

## five



It was late in the afternoon when at last Kalua's cart came within view of its destination: the Sudder Opium Factory—fondly spoken of by old Company hands as the 'Ghazeepore Carcanna'. The factory was immense: its premises covered forty-five acres and sprawled over two adjoining compounds, each with numerous courtyards, water tanks and iron-roofed sheds. Like the great medieval forts that overlooked the Ganga, the factory was so situated as to have easy access to the river while being high enough to escape seasonal floods. But unlike such forts as Chunar and Buxar, which were overgrown and largely abandoned, the Carcanna was anything but a picturesque ruin: its turrets housed squads of sentries, and its parapets were manned by a great number of peons and armed burkundazes.

The day-to-day management of the factory was in the hands of a superintendent, a senior official of the East India Company who oversaw a staff of several hundred Indian workers: the rest of the British contingent consisted of overseers, accountants, storekeepers, chemists and two grades of assistant. The superintendent lived on the premises, and his sprawling bungalow was surrounded by a colourful garden, planted with many varieties of ornamental poppy. The English church was nearby and the passage of the day was marked by the ringing of its bell. On Sundays, worshippers were called to service by the firing of a cannon. The gun-crew was paid not by the Carcanna, but by the subscription of the congregation: the

opium factory being an institution steeped in Anglican piety, none of the residents begrudged the expense.

Although the Sudder Opium Factory was indisputably large and well-guarded, there was nothing about its exterior to suggest to an onlooker that it was among the most precious jewels in Queen Victoria's crown. On the contrary, a miasma of lethargy seemed always to hang over the factory's surroundings. The monkeys that lived around it, for instance: Deeti pointed a few of these out to Kabutri as the ox-cart trundled towards the walls. Unlike others of their kind they never chattered or fought or stole from passers-by; when they came down from the trees it was to lap at the open sewers that drained the factory's effluents; after having sated their cravings, they would climb back into the branches to resume their stupefied scrutiny of the Ganga and its currents.

Kalua's cart rumbled slowly past the factory's outer compound: this was a complex of some sixteen enormous godowns that were used for the storage of processed opium. The fortifications here were formidable, and the guards particularly sharp-eyed—and well they might be, for the contents of those few sheds, or so it was said, were worth several million pounds sterling and could buy a good part of the City of London.

As Kalua's cart rolled on, towards the factory's main compound, Deeti and Kabutri began to sneeze; soon, Kalua and the oxen were sniffing too, for they had now drawn abreast of the godowns where farmers came to dispose of their 'poppy trash'—leaves, stalks and roots, all of which were used in the packaging of the drug. Ground up for storage, these remains produced a fine dust that hung in the air like a fog of snuff. Rare was the passer-by who could brave this mist without exploding into a paroxysm of sneezes and sniffles—and yet it was a miracle, plain to behold, that the coolies pounding the trash were no more affected by the dust than were their young English overseers.

Noses streaming, the oxen plodded on, past the massive brass-studded doors of the factory's Sudder Gateway, towards

a humbler but more-frequented entrance at the south-western corner of the walls, a few steps from the Ganga. This stretch of riverbank was unlike any other, for the ghats around the Carcanna were shored up with thousands of broken earthenware gharas—the round-bottomed vessels in which raw opium was brought to the factory. The belief was widespread that fish were more easily caught after they had nibbled at the shards, and as a result the bank was always crowded with fishermen.

Leaving Kabutri in Kalua's cart, Deeti headed alone towards the factory's entrance, nearby. Here stood the weighing shed to which the farmers of the district brought their poppy-leaf wrappers every spring, to be weighed and sorted into grades of fine and coarse, 'chandee' and 'ganta'. This was where Deeti would have sent her own rotis, had she accumulated enough to make the trouble worthwhile. Around harvest time there was always a great press of people here, but the crop being late this year, the crowd was relatively small.

A small troop of uniformed burkundazes was on duty at the gate, and Deeti was relieved to see that their sirdar, a stately white-moustachioed elder, was a distant relative of her husband's. When she went up to him and murmured Hukam Singh's name, he knew exactly why she had come. Your husband's condition isn't good, he said, ushering her into the factory. Get him home quickly.

Deeti was about to step in when she glanced over the sirdar's shoulder, into the weighing shed: the sight made her pull back, with a sudden start of apprehension. Such was the length of the shed that the door at the far end looked like a distant pinprick of light; in between, arrayed along the floor, stood many gigantic pairs of scales, dwarfing the men around them; beside each set of scales sat a tall-hatted Englishman, overseeing teams of weighmen and accountants. Buzzing busily around the sahibs were turbaned muharirs bearing armloads of paper and dhoti-clad serishtas with thick registers; swarming everywhere were gangs of bare-bodied boys carrying improbably tall stacks of poppy-flower wrappers.

But where to go? Deeti said to the sirdar, in alarm. How will I find my way?

Go straight through this shed, came the answer: and keep on going, through the weighing hall, to the mixing room. When you get through, you'll find one of our relatives waiting. He works here too: he'll show you where to find your husband.

With her sari draped over her face, Deeti stepped in and made her way past columns of stacked poppy-flower rotis, ignoring the stares of serishtas, muharirs and other lesser carcoons: not another woman to be seen, but no matter—everyone was too busy to ask where she was going. Yet, it still took an age to reach the far door and here she stood blinded for a moment, in the bright sunlight.

Facing her was a doorway, leading into another immense iron-roofed structure, except that this one was even bigger and higher than the weighing shed—it was the largest building she had ever seen. She walked in, murmuring a prayer, and was brought again to a halt by the sight ahead: the space in front of her was so vast that her head began to spin and she had to steady herself by leaning against a wall. Bars of light were shining through slit-like windows that stretched from the floor to the roof; enormous square columns ran down the length of the hall and the ceiling soared so high above the beaten floor that the air inside was cool, almost wintry. The earthy, sickly odour of raw opium-sap hung close to the ground, like wood-smoke on a chilly day. In this hall too, gigantic pairs of scales stood against the walls, here used for the weighing of raw opium. Clustered around each set of scales were dozens of earthenware gharas, of exactly the kind she herself used in packing her harvest. How well she knew them, those vessels: they each held one maund of raw opium gum, of a consistency such that a ball of it would stick briefly to your palm if you upended it. Who would guess, in looking at them, how much time and trouble went into the filling of these vessels? So this was where they came, these offspring of her fields? Deeti could not help looking around in curiosity, marvelling at the speed and dexterity with which the vessels were whisked on and off the scales. Then, with paper battas attached, they were carried

to a seated sahib, who proceeded to poke, prod and sniff their contents before marking them with a seal, allowing some through for processing, and condemning others to some lesser use. Nearby, held back by a line of lathi-carrying peons, stood the farmers whose vessels were being weighed; alternatively tense and angry, cringing and resigned, they were waiting to find out if their harvests for the year had fulfilled their contracts—if not, they would have to start the next year with a still greater load of debt. Deeti watched as a peon carried a slip of paper to a farmer and was rebuffed with a howl of protest: all over the hall, she noticed, there were quarrels and altercations breaking out, with farmers shouting at serishtas, and landlords berating their tenants.

Deeti saw now that she was beginning to attract attention, so she hunched her shoulders and stepped forward, hurrying through that endless cavern of a hall, not daring to pause till she found herself outside again, in the sun. Here, she would have liked to linger a little, to catch her breath, but from the cover of her sari she spotted an armed burkundaz striding in her direction. There was only one way to go—into a shed to her right. She did not hesitate; hitching up her sari she stepped quickly through the door.

Now once again Deeti was taken aback by the space ahead, but this time not because of the vastness of its dimensions, but rather the opposite—it was like a dim tunnel, lit only by a few small holes in the wall. The air inside was hot and fetid, like that of a closed kitchen, except that the smell was not of spices and oil, but of liquid opium, mixed with the dull stench of sweat—a reek so powerful that she had to pinch her nose to keep herself from gagging. No sooner had she steadied herself, than her eyes were met by a startling sight—a host of dark, legless torsos was circling around and around, like some enslaved tribe of demons. This vision—along with the overpowering fumes—made her groggy, and to keep herself from fainting she began to move slowly ahead. When her eyes had grown more accustomed to the gloom, she discovered the secret of those circling torsos: they were bare-bodied men,

sunk waist-deep in tanks of opium, tramping round and round to soften the sludge. Their eyes were vacant, glazed, and yet somehow they managed to keep moving, as slow as ants in honey, tramping, treading. When they could move no more, they sat on the edges of the tanks, stirring the dark ooze only with their feet. These seated men had more the look of ghouls than any living thing she had ever seen: their eyes glowed red in the dark and they appeared completely naked, their loincloths—if indeed they had any—being so steeped in the drug as to be indistinguishable from their skin. Almost as frightening were the white overseers who were patrolling the walkways—for not only were they coatless and hatless, with their sleeves rolled, but they were also armed with fearsome instruments: metal scoops, glass ladles and long-handled rakes. When one of these overseers approached her she all but screamed; she heard him say something—what it was she did not wish to know, but the very shock of being spoken to by such a man sent her scurrying down the tunnel and out at the far end.

Not till she was through the door did she allow herself to breathe freely again: now, as she was trying to cleanse her lungs of the odour of raw, churned opium, she heard someone say: Bhauji? Are you all right? The voice proved to be that of their relative and it was all she could do not to collapse on him. Fortunately, he seemed to understand, without explanation, the effect the tunnel had had on her: leading her across a courtyard, he stopped at a well and poured water from a bucket, so she could drink and wash her face.

Everyone needs water after they come through the mixing room, he said. Better you rest here a bit, Bhauji.

Gratefully, Deeti squatted in the shade of a mango tree while he pointed to the buildings around them: there was the wetting shed, where the poppy-leaf wrappers were dampened before being sent into the assembly room; and there, set a little way back from the other buildings, was the house where medicines were made—all kinds of dark syrups and strange white powders that were much valued by the sahibs.

Deeti allowed the words to roll around and away from her, until she was once again impatient to deal with the errand at hand. Come, she said, let's go. They rose to their feet and he led her diagonally across the courtyard, into yet another gigantic shed, every bit as large as the weighing room—with the difference that where the latter had been filled with the clamour of altercation, this one was sepulchrally quiet, as if it were some cavernous shrine in the high Himalayas, chilly, damp and dimly lit. Stretching away, on either side, reaching all the way to the lofty ceiling, were immense shelves, neatly arranged with tens of thousands of identical balls of opium, each about the shape and size of an unhusked coconut, but black in colour, with a glossy surface. Deeti's escort whispered in her ear: This is where the afeem is brought in to dry, after it's been assembled. She noticed now that the shelves were joined by struts and ladders; glancing around, she saw troops of boys clinging to the timber scaffolding, climbing as nimbly as acrobats at a fair, hopping from shelf to shelf to examine the balls of opium. Every now and again, an English overseer would call out an order and the boys would begin to toss spheres of opium to each other, relaying them from hand to hand until they had come to rest safely on the floor.

How could they throw so accurately with one hand, while holding on with the other—and that too at a height where the slightest slip would mean certain death? The sureness of their grip seemed amazing to Deeti, until suddenly one of them did indeed drop a ball, sending it crashing to the floor, where it burst open, splattering its gummy contents everywhere. Instantly the offender was set upon by cane-wielding overseers and his howls and shrieks went echoing through the vast, chilly chamber. The screams sent her hurrying after her relative and she caught up with him on the threshold of yet another of the factory's chambers. Here he lowered his voice reverentially, in the manner of a pilgrim who is about to step into the innermost sanctum of a temple. This is the assembly room, he whispered. It is not for everyone to work here—but your husband Hukam Singh, is one such.

It could indeed have been a temple that Deeti had entered now, for the long, well-aired passage ahead was lined with two rows of dhoti-clad men, sitting cross-legged on the floor, like Brahmins at a feast, each on his own woven seat, with an array of brass cups and other equipment arranged around him. Deeti knew, from her husband's tales, that there were no less than two hundred and fifty men working in that room, and twice that number of running-boys—yet such was the assemblers' concentration that there was very little noise, apart from the pattering of the runners' feet, and periodic shouts announcing the completion of yet another ball of opium. The assemblers' hands moved with dizzying speed as they lined hemispherical moulds with poppy-leaf rotis, moistening the wrappers with lewah, a light solution of liquid opium. Hukam Singh had told Deeti that the measure for every ingredient was precisely laid down by the Company's directors in faraway London: each package of opium was to consist of exactly one seer and seven-and-a-half chittacks of the drug, the ball being wrapped in five chittacks of poppy-leaf rotis, half of fine grade and half coarse, the whole being moistened with no more and no less than five chittacks of lewah. So finely honed was the system, with relays of runners carrying precise measures of each ingredient to each seat, that the assemblers' hands never had cause to falter: they lined the moulds in such a way as to leave half the moistened rotis hanging over the edge. Then, dropping in the balls of opium, they covered them with the overhanging wrappers, and coated them with poppy-trash before tapping them out again. It remained only for runners to arrive with the outer casing for each ball—two halves of an earthenware sphere. The ball being dropped inside, the halves were fitted into a neat little cannonshot, to hold safe this most lucrative of the British Empire's products: thus would the drug travel the seas, until the casing was split open by a blow from a cleaver, in distant Maha-Chin.

Dozens of the black containers passed through the assemblers' hands every hour and were duly noted on a blackboard: Hukam Singh, who was not the most skilled

among them, had once boasted to Deeti of having put together a hundred in a single day. But today Hukam Singh's hands were no longer working and nor was he at his usual seat: Deeti spotted him as she entered the assembly room—he was lying on the floor with his eyes closed and he looked as if he had had some kind of seizure, for a thin line of bubbling spit was dribbling out of the corner of his mouth.

Suddenly, Deeti was assailed by the sirdars who supervised the packaging room. What took you so long? . . . Don't you know your husband is an afeemkhor? . . . Why do you send him here to work? . . . Do you want him to die?

Despite the shocks of the day, Deeti was not of a mind to ignore these attacks. From the shelter of her sari, she snapped back: And who are you to speak to me like that? How would you earn your living if not for afeemkhors?

The altercation drew the attention of an English agent, who waved the sirdars aside. Glancing from Hukam Singh's prone body to Deeti, he said, quietly: *Tumhara mard hai?* Is he your husband?

Although the Englishman's Hindi was stilted, there was a kindly sound to his voice. Deeti nodded, lowering her head, and her eyes filled with tears as she listened to the sahib berating the sirdars: Hukam Singh was a sepoy in our army; he was a balamteer in Burma and was wounded fighting for the Company Bahadur. Do you think any of you are better than him? Shut your mouths and get back to work or I'll whip you with my own chabuk.

The cowed sirdars fell silent, stepping aside as four bearers stooped to lift Hukam Singh's inert body off the floor. Deeti was following them out when the Englishman turned to say: Tell him he can have his job back whenever he wants.

Deeti joined her hands together, to express her gratitude—but in her heart she knew that her husband's days in the Carcanna had come to an end.

On the way home, in Kalua's cart, with her husband's head in her lap and her daughter's fingers in her hand, she had eyes neither for Ghazipur's forty-pillared palace nor for its