

## 'A Special Friendship'

The ship was finally approaching the destination.

"Mum! When are we going to arrive?" asked Harriet.

She was a little plum girl, but she was also tall. Her long blond straight hair was blowing madly in the wind. She frowned, tired of being on that horrible ship.

"Pretty soon" answered a distinguished lady.

"Mom, this ship stinks! I'm tired of being here! There are bad smells, the beds are really uncomfortable, the restrooms are dirty and I don't like the food!" exclaimed Harriet.

"Calm down Harriet, we'll be there in a few hours and then we'll get off!"

It didn't take it too long to land.

"Let's get our luggage and let's get off this mess" said Mr. Taylor

As soon as they touched the muddy ground Harriet exclaimed:

"Ew! What a mess! Mum, why did we have to come here...?"

"Harriet, contain yourself!" said her father, annoyed:

"You will have to get used to this new life, we're here for important purposes and I have a task, as you already know. I don't want to hear more complaints".

"Okay...fine..." said Harriet in a huffy voice.

"Let's wait here, our porter is arriving, he is a man from a low cast" The tall man spoke to his family in a harsh voice, but the little girl didn't understand what he said.

"What's a cast, dad?" asked Harriet.

"A cast is something that classifies an Indian in their society"

"So...since he belongs to a low cast... is he stinky?"

"Probably, but this is not the point. He is the only one who can do this"

"Here is your hamal" said a local man, pointing to a middle-aged Indian man who was sitting on a bullock-cart with a red canopy at the top.

The poor man was skinny, he had brown skin and, at a closer look, seemed older than he was. There was a small retinue of two...

He seemed the one responsible for the journey of the Europeans.

"Good morning Sir, my name is Azad. I'll help you with your bags and show you your house".

"You are late, black man" mumbled Mr. Taylor.

"I am sorry Sir, but I've just finished my job."

Harriet was staring at the cotton tunic and canvas shirt she was wearing. She had never seen a Dhoti before. Actually, she had never seen a person dressed so poorly, disheveled and dirty.

She had always been used to high class people and not even her servitors in England were in such bad shape.

He brought them to the house where they would stay until the Indian riots were over.

While Azad was driving the bullock-cart, Harriet continued to complain: she said that the moist soil was ruining her shoes, that she wanted a carriage like the one she had back at home, and that she was tired of walking under the boiling sun.

Then the canopy of the bullock-cart was immediately hit by splashes of mud, while the mother fanned herself with a fan and meanwhile the father walked carelessly of his daughter and wife.

They had almost arrived at the house, in the Indian countryside, when a cow cut off Mr Taylor's way, who, annoyed, in order to make it move out of the way, hit the animal with his daughter's parasol.

Azad exclaimed immediately: "No Sir, here cows are sacred animals and they can't even be tou-..." but the ambassador glared at him to interrupt him, then answered:

"No one can tell me what to do" replied the man.

Azad lowered his head in silence and they continued to walk.

Once they arrived, they found themselves in front of a gigantic completely white building, decorated with Italian marble statues and a big garden.

Inside the house there were a lot of colours: the furniture was in wood with colourful details, the carpets were everywhere and paintings of different types were hanging on the walls.

The living room was really big and there were some statues, chests, red and ochre sofas and a big coffee table with a representation of Trimurti where people could pray.

Harriet's father removed it immediately and he put the little altar in a corner, then he put on the little table some bottles of Whiskey and some expensive cigars he usually smoked he had brought from England. When the little girl went to see her room, she was disappointed: it was simply furnished with a queen size bed with green curtains and two little pillows of the same colour. No toys or dolls were there. Luckily, she had managed to hide some of her favourites in her suitcase, away from her father's judging eyes. In her English house she had a big bed with precious sheets and a lot of dolls. She also realized that she didn't have a big wardrobe for all the dresses and hats she had brought. In front of the bed there was a little table with a mirror and a washbowl, but everything seemed so tiny and uncomfortable to her. Moreover, the wood was overused.

When Azad finished unloading the ambassador's luggage and welcomed the new guests in the house, he went back home to his family. He had three boys called Pravar, Arun and Ganesh and two daughters: the little Maya and Jasmine. The latter was thirteen years old, even though she looked older than the other girls of her age. The girl was the only adult female presence in the house and helped her father doing the housework. Her mother had died during a shooting caused by the Indian riots. In her father's opinion, she looked just like her mother, and he saw in her daughter most of her mother's traits: her kindness, generosity and honesty. He considered her the most beautiful girl in India. Jasmine was a tall girl, she had olive skin and short hair: in fact, it's an Indian tradition for the girls to shave their own hair after the death of a beloved relative. The thing that stood out the most about her were her big dark and deep eyes.

"Hi daddy! How are you? How was work?" said the girl curiously.

"It was ok my dear, except for a British ambassador who abruptly tried to hit a cow on our way" answered the father tiredly.

"And you did nothing?!" Exclaimed his daughter, shocked.

"I tried, but you know what the English are like, with their very authoritarian and sometimes grumpy ways...he even moved the representations of the sacred Trimurti from the altar, where he then placed bottles and cigars."

"What?! But it is really unbecoming and rude, as well as disrespectful, especially from such an educated person! I guess he doesn't have a family!"

"He does! He has a wife and even a daughter! I think that her name is Harriet."

"Tomorrow I could come and help you with work, you seem exhausted...!" Said Jasmine, willing to help her father.

"No, it's better if you don't. Who would take care of your brothers and your sister?" countered Azad.

"I can do it, dad!" Answered Pravar, the eldest of his children, who had eavesdropped all of the conversation:

"I would do it with great pleasure".

Azad agreed, after all he was 18 years old.

The next morning, while they were heading to the house of the ambassador, memories of her mother played in Jasmine's head. She remembered the times they spent together, and how devastated she was after her death.

"Dad, are you sure to entrust Pravar with such an important task? He isn't often at home: he's always hanging around in Calcutta".

In fact, his best friend was Jay, an Indian soldier in the service of Britain, who often told the boy all his adventures and Pravar, who was very curious, sometimes went with him.

"I totally trust all of you" continued Azad "and remember that Pravar was very responsible after your mother's death."

There were a few moments of silence, interrupted by the mooing of the man, who continued to talk:

"My darling, when you hid in your bedroom and you cried there, without talking with anyone and drowning in the memories of your mother Avani, Pravar always helped at home with your brothers and sister".

"I'm sorry, dad" said Jasmine, feeling guilty.

"Don't worry, honey" said Azad.

It didn't take them long to arrive at the Taylors' house. They got off the cart. Jasmine started walking, lifting the dusty soil beneath her bare feet, which bumped into her tanned legs.

The girl was enchanted: she had never seen anything like all that luxury in one place, it was not something she was used to. It was at that moment that she saw a blond girl playing with some dolls. "She must be her daughter" she said.

"Yes. Her name is Harriet" answered Azad in a kind voice.

Jasmine was peering at her while she was doing the housework.

When Harriet noticed that she was being watched, she turned around and said:

"Are you the servant's daughter by any chance? ...Arun, right? Anyway, my name is Harriet, and yours?"

"My name is Jasmine, and my father is actually called Azad. These dolls are beautiful! I have some at home too, but they're a bit old and homemade. My mother made them".

"Ah, you can speak my language, good! Anyway... I can...um well...I can lend you one of my dolls... if you want, so we can play together" Harriet said hesitantly, intrigued by that girl who was so different from her.

"Thank you very much. Yeah, I can speak a bit of English because of my brother: he wants me to learn English, because we are a British colony, so we have to know how English people are and their culture." She took a break and then she continued:

"You are very kind, but I have to finish my work first". Jasmine was a bit surprised: she didn't expect such a nice girl, after Azad's description of her.

About half an hour later, the two girls started to play in the meadow with the dolls and when Azad saw them, he addressed his daughter, saying: "you know, you shouldn't".

Harriet delicately took back her doll, not being used to share her toys with other girls, and told Jasmine:

"Sorry, I'll be right back, I have to go to the bathroom for a moment".

She ran up the marble stairs and went to her room: she sat on her bed and thought that she had just played with a girl who, unlike the others, hadn't asked her for anything in return. She felt a shiver running down her spine, a strange new sense of happiness.

They spent many days playing together in the garden. Jasmine tried to finish her work first, then the two girls used to meet outside the house to talk and play.

One of those days, when Harriet went into her bedroom to take some other dolls for Jasmine, she was interrupted by her mother who entered her room in an angry mood:

"What were you doing down in the garden playing with that girl? You know very well who she belongs to and how you have to behave here in India!" her mother spoke in a firm, terse tone.

"Sorry mom, I won't do it again; it's just that I feel very lonely and I never know who to play with..." Harriet justified herself, not understanding exactly what was wrong with what she had done.

"You have all your toys and your dolls! Aren't they enough? Sometimes you seem foolish! You are part of an important family, please don't behave like that again. Now, you'll stay in your room until dinner" said her mother, this time in a quieter voice: she had realised her manners were a bit too harsh sometimes.

When Mrs. Taylor left, Harriet threw herself on the bed, her eyes tearing up, trying to contain her sobs, but when she heard her mother's voice coming from the garden, talking to Jasmine's father about the inappropriateness of his daughter's attendance of their house, two big tears trickled down her cheeks.

Jasmine felt guilty and sorry at the same time: she had overheard everything. Azad didn't have to explain to Jasmine too much. She immediately got on the cart. The journey back home was pretty still.

"What happened? Why did you run away?" asked her father in his usual kind and loving voice. "Nothing dad, don't worry..." said Jasmine, trying to avoid the conversation, but Azad insisted: "Come on, I know you, tell me what's wrong...you know, you can talk to me."

"Sometimes I'm almost sorry that you know me so well" said Jasmine jokingly with a faint smile. Her father smiled in agreement and Jasmine went on, telling him everything. When she finished talking Azad comforted her: "You'll meet her again somehow." Jasmine didn't understand completely what her father meant but answered: "Thank you".

The next day, when Azad went to the Taylors' house, he saw Mrs. Taylor who immediately went to tell him which boxes he had to move and where he had to put them. As soon as she climbed the stairs to go upstairs, Azad saw the little Harriet hiding behind a column and jokingly told her:

"All clear, Miss Taylor. How can I help you?"

The little girl came out of her hiding place with her hands behind her back and said:

"Ehm...hi Azad...could you give Jasmine this letter, please?"

She reached out her hand, in which she was holding a small white envelope, with an elegant stamp on the front.

"You know, I shouldn't, Miss Harriet" said sweetly Azad, thinking she was joking.

"I know, I know, but it's really important for me... I'd like to apologize for my mother's behaviour and -" said Harriet trying to go on, but the man interrupted her:

"I understand your wish, but I'd risk my job and I can't right now..."

Harriet started crying and fell at the man's feet: she'd never expected a behaviour like that.

"Please!! She's my first friend and I don't want to lose her... I promise that you won't lose your job".

Azad smiled. When Harriet saw the expression on the man's face, she got up and she was ashamed of what she had just dared. The man saw her embarrassment:

"Don't worry, your letter will be delivered to Jasmine. It will be our secret, ok?"

Harriet gave a 32-tooth smile and was tempted to hug that man, who only a few days earlier seemed so dirty, but she limited herself to:

"Thank you, sir, I will remember this."

And went back in the garden to play happily, thanks to the hope she had to see again her new friend.

In the evening, Azad returned home. Jasmine greeted him and when she saw that he had a letter, she curiously snatched it from his hand and enthusiastically opened it, without thinking that, she didn't know how to write and read.

Jasmine thought that the only person who could help her was her eldest brother's friend: Jay, who had learnt how to write and how to read in English thanks to his task in the army.

Jasmine, knowing that, went straight to Pravar who, fortunately, was at home. His mentality wasn't totally "Indian": spending a lot of time with his friend Jay had influenced him.

He was happy with her sister's new friend; therefore, he was glad to help her. "Let's go to Jay!" he said excited. Jay was a slim and good-looking boy. He smiled at the girl: "Hi little Jas, what brings you down?"

Jasmine hugged the boy and handed in the envelope. The soldier started to read the letter: it was as precious as a piece of jewellery for the girl:

*'Hello Jasmine,*

*how are you? I'm sorry about how my mom treated you yesterday.*

*I ask you to forgive her, she was a little stressed out and worried because my dad works a lot. you know, he's always nervous and rude with her... But he's doing everything he can to help you and your people. Please, understand him.*

*But let's get to the point: since you cannot come to my house, I wish we could find another way to meet. I want to see you because I saw something special in you the first time we met. So, you look pretty smart, and you know the city of Calcutta better than me. It was like a gift for me playing with you. you are a very funny girl.*

*Love,*

*-Harriet*

When Jay had finished reading the letter, Jasmine said:

"Wow! I didn't think that she cared about me! I'm so happy! Probably she will become my friend, my first friend! But I'm not sure about that... In your opinion, will she refuse me? So, I want to say, we've known each other for only a few days after all..."

"Jasmine, you don't have to worry" continued Jay "Never give up".

Hearing that sentence, Jasmine felt more confident, as she had never been in her life, and replied smiling:

"Thank you, Jay"

"Mmmm... we could meet at the bazaar, near our house!" added the girl excitedly.

"Good idea, Jasmine, do I have to reply?" asked Jay.

"Yes, please. Thank you very much, Jay! I don't know how I can return this favour."

"Don't worry, the honour is mine, you're my best friend's sister, why shouldn't I help you!?" said the boy, quietly.

"So... we should write something like this:

*'Hi Harriet!*

*I'm fine and you? Don't worry about what happened.. I understand. I'm just so happy to receive news from you! About our "secret meeting", I suggest we meet at the bazaar near my house. You can ask your parents to have a historical and cultural tour of Calcutta and your father could arrange that by asking the general of the army. At this point Jay, who is the general's favourite, will take action: he could be your guide. I can come to the bazaar secretly with him, so that we can spend some time together, talking and playing. My brother Pravar will be there too! I think we could meet at three and thirty next Friday, in front of the greengrocers, you can't miss it: it has got a big yellow tent and, when you walk near it, you can smell all the spices: it's a very strong smell. I won't tell you more...! When you taste our typical food, I'm sure that you'll like it.*

*I'll see you soon,  
your new friend,  
Jasmine'*

The following day Jasmine had a great idea to deliver her letter to Harriet: since her dolls were handmade and so they were easy to be disassembled, she decided to hide the letter in the head of one of them and then she drew some arrows near the neck of the doll, so that Harriet could understand the clues. She gave the doll to her dad, asking him to give it to Harriet, finding the excuse that it was Harriet's and she had to give it back to her.

Azad wanted to ask something more, but he didn't. He left early in the morning, deeper in thought than usual, without asking what her daughter had done with the letter.

When he arrived at the Taylors', he was a little annoyed because of a storm which had hit the area where the English family lived the night before: the garden of the house was damaged and he had to clean all that mess. He suddenly remembered that he had to give Harriet her doll so he decided to start working inside the house, where there were other things that needed to be sorted out.

He went upstairs, to the little girl's bedroom:

"Hi, Miss Harriet. Jasmine asked me to bring you this doll, that you gave her on the first day you played together".

At the beginning Harriet didn't understand. She stared at the doll dazed:

"I don't remember" she said.

Then she took a break and understood that Jasmine had planned something:

"Ah! I remember now! Thank you very much, Azad!" and she closed the door.

Harriet kept staring at the doll for a long time, until she noticed some arrows, handley drawn around the neck: she tried to disassemble it and she managed to. She found a letter, she read it and she thought: 'Wow! It's a beautiful idea! It will be my first trip to Calcutta!' She was very happy.

Two days before the meeting, Harriet went to her mother to ask her if the educational tour she had asked for some days before had been arranged. She went downstairs and she exclaimed:

"Mum! Will I go to the bazaar?"

"You know... I don't trust these people too much, but I think it'll be useful to widen your culture and knowledge. Your dad has talked to the General of the Army, you'll be guarded and guided by one of his best soldiers."

"Thank you, dad" replied Harriet happily

"What's his name?" asked the lady to her husband.

"It's Sen, Jay Sen" answered Mr. Taylor.

Azad, who had overheard the conversation, said: "I know him, he's a good boy. It's very respected and admired among British and Indian, too."

"Well, one more reason to trust him and let you go" added Mrs. Taylor.

"Can I ask Jasmine to come with me, mom? I haven't seen her for several days" dared Harriet

"I like the idea of the tour, and I could come with you some days. But Jasmine can't come with you" said Mrs. Taylor.

"Ok, mum" whispered Harriet, a little disappointed. She had given it a try: now she was ready to break the rules.

"Dad, remember that the tour should start in the early afternoon, I have to do my homework and read my books in the morning" specified Harriet. Since she was in India, the girl hadn't had to go school, but her parents decided to pay a private teacher for their daughter, who stayed with her every morning until lunch.

"Of course," answered the man. Harriet smiled satisfied.

The two girls waited a whole week, full of happiness, and, finally, the awaited day arrived. Harriet chose to wear a beautiful dress with lace hems and she was ready to go.

It was a sunny day and the young lady was really excited: that afternoon she was going to see her friend again. They would visit the bazaar together, something very exotic she had never seen before.

When she met Jay, she was amazed by his gentle smile and manners. He looked like a perfect bodyguard. He took Harriet at the entrance of the market. The smell of the spices dominated the air. Harriet stared at everything with amazed eyes. Then she spotted Jasmine in the crowd:

"Hi Jasmine!"

"Hi Harriet! We are finally here. I'm so happy to see you!"

"Me too! And I must confess I have never done something like that" she referred to how she managed to sneak off her mom and meet her.

"I'm glad you came. What do you want to start with?"

"I'd like to eat curry" answered Harriet.

"Ok, we can buy some in that little shop."

When Harriet saw that strange mix of different food on the stands, she hesitated a little but as soon as she tasted it, she was enchanted and she resolved she would see everything in the bazaar.

They started walking through the different stands, which were full of colours. The most common were red, yellow and orange. Objects of every type were everywhere and you could hear the sounds and the noises of the people talking and some of them singing.

It was hot and packed there, but Jasmine knew how to move around and sneak off among the people.

They stopped at a stand and they started to take a look: there were necklaces, bracelets and amulets with emblems, stones and gems and useful gadgets. They also saw a man breathing fire into the air.

Harriet was astonished:

"How is he doing that?" exclaimed.

"Well, he apparently has a 'bad breath'" replied Jasmine.

When Harriet understood the joke, she started laughing with enthusiasm. The little girl wanted to see more, she had seen only a little part of that big and special place.

They headed to a dress shop and she got crazy out of happiness. The shop was beautiful: it was tiny but full of cute dresses decorated with flowers and Indian symbols and patterns.

"Wow!" exclaimed Harriet. "That is a really good dress! And it looks great on you! We should buy one for me and one for you!" said then enthusiastically.

Jasmine got sad because she didn't have the money to buy such a beautiful dress:

"I'm sorry Harriet, I know that you want to buy it, but I can't afford, it's too expensive..." said Jasmine sadly.

"Oh, ehm it's... ok... don't worry, after all it wasn't so nice" answered Harriet, a bit embarrassed.

Except for the dress, it was a very beautiful day and they decided to go to the bazaar every day, with the excuse of educational tours and cultural lessons held at the Army by some teachers. Harriet attended just some of them.

One day her private teacher asked Harriet to do a bit of research about Indian religion, while she was on her usual cultural tours. Harriet was excited about the idea and told Jasmine about it. Her Indian friend knew what to do: she decided to show her friend a traditional Indian temple, the temple of Dakshineswar, near the Hooghly River. It was a very big building: it was all yellow with red details and red domes. That temple was

attended by all the rich Indians and the English tourists, but on those days of, there were only the Brahmins meditating.

It was a Hindu temple dedicated to the Kali goddess: it was wonderful. Harriet was astonished when she saw the beauty of all the statues. From the windows you could see the breath-taking landscape, and you had the view of the river.

When they joined the temple, Harriet didn't understand why many Brahmins were getting wet in the River's water, so she asked Jasmine. Before she could start answering, one of those men intruded in the conversation and answered for her:

"We are getting wet in River because it is our religious tradition: we bath in the River to purify ourselves from our sins".

"It's amazing! But doesn't it bother you?" exclaimed Harriet.

"No, it doesn't, it's an honour for us" replied the Brahmin calmly.

Harriet wrote this information down it on her sheet of paper.

They saw a lot of statues and, following Harriet's questions, the Brahmin explained which god they symbolized, showing all of the gods of their religion.

Then, they stopped in front of a very detailed and wonderful drawing.

"Amazing! What is this?" asked Harriet curiously.

Jasmine had never seen it either.

"This is the Wheel of Life" replied the man, pointing to the different part of the drawing.

"See, there are the Heavens, where the Gods live, which are out of the Wheel. There are the Hells, where the demons dwell, which are under the wheel. And finally, between the Heavens and the Hells, there are all the people running to and fro: we are those people. I learned these words years ago, when I met a very special man, and I was only a chela among others" explain the Brahmin in a serious and nostalgic tone.

"But why? I don't understand" said Harriet, a little confused.

"In our religion bonds are something negative: if you love a person, you will suffer. Passions destroy men's happiness and peace. Do you agree with me, little girl?" asked the man calmly, turning to Jasmine.

"I know, this is what I've heard from the wise men, but actually I disagree" answered the girl with authority.

"Why is that?" Said the Brahmin, shocked.

"I've loved and I still love my mum: I suffer because of it every day and I often cry, since she died. But I think affection is the real essence of life and of men: it makes me feel alive and it makes me feel...myself. Look, I have short hair in her honour and memory. I loved my hair and I was very sad and also angry when I cut it, but living like this is worth it. Don't you think so?" asked Jasmine, a little sad, thinking about her mum.

"I'm very sorry Jasmine, but I agree with you." Said Harriet, putting one hand on her shoulder.

"It's a different way to see life, but I could like it" answered the Brahmin after a little, smiling.

That day was very meaningful for both of them as they bonded a lot. Before returning home, Harriet thanked Jasmine and embraced her, under the stars of that late summer night.

After that day Harriet was very happy with all the new things she had learned about Hinduism and about her friend.

"You know Jasmine, since I'm here, I haven't gone to school, I've had a long break! I've only a private teacher, but she isn't strict at all! I'm happy with that!" said Harriet joyfully.

"What is a school?" asked Jasmine perplexed: she had never been to school and she didn't know what a school was.

"School is a place where you can learn all the main aspects of life and reality: there I learned how to read and write. For many students school is very boring, but they don't understand the big gift that they have! There are a lot of boys and girls who don't have the opportunity to go to school, like you..." said Harriet.

"I don't understand them... I'd like to go to that beautiful place! I'd like to learn how to write and read by myself. I wish I could have read and replied to your letter without Jay's help..." said Jasmine regretful.

"Yes, we take for granted what we have. Don't worry about it, it isn't your fault! I could teach you" exclaimed Harriet, a little sad for her friend but with renewed confidence.

Jasmine knew that it wasn't possible, she could have taught her some English but what she needed to learn was actually Hindu. Nevertheless, she appreciated her enthusiasm.

They greeted each other and they returned back home: an elegant cart was waiting for Harriet outside the temple.

Time went by and the two friends had the possibility to meet up very often and deepen their friendship, learning something from each other.

One day, Harriet and Jasmine met Pravar and they had a long walk together in the streets near the main square. The boy liked telling Harriet all the information he knew about India, the English and the adventures he had partly experienced and partly dreamed of. The girl listened to him with bliss, and Jasmine smiled amused.

"It's almost lunch time and I'm pretty hungry!" said Jasmine. "Why don't we go to the bazaar, grab some curry and go home to cook a special dish?" suggested Pravar.

"Sounds good!" answered Harriet.

"Arun and Ganesh must be at the bazaar with Maya, too. I guess we'll meet them at the candies stand round the corner." added Pravar.

Suddenly they heard some shots: the joy of the people was interrupted by shotguns and immediately their laughs changed into shouts and cries of fear.

Some bullets hit an awning and probably some people too: all the people lay down on the ground with their face on the dusty soil and their hands behind their head.

Jasmine did the same and grabbed her friend's arm telling her to follow her lead.

Pravar, instead, was desperately looking for his sister Maya and his brothers. Suddenly he spotted Jasmine and told her to come towards him. The two girls ran rapidly reaching Pravar who hugged them in a despairing, fearful and suffering grip.

The girls were lying down on the ground, but the boy wasn't: he heard his sister Maya shouting and asking help and Arun and Ganesh crying out of fear.

He ran towards them and took them in his arms, in order to check if they were fine.

"Pravar, I'm happy that you are with us!" said Arun, who continued:

"You know, people have shot near our house too and I got so scared! You know, they have hit our neighbour Ekta? The one who lives in front of us".

The screams ceased shortly after, when the army of the English embassy arrived to suppress the riot, but they resumed when the soldiers started shooting at the rebels of the East India Company, a group of British traders, who controlled the trades between India and Britain. These ones had started these riots.

Some people were crying, some others complained with the soldiers: in the confusion no one noticed that Maya had a serious wound on her belly that was bleeding relentlessly.

There were also some injured soldiers on the ground.

Pravar ran quickly to an English soldier to ask him for a doctor. When he reached him, he saw the worst: Jay had been shot in his shoulder and he was bleeding too, so Pravar, worried for him, threw himself on him screaming:

"Help! Please, help me!!!"

"What's happening?" asked another soldier.

"One of your men is wounded! Please, help him!"

The doctor arrived and saw the soldier on the ground and the little girl non far from him: Jasmine and Harriet, who had rushed to her aid, were keeping her wound covered with some cloth, putting pressure on it.

As soon as Jay saw Maya injured, he gasped:

"No, you must help the girl... her life is more precious than mine: she is younger and she has got a life to live. Azad would die from pain if she doesn't survive. They have lost their mother already... save her!"

The English soldier objected:

"No, Jay, you know that I can't! I must protect my fellow soldiers!"

"Please Arthur, you are my friend, do this for me! And then you owe me a favour!"

Pravar was speechless hearing his friend's words and started crying, seeing his best friend dying before him. Arthur understood Jay's reasons and asked the doctor to take care of the little girl. From that moment on, he promised his fellow he would protect the little Maya.

The soldier understood that for Jay it was too late: so, he leaned down, took off his helmet out of respect and, crying, he said:

"Goodbye my friend. Rest in peace".

Pravar, who was holding her sister's hand, seeing she was being taken care of by the doctor, kneeled down close to Jay and said goodbye to his only friend.

Just as Jay took his last breath, Arthur put a sort of towel on his face and took him in his arms. He looked back and said to Pravar:

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

Later, the English soldier brought him to a safe zone and, after some days, in a cold Wednesday, Jay was buried in the cemetery, under the black clouds which were the presage of a storm.

Maya had been brought to the nearest military hospital. Jasmine and Harriet were near her all the time. Jasmine looked after her little sister just like her mother used to do, she had the same gaze her mother used to have towards her when she was about to fall asleep. Harriet, worried for Maya, kept biting her nails nervously: she couldn't avoid watching all the people around her suffering, crying and praying.

When the doctors visited Maya, he understood that the only chance that they had was to remove the bullet, place stitches and hope that the little girl would recover soon.

After removing the bullet, the doctor blindfolded the wound and gave her medications. The girl was safe, now it was time for her to rest. As soon as she woke up, Maya tried to stand up and wanted to see her big sister, claiming that she already felt better. She was an impulsive girl, but the nurses managed to calm her down.

Pravar went to the hospital with his father Azad and his brothers Ganesh and Arun, and when the father saw the little Maya, two big tears descended from his eyes. They were not tears of sorrow but of joy: he was happy to see her healthy, with a smile on her face. As soon as she saw her dad and her eldest brother, she hugged him like he'd never done before.

Azad realised that also Jasmine and Harriet were there.

"Miss Taylor, do your parents know that you are here? They must be worried" he asked troubled.

"I'll take her home, dad" chimed in Pravar.

"I'll go with you" said the man. He knew his presence would be important in such hard times, especially after the events that had taken place.

"Me too!" added Jasmine.

They all got on the cart and headed to the Taylor's house. When they arrived Mrs. Taylor went to meet them halfway:

"Harriet! I've heard about the riots in the city! Where have you been? How are you? Your dad has gone to the city centre to sort things out and look for you!"

"I'm ok, mum" answered Harriet still upset because of the shooting.

A few minutes later Mr. Taylor arrived, rushed towards the girl, hugged and controlled her, to be sure that she wasn't wounded.

"My sweet! You're ok!" exclaimed then.

"What's happened precisely, Harriet?" asked Mrs. Taylor worried.

"There was a shooting at the bazaar and lot of people died! I don't want these Indians in the way!" he said coldly and authoritatively. Then he pointed to Azad and his children: "I don't want these Indians in my house! Get out! Now!"

At that moment everyone got scared, except for Pravar, who head-on and impulsively, as usual, replied:

"You, Occidentals, are very foolish! You have a closed mentality, you don't think about anything but your own business, do you realise it?! Your daughter is alone and sad and when she finds a friend, you turn her away! Did you know that my best friend died to save someone else?! Yes, Indians can also give their own life...who would do that among your people? Life is a breath: we have to live it in the best way and with the most important people. And what do you do? You don't let Harriet have a friend that loves her. I thought you learned something by staying here in India, but you didn't! You don't want to understand! Arrest me, kill me: do with me whatever you want, but remember: a man is nothing without a bit of humanity and selflessness."

After those words all people were speechless and Mr. Taylor, feeling challenged by what the boy had just said, ordered his protection:

"Take him in the nearest prison. Now please."

Harriet interrupted him:

"No, dad, wait! Why do you treat Pravar like this?"

"Because a boy who belongs to lower cast has just disrespected us. He has to thank me for not killing him. Go to your bedroom, now. I'll deal with you, later."

Harriet turned to Azad and asked:

"Why are you part of a low cast? And why can't we be friends? What have you done wrong?"

“We must have sinned much in our last life and this is our punishment” said the man “a Lama explained this to me very well, when I was young.” Azad looked resigned while pronouncing those words.

“But it’s wrong! No Gods, in all religions, would do this to such loyal and honest people. I don’t want you to be fired, Mr. Kumar!”

Then, she turned towards her father and prayed him:

“Please! Jasmine is my friend! If you fire Azad, his family won’t have nothing to eat!”

“It doesn’t matter to me!” stepped Mr. Taylor in, and after these words, the guards handcuffed Pravar and put him on a cart, directed to the prison.

“Stop, please!” This time Mrs. Taylor was talking, looking at her husband with a pitiful gaze.

“Henry, I respectfully disagree. Azad isn’t wrong: maybe Pravar made a mistake, by being impolite, but it’s not a big deal. We have to learn to forgive. We have done something wrong by treating this family like this. Please, look at them: that girl has just seen a shooting and she could’ve died. Azad works hard every day to give his family just enough to eat, but we haven’t considered that and we’re arresting his son on this terrible day. Think about it, and then forgive him.”

“You aren’t the leader here: you have no right to speak. In this house I’m the only one who can decide and now I decide to arrest Pravar and to fire Azad!” Exclaimed Mr. Taylor.

“Henry! Why don’t you listen to us? Please! Our daughter was where the shooting took place and now, she is here, safe and sound, thanks to Pravar, and you are putting him in prison!”

The ambassador was perplexed:

“Leave me alone! What’s said is said, and that is all.”

They didn’t manage to change his mind and he motioned for the guards to take Pravar away.

That night, Mr. Taylor couldn’t sleep. He felt guilty for his actions. He was a very proud and self-confident English man, but his heart didn’t leave him in peace.

That night a war took place in the battle field of his heart.

The next day he went to the prison and ordered the guards to free Pravar. They obliged, and the boy was set free. When Azad saw his son come back, he was very happy and so was Jasmine. Mr. Taylor consented Jasmine and Harriet’s friendship, also thanks to his wife, who convinced him. The two girls couldn’t believe their ears when Azad told them the great news.

Months went by and the two girls learned one from the other and they discovered each other, with the constant help of Pravar, who created a very close bond: that hard, that not even three thousand men could break.

On one of those hot days of July the riots were finally over, after half a year.

One day the nineteen-year-old Pravar went to the cemetery to visit his dear friend Jay:

“You know, my friend, the riots have been repressed. I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart, because it is only for you that my little sister, Maya, is still here with us.” A tear tore his cheek, but he continued:

“Jasmine has found a friend, thanks to you. Do you remember that time when you read Harriet’s letter and helped Jas to reply to it?” Another tear fell down his cheek:

“Rest in peace, my friend. I know that you’ll reincarnate in a happy and good person: you are finally free” With those words he parted from Jay’s tomb.

Jasmine and Harriet spent a few more days together, and the time had come to say goodbye.

The riots were repressed and so Mr. Taylor didn’t have anything else left to do: he had accomplished his task in Calcutta and so he had to return to London and with him, also his family.

The ship was arriving at the port of the city, also called the port of Kolkata, and the two girls had to say goodbye.

“I’ve known you for only a year, but it seems like I’ve known you for a lifetime, my friend” said Jasmine with a nostalgic tone.

“It’s the same for me, Jasmine” replied Harriet, trying to hold back tears.

This moving moment was accompanied by the sunrise, that painted the sea with a beautiful orange colour and the sound of the waves crashing on the shore created a wonderful atmosphere.

The two little girls stayed still, staring at each other as to say:

“Goodbye friend, I love you”.

After a few minutes Harriet interrupted the silence:

"You know, I never thought I'd be your friend, but now we're here, crying because we will never meet again... the world is strange, and life is mysterious but marvellous too."

"You are right, Harriet".

The ship had arrived and Mr. Taylor motioned the servant to move the luggages on the ship, worn out by all the events of those months.

"I think being here was one of the best things that ever happened in our life, it did me good, it changed me: I must confess, India is a very beautiful English colony!" exclaimed Mr. Taylor to his wife.

"And now, where will I find a friend like you, Harriet?" continued Jasmine.

"Be yourself, Jasmine. I'll do the same when I return to London. Because all of us are special, and we must be ourselves, always. I've learnt this in India, thanks to you. We are so different from many points of view, but also such good friends."

Jasmine smiled: "I've learnt that we can change and we can learn from our mistakes, we always have the possibility to choose and be what we want to be."

Harriet got on the ship slowly and, once she was on, she looked at Jasmine and exclaimed:

"I've learnt a lot from you, Jasmine. You'll always be in my heart!"

"You too, Harriet!"

And the girls' eyes were glistening with tears, which were slowly trickling down their face, sad because they were being separated, but happy as well only for the fact that they had met each other and had lived an incredible adventure, the adventure of their friendship.

*The story started with 'The ship was finally approaching' and finished with 'The ship was leaving', leaving behind a special story, who has united two totally different girls, but so similar too, having the same beautiful heart.*