I'm taking are these kids. These two—your boy and this...this imported stuff."

"No! Let them be! Take the fish! Take the boat!" pleaded Kanti Kaka, desperately. "They're worth quite a lot of money!"

"Not as much as these kids here," the pirate shook his head, "Let me see now. What is your son worth to you? A thousand...five...ten? Yes, that's right. Ten thousand is the price I put on your boy's health. As for this girl...well...imported stuff is costlier, you know. How much for her, boys?"

"Twenty-five thousand!" shouted one pirate. "Make that fifty!" called out another. "That's it!" nodded their chief, "fifty it is!"

"We don't have that kind of money!"

"I know you don't, old man. But your brother? He must have plenty of dollars stashed away? Tell him to part with a few and take away his daughter."

"You can't do this!" Kanti Kaka tried again, desperately, "Let them go. Take me instead."

"What on earth will I do with you? I must refuse the offer, I'm afraid. Enough talk now! Get the kids into our boat, guys. On the double!"

As the pirates hastened to do their leader's
bidding Kanti Kaka slumped to his knees, his face buried in his palms.

"Don't worry, Papa!" called Moloy, struggling as the bandits hauled him up into the bigger vessel, "Bonbibi is with us!"

"Bonbibi, indeed!" chuckled the pirate chief, "stop yakking, kid. Up you go!"

It was Bharti’s turn next. As rough arms grabbed her wrists and lifted her, the girl felt a strange sense of detachment. ‘This was not...could not be happening to her! What was she...Bharti Mukherjea...daughter of Sumanta Mukherjea of Washington D.C...what was she doing here in this strange tableau? Fishing boats...pirates...'

The pirate chief was the last to leave the Sonkali. As he turned to climb into his trawler, his eyes fell again upon Sanjib. The boy had been leaning against the sides of the boat, his eyes blazing with anger and hate.

"You," the pirate beckoned to Sanjib, "come here. Who's your father, eh?"

"You’ll see, you scoundrel!" retorted the boy through clenched teeth, "You’ll pay for this!"

"Is that so? A tough guy, eh? In that case you're going with us, too. I'd like to see you dance on that wooden leg of yours."

A few minutes later the pirates were ready to leave. As the trawler’s engine revved into action the three children leaned against the stern of the pirate boat, gazing anxiously
down at the two remaining occupants of the Sonkali. Gayen's body lay where it had fallen by the wheel, unmoving.

"Don't worry about us, Papa!" called Moloy. "They'll be sorry they ever set eyes on us!" was Sanjib's attempt at bravado.

"Tie these heroes together," growled the pirate captain to his men. Then, turning towards the Sonkali, "You'll hear from us, Kaka. Your kids will be well looked after. That is, if you cooperate! And remember...no police! It will complicate everything. Let's try to keep this transaction simple and straightforward. Is that clear?"

Kanti Mukherjea did not reply.

As the master of the Sonkali looked from his own devastated vessel to the pirate boat, the trawler started to pull away. Faster and faster, like remorseless fate, the large boat ground its way through the unresisting waters of the swamp.

The trawler's outline shrank on the horizon.

There was no hope of succour from any quarter. His son...Bharti...Sanjib... Sudden panic gripped Kanti's heart. In his fever of anxiety he snatched up his ancient musket and started to line it upon the fast receding silhouette of the enemy vessel.

"No! Kaka!" Bidhu lunged at his employer, knocking the musket away, "Don't do that! They've got our children. Not now..."
The musket dropped from Kanti's fingers. His shoulders drooped and a strange torpor began to creep over his mind, paralyzing thought.

The water was still again.

"Kaka!" Bidhu's comforting hand brought Kanti back to reality, to the need to pick up the pieces after the tragedy.

"Kaka, we could follow them. Maybe we can find out where they've taken the kids?"

"No," Kanti shook his head. He appeared to have aged in the past half hour, "For one, their boat is too fast. And, as you said, they might harm the children if we tried anything of the sort. No, we can't take that chance!"

"Let us go back to Raidighi then. It's almost evening."

The sun was a smudged orange glow in the Western sky. Shadows were beginning to creep over the delta and the darkening waters stirred under a gentle, persistent breeze.

"Look to Gayen."

"He's gone, Kaka. There is nothing we can do for him. I checked already."

"Start the motor then."

As the Sonkali started the long and depressing journey back to base after her maiden, ill fated adventure, Kanti Mukherjea was trying to goad his brain into action; to think, and to decide how he was going to break the awful news to his brother.
Only a handful of Raidighi’s residents were at hand to welcome the Sonkali back to the shore. Sumanta Mukherjea was one of them.

The boat’s engine cut, its bow beached noiselessly. An instant later Bidhu’s wiry figure leaped off the craft and hurried ashore.

"What’s the matter, Bidhu? Where’s everyone?" Sumanta’s anxiety was reasonable.

"Come here, Dada!" Bidhu put an arm round the older man’s shoulders, taking him aside, "There’s something I have to tell you..."

"What...what are you..." Sumanta looked anxiously over his shoulder at the Sonkali, waiting expectantly for the figures of his brother and the three children to emerge, "Where are the others? Dada...the children..."

"That is what I have to tell you," Bidhu’s grim face was enough to put Sumanta Mukherjea on guard, "Something terrible has happened..."

"Oh, my God! What is it? Tell me quickly!" "The children...they...they have been..."

"What has happened to them?" Sumanta pushed Bidhu aside and sprinted towards the boat shouting, "Dada! Bubu! Moloy! Where are you?"

Kanti Mukherjea’s hunched figure leaning against the wheel of the Sonkali told the story. The boat, Sumanta saw, was empty except for his brother. There were no children...

"Dada!" as his eyes fell on the slumped
shoulders and the drawn features, realization dawning, "No! Not the children!"

Kanti started to cry. Dry sobs wracked the man's frame. Without another word Sumanta put his arm about his brother and helped him out of the fishing boat.

There was a small crowd of curious onlookers on the beach. News had spread quickly that the Sonkali had run into trouble.

"Here! Let me pass!" elbowing his way through the assembly, navigating his ample figure towards the grounded craft was Rash Behari.

It was Rash Behari who had financed the purchase of the Sonkali. He naturally had a personal interest in the fortunes of the boat and its crew.

"What's up, you?" the contractor grabbed Bidhu's arm and shook him like a leaf. "Where is your master?"

"Jal dasyus, Dadal" replied the sailor, "They took away the children. There... Kanti Kaka's over there with his brother..."

"Dasyus? How dare they! Let me see... Kanti! Kanti!" Rash Behari marched importantly forward, as if he had the answer to the sudden and shocking tragedy that had befallen his debtor.
Kedo

The first sensation that Bharti experienced upon waking was a queer tingling as if ants were crawling all over her body. Her eyes opened with some effort, but there was no morning sunlight streaming in through the curtains draped over her bedroom window.

"Papa..." her lips started to form the familiar call that would bring cozy comfort and reassurance. "Pa..."

As consciousness dawned, the tingling on her skin intensified. She could ignore it no more. She tried to sit up. Her shoulders and wrists ached. They were immobile for some strange reason. Then it all came back...

She was not in the Mukherjeas' flat in Washington. Raidighi! The fishing expedition. She was a captive! With this awareness came the thought of her companions. Moloy... Sanjib...where...where were the boys? Where was she? The Sonkali....pirates! Again she tried to sit. Her limbs would not move. With good reason. They were securely tied. Where had their captors brought them?

Bharti's eyes were gradually beginning to see in the darkness. It was not the sun that had woken her. Certainly there was no natural illumination in this...this room...or wherever it was that she had been dumped in.

Then her eyes caught the indistinct outlines
of two more human figures in the near darkness. The boys!
"Moloy!" she hissed, instinctively trying to keep her tone low. "Moloy! Sanjib!"
"Who? What...?" a sleepy, barely audible voice replied. One of the recumbent forms now tried to struggle into a sitting position.
"It is I, Bharti! Moloy? Sanjib?"
"Didi!" came the response in Sanjib's familiar tones, "Where are you, Didi?"
"Here...over here. Is Moloy still asleep? Wake him up, Sanjib. This is no time to be sleeping. Where are we? Can you imagine?"
"I should think we are inside some kind of a hut, Didi. And there is no reason to wake him up now. Let him rest while he can."
"We must get away!" she insisted, "and quickly! Before those...those dreadful men come back for us!"
"We are not going anywhere," the boy chuckled, "Haven't you realized that we are all tied up? Like chicken waiting to be slaughtered and dressed?"
"Oh, no! Don't say that! I'm terrified!"
"So am I, Didi. But what's the point? We can't move, can we?"
"What do you think they will do to us, Sanjib? Do you think they'll kill us?"
"Not before they get that money they are after." The boy sounded resigned to his predicament. "How long do you think it will
take Kanti Kaka and your father to raise that much money, Didi?"
"Kanti Kaka probably doesn't have that kind of money. Papa will have to go to Kolkata to cash the traveller's cheques..."
"That means a couple of days, on the outside. Well...we shall know what plans they have for us soon enough. I bet they have some cheerful ideas."
"That's not funny, Sanjib! Stop trying to frighten me. I'm scared already."
"You don't sound afraid, Didi!"
"That's because I learnt to keep my voice steady when acting in plays at school."
"Oh? Won't you teach me to act too? I love play acting, Didi."
"If we get out of here alive I will," said the girl. "But this is no time to be discussing theatre, Sanjib. And there is this funny sensation I've been having. It's all over my body. A kind of tingling. Was it something they fed us?"
"Ants, Didi. That ticklish feeling is ants. We're sitting on hay."
"Ants!" Bharti almost screamed and started to wriggle her body frantically. Sudden visions of large, red predatory insects tearing her flesh to bits rose in her mind's eye, goading her to redouble her efforts, "Get them off me! Out! Get off me! Shoo! Scram..."
"What is all the noise about?" the groan
arose from Moloy's still prostrate form.

"So you're up at last, are you?" sighed Sanjib. Then he turned to the girl who was still trying to shake the crawlers off her body and said, "You'll only hurt yourself trying all that, Didi. They're harmless."

"How do you know?"

"If they hadn't been harmless can you imagine what they would have done to us all this time?"

"What are you blokes yakking about, eh?" insisted Moloy's still drowsy voice. "Can't a person get some decent sleep around here. Here...where are we, by the way?"

"We are in heaven, mate!" Sanjib's teeth flashed in a quick grin, visible even in the almost extinct light of the hurricane lamp that their captors had hung from the single bamboo supporting the roof of their prison. "And we were discussing how soon we will all be at the gates of hell; when these rascals will get their money and decide they don't need us anymore."

"They can't do that!" Moloy sat bolt upright. "Who is to stop them?"

"Kaka! The police... Kaka's sure to have told the police by now. They must be looking for us. They should be here any minute now!"

"Where? Here? In the swamp? Or the forest? Or in one of the dozens of islands that are everywhere?"
"You mean they will never find us?" sobbed Bharti.

"Let's say that I don't favour our chances."

"We must try to escape!" Moloy shook his tousled head, "We can't just sit here and wait...to die!"

"At least I will be finally rid of that scoundrel Rash Behari," sighed Sanjib, wistfully, "I will not have to slave for him anymore."

"Don't say that, Sanjib," Bharti consoled him, "There is so much to live for."

"I'm only eleven!" moaned Moloy, "I am too young to die, Didi!"

"So are we all, Moloy. Let's stop discussing this, shall we? It's a depressing subject."

"I shall have only one regret."

"What is it, Sanjib?"

"I always wanted to go to school...like Moloy here... and the other children in the village. I wanted to learn so many things..."

"You wait until we are out of this place, Sanjib! I shall talk to Papa about it. We'll see how Rash Behari can keep you out of school. It is every child's right to be educated, don't you know?"

"All I know, Didi, is that I must wake up before sunrise every day and run errands for that fat contractor until I drop dead on my mat late at night."

"How much does he pay you, Sanjib?"

"Pay me? Why would he pay me?"
"You mean he doesn't give you any money for all that work? For slaving for him from dawn till dusk?"

"He doesn't owe me anything!" There was defeat in the boy's words. "It is I who owe him, Didi."

"You owe him? What...why?"

"My father borrowed a lot of money from Rash Behari. That was long ago. He died, so it is up to me to pay back the debt."

"But that's ridiculous! Why should you pay for what you were not responsible for?"

"That's the way it is, Didi. That is how it has been since I was old enough to walk and always will be!"

"But...it's awful!"

"Something worse than that is about to happen," hissed Moloy suddenly, "Shut up, you two! I can hear voices outside. There is someone coming!"

"He's right!" Sanjib strained his ears. "Quick! Back to bed!"

"What...what do you mean?"

"Quiet! Not a word. Lie down and keep your eyes shut."

Not a moment too soon the three children returned to their recumbent positions on the raw floor of the hut. The door of the hovel swung open and two men entered, one behind the other.

"They're still out cold!"
"Suits us. Let them lie. The longer they sleep, the less we shall have to feed them."

"Do you think the boss will let them go after the ransom is paid?"

"Not this time! 'Never trust a kid,' he always says. 'They're sharper than grown-ups. Keep a child out of trouble if you want to sleep peacefully'. So...

"They die, eh?"

"After the money is paid."

"Naturally!" the pirate chuckled, "But there's one thing that bugs me."

"What?"

"Why do we always have to pay a percentage to that fatso...the contractor?"

"Rash Behari?"

"He's a parasite! We do all the work...take the risks. He gets more than we do."

"Don't ever let the boss hear you talking like that, you fool! If it weren't for those contractors, we wouldn't be in business."

"Is that so?"

"You bet! They send the sacrifices for Bonbibi, eh? These suckers whom we kidnap and ransom. And who do you think finances the villagers for the ransom the boss demands?"

"So that's the deal, eh? Whatever happens the contractors win!"

"That's the way it is."

"Check their ropes."
"Whatever for? I'm no novice."
"It pays to be careful."
"No one's escaped from Kedo Island yet!"

For one long minute after the pirates had left the hut, none of the children stirred. What they had just heard was enough to chill the stoutest of hearts. They were all going to die!
"Sheesh! That was a close call!" Sanjib was the first to recover from the shock. "If those fellows had found us awake..."
"They wouldn't have talked like they did!" added Bharti, "we know their plans now."
"What do we do?" Moloy moaned.
"That crook Rash Behari!" flared the girl, "so he's behind all this!"
"I've always suspected that he was more than a mere contractor for fish and boats," Sanjib nodded, "So now we know the real nature of his contracts!"
"What do we do?" groaned Moloy, "I don't want to die!"
"Stop whining, Moloy! We all have to die someday."
"But I'm only a child!"
"We still have a couple of days," Bharti tried to reassure her cousin.
"Probably less! Kolkata isn't very far off. As soon as your father returns with the money and the pirates have it..."
"Suppose they decide not to pay? What if they go to the police?"
"They won't!" Sanjib was confident, "because Kanti Kaka is aware of the vile of the pirates and wouldn't want to expose us to any further risk."

"You are an optimist, Sanjib, aren't you?"

"I am practical, that's all, Didi. In all my life I've never heard of pirates sparing anyone if they get even the slightest hint of danger!"

"What a cheering thought!"

"What do we do?" came the familiar refrain from Moloy.

"We'll have to think of a plan, what else?"

"Easier said than done," said the girl, suddenly contemplative, "let us think...no...look for a way out of here. Three heads are better than one. So think, both of you!"

"You're quite right, Didi. We might as well use our heads now while they are still on our shoulders. Who knows ..."

"Stop talking like that, Sanjib! You're being no help!"

"What do we do?" came Moloy's fearful moan once more, "What now, Didi?"

"You say that one more time and I'll stab you with my knife!" hissed Sanjib. "Quit whining, you..."

"Wait!" Bharti was sitting bolt upright, her limbs suddenly straining against her bonds. "That's it! The knife...your knife!"
"Shall we never be free of this curse?"

"Don't lose heart, Kanti Kaka!" reassured Bidhu, "Sumu Dada will be returning any time now with the money and then the children will be free."

"But it will be somebody else's turn next," said Binoy Majhi, "then another...and another. Our troubles never seem to end."

Yes!" nodded another villager vehemently, "if things continue like this we will all be reduced to beggary soon. We cannot go fishing for fear of the dasyus! And when we do muster courage to put out to sea, our people are captured and we have to shell out astronomical sums to get them released."

"Yeah ...if it wasn't for Rash Behari Babu..."

"That fat leech! What's it to him? Almost every house and boat in this village is mortgaged to him!"

"Still...he always comes to our aid..."

"For a price, of course!"

"Where will all this end?" sighed Kanti Kaka.

The small crowd of Raidighi's residents had collected outside Kanti Mukherjea's residence. Kanti sat on a cot, his forehead resting on his palms, shoulders drooping. Bidhu was trying to console his employer, patting the older man's back gently.

"Please, Kaka! Don't lose hope..."
"This has gone far enough!" Binoy Majhi interrupted, his voice quivering with emotion, "We are all done for if we don't do something about this very quickly. We cannot continue like this... every moment of our lives is torture. We live in fear and hunger!"

"Let us gherao the Chaudhury at his residence. He is responsible. Didn't we vote for him in the last elections?"

"A fat lot of good that'll do! He'll make some sympathetic noises and send a petition to the government in Kolkata like he did the last time. What became of that?"

"The Border Security Force chased some dasyus after the government decided to take action."

"What of it? They returned empty-handed."

"You can't blame them entirely. They are not permitted to chase those pirates across the border. It could lead to a war between the two countries."

"That's a load of bull! The dasyus are too smart for them..."

"More likely that they are all involved!"

"Come, come, now! No more of that talk!"

This last remark came from Rash Behari. The contractor had come up while the villagers were talking. He waved his polished cane at the assembled men.

"Off with you, fellers! Don't crowd around here. Can't you see Kanti Kaka's in a bad way
already? This kind of talk doesn't do anyone any good."

"How come Contractor Babu is never bothered by all this, eh?" said someone in a loud whisper, "He's the only one who never seems to lose any sleep or weight..."

"That's because he always gains!" came the reply, and a titter went around the assembly.

"Who said that?" Rash Behari glowered, his moustache bristling with feigned anger, "I'll have your hide! Off with you!"

Quietly, in pairs or alone, the crowd melted away. Whatever the villagers might say behind the portly contractor's back, no one could afford to antagonize Rash Behari. They were all indebted to him and he could make serious trouble for anyone who crossed him.

"Come, now, Kaka," the contractor sat down on the cot beside the latest victim of the dusyus, "Don't lose heart."

"Is there anything left to lose?" groaned Kanti Mukherjea.

"When is your brother returning from Kolkata?" asked Rash Behari, "we have only a few hours left to meet dusyus' deadline."

"I don't know! I can't think!"

"My offer stands, Kaka. I can lend you the cash, if only you would let me. After all, the children's lives are more important than any amount of money!"

Kanti lifted his head and then gazed into
the contractor's eyes. What he saw in the aging fisherman's eyes disturbed Rash Behari. Was it an understanding...or had he pushed this man too far?

-k-k-

"Where are we?"

"I haven't the faintest idea!" gasped Sanjib. The boy was out of breath due to the exertion of walking without his crutch. The pirates had taken away his artificial limb perhaps with the intention of discouraging any thoughts of escape. Moloy and Bharti had been helping their friend along, by turns.

"I think it's a forest!" Moloy's eyes rolled, the whites glistening even in the darkness that surrounded them.

"Of course it is, you ninny!" snapped Bharti in exasperation, "You didn't imagine we were taking a walk on the beach, did you?"

Once the children had manoeuvred themselves into a position where they could lay their fingers on the Swiss Army knife which was in Sanjib's pocket, it was only a matter of minutes before the ropes holding their wrists and ankles fell apart under the assault of cold steel.

They had managed to sneak out without being noticed by the pirates. Apparently their captors were supremely confident that the children would make no attempt to escape. There was no one guarding the hut.
Thanks to the pirates' carelessness and Sanjib's knife, the trio had managed to put some distance between themselves and their recent prison. That, at least, was what they surmised. In the dense vegetation and the darkness that enveloped them, there was no way they could know how far they had progressed.

Time seemed an eternity. The rise and fall of crickets' calls was all the indication they had of the passage of time. Bharti's expensive wrist watch was not on her wrist anymore. No doubt one of the pirates had taken a fancy to the stylish chronometer.

"Let us stay put here till daylight," suggested Moloy fearfully, "we can barely see anything."

"No!" snapped Bharti, "We ought to get as far away from those criminals as possible. They'll find out that we've escaped, any time now. Maybe they already have..."

"I'm pooped," sighed Sanjib, "the two of you go. Make a run for it. With me along we're all getting slowed down. I'm a liability."

"How dare you talk like that, Sanjib? We'll stick together."

"I will hide somewhere, Didi. You guys get back to Raidighi somehow and return with help."

"We're not leaving you behind and that's final!"

"At least we ought to rest and find something
to eat," complained Moloy, "I'm ravenous."

"All you ever think of is food," Sanjib chided. "Haven't you realized what will happen to us if those villains catch up?"

"If we cannot see our way in this dense and dark forest, how do you think they can?"

"They'll have torches, you fool! And rifles too. So stop yakking and get a move on."

The fugitives pressed on, as if their lives depended upon putting as much distance as they could between themselves and the pirates, which in fact they did. Fear lent wings to their young legs, forcing them to ignore the pangs of hunger and exhaustion.

"We made a big mistake," Moloy said after a while.

"Well?" challenged Sanjib, weakly. But the irritation in his words only couched a sense of relief. For once he was glad to hear his friend speak. Even the pearls of wisdom that Moloy might offer were welcome in the desolation that loomed all around the youngsters.

"We ought to have carried some food from the pirates' camp."

"And how, pray, could we have got to that food?"

"Let us not discuss the if's of history," shrugged Bharti, "march on, comrades. If we live, we shall eat again. But no amount of food will save us if those...those bandits catch up."

"Well said, Didi!" applauded Sanjib,
although he admitted to himself that he would
welcome food and water with the same fervour
that Moloy had given vent to.

The march continued in silence for another
interminable period. What dangers they
braved in that near-blind progress through
wild vegetation the children had no idea. But
the occasional sounds that arose from the
thickets and undergrowth on either side gave
some indication of the terrain they were
passing through. Sibilant whispers might have
been snakes, sudden snarls and growling in
the treetops might be a leopard or two; once
they even heard the distant roars of some
large carnivore. Fortunately the predator's
hungry steps did not appear to be
approaching them.

"That is a tiger!" whispered Bharti, "I am
certain."

"I hope not," came Moloy's hushed reply,
"I have no desire to meet the King of the
Sunderbans at this hour!"

"Dakhin Roy surely has better sense," jeered
Sanjib, trying to keep up the spirits with an
attempt at humour, "than to eat your flesh
and upset his tummy."

"Hmmph!" was the offended one's response.

The first streak of dawn caught them by
surprise. A pale, greyish-white sliver of light
stole through the forest canopy, illuminating
their surroundings.
"It's daylight!" bellowed Moloy, with as much enthusiasm as lungs weakened by exertion and deprivation would allow.

His description was not quite accurate. But from pitch darkness to poor visibility was real progress. They had reason to feel elated.

"What do we do now?"
"Go on, what else?"
"Hey look!"

The exclamation came from Sanjib. The vegetation around had thinned suddenly, affording them a view of what lay beyond.

What the fugitives saw was a mud flat. And water. On the far horizon where the salt water of the estuary appeared to touch the sky, the sun was painting the air and swamp in shades of mauve.

As the children continued to gaze upon the vision and draw in grateful draughts of the fresh, bracing morning air, the sky turned to pink, then orange.

"How pretty!" Bharti sighed, "like a picture postcard!"

"Let's get a move on," said Moloy. "If those pirates catch us here, we'll only be memories on postcards."

"But where do we go from here?"

Sanjib's question was well taken. Behind them was the dense forest that they had just negotiated. Ahead was water.

"Let's turn left," suggested Moloy helpfully,
for want of anything better to say, "or right."

"And bump into our friends again? No thanks!"

"We must do something!" insisted Bharti's cousin, "We can't just sit here and wait for them to catch up with us."

"If I am not mistaken we are on an island," Sanjib was thoughtful.

"What else is there in these waters, Sanjib?" demanded Moloy, "There are islands and more islands..."

"Which means the only way of getting off this island is by boat. The pirates ought to have a boat...maybe more... They must be moored somewhere on this island."

"Let's look for one then!" urged Bharti.

"But first we should fill our stomachs," wailed Moloy.

"With what?"

"Berries, if nothing else. I can see some kind of fruit on those bushes."

"Not unless you want to be poisoned," Sanjib warned, "This is a forest, my boy and not your backyard. Those are not vegetables."

A sudden shout, rising from the jungle behind them, brought an abrupt end to this conversation.

"DasyusV" hissed Bharti, "they're closeby. Quick! Run for it!"

"Leave me here and go!" said Sanjib through gritted teeth.
"Shut up and move!" Moloy grabbed one of his friend’s arms and his sister, the other. Together they half dragged, half coaxed the disabled boy along the mud flat. The trio had no idea what they were heading towards. Behind them was certain danger; ahead they knew not what unknown terrors lay.

The exhausted children had gone barely a hundred yards when Sanjib shouted again, pointing, "Didi! Moloy! Look!"

"A boat!" echoed the cousins together.

**In the swamp**

The boat, fortunately, was in running condition and had a motor fitted to the stern. Minutes later the children had put a fair distance between themselves and their island prison.

"Where do we go?"

"Back home, of course," replied Bharti to her cousin's question.

"But which way is Raidighi?"

That, realized the children, was a valid question. They had escaped the terrors of the island only to launch themselves onto this vast expanse of water. There was only water—water in any direction they might turn. Occasionally they would sight a landmass or clusters of vegetation and, of course, the ubiquitous pneumatophores.
"We ought to go due North," suggested Sanjib. The boy's normally healthy, dark features were now ashen. He looked on the verge of collapse.

"Why North?" demanded Moloy.

"Because, when the boats leave Raidighi they always go South..."

"He has a point," nodded Bharti, manoeuvring the boat's tiller. "Let's try, anyway. We have nothing to lose."

"I hope we haven't made a mistake," the girl said apprehensively, when they had progressed in a northerly direction for a while. The mud flats that they had been seeing in the water were gradually petering out.

"We can't be wrong," Sanjib said weakly, "I have travelled in these waters so often..."

"What's that?" Moloy was gazing out across the glistening sheet of water.

"Can you see something?"

"No...no! The motor...listen...what's that noise...listen!"

Moloy’s apprehension was not misplaced. Even as he spoke, the steady rhythm of the engine turned to an intermittent sputtering.

"What's going on?" Bharti cried in alarm.

"I think we're running out of fuel!"

"Wait! I can see something there...see...over there? That's land!" Sanjib pointed, "steer for that shore, Didi!"

"That doesn't look like Raidighi!" exclaimed
his friend, "We don't want more trouble..."

"We're already in enough trouble. Do you want to spend the rest of your life floating helplessly on this water? Go, Didi!"

Bharti shifted the tiller and the boat headed, its engine now faltering ominously towards the landmass that grew larger and larger as they approached.

The fugitives could see clearly the profile of a heavily wooded island with only a very narrow strip of beach fronting the vegetation.

"We'll never make it!"

"We will!"

"Closer! Closer..."

With its last, dying gasps the boat’s motor propelled them towards the uncertain refuge of another strange shore.

"We have to rest, Didi. Sanjib can't go much farther in this condition!"

"We cannot. And certainly not here. Anyone approaching by boat can see us here. We better get in there," Bharti nodded towards the forest.

"I'm not going into that dark forest," Moloy protested, "It scares me."

His fear was fairly reasonable. There was something sinister and eerie about the almost impenetrable wall of vegetation confronting them.
"God knows what's in there!"
"We'll have to take the chance. Maybe we can find some food. How do you feel, Sanjib?"
"Oh, I'm all right, guys. I'm not about to kick the bucket, you know. Let's go."
"There...there's a break in the forest over there. Looks like some kind of a path..."

So, supporting Sanjib between them, the cousins pushed into that forbidding jungle. The path they were treading was narrow, barely wide enough for two persons to walk abreast. As they plodded wearily on, the sound of dry leaves crackling under their feet was all they could hear. For a jungle as thick as this one there was a remarkable absence of noise. Birds did not chirp here. Nor did the insects titter.

"I think there's no life in this damned place," Moloy stated everyone's fears. "Not a sound! Nothing except these trees and vines and... I'm scared!"
"Wait...look! What's that?"
"Water! That's water!"

Bharti's eyes had, indeed, located a pool. Hurrying towards the small body of water the trio presently found themselves staring into the clear, still liquid.
"Careful!" warned Sanjib as Moloy kneeled and dipped his cupped palms into the inviting fluid, "It might be poisoned."
"Now you're raving! Who would want to
poison this water, eh?” and Moloy began to pour water down his parched throat, "Ahhh... this is nectar!"

"Look! There are so many fish in here!" Bharti pointed.

"Gives me an idea," Sanjib started to unwind the lungi that he had wound over his tattered shorts.

"What are you doing?"

"You're not going swimming in that ..."

"Watch!" clutching two ends of the cloth Sanjib cast his lungi into the water. It swelled like a balloon at first, then settled into the water. The boy waited for almost a minute. With a sudden twist of the wrist he lifted his impromptu net clear off the pool.

"There!" Sanjib spread his soaked lungi on the forest floor at a safe distance from the pool, "You see that?"

Writhing on the wet cloth, gasping for air, were a pair of fat, healthy fish.

"Good show!" Moloy applauded, having finished gorging himself with the water. "But what do we do with these? We can't eat them raw."

"I have an idea," the girl suggested, "Gather some dry leaves and twigs. I know how to make a fire."

"Where did you learn that from?" wondered her cousin, "When did you ever go into a dense jungle?"
"I have been out camping as a girl guide. Anyway...never 'mind that now and start collecting dry leaves."

While Moloy set about his task the girl selected a pair of small rocks that suited her purpose. A couple of minutes later a neat pile of dry twigs and leaves lay at her feet. She struck the stones against each other. Again she tried, and then again. At the umpteenth attempt sparks flew. A leaf smouldered, then a small flame appeared. It grew and flourished.

"How's that!" Bharti stood back, surveying the small fire that she had managed to get going.

"Quick! The fish ... into the fire with them!"

While the cousins built the fire Sanjib had been busy sharpening a slim, leafless bough broken off a tree. With his knife he had managed to contrive a stake of sorts. The two fish he speared with this pointed stick and held over the fire.

"Get more leaves, Moloy. We have to keep the fire going."

"I wish we had some tea leaves and a pan!"

"Now that's ambition for you," Sanjib chuckled, "just be content with what you have, child."

"I suppose we'll have to do without salt or pickle...the finer things of life..."

"Be grateful for small mercies, Moloy."
With Sanjib’s knife the roasted fish was carved into small pieces which they gobbled up in silence. Their last meal had been several hours earlier.

"I didn’t know roasted fish tasted so good. That was some feast!"

The comment came from Moloy. Stretched out on the earth beside the pool, the boy’s face bore an expression of joy, almost.

"Time to move, friend. You don’t want to be caught napping here, do you?"

"Oh, no. No one’s visiting this place, eh?"

"Don’t bet on it, mate," Bharti turned to Sanjib, "I have an idea. You can make yourself a walking stick with… with… there! That large branch should do."

Soon the trio were on the road again, hunger satiated and Sanjib moving with renewed vigour, thanks to the aid of his newly acquired crutch.

"We ought to have carried some of the fish in that pool with us," complained Moloy after a while.

"Don’t you ever think of anything else except food?"

"I have my priorities right, friend."

"Stop bickering! We have a lot of work to do."

"Where are we going, Didi? Shouldn’t we be trying to get back to Raidighi?"

"We’ll get nowhere if you don’t stop arguing and concentrate on our future action, guys."
"I have a plan..." Moloy started to say.
His scheme remained unstated.
The vegetation opened out suddenly in front of them. They were at a clearing. It was ringed by heavy undergrowth and some trees. On the far side of the open space the jungle track continued its progress through the trees. The clearing itself was inviting, its floor heavily carpeted with fallen, yellowing leaves.  
"Ah!" exclaimed Moloy and started forward, "what a spot!"
"Hold on!" Sanjib yelled, letting go of his crutch and stretching out to restrain his friend from stepping in.
Too late! Moloy was already out of reach of his friend's arms. A moment later an ear-splitting scream rose from the boy's throat. As Moloy's shout echoed off the surrounding treetops his companions watched in horror.
Moloy's feet hit the heavy carpet of leaves, and sank... and sank. Down he went, into the liquid mush that lay concealed under the layer of leaves.
"Moloy!"
"Didi! Sanjib!" screamed the boy, his arms flailing helplessly in the air, "Help me!"
"It's quicksand! Help!" screamed Bharti.  
"Hold on!"
Sanjib lay prostrate, having lost hold of his crutch and fallen as he lunged to stop his friend stepping into the treacherous clearing.
"Stop struggling," he called to his trapped comrade, "It will only drag you down faster..."
"Use your crutch, Sanjib!" Bharti shouted, "Quick! The stick!"

Sanjib lifted the long, stout bough that had served him as a support. Forward and out, his right arm stretched, straining every inch to reach Moloy's desperate fingers.

"Help me! Help me!"

The stick fell short of the boy's aching hands. Only a few inches more...

Moloy was sinking rapidly in the bog. He was in, almost up to his armpits.

Sanjib strained every sinew. Another inch... closer...

"It's too short, Didi! Get another stick! Take my knife and go...hurry!"

"Get that, booo...o...o...y..."

The shout came from a different quarter. As Bharti and Sanjib watched, paralyzed by the sudden interruption, something flew across the clearing and struck one of the drowning boy's arms. It was a lasso, a noose formed at the end of a crude rope.

"Hold on, boy!"

Instinctively Moloy's fingers clutched at the noose. They caught and held it.

"Around your shoulders, boy! Under your arms!" came the command from the intruder.

It was a strange figure that stepped out of the vegetation at the far end of the clearing—

*
It was a man...a grown man. He was like an apparition, with long hair and beard, his clothes almost in tatters. A more remarkable figure the children could not have expected to encounter in that desolate wood.

But the newcomer paid no attention to the gaping young ones. His attention was concentrated entirely on the boy struggling in the morass.

Moloy managed to slip the noose under his armpits. His rescuer started to pull. The carpet of leaves shifted and heaved, unwilling to yield their victim without a fight.

But the man's strength and skill were succeeding. Slowly, inch by excruciating inch, he dragged Moloy away from the treacherous confines of the quicksand.

Before Sanjib or the girl could quite gather their wits, the fight was over. Moloy was on dry land, on his knees beside his messiah, his shoulders heaving as he breathed in huge lungfuls of fresh air.

"There you are!" announced the man of the jungle, "and now...what in God's name are you kids doing here?"

The Fort

"Who are you?"
"Let me ask the questions first," said the
escapees' benefactor. "Now what are you kids doing on my island?"

"Your island?" wondered Bharti? "Is this an island? We thought we were actually close to Raidighi..."

"Raidighi?" the apparition chuckled, "Ha! Ha! Ha! Raidighi indeed!"

"You don't have to jeer at us!" snapped the girl, "we had nothing to guide us. No map, no compass...nothing."

"How did you get here in the first place?"

"By boat, how else?"

"A boat, eh?" There was a sudden glint in the man's eyes, "Where's your boat?"

"Somewhere on the mud flat over there," Sanjib pointed. "We left it there, naturally ..."

"You didn't hide it?"

"Whatever for?"

"The fuel tank was empty, in any case."

"A mistake!" snapped the tall, gaunt individual, "A grievous mistake. Let us hope we live to regret it."

"Where are we going, Kaka?" interrupted Moloy, "Do you live here?"

"Do I look like a tourist, eh?" chuckled the other man.

"No...well...is this your home?"

"You could say that. I've been around for a while. A year maybe...maybe months...I don't know...I don't know."

"Are there other people on this island?"
"None that I know of."
"You live here all alone?"
"You could say that."
"But why? Where is your family—your wife and children...?"
"They have probably given me up for dead by now."
"Is there no way off this island?"
"There is...by boat. I've been waiting for one all these days...in fact months..."
"But without fuel...what do we do now?"
"Let's get home for starters."
"Home?"
"Yes...follow me, friends."
"Is there any food at your...er...home?"

Moloy wondered.
"Patience! All in good time."

The motley procession trudged through the jungle in silence, thereafter. Bharti followed their leader. After her went Moloy who cast fearful looks all around, thanks to his recent encounter with death, while Sanjib brought up the rear.

"Here we are!" announced the host some time later, stopping short so abruptly that Bharti bumped into him.

The children gaped. They had broken out of the dense foliage into another clearing. But it was an extraordinary sight that met their eyes. Before them loomed a wall, several feet high. Their leader stood now at an arched
opening in this wall. Beyond could be seen a pathway strewn with big blocks of stone with low, crumbling walls on either side.

"My home," said their guide proudly, "follow me, kids."

"This is your home?"

"What on earth is this place?"

"A fort!" exclaimed Bharti, "this is a fort."

"It was a fort," corrected their host, "It's my residence now."

As the children silently followed their leader deeper and deeper into the complex, winding, walled pathways, their wonder increased. Almost everywhere the jungle had overtaken human effort, stone and mortar crumbling under the assault of the insistent, never-yielding creepers and climbers.

"Well, now. How do you like this place?"

They were inside a walled square which might have been a large room during the halcyon years of this ruin. At the present time it was open to the sky. In one corner of the 'room', tucked away in a spacious niche, was a crude bed made of boughs and leaves. There was also a roughly constructed chulha.

"This is my palace!" announced their new friend, watching the visitors' faces closely.

"What kind of a place is this...this fort?" Moloy's voice shook, as if with fear. "This place gives me the creeps."

"The little girl was right. It was a fort a long,
long while ago. Now it's my palace, as you can see."

"Can we have something to eat now?" Moloy wondered. "You promised..."

"Ah, yes, most certainly! Now, then, please make yourself comfortable, fellas. There is no dearth of furniture here as you can see?" He pointed to the huge blocks of stone scattered about the enclosure.

"You didn't tell us your name, Sir," Sanjib reminded their host gently, "or how you came to live here?"

"I'll rustle up some grub first," was the reply. "We can talk easier on full stomachs."

Lunch, prepared by the 'king' of the abandoned fort with some help from Bharti, was meat accompanied by some boiled roots.

"What is this?" wondered the girl, savouring a red, tender morsel, "It tastes good."

"Crab meat."

"Crabs?"

"There are lots of them on this island."

"Good for you, Sanjib," teased Moloy, then explained to the 'king', "Our friend here fancies himself as a crab hunter...he does."

"You can look forward to a long, happy stay here in that case, hunting crabs of a dozen varieties."

"Who wants to stay?" Moloy's eyes were round with apprehension, "Let us get out of here as quickly as we can. Our folks must
have gone crazy worrying about us..."

"All in good time!"

"You must tell us your story first," Bharti reminded gently, "How did you come to be here?"

"It's nothing very exciting and not very different from yours. I stumbled on this island when I was fleeing those dasyus. I grabbed a boat and ran. And reached this place."

"Where's your boat?"

"That's the sad part of the story. I was so elated at finding land that I forgot to secure the boat. I went exploring. By the time I returned, it was a different scene. There was no beach. The tide had come in and carried my vessel away. Well...that was that. I was stuck here with no one but myself for company. That was months ago...years perhaps..."

"Didn't the pirates follow you here?"

"They probably thought I had ended up as lunch for a crocodile. Good riddance as far as they were concerned. They must have collected their ransom in any case."

"You haven't told us your name yet," reminded Sanjib.

"Oh? I had almost forgotten it, myself. You can understand that, I suppose. As you can see there is no one here to call me by name. I used to live in Raidighi..."

"You're from Raidighi?"
"There was a fisherman called Sukhen there, once..."
"You're Sukhen?" exclaimed Sanjib, "Sukhen Majhi?"
"Why? Do you know me, kid?"
"Of course I know you, Dada. I am Sanjib, Rash Behari's errand boy! And this...this here is Moloy, Kanti Kaka's son."
"You don't say?" a look almost of happiness crossed Sukhen's features, "Am I glad to see you! But how did you kids get here? And who are you, little girl?"
"Oh, I forgot!" continued Sanjib, "Bharti is Moloy's cousin. She has come here on a visit from... from...what is that place, Didi?"
"America," supplied the girl, "I live in a city called Washington in America."
"Well, well, well!" nodded Sukhen, "A jolly company we are now!"
"We owe it all to those pirated!" cursed Sanjib.
"And your knife," winked Moloy, "If it hadn't been for that little contraption I would have been sound asleep inside that hut now, instead of being lost on an island without a boat or a prayer."
"What's that, eh?" Sukhen was interested, "about a knife?"
Sanjib told him the story of the ill-fated fishing expedition, their capture and escape from Kedo.
"What is this place, Dada?" Bharti pointed to the decrepit walls surrounding them, "Who could have lived on this island?"

"Well...you can imagine who would want to construct a fort on a godforsaken island like this one. Pirates, who else?"

"Pirates?" Moloy's voice shook, "But you...you said there's no one else..."

"I did, I did!" agreed Sukhen, "There have been dasyus in the Sunderbans for several centuries. They were nurtured by the kings of the Arakan."

"No doubt the pirates shared their booty with the Arakan kings."

"Quite right. Even the Firangis joined the crowd later. They all had a merry time, I suppose, looting and pillaging in the villages of the Sunderbans, kidnapping and killing our forefathers..."

"Didn't anyone ever try to capture them or try to drive them away?"

"Someone must have driven the 'mogues' off this island, which is why you are able to feast and relax undisturbed among these splendid ruins today, my friends!"

"Mogues? Who are they?"

"That's what the pirates were called long, long ago. Be grateful they don't live here anymore, eh?"

"Oh, yes!" Bharti agreed, "at least we are safe here."
"I would rather be home," Moloy rolled his eyeballs.

"I second that motion," said Sukhen, "By the way...have you any news of my wife and child, boys? Are they well?"

Sanjib looked away, not answering the question.

"What is it, boy? Tell me, how is my family?"

Sanjib's shoulders drooped. He was quiet.

"Why don't you speak, boy? Answer me...

"I...I don't know," Sanjib said, in uncertain tones.

"You're hiding something from me, boy!" Sukhen caught the boy's shoulders and shook him, "Out with it! Tell me, boy!"

"Well," Sanjib gazed into the other's eyes for a long moment, then shrugged, "If you insist...the news is not good, Sukhen Dada. Your...your wife and child..."

"Are they...are they..." Sukhen's words were a hoarse whisper, "are they dead?"

"No! No!" Sanjib shook his head energetically, "It's not that...they left..."

"Left? What do you mean left?"

"They went away somewhere..."

"Where?"

"No...no one knows, Dada. Everyone thought you were dead when you didn't turn up for such a long time. So your wife..."

"Oh, my God!" Sukhen buried his face in his hands. Sobs shook his emaciated figure.
"Don't weep, Dada!" the three children gathered around their friend, trying to comfort the shattered man, "Please don't weep."

"We'll help you look for your people, Dada," said Moloy, "Please don't be unhappy. Once we're off this damned island..."

"I won't go back!" Sukhen looked up at them, his eyes full of pain, "I shall not leave this place. I have nothing to return to."

"Don't say that, Sukhen!"

"Some day I shall have my revenge!" Sukhen said through gritted teeth, "I will spend whatever is left of my life trying to destroy those dasyus! They...my wife and child gone...they've ruined me... Why should I return? If I return to Raidighi it will only be to work like a slave so that I can repay my debts to that fat slob, Rash Behari..."

"We have some good news for you, Dada!"

"Good news?" Sukhen glared at Sanjib, bleary eyed, "What news can be good?"

"Rash Behari...it's about him. We know his secret."

"Secret? Rash Behari? What are you all talking about?"

"We are saying, that fat pig is mixed up with the dasyus, Dada!"

"You don't say?"

"Yes!" Bharti joined in, "we overheard the pirates when we were their prisoners in that jungle. Rash Behari gets money from the
dasyus—a percentage of their booty. And he also lends money to the people of Raidighi to pay off the dasyus... you see how it is?"

"So that's his game, heh?" Sukhen was on his feet, shaking his fist, "If it's the last thing I do, I'll get that villain!"

"Let's get off this island first."

"We must be careful, Sukhen. Rash Behari is a powerful man..."

"And cunning."

"We'll see about that!" snorted Sukhen, "when we return to Raidighi."

"Now you're talking!" Moloy smiled, "but how do we go? There's no fuel in our boat."

"Where there's a will, there's a way, my friends."

"I'd trade all of my will for a can of fuel at this moment," said Moloy wryly.

"Where's that knife of yours, Sanjib?"

"What are you going to do with my knife, Sukhen Kaka?"

"Oars, kid! Give me that knife."

"Oars?"

"Yes...we have four pairs of good hands, don't we? So let's get to work, children!"

The evening was upon them by the time the oars were ready.

"That should do!" Sukhen surveyed the two pairs of oars that they had managed to create out of stout boughs from the surrounding forest. At the end of each was lashed a flat
paddle fashioned of the heavy bark of trees. They were crude devices but adequate, given the circumstances in which the quartet had been obliged to labour.

"What now?" Moloy was anxious to be up and moving.

"Should we not wait until the morning, Dada?" wondered Bharti, "It will be dark within a couple of hours and out there on the water we shall not be able to even know where we're going."

"There's going to be a decent moon tonight," Sanjib was confident, "We can row by that."

"More important," said Sukhen, "the tide's going to be up come evening and we'll lose your boat, like I did mine, if we don't get going now!"

Sukhen spent some more time preparing a meal of smoked fish. This he packed neatly in leaves. For water he made a large container carved out of a dried gourd.

"We shall need food and water soon," he explained. "There's no knowing when well get to human habitation. So there!"

A short while later the group of four—three youngsters and a gaunt man in rags—was making its way back towards the mud flat where the trio had beached their boat. The youngsters' clothes showed the ravages of the night and the jungle.

Without Sukhen it was doubtful whether
they would have been able to locate their vessel. He knew the island like the back of his hand. He also knew the safest route towards the beach, avoiding innumerable traps that the forest held for the unwary.

Among the honey collectors

"Hsshh! Not so loud, you fool! Haven't you heard? Even walls have ears!"

"Well, I didn't see anyone around the house when I sneaked in," said the visitor, crushed by the reprimand, "I am careful, see?"

"So then how did they escape, if you are all so smart, eh?" demanded Rash Behari, his lips curling in disgust and anger.

"How were we to know that those infernal kids had a knife or something about them?"

"You didn't bother to search them?"

"It has never happened before!"

"Now it has, and you'd better get those kids back quickly if you know what's good for you. You don't want to be hanging upside down inside a police lock up, do you?"

"We looked everywhere on the island, boss."

"So they've left the island, too?" Rash Behari shook his head in disbelief. "That means they got one of your boats as well, eh? You imbeciles!"

"Well..." the pirate squirmed under the contractor's withering gaze.
"When did you discover they had escaped? When did they leave Kedo?"

"We found them gone a couple of hours before sunrise, boss. They must have left Kedo an hour later...maybe two..."

"They should have been here by now in that case?" the contractor's brows knitted together as his brain raced.

"No way, boss!" the pirate sounded extremely confident.

"Why?"

"There wasn't enough fuel in that boat to get them this far. A few kilometres maybe...no more than that. Even if they got to the mainland it would take them a day or two to get back to Raidighi. If they escape the swamp, that is..."

"We can't take that chance," snapped Rash Behari, "we've got to act quickly. Where is the exchange to take place?"

"At Chotomollakhali, boss."

"When?"

"At noon...around twelve..."

"That's too late!" breathed the contractor, "By your own reckoning they escaped last night. It's almost twenty-four hours gone now. If those kids get back before the ransom is paid we can say goodbye to all that cash!"

"What do you suggest, then?"

"Let the rendezvous be at sunrise. There are only a couple hours to go before first light."
Go now and deliver your message to dear Kanti Kaka."

"And to his wealthy brother, heh?" the other chuckled.

"Don't get too boisterous yet, you fool! One more mistake and you'll be great food for the *kamotl*"

"Aw, boss!" the messenger's eyes rolled in fear. He knew that the fat man's bluff exterior hid a ruthless mind that would sacrifice anything or anyone which crossed him, "I was only kidding..."

"Get going now! And don't forget to clear out of Kedo when you've got the money. Tell your *sardar*...don't leave any clues for the police. They're certain to come calling if those children get back to Raidighi. Not a trace that you've been on that island. Is that clear?"

The pirates' representative slunk out of the contractor's house, much chastened. When he was gone Rash Behari remained for a few minutes in contemplation, his brow furrowed.

"I can't row any more!" groaned Moloy, letting go of the makeshift oar and stretching his limbs, "my whole body aches."

"You don't want to spend the rest of your days blundering about in this wilderness, do you?"

"I don't care," Moloy was unfazed by his friend's taunt, "I don't care if a crocodile gets
me. I'm too tired. I could sleep for a week."

"He's right, Sukhen," Bharti looked imploringly at their leader, "We're all exhausted. We need to find a place where we can rest awhile."

"I've been thinking about that, kids. We should be close to the mainland now. As soon as we spot land we'll go ashore."

"When do we get back home?" quavered Moloy, "They'll all be worried sick."

"As to that, I've no remedy," Sukhen shook his head, "We could be a few hours away from Raidighi...or several days...this swamp has a way of confusing everyone. No one really knows the ways of the Sunderbans..."

"Except Bonbibil" Sanjib piped up.

"Bonbibi indeed! It was her will that guided you children to my lonely home in that fort. I might have lived and died there if Bonbibi hadn't thought it fit to send you along."

"Hail the Goddess!" Moloy said grimly. "Show us the way, Bonbibil"

"Look!"

"Whoa...what...what is that?"

All four passengers of the small boat craned their necks forward, following Sukhen's pointing oar. Off to their right, a dull black mass that could only be land interrupted the tedium of the water's surface.

"It's land!" Moloy jumped to his feet, "we are home!"
"Land!" echoed Bharti and Sanjib.

"Easy there! Sit down! Down!" snapped Sukhen as their light craft keeled dangerously over at the sudden movements of its occupants, "Now that we're close to land there's no point providing a meal for the kamot, eh? Sit down and row, guys!"

The youngsters needed no further exhortation. As one man they pulled, leaning their backs into the oars with renewed vigour. Spray erupted off the surface of the swamp as the boat literally flew in the direction of the mud flat.

"Ahoy, there!"

The call that rang out from the approaching shore was like music to the castaways' ears.

"Help!" Moloy responded.

"This way!" came the reply.

By the indistinct light of the moon they could see a human figure standing close to the water's edge, beckoning. A few minutes later the vessel's bow slid into the soft mud of the shore.

"What are you fellows doing out in the swamp at this hour?" the man enquired as he helped Sukhen pull their boat up on to the mud flat, where it would be safe from the tides.

"We are all crazy!" Sanjib's big, white teeth flashed in the night.

"You can say that again! These kids took a
great fancy to the swamp...they were out sightseeing and they found me. Or rather," Sukhen winked at Moloy, "I found them!"

"Well...whatever your reason was for going out there...this is no time to be touring the Sundarbans. *Dakhin Roy* is apt to be on the prowl."

"He's kept away from us so far," Sukhen nodded, "But you're right. No point pushing our luck. By the way, friend...where are we? And who are you?"

"You are in Chotomollakhali, friends. And I am Som."

"Co-to-mo-ka-?" Bharti tried and looked at her companions in dismay, "What did he say? What was that name, Sukhen?"

"Chotomollakhali!" he smiled and turned to their new-found acquaintance, explaining, "she is a foreigner, you see? She's new to our names and ways."

"Oh, really?" Som looked Bharti up and down, then walked around her, as if making sure that she was human. "Welcome to Chotomollakhali, Didi."

"Didi?" Bharti pouted, "Why does everyone call me that? Do I look so old?"

"No offence meant, Didi," chuckled Sukhen, "he's only being respectful."

Sukhen then spoke rapidly to their host in a dialect which the children could barely follow.
"What was that?" Moloy demanded to know, "what were you guys scheming, eh?"

"Oh, that? Nothing. He was telling me about himself and this island. It appears that we are among the honey collectors, friends!"

"Honey collectors?"

"That is what people do around here. Collect honey."

"You're right, Dada," Som nodded, "that is what we do for a living. We go into the forest for honey."

"Forest?" Bharti rolled her eyes, "Sounds like a dangerous pastime."

"No more dangerous than any other."

"But Dakhin Roy..."

"Yes...Dakhin Roy," Som shrugged, "He is the Lord of the jungle. It is at his pleasure that we go into the wilds to do our work."

"I wish you chaps would stop talking!" Moloy yawned, "I'm ready to drop off to sleep at this very spot."

"Oh, yes," Som patted the boy on his back, "how thoughtless of me! Come along, friends. Come to my hut. As for food you can share whatever is available."

"How come you were on the beach at this late hour?" Sukhen wondered.

"I was late returning from the forest. It is fortunate I was here and you ran into me. Dakhin Roy does not take kindly to outsiders. He does not like intruders in his domain."
"Please accept our heartfelt thanks for protecting us from his wrath, dear friend," Sukhen folded his palms in a gesture of contrition. "You are no less than a God for us, yourself!"

"I am only Som. Come, our young friends are almost asleep on their feet, what?"

Dakhin Roy

"Where is Rash Behari, Dada?"

Sumanta Mukherjea's face showed the ravages of worry and fatigue. There were dark circles under his eyes. The long trip to and from Kolkata, and the tension, had taken their toll.

Kanti Kaka was not in much better shape. The normally calm, self-assured fisherman had become a shadow of his former self.

"You go find out, Bidhu," Kanti nodded to his Man Friday, it is time we were leaving. There is only an hour left to sunrise. We shall be late..."

"We might as well leave, Kaka," was Bidhu's reply, "I already checked up at Rash Behari's. He has gone off on some urgent work...to Kolkata. Won't be back for a couple of days."

"That is strange," Kanti shook his head in bewilderment, "He was set on accompanying us to the rendezvous with the dasyus."
"He is a big and important man. He has all sorts of business to attend to."
"We can't wait any longer, Dada," urged Sumanta, "We had better be going."
"Get the boat ready, Bidhu."
"I'm all set to move," Bidhu lowered his voice, "are you sure you don't want to take the Inspector along?"
"No way! That could certainly endanger the children's lives!"
"As you wish, Kaka."

Shortly thereafter, the Sonkali was chugging along, through the tranquil waters of the swamp, in the direction of Chotomollakhali. They had a little over an hour to reach the village. Already the fingers of dawn were teasing the cold veil of night.

'Rash Behari's absence was a blow,' Kanti Kaka thought to himself. Whatever his shortcomings, the fat contractor was a shrewd man and worldly wise. He would have known how to handle a situation such as the one the two brothers were shortly to be confronted with.

The pirates were desperate men. They would be armed and ready to kill at the slightest provocation. The only firearm on board the Sonkali was Kanti Mukherjea's ancient musket. He had not the slightest doubt that his weapon would be useless against the pirates' automatic weapons. In any
case, the Mukherjeas were no fighting men.

The ransom was to be delivered to the dasyus’ representative who would meet them at the village. The children would be returned to Raidighi by noon. How or by whom had not been explained.

"Will they release the children, Dada?"

"We can only pray, Sumu, and hope for the best," Kanti Kaka reassured his brother.

"But the bandits’ greed is our best guarantee that our children will be returned."

"How's that?"

"There is always the possibility of future earnings from more such attacks if their hostages are released unharmed. No one wants more trouble, not even the dasyus. If there is bloodshed the police will be under pressure. They're likely to chase the dasyus harder...for a while at least until the furore dies down."

"I hope you’re right, Dada."

"Have faith, Sumu. Bonbibi will protect the kids. They are in her realm."

"What are you doing up so early, Som?"

"Haven’t you heard? The early bird gets the worm," the honey collector smiled at Bharti. "We are obliged to go deep into the jungles looking for beehives. The further we go, the more fruitful our effort is likely to be."

Som had already completed his dawn
ablutions and was preparing to leave the hut. The implements of his profession, a pot and a crude net, were tied about his waist. Bharti's companions were still asleep.

"What is that for?" Bharti pointed to the net, "The pot...I can understand...is for collecting honey. But..."

"We knock the hives into the net, Didi."

"Aren't you scared of the bees, Som?"

"We have to be careful. You have to be when you're raiding somebody else's home, eh?"

"Can I see you off?" wondered the girl, stretching and yawning. "Now that I'm awake, I'd like to exercise my legs a bit. Some fresh air will do me good."

"Certainly. Come along."

Bharti followed the young man out of the hut. The morning chill hit her senses like a gentle slap, driving away the vestiges of sleep. The sun was not yet up but the sky was already a purple hue.

"My word! This is refreshing!"

As Som strode towards the beach she trotted after him.

"I thought you were going into the forest, Som? That is in the opposite direction..."

"There is something we do every morning before we leave for work, Didi."

Som walked across the mud flat until he stood almost knee deep in the water of the swamp. Then be lifted his arms skyward,
palms folded and closed his eyes. His lips moved in prayer.

"What was that...surya namaskar?" queried the girl, when he had finished. She had been unable to comprehend the muttered words of prayer.

"No, Didi!" Som made a sweeping gesture with one arm, covering the water, the forest and all the land around, "it is a prayer to the lord of the jungle. It is a hymn to Dakhin Roy. He is the protector of this land. He is our guardian. At his will we do our work..."

"Aren't you afraid?" There was a tremor in her voice as Bharti realized that the forest and swamp surrounding them was the abode of the tiger. Dakhin Roy might step out of the jungle any moment and they all would be at his mercy.

"Are you afraid of Vishnu, or Mahesh, or Kali?" was Som's reply, and when the girl shook her head, "Dakhin Roy is our Lord and protector. If a honey collector's extinction is written at his hands, so be it!"

Since the time that she had learnt from her father about the land of her forefathers, Bharti had wanted to visit India and see the fabled Royal Bengal Tiger. The orange coat and dark stripes, the yellow glowing coals of a tiger's eyes; those formed the mental picture that books and zoos provided her with. But here, in this wild swamp, on a cold morning with
only this wiry young man for company, it was a different story.

Bharti had not seen the tiger in the wild yet. But all about them—in the air and in the water, in the jungle and in their very breath almost—she could sense the presence of Dakhin Roy. He was fear and hope. He represented life and death—all the mysteries of existence.

"What was that?"

Som's question interrupted Bharti's reverie. She gaped at him, still uncomprehending.

"That sound? Don't you hear it? It's a boat, Didi...a motor boat!"

"Yes, I hear it now."

The steady hum of a diesel engine was now distinctly audible.

"It's coming this way," said Som. Then, as the outlines of a craft took shape in the fast evaporating morning mist, he shouted, "They're dasyus, Didi, jal dasyus!"

"The pirates!"

"Quick! Get back inside my hut!"

"You...Som," cried the girl, "aren't you coming? They'll see you..."

"I'll be all right. You go! Hurry!"

Bharti sprinted towards the hut, not daring even to glance over her shoulder at the approaching motorboat. She only drew breath after she was inside the safety of Som's hut.

On the beach events were unfolding quickly.
As soon as the bow of the pirate craft ground
into the mud flat two men jumped out and
hurried towards the waiting honey collector.
"Hey, you!" called the leading pirate, "what
are you doing here? Have you seen anyone
else about? Two men from Raidighi?"

"I live here, sardar," Som realized from the
other man's demeanour that he was the
pirate chief. "No! There's no one else here.
I was just about to leave for my day's work in
the forest."

Som sent up a mental prayer hoping that
the pirates had not caught sight of the girl
standing by his side a couple of minutes ago.

"Stay put, there! You're not going anywhere
for a while," barked the chief. Then, turning
to his follower, "Keep an eye on this fellow."

"You!" the pirate chief strode several yards
back and forth, along the mud flat, before
addressing Som again, "is there any other
place where a boat can land?"

"No, sardaii" Som shook his head, "If you're
waiting for someone to come here by way of
the swamp this is the place to wait. Who are
you waiting for, anyway? Maybe I can help..."

"It's no business of yours! Don't poke your
nose into affairs that do not concern you, that
is, if you want to stay in one piece."

Som kept quiet, but his eyes flew towards
the hut.

"Is there anyone in that hut?"
The honey collector’s heart skipped a beat. He tried to keep his features expressionless and his voice steady.

"I live alone, sardar," he lied, simultaneously sending forth a silent entreaty that none of his guests would choose this time to venture out of the shelter.

"Kick"

Som’s prayer was well timed. For at that moment there was repressed commotion inside the hut. Sukhen was awake and the boys had also begun to stir.

"What are you two peeking at?" yawned Moloy when he noticed Sukhen and his cousin craning their necks to see outside the hut, while keeping themselves concealed. He shook Sanjib by the shoulder, "Hey, you! Are you going to snore all day?"

^Shhh!" Bharti hissed, putting a finger to her lips, "Shut up, Moloy!"

"What the..."

"What’s going on, Didi?" came Sanjib's sleepy drawl.

"Keep quiet!" Sukhen motioned to the boys, "don't you dare make a sound now!"

"The dasyus! They're here!"

"The d...das...what are you talking about?"

"Shhh! Keep still and watch!"

Soon four anxious faces were peering out of the gloom inside the hut, trying to follow the events on the beach.
"What time did you tell them to be here?" the pirate chief growled at his henchman, "the sun is up!"

Barely had the words escaped his stained teeth than an orange glow appeared on the horizon. As it rose and spread through the sky, the sound of an approaching motor intruded into the silence of the beach.

"That’s a boat!" yelled the man guarding Som and twisted around to face the water. "That should be the money!"

"Not a moment too soon!" his chief spat into the mud and advanced in the direction of the incoming boat, his automatic held ready for action.

The four watchers inside Som’s hut also saw the second boat. It was familiar.

"The Sonkali!" breathed Sanjib, "That’s the Sonkali!"

"Who... Kaka...?"

"Wait!" Sukhen’s restraining hands held on to the boy’s shoulders, "Not now! Just watch!"

They could see the pirate chief striding confidently forward to intercept the Sonkali. Its motor fell silent and the boat halted in the water a few yards short of the mud flat. Presently a figure started to get out of the boat.

"There’s Kanti Kaka!" exclaimed Bharti.

"And your father!"

"Stay, kids!" Sukhen urged hoarsely,
"Let us not do anything in a hasty manner."
"Kaka is carrying something... a bag..."
"They have brought the money...!"
"But we're here! Free!"
"They don't know that..."
"Let's stop them before the dasyus' escape with the cash..."
"And get us all killed?" Sukhen directed a withering glance at Moloy. "Just sit tight!"

Kanti Mukherjea had started to walk towards the mud flat, the leather pouch tucked under one arm. His brother was climbing out of the Sonkali. The figure of Bidhu could be seen at the fishing boat's bow, his bare torso outlined against the painted sky.

"So I see you have taken my advice, eh?" the pirate gloated, "Good for you!"

The other pirate joined in his chief's merriment. An instant later that laughter turned into a terrible, mind-shattering scream.

The dasyu chieftain was in ankle-deep water, facing the figures approaching from the Sonkali. The water erupted, almost at his feet. From out of the seething foam rose an orange-brown, striped apparition, towering for one incredible moment above the paralyzed human figure. Then it fell, crushing in its merciless jaws the writhing, tortured remains of what had been a man.
A child's justice

For a seeming eternity all life froze on the mud flat of Chotomollakhali and inside Som's hut. That fleeting, unforgettable glimpse of Dakhin Roy had been enough to crush all who witnessed his power. One moment he was there, terrible in his glory, clutching his threshing, screaming victim in vice-like jaws, the next he was gone, and the swamp was still again.

Som was the first to react. The second pirate was still gaping at the spot where his leader had disappeared. Like a striking beast the lean honey collector lunged, one arm closing around the pirate's throat while the other knocked the automatic rifle out of the near nerveless fingers. They collapsed in the mud in a tangled heap and went rolling, over and over into the water.

"Hold on!" yelled Bidhu and dived in to help Som.

The combined strength of the two young men was too much for the pirate. Soon his struggles ceased.

"That's that!" declared Bidhu, pulling himself out of the water and stretching a fist out towards the honey collector, "I'm glad to have met you, friend!"

"Kaka!"

"Papa!"
The cries came from the direction of the hut. Kanti and Sumanta Mukherjea looked up to see three figures sprinting down the mud towards them.

Moloy led the happy charge. Sukhen followed him. Sanjib hopped along as fast as he could.

Three figures!
"Where's Bharti?"
Kanti was the first to realize that his niece was not in the group rushing to greet them.
"Where is your sister?"
"Over here! We are over here!" The shout came from the hut.

The group on the beach could not have been more surprised if a tidal wave had hit them at that moment.

The slim, hesitant figure of Sumanta's daughter appeared near the honey collector's hut. Behind her, clutching the girl's shoulder with his left hand and brandishing a revolver in the other, stood the portly figure of the contractor.

"Rash Behari!" Kanti stared indignantly at the pair, "is this some kind of a joke?"
"Stay back, Kanti Kaka!" warned the contractor. A grim smile played on his lips. A smile that did not reach his eyes. "All of you stay away from us and no one gets hurt."

"What is the meaning of this?" demanded Sumanta, "let the child go!"
"Oh, no...not so fast! Throw me that purse, first. Fifty thousand is a lot of money. I know you went through a lot of trouble to collect it, Sumanta Babu."

"He's part of the gang, Kaka," Moloy explained, "He knew about it all along."

"So that was your game, was it?"

"I'm afraid that is so," shrugged Rash Behari, "But...the best laid plans fail. Still, I'm not going to run out a loser. I never have, you understand?"

"You'll live to regret this, Rash Behari!"

"It doesn't seem that way right now, does it? Come, come...the bag! I'm in a hurry!"

"Give it to him, Dada," urged Sumanta, "Let him have the money for all it's worth."

"Let the girl go!"

"Not so fast, Kaka. I'm afraid I shall have to take her with me...for the time being. Insurance, you see?"

"You can't get away with this!"

"I will, too. Now then...stand aside!" The contractor hurried down the beach, prodding the girl along with the snout of his revolver.

They stood aside to let the pair pass. Rash Behari held all the cards.

"You've got the money. Let my child go!"

"You'll find her at my house in Raidighi. Tied up and gagged...but in one piece."

The contractor and his captive were now quite close to the vessel.
"Poor sods!" Rash Behari nodded towards the body of the dead pirate floating in the water, "Dakhin Roy spoilt their party. But no one’s going to ruin mine!"

"Up you go, little girl!" Rash Behari turned and hoisted Bharti into the motor-boat, not taking his eyes off the watching group on the beach while he did so.

This proved to be his undoing.

Unseen by human eyes, a long, serrated form had glided through the swamp, up close to the mud flat. Only the tips of the snout protruded above water. For an instant the crocodile waited, making sure of his prey. Then he attacked.

"I'm sorry it had to be this way, Kanti Ka..a..a..." *

The words trailed off in a howl of abject terror as the reptile's jaws snapped open and shut, clamping on the contractor's foot. It moved swiftly back into the swamp, dragging its struggling, screaming victim deeper and deeper into a watery grave.

A tanned, youthful figure shot forward, sprinting across the ground towards the struggling man and his nemesis. In one brown blur of motion, Sanjib had thrown himself into the swamp. He swam with strong, sure strokes towards the crocodile. In one fist he held the knife that had been a nameless foreigner's gift. Sunlight glinted off the polished blade.
And then the boy and the crocodile were locked in a mortal combat. Sanjib held on to the reptile's torso with one hand as it rolled over and over in the water. Its spiny tail thrashed water into boiling foam. Grasping a fleeting chance Sanjib's arm rose and fell. Steel bit into the amphibian's soft underbelly. It roared in pain and anger. Again and again the knife struck. The water ran red with the dying beast's blood. And then, as suddenly as the struggle had started, it was over.

Sanjib's arm fell limply into the water. His body relaxed, then appeared to float on the water's surface.

Rash Behari was still floundering in neck deep water, half crazed with pain and fear.

"Get them out of the water, Bidhu!" Kanti Kaka called.

"Sanjib!" Moloy's voice was hoarse. So was Bharti's. Both children had been screaming incessantly at their friend while the fight lasted.

"He'll live!" was Bidhu's pronouncement as he examined and then hoisted Sanjib's still form up across his shoulders.

"Where am I?"

"You are in your bed!" was Bharti's rejoinder to her friend.

Sanjib's eyes fluttered open, then promptly
they closed again. "I'm tired...tired..."
"Go back to sleep. It'll do you good."
"You will spoil him sick, cousin," came Moloy's cheerful comment. "He was always a layabout. God only knows what he'll be up to next..."
"What kind of a friend are you, Moloy?" scolded Bharti, "I for one am glad I have a friend like Sanjib!"
"And a cousin like me, heh?"
"You're impossible! By the way, where is his soup?"
"Oh...soup?" Moloy squirmed, then retreated, "Hold on, I'll get it. I forgot..."
"Will you be going back to your country now, Didi?"
Bharti looked at Sanjib's wan features.
"I suppose I shall, Sanjib. The vacation is over. I have to get back to school."
"Will you remember Raidighi?"
"I couldn't forget a moment of my stay here if I wanted to. I loved every moment of it."
"Even the jal dasyus?" he teased.
"Aww... no... not that part," grimaced the girl, "but still... all's well that ends well! A poet said that..."
"Do you read poetry, Didi? I wish I could... I like songs...and stories..."
"There's a promise I'm going to take from you, Sanjib."
"What is it?"
"You'll go to school. And you shan't ever give up your studies, right? If you do, I'll hear about it from Kanti Kaka and come right back here!"

"In that case I shall certainly drop out at the first opportunity, Didi. Anything to meet you again!"

"I am serious about this, boy. A child's place is in school, okay? And don't you dare forget that ever!"

"I know what you'll be when you're grown up, Didi," Sanjib's eyes glinted mischievously.

"Eh... what?"

"You'll make a real tough school teacher, Didi!" Then his face fell and he shook his head.

"Now what? What is bothering you..."

"It's not so easy as all that, Didi. Who will pay for my education, my clothes, food... Now that Rash Behari has been sent to jail, there is no one I can turn to. At least he gave me food and shelter..."

"Surprise! Surprise!" Bharti grinned.

"What?"

"There's a gift for you..."

"Stop teasing, Didi!" Sanjib looked gloomy, "How I wish I could attend school..."

"You will, my boy. You will! Rash Behari wasn't all bad, you know? His last gesture before he was marched off to prison, was to leave everything he had to you."
"He left everything to me?" Sanjib's jaw fell open in amazement, "You must joking... Are you crazy?"

"Oh, yes? Ask Kaka if you wish," the girl nodded vigorously, "You are now the contractor's heir, Sanjib. He has provided for your education and everything else. You need never go to work for anyone again. At least, not until you've graduated out of college!"

A warm glow lit up the boy's face. His eyes were moist and full of an indescribable joy.

"I wish..." Sanjib sighed, "I wish every boy and girl in this world could do all the things that a child must do, Didi. That is laugh...and play...and learn to be a fine human being..."

"Spoken like a man, my friend!" chanted Moloy, returning with a bowl of steaming soup for the convalescent. "I am sure Dakhin Roy would approve!"
A sunrise over the Sunderbans would ideally mean a warm, rosy glow on the horizon, fresh invigorating air, the incessant chirping of birds and the desperate scramble of night crawlers as they search for cover. But this daybreak was a morning like no other. It was doubly charged with the excitement and expectation of a group setting out on a fishing expedition. What adventures would the still, translucent waters unfold? What mysteries lie hidden in the eerie, sinister impenetrable wall of vegetation that borders the swamp?