

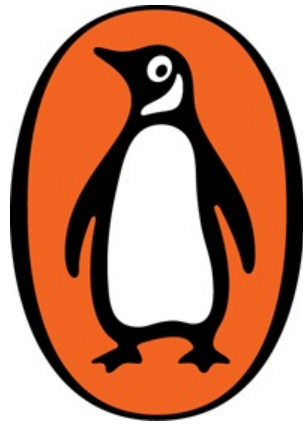


*Edited by*  
M. ASADUDDIN

# PREMCHAND

*the complete short stories*

VOLUME 4



PREMCHAND

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the complete short stories VOLUME 4

*Edited with an Introduction by M. Asaduddin*

*Translated from the Hindi and Urdu by M. Asaduddin and others*

*Foreword by Harish Trivedi*



PENGUIN BOOKS

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# PENGUIN BOOKS

## THE COMPLETE SHORT STORIES: VOLUME 4

**Premchand** (1880–1936), considered one of the greatest fiction writers in Hindi, was born Dhanpat Rai in Lamahi, a small village near Benares. He wrote in Urdu under the name Nawab Rai and changed it to Premchand when his collection of short stories, *Soz-e Watan*, was seized for sedition in 1909. In a prolific career spanning three decades, Premchand wrote fourteen novels, two plays, almost 300 short stories and several articles, reviews and editorials. He edited four journals, and also set up his own printing press. Though best known for his stories exposing the horrors of poverty and social injustice, he wrote on a variety of themes with equal felicity—romance, satire, social dramas, nationalist tales, and yarns steeped in folklore.

**M. Asaduddin** is an author, critic and translator in several languages. His books include *Premchand in World Languages: Translation, Reception and Cinematic Representations*; *Filming Fiction: Tagore, Premchand and Ray*; *A Life in Words*; *The Penguin Book of Classic Urdu Stories*; *Lifting the Veil: Selected Writings of Ismat Chughtai*; *For Freedom's Sake: Manto*; and (with Mushirul Hasan) *Image and Representation: Stories of Muslim Lives in India*. He has been a Fulbright Scholar-in-Residence at Rutgers University, New Jersey, USA, and a Charles Wallace Trust Fellow at the British Centre for Literary Translation at the University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK. He is a regular speaker at literary festivals, and his translations have been recognized with the Sahitya Akademi Award, and the Katha and A.K. Ramanujan awards for translation, as well as the Crossword Book Award.



## Advance Praise for the Volumes

‘Not having access to all of Premchand’s stories has always been a cause of frustration to his readers. The publication now of the entire, admittedly huge, corpus of his short stories is very welcome. Premchand—in spite of occasional challenges—remains a true colossus of Indian literature. The sheer variety, with its hypnotic power, and the vastness of his output is staggering. It is impossible to arrive at any kind of assessment of modern Indian literature without taking full account of Premchand. Then, his fiction as a living source and commentary on the social, political and rural India of the early part of the twentieth century is valuable and relevant even today. These four volumes deserve a place on the bookshelf of every lover of modern fiction, in India or elsewhere’

SHAMSUR RAHMAN FARUQI

well-known critic, poet and novelist in Urdu

‘Premchand’s fiction draws from his vast experience of the conflicts of village life, of caste tensions, of excessive revenue demands and the never-ending chain of debts entailed by these. If these are grim tales, they are both deepened and lightened by his psychological insight, his irony and humour, and the broad canvas on which they are drawn, which links country and city in a manner unknown in Hindi–Urdu fiction writing before him. To present this rich corpus, drawn exhaustively from both Urdu and Hindi originals, the vast majority made available in English for the first time, is a pioneering feat for which the translators are to be congratulated’

VASUDHA DALMIA

professor emerita of Hindi and Modern South Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley

‘At once an extraordinary feat of scholarship and an immense labour of love, this collection gives us the complete corpus of Premchand’s short stories in English

translation for the first time. It thus allows readers without access to either or both of Premchand's languages of composition, Urdu and Hindi, insight into one of the greatest writers of India's modernity—indeed, into the making of modern India. Most importantly, as the rich and informative Introduction to this translation states, the stories bear witness to Premchand's "secular and inclusive" view of the Indian nation. Premchand's socialism, his realism, his role in the fashioning of a modern prose style in two languages, his searing insights into caste and gender politics, his sympathy for the oppressed, for the labouring poor, even for working animals, make him a writer from whom we still have much to learn. If this remarkable collaborative enterprise brilliantly led by M. Asaduddin helps us to do so, its purpose will be served'

SUPRIYA CHAUDHURI

professor emerita, Department of English, Jadavpur University, Kolkata

'It is a valuable work, especially for foreign readers who cannot read the original text in Hindi or Urdu. This complete translation of Premchand's short stories must be welcomed as a major contribution to the accessibility to modern Indian literature. Being considered one of the foundational figures of modern Indian literature, Premchand deserves this kind of ambitious work on him, which will find him his rightful place in world literature'

PHILIPPE BENOÎT

Sanskritist and professor of Bengali, National Institute for Oriental Languages and Civilizations, Paris

'Premchand is one of the most famous—perhaps the most famous—Hindi authors. Many of his short stories have been translated into a wide array of languages. And yet, when one looks at these selections it appears that the translators tended to choose a particular set of stories regarded as Premchand's masterpieces, ignoring the rest. The present collection aims to present the full picture, displaying Premchand at different stages of his life, in different moods, displaying changing attitudes with regard to the functionality of literature. For the first time, readers of English will be able to appreciate Premchand's storytelling in all its facets and fullness'

CHRISTINA OESTERHELD

professor of Urdu, University of Heidelberg, Germany

‘Premchand was greatly popular with an earlier generation of Russian readers. This anthology will certainly enhance his visibility to an international audience and make him popular with the new generation of Russian readers and scholars of Indian literature’

GUZEL STRELKOVA

professor of Hindi, Moscow State University, Moscow

*For  
Jamia Millia Islamia,  
a university that has nurtured composite culture,  
secular nationalism and pluralism for 100 years*

## Foreword

During the birth centenary celebrations of Premchand (1880–1936), he was described as one of the *panch devata*, that is, one of the five gods, or (to put it more plausibly in English and also perhaps a bit more secularly!) one of the five iconic figures of modern Indian literature.<sup>1</sup> This was high praise indeed, for each one of the twenty-four languages of India which are recognized and honoured by the Sahitya Akademi can boast of several outstanding writers in the modern period. The foremost of these probably still is Rabindranath Tagore, best known for his lyrical and transcendently spiritual poetical works and, of course, for being the first, and so far the only, Indian to win the Nobel Prize for literature. But of those following behind him, Premchand stands as tall as any other writer.

Premchand wrote in both Urdu and Hindi, which made him an inheritor of two distinct literary traditions and also gave him a far wider readership than writers in other languages could aspire to. He wrote in the popular genres of the novel and the short story, and he practised a simple and candid style which had a direct emotive effect. He set his fiction in both cities and villages, often bringing the two Indias into poignant juxtaposition, most pointedly in his last novel, *Godaan* (1936), and in other novels and numerous short stories too throughout his career. After experimenting early in his career with a few short stories set in the historical past (which he used allegorically for a present patriotic purpose), he wrote as a rule on contemporary themes of immediate social and political relevance. He marched with the times, responding to successive waves of public events and movements with a creative openness that wasn't bound by blind allegiance to any ideology. The scope of his understanding and the range of his sympathies were wide enough to encompass each aspect of the impact of colonial rule and of the nationalist movement for freedom in its many dimensions. His heart beat with the heart of the nation. As the Marxist Hindi critic Namwar Singh says:

Premchand was the unique epic-chronicler [*maha-gathakar*] of our struggle for freedom and it will be no exaggeration to say that he occupies in this regard an unrivalled place in the whole of Indian

literature. If one wanted to find in any one Indian writer the very pulse of Indian life, its struggles and its setbacks, its sorrows and its anguish, in all their depth and all their wide scope, over a period of three decades right from the Partition of Bengal in 1905–06 up to 1936, when he passed away, then, notwithstanding the fact that we have Rabindranath Tagore, we have Sarat Chandra, we have Subrahmanya Bharati, we have V.S. Khandelkar, we have Kanhaiyalal Maniklal Munshi, and we have as well Dr Mohammad Iqbal, I would like to name Premchand, for he is the one writer we have in whose works the immortal saga of our struggle for independence has been narrated in all its fullness.<sup>2</sup>

And yet, it would be to underestimate Premchand to think of him only, or even primarily, as a chronicler of what was perhaps the most vitally transformative phase in the history of modern India. For he was, like a true artist, concerned first and foremost with human beings and the daily, ordinary lives they led. If these lives were impacted by larger historical forces, as indeed they inescapably were, Premchand's focus remained on the human characters rather more than on the forces shaping them, and it was in this indirectness that the greatness of his achievement lies. His eventful narratives of the nation were above all else compassionate tales of humanity.

### **Life and Times: Sedition and 'Premchand'**

Premchand was born in Lamahi, a village which now stands virtually on the outskirts of Benares, of Kayastha parents, which meant that he would culturally be more inclined to Urdu than Hindi. His mother died when he was eight, his father remarried shortly afterwards, and Premchand first went to school in Gorakhpur where his father, a postal clerk, was then posted. Premchand's real name was Dhanpat Rai Shrivastav, but he was fondly called Nawab, a prince, and he published his early writings under the name 'Nawab Rai'. In his early teens he read voraciously *Tilism Hoshruha* (in Urdu, published from 1883 onwards in numerous volumes amounting to thousands of pages) and similar *dastaan* tales of what may now be called the old school of Arabian magic realism.

Premchand passed his matriculation examination (class 10) in 1898, and began a long career as a teacher and school administrator, during which he passed as a 'private' or non-formal candidate the Intermediate examination (class 12) in 1916 and the BA in 1919, with English literature, Persian and history as his subjects. In 1921, he resigned government service at the call of

Gandhi during the Non-Cooperation Movement. He had, between 1915 and 1924, moved away from Urdu to begin writing in Hindi which Gandhi had in 1918 declared to be the *rashtra bhasha*, the national language. During the salt satyagraha called by Gandhi in 1930, his (second) wife, Shivrani Devi, courted arrest and spent two months in jail. In 1923 Premchand had bought a press and started the publishing house Saraswati Press but in the absence of a regular income, he served two stints as the editor of the Hindi journal *Madhuri* in Lucknow, in 1924–25 and again from 1927 to 1932. Meanwhile, he started a journal of his own, *Hans* (The Swan, vehicle of Saraswati, the muse of literature), in 1930, and then taken over another journal, *Jagaran* (Awakening), in 1932. Premchand returned to Benares to spend the last four years of his life back in Lamahi where he had built a bigger pukka house which still stands, and from where he commuted to his press in Benares. On 8 October 1936, at the age of fifty-six, he died of a stomach ailment that had long afflicted him. He had published in Urdu and Hindi thirteen novels, including one left unfinished, and what are now reckoned to be close to 300 short stories.<sup>3</sup>

At least four novels by Premchand are counted as being among the greatest written in Hindi: *Sevasadan* (1919; The Abode of Service), *Rangbhumi* (1925; tr. as *The Playground*), *Karmabhumi* (1932; Field of Action), and *Godaan* (1936; tr. as *Godaan* and also as *The Gift of a Cow*). It has long been a matter of debate whether Premchand was a greater novelist than a short story writer and, though scholars may prefer the weightier and more complex novels, popular opinion has favoured the more accessible and immediately affective short stories. A brief account is given below of a few highlights and turning points in Premchand's career as a short story writer.

Premchand published his first collection of five short stories in 1908, *Soz-e Watan* (in Urdu: The Dirge of the Nation), and it met with an unexpectedly hot reception. The stories were all patriotic, which the British government promptly interpreted to be seditious, and Premchand, who was then serving as a sub-deputy inspector of schools, was summoned to appear before the district magistrate who asked him to confirm that he was the author of the book which had been published under his pen name 'Nawab Rai', told him to burn all the copies and never to write anything like that again. He then added, 'Thank your stars that you are a servant of the British Empire. Had these been Mughal times,



both your hands would have been chopped off.’<sup>4</sup> What was chopped off, however, was the name ‘Nawab Rai’, and it was then that the new pen name ‘Premchand’ was born, under the oppressive shadow of British censorship and as a subterfuge against its vigilance. This was only the first of Premchand’s many brushes with authority, for in the 1930s he was required time and again to deposit a security of Rs 1000 at the slightest whiff of sedition in anything that he published in his two journals.

## Urdu and Hindi

A more significant turning point came when Premchand decided to change his linguistic horses in midstream and cross over from writing in Urdu to writing in Hindi. This profound makeover began in 1914 and, through a long and assiduous process, culminated in 1924, when Premchand revised and rewrote his Urdu novel *Chaugan-e Hasti* (Life as a Game) in Hindi as *Rangbhumi* (1925; The Playground). He gave two reasons for making this transformation. Publishers were hard to find in Urdu, while they were plentiful in Hindi and paid substantially more. Besides, Premchand felt out of place in the Urdu cultural milieu; as he asked in a moment of despondency in a letter to an Urdu editor in 1918, ‘Has any Hindu ever made a success of writing in Urdu that I will?’<sup>5</sup> The facts seem to support him, for in one count by a British literary historian in 1928, of about 250 writers he treated in his work, only eight were Hindus and none of them was regarded as being of the first rank.

Be that as it may, Premchand, by beginning to write in Hindi, entered a wider and apparently more congenial cultural ambience in which even the semantic resonances seemed to conform more closely to his vision of the world. The very titles of several works from this transitional period bear this out. The novel titled *Bazar-e Husn* (written in 1917 in Urdu; The Market-Place of Beauty) was published first in Hindi as *Sevasadan* (1919; The Abode of Service). The short story published in Urdu as ‘Panchayat’ (May–June 1916; The Jury of Five Elders) was published in Hindi as ‘Panch Parameshwar’ (June 1916; The Five Elders as [the voice of] God), and ‘Brahm ka Swang’ in Hindi (1920; Pretending to be Brahm or God) was toned down in Urdu to become ‘Nok-Jhonk’ (1923; Banter).<sup>6</sup> It must be added that Premchand never wholly abandoned Urdu, for till the end he wrote in it a few of his short stories, most notably ‘Kafan’ (1935), and

also lectures and essays, including his presidential address to the first conference of the All-India Progressive Writers Association (1936), in which he quoted verse four times, each time in Persian. When his host Sajjad Zaheer remarked that the Urdu in his speech had become a little ponderous (*sageel*), Premchand laughed his loud laugh and said he thought he would show everyone that he was a '*Kayastha ka bachcha*' (son of a Kayastha), implying that his Urdu could be as high-flown as any Muslim's!

## **Realism and Idealism**

Another important development in Premchand's career is believed to have taken place in the last few years of his life, when he wrote some stories in which his realism was not irradiated by his usual optimistic outlook. Throughout his career, in both his novels and his short stories, his protagonists had been inspired by the abiding values of truth, mutual trust, goodwill, cooperation and service to others. In moments of adversity and crisis, they were motivated by an idealism which led them to acts of selfless sacrifice, or to a change of heart involving an admission of past errors and deep repentance in which all conflict and dissonance were dissolved into a compassionate harmony. Premchand seemed to have been a firm believer in what the English poet John Keats, in a memorable phrase, called 'the holiness of the heart's affections and the truth of imagination'.<sup>7</sup>

Premchand similarly said that a good short story offered 'a vivid and heart-touching depiction of an episode, a glimpse of the soul'. In another essay, he described his own mode of writing fiction, or indeed his whole vision of life, as *adarshonmukh yatharthvad*,<sup>8</sup> that is, idealistic realism or, more accurately, ideal-oriented realism. Some of his best-known and best-loved short stories are shining examples of this possibly naive-seeming and sentimental but in fact resolutely principled view of life in which goodness, virtue and self-realization are ultimately bound to prevail over all misunderstanding and temporary ill will.

Yet, in his last few years, Premchand wrote some stories which seem devoid of such a hopeful tenor and are instead inconclusive or even bleak. To cite just the best known of them, in 'Poos ki Raat' (1930; A Winter Night), a farmer falls asleep on his night-long watch over his ripening harvest, wakes up in the morning to find it devoured and destroyed by a herd of nilgai, but as he walks

back home, he tells himself that he would at least not have to freeze any more by passing night after night out in the open. In ‘Sadgati’ (1930; Gone to Heaven, made into a film by Satyajit Ray), a poor low-caste man is cruelly worked to death by a Brahmin priest, with the latter excusing himself in the end by saying that after death in a Brahmin’s service, the wretched man would surely go to heaven. And in ‘Kafan’ (1935; The Shroud), a father and son end up in a drinking house in a city, carousing in an only-too-rare carnivalesque moment, quite oblivious of the son’s young wife who has died in childbirth the night before and still lies unmourned and uncremated back in the village.

These are deeply unsettling works, and commentators on Premchand have been at a loss as to what to make of them. Some have suggested that Premchand was here at last moving out of the shadow of Gandhi and of traditional values to a kind of radical progressive position. As there is not a trace of resistance or rebellion against the system or even the particular oppressor in any of these stories (as there is not in Premchand’s last novel, *Godaan*, either), some others have suggested that Premchand had in the end grown weary of his own idealism and become a little cynical. Another way of looking at these few stories, which are so striking partly because they go against the grain of the rest of Premchand’s career, may be to suggest that in them, Premchand was experimenting with something new and beginning to develop a ‘late style’ (in Edward Said’s formulation in his late and indeed posthumous book)<sup>9</sup> as many other masters had done as they advanced in years. Premchand died at the age of fifty-six, and one can only speculate on what and how he would have gone on to write had he been granted, say, ten more years. We may anyhow note that the last two short stories Premchand published in his lifetime, ‘Do Bahnen’ (August 1936; Two Sisters) and ‘Rahasya’ (September 1936; The Secret), are both as full of Premchand’s signature vocabulary of *seva*, *tyag* and *daya* (service to others, sacrifice and compassion) as anything he wrote at any time in his career.<sup>10</sup>

## **Translating Premchand: The Two Originals**

Premchand’s short stories began to be translated in his own lifetime into other Indian languages, including Gujarati, Bengali, Marathi and Tamil, as well as into English, German and Japanese. The first volume of a selection of his short stories in English translation was published in 1946 by Gurdial Malik and, as M.

Asaduddin has shown, about a dozen other selections have been published since then by translators both Indian and American. As most of the translators have gone in for the same 'best' stories, the total number of short stories translated into English remains a small fraction of the oeuvre.<sup>11</sup>

Translation is sometimes slandered as being a losing game by those who do not pause to reflect on what is gained, for without translation, however inadequate, we would not have access to an alien author or work at all. What comes across especially well in English in the case of Premchand is his irreducibly humane content and his gripping, even enchanting, narrative voice. With the very first sentence of a novel or a story by him, we enter a parallel universe of his creation, which compels utter credibility and full engagement. His diction is simple, especially in the frequent dialogues, his sentences are short—sometimes too short to sound natural in English—and even in those of his tales which have a parable-like ending, the specificity of realistic notation remains undiminished. On the other hand, his authorial passages of both a narrative and discursive kind exploit fully the expressive resources of the language he uses and are so felicitously modulated as to stretch the capabilities of the best translators. Premchand's penchant for using idiomatic phrases presents a difficulty and so do culture-specific terms, as with translating any writer.

But a difficulty that may be unique to Premchand arises from the fact that whether one translates him from Hindi or Urdu, the original text may well turn out to be always already translated—from the other language! It is now possible to say with certainty which of the two versions of a story was first published, and in the great majority of the cases it is clear that the version first published was also the first to be written. But this priority may not always indicate primacy, for if the second, translated version turns out to be different in significant respects, it would be inept to reject it altogether. Though the early translations from Urdu into Hindi were mostly done by Premchand himself, we have firm evidence, for example, that the final manuscript of the Hindi *Rangbhumi* was translated into Urdu by another person who demanded a rate that Premchand thought to be exorbitant. In any case, all his works throughout his life in both Hindi and Urdu were published under Premchand's own name with no mention of a translator and are treated by the common reader as being equally original.

A good English translation then must take both the Hindi and the Urdu versions into account and in the case of each notable variation, reconcile them if possible or at least opt for whichever seems more apt. As I have argued elsewhere, it must be one translation rendered out of two originals. The issues involved here may be quickly illustrated through the one story that I have myself contributed to these volumes, 'A Special Holi' (Volume 2). Its title in Hindi is 'Vichitra Holi' (published in 1921) and in Urdu 'Ajeeb Holi' (1928), which may look quite similar but have different connotations, especially when we read the story. It depicts all the servants of a British sahib staging a rebellion against him on the carnivalesque day of Holi when he is out hunting, and they indulge in riotous merriment by drinking his wine, dancing on his dining table and singing lusty Holi songs. They are punished and slink away when Mr Hunter returns, but they have had their day of glorious liberation. Now this, as Premchand narrates, is more a *special* Holi, in a positive sense, than a *strange* Holi, in a quizzical or suspicious sense, and the Hindi title is closer to the mark. Elsewhere in the story, Hindi words seem more apt in some places but Urdu words in some other places, and in this transitional phase of his career from Urdu to Hindi, Premchand even seems to waver here and there between Hindi usage and Urdu usage, mixing up, for example, the verbs that would go with *arpan* (dedication) and *qurbani* (sacrifice).<sup>12</sup>

## The Present Volumes

In this respect, a major new beginning is made with the translations in these four volumes, for the translators had access to both the Hindi and the Urdu versions. Besides, the notes at the end indicate the major variations between the two texts and provide the publishing details of both the versions. The Introduction by M. Asaduddin, a multilingual scholar, provides an erudite and comprehensive overview of Premchand's career, and his thematic and stylistic range. His archival researches have resulted in the discovery of two whole stories which were so far known to have been published but could not be traced, and also of sections 2 and 3 of a third story of which only the first section was available. This edition of translations of Premchand thus goes a bit beyond even the most comprehensive editions of his works so far published in either Hindi or Urdu and gives a new meaning to the phrase 'Found in Translation'!

But the outstanding feature of these volumes is, of course, the fact that they present in English translation close to 300 stories that Premchand wrote. Such an enormous project must have initially seemed audacious, and then been full of difficulties, problems and heartaches during its long gestation. But a team of sixty translators, occasionally interacting together in workshops, finally realized the plan with Professor Asaduddin himself leading from the front by translating, I am given to understand, no less than 100 stories all by himself.

So far as I know, this is an unprecedented project of its kind and scale in the history of translations into English in India, for not even the great Rabindranath Tagore has had all his short stories (which number seventy-nine, as collected in the three volumes of his *Galpa-Guchchha*, that is, 'Bunch of Stories') translated into English, much less in a uniform edition like this one. As this fleet of four ships, this argosy laden with some of the best writing produced in India in the modern period and now made available in a global language, is launched by a major international publisher upon the seven seas, one hopes that it will succeed in flying the flag of Indian literature far and wide and win for it a new and wider circulation.

**November 2017**

**Harish Trivedi**

# Introduction

‘Premchand stands supreme as the iconic fiction writer of Urdu and Hindi, and to read and re-read him over and over again is to understand better ourselves and our society’<sup>1</sup>—Harish Trivedi

Premchand is generally regarded as the greatest writer in Urdu and Hindi, both in terms of his popularity and the range and depth of his corpus. His enduring appeal cuts across class, caste and social groups. He was not only a creative writer in Urdu and Hindi, but he also fashioned modern prose in both languages and influenced several generations of writers. The fact that his works were published in more than two dozen Hindi and Urdu journals<sup>2</sup> simultaneously attests to his extraordinary reach to the wide audience that formed his readership. Many of his readers encountered modern Urdu and Hindi novels and short stories, and indeed any literary forms, for the first time through his writings. Premchand’s unique contribution to the formation of a readership—and, in turn, to shaping the taste of that readership—has yet to be assessed fully. Few or none of his contemporaries in Urdu–Hindi have remained as relevant today as he is in the contexts of the Woman Question (*Stree Vimarsh*), Dalit Discourse (*Dalit Vimarsh*), Gandhian Nationalism, Hindu–Muslim relations and the current debates about the idea of India that is inclusive of all groups and denominations, irrespective of caste and creed. Francesca Orsini, who has worked on the Hindi public sphere, says pertinently: ‘His strong social conscience and radical politics, which brought him closer and closer to socialism, were rooted in an utterly secular and inclusive view of the Indian nation, which makes him a particularly valuable and rare role model these days.’ (Orsini 2003, xxvi)

However, despite his pioneering and iconic status, studies on Premchand have remained woefully inadequate because his entire corpus was or is still not available in either Hindi or Urdu, not to speak of English. Researchers had to remain content with only one of the corpuses (either Urdu or Hindi) accessible to them. This is also true of his short stories. Till today, the entire corpus of his short stories is not to be found in any of the versions. Fortunately, it is now being



made available in English by combining and assimilating both the archives. Moreover, some new materials not accessible so far either in Hindi or Urdu are being made available for the first time in English. These twin advantages—in addition to the fact that the entire corpus is now being made available in English in a reliable chronological order<sup>3</sup>—should make the reading of Premchand more fruitful, exciting and enjoyable and give a new fillip to Premchand studies. There is a need to revisit Premchand in the light of the new materials that have been discovered, mainly, though not exclusively, through the efforts of Kamal Kishore Goyanka, and some more new materials that are presented in this anthology.

### **Premchand as a Short Story Writer: Beginnings**

Premchand pioneered modern short story writing in Urdu and Hindi. The Urdu short story, or *afsana* (sometimes called *mukhtasar afsana* to distinguish it from longer fictional works), can be seen as a continuity of the fictional tradition that existed in Urdu for several centuries—that is, literature consisting of *qissa*, *hikayah*, *dastaan*, and so on, which drew upon the Perso-Arabic narrative tradition on the one hand and the Indian tradition of storytelling as one finds in works like the *Panchatantra*, *Hitopadesha* and the Jataka tales on the other. The short story proper in Urdu, however, emerged only in the opening decade of the twentieth century. By that time, novels and short stories were familiar conventions, having already been established in Bengali at the hands of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Rabindranath Tagore and Sarat Chandra Chatterjee. These Bengali writers are being invoked here because Premchand had read all of them in translation and drew inspiration from them. In fact, he began his writing career by translating Tagore. Of course, his staple readings were the medieval-style romances in Urdu and Persian popular at the time, particularly the writings of Ratan Nath Dhar Sarshar and Abdul Halim Sharar.

The atmosphere of *dastaan* and historical romances hangs heavy on Premchand's early stories. But he soon grew out of that phase and made his work more socially relevant by giving it the hard, gritty texture of realism. His art of storytelling became a vehicle for his socially engaged agenda of social reform and ameliorating the condition of the deprived and oppressed sections of society. However, that does not mean he was mainly concerned with the content

and external circumstances of his characters and not with their inner worlds. Like all great writers, he took interest in unravelling the mental processes of his characters and the psychological motivations of their actions. As he says:

My stories are usually based on some observations or personal experience. I try to introduce some dramatic elements in them. I do not write stories merely to describe an event. I try to express some philosophical/emotional reality through them. As long as I do not find any such basis I cannot put my pen to paper. When this is settled, I conceive characters. Sometimes, studying history brings some plots to mind. An event does not form a story, as long as it does not express a psychological view of reality.<sup>4</sup> (My translation)

In the stories he has written—which number close to 300—one finds different modes and points of view, which he adopted by employing an array of narrative devices. An overwhelming number of his stories are written in the third person or omniscient narrative mode and a far lesser number in the first person. He makes extensive use of dialogue, using different registers of Urdu and Hindi in addition to dialects, colloquialisms, idioms and speech patterns specific to a caste, class or community. He also uses the technique of interior monologue and multiple points of view in quite a few stories. The salient point is that even though Premchand was mainly concerned with the content of his stories, to the extent of sometimes making them formulaic and predictable, he certainly did engage with the stylistic aspects too. And in this respect, he was influenced by both Indian—specifically Bengali—and foreign writers.

## Sources

The subject matter of Premchand's stories has been taken from Indian history and mythology, Indo-Muslim cultural history, contemporary society, and his own wide readings of literature from across the world, particularly English, Russian and French literature, from which he translated into Urdu and Hindi. The early decades of the twentieth century in India were exciting times, marked by the stirrings of change in society, particularly in its transition from a predominantly feudal and patriarchal society to a more democratic and modern one. From the third decade, the movement for independence gained momentum. Premchand had a journalist's curiosity of the quotidian and the contemporary. He was extraordinarily alive to the goings-on around him and made the events and issues the subject matter of his stories.<sup>5</sup> There is hardly any issue relevant to

the India of that time that he did not touch in his fiction. From a reading of his short stories it is quite possible to recreate the society of that time, with all its quirks, contradictions and superstitions, as well as the prevalent reformist and intellectual climate, particularly in the northern part of the country.

## Themes

Premchand began his career as a short story writer with the publication of *Soz-e Watan* (The Dirge of the Nation, 1908), written under his pen name, Nawab Rai. It is a collection of five stories wherein he wrote on patriotism in a mode that can be called revivalist or revisionist, much in the vein of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, whom he imitated in matters of style as well.<sup>6</sup> The patriotism and the hatred against invaders displayed in these stories made the colonial government ban the book, and Premchand barely escaped with a sharp reprimand from the magistrate. This was his first encounter with colonial censorship but not his last. He had to battle with censorship that tried to cripple him both as a writer and an editor of magazines later in life, without much help from anyone. What is pertinent to note here is that a strain of patriotism ran through stories such as 'The Rarest Pearl in the World' ('Duniya ka Sab se Anmol Ratan'), 'Sheikh Makhmoor', 'Rani Sarandha', and 'Raja Hardaul', which were written either in the dastaanesque mode or in the mode of historical romances, sometimes both. He continued to write in this vein for some time before he moved gradually to the realist mode, which was preferred by writers in many other Indian languages.

'A Well-bred Daughter' ('Bade Ghar ki Beti') is the first story to depict the family drama of an average, middle-class Indian family written in the realistic mode. He wrote a large number of stories throughout his career in this mode and on this theme. This and 'Family Break-up' ('Algojhya') are two classic stories about the Indian joint family that is held together by the ideal of sacrifice, where individual aspirations are subordinated to what is good for the family. A joint family in a village provides an ideal for Premchand whereby peasants can avoid dividing their landholding into smaller units. The breaking up of a family is an immensely painful affair in Premchand's stories, bringing social disgrace and opprobrium to those involved. However, between the two stories mentioned above, Premchand wrote a large number of stories about the daily life of smaller families in villages and small towns where he dealt with different aspects of

family life: conjugal tiffs and strife, domestic cruelty, struggle for survival amidst limited means and penury, polygamy, rivalry between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law for domination in the house, the phenomenon of co-wives and the plight of stepchildren, conflict between legitimate aspirations and meanness of opportunities, the cycle of debt that ruins families, and so on.

Premchand felt a deep affinity with the common man and his natural sympathy was towards the oppressed and deprived sections of society. No writer before him in Urdu or Hindi, and possibly other Indian languages, had depicted the lives of underdogs, untouchables and marginalized sections with such depth and empathy. Throughout his life, 'Premchand did not let go of his unsentimental awareness of the grim realities of rural life, of life at the bottom of the economic scale' (Amrit Rai 1982, ix). The oppressors and oppression came in many forms—they may be priests or zamindars, lawyers or policemen, or even doctors, all of whom held society in their stranglehold. Rituals pertaining to Hindu marriages and deaths were so exploitative and oppressive that these events were often robbed of their dignity and joy and spelt the ruin of families. Premchand began his career by exposing the corruption of the Hindu priestly class in his novel *Asraar-e Muavid* (Mysteries of the House of Worship, 1903–05), and then continued the tirade in many of his stories. In the story 'Babaji's Feast' ('Babaji ka Bhog') he depicts the greed of a Brahmin who has no compunction in robbing a poor family of its meagre means, and in 'The Funeral Feast' ('Mritak Bhoj') he showed how the predatory and parasitical Brahmins drive another Brahmin woman to destitution and her daughter to suicide. In a series of stories where the central character is Moteram, a Brahmin priest, Premchand exposes with rare courage the rapacity, hollowness and hypocrisy of the Hindu priestly class, which earned him the ire and venom of a section of high-caste Hindus, even culminating in a lawsuit for defamation. But he remained undaunted and went on exposing the many oppressive customs prevalent in society.

But his most trenchant critique was reserved for caste injustice, whereby people on the lowest rung of the Hindu caste system, and beyond the pale of the caste system, were considered untouchable and were compelled to live a life of indignity and humiliation. The upper-caste Hindus treated them worse than animals and this injustice was institutionalized through the social sanction of the

caste system. Stories such as ‘Thakur’s Well’ (‘Thakur ka Kuan’), ‘Salvation’ (‘Sadgati’), ‘The Shroud’ (‘Kafan’), ‘Temple’ (‘Mandir’), ‘The Woman Who Sold Grass’ (‘Ghaaswali’) and ‘One and a Quarter *Ser* of Wheat’ (‘Sawa Ser Gehun’) constitute a devastating indictment of the way upper-caste Hindus have treated Dalits for generations. They demonstrate that Dalits were subjected to daily humiliation and this humiliation stemmed from the fact that Dalit inferiority had become embedded in the psyche of the members of the Hindu upper castes, who have developed a vast repertoire of idioms, symbols and gestures of the verbal and physical denigration of Dalits over centuries. Grave injustice and the inhuman treatment of Dalits have become normalized, and cause no revulsion in society. Despite criticism from a few Dalit ideologues who level some rather irresponsible charges against Premchand for depicting Dalits in a certain way, the stories above—some of which have been rendered into films—have contributed significantly in raising awareness about the injustice perpetrated against the most vulnerable section of society. In this respect, as Vasudha Dalmia suggests, Premchand was much ahead of his time: ‘In his fiction, written over the three decades in the early century, Premchand presented what academic scholarship was to face squarely only towards the close of that century.’<sup>7</sup>

A considerable number of his stories deals with the plight of women. Premchand was deeply sensitive to the suffering of women in a patriarchal society where they had no agency and lived their lives according to the whims and fancies of the men on whom they were dependent—husbands, fathers, brothers or even close or distant male relatives. Women were expected to be docile, submissive and self-effacing, sacrificing their lives for the well-being of the family. Girls were treated as a curse on the family and the parents of girls were subjected to all kinds of humiliation and indignities while their marriages were arranged. Parents were sometimes compelled to marry off their nubile and very young daughters to old men just to unburden themselves of the responsibility and shame of being saddled with an unmarried daughter. The practices of *kanya vikray* (sale of a daughter in marriage), even *kanya vadh* (killing of a girl child), were prevalent. In his essays and editorials, Premchand made a strong plea for the abolition of the evil practices that made the life of women unbearable. He advocated divorce in extreme circumstances, and

supported the wife's claim to own half the husband's property in case of divorce and inherit the property in case of the husband's death.<sup>8</sup> He also wrote in favour of the Sarda Bill which aimed at raising the minimum marriage age for girls. In a large number of stories, such as 'Tuliya' ('Devi'), 'Sati', 'The Goddess from Heaven' ('Swarg ki Devi'), 'Return' ('Shanti'), 'Godavari's Suicide' ('Saut'), 'The Thread of Love' ('Prem Sutra'), 'Two Friends' ('Do Sakhiyaan'), 'The Lunatic Lover' ('Unmaad'), and so on, he sheds light on the plight of women in an oppressive, patriarchal system. Through the immortal characters of old women like Chachi in 'Holy Judges', the old aunt in the eponymous story, and Bhungi in 'A Positive Change' ('Vidhwans'), he shows how difficult life was for old women in a society that was known to respect its elderly members. The fate of widows, who were considered inauspicious and were expected to renounce all joys of life, was even worse, as shown in 'Compulsion' ('Nairashya Leela'), 'The Condemned' ('Dhikkar') and 'A Widow with Sons' ('Betonwali Vidhva').

However, there is a certain ambivalence in his depiction of women and their status as equal partners in marriage.<sup>9</sup> Some of the stories were radical for his time, yet he was unable to imagine a fully independent and empowered woman with her own agency and subjectivity, as Tagore did, for example, in 'Wife's Letter' or 'Chitra'.<sup>10</sup> In the entire Premchand oeuvre of short stories there are only three single women—Miss Padma of the eponymous story, Miss Khurshed of 'Disgrace' ('Laanchan') and Miss Joshi of 'Faith' ('Vishwas'). While Miss Padma, despite her education and economic independence, seems inadequate as a woman, deprived of a family life and bereft and regretful after a failed live-in relationship, Miss Khurshed is depicted as enjoying to the hilt her single status as a woman, and even sharing a deeply emotional relationship with another woman, Dr Leela. Miss Joshi starts off as a social butterfly, with the high and mighty kowtowing to her, but after several years of a live-in relationship with Mr Johri, pines for the bliss of domestic life with Mr Apte. However, there are so many female characters in Premchand's stories, portrayed from different points of view, that any kind of generalization will be undesirable. The labels 'pro-feminist' and 'anti-feminist' are not very helpful in understanding Premchand's stories either, as these labels inevitably carry the elements of reductionism inherent in them. To some, the very fact that Premchand could imagine women outside the marriage bond and as capable of finding fulfilment

in a career was radical enough, if not too radical, for his time. Similarly, despite his sympathy with widows and his support for widow remarriage, there is a certain uneasiness in depicting a widow who has an equal claim to bodily pleasures and comforts. Widows in Premchand's stories seem to find fulfilment only in the ideals of service, devotion and self-effacement. Indeed, in the entire corpus of his short fiction there are no more than two widow marriages<sup>11</sup> and both of them end disastrously.

As stated earlier, Premchand began his career as a short story writer by writing stories of patriotism in a somewhat revivalist mode. Later in life when he came under Gandhi's influence and showed deep involvement in India's struggle for independence, to the extent of giving up his government job, he wrote a string of nationalist stories dealing with the adoption of indigenous or swadeshi products, the boycott or even burning of foreign goods, picketing outside alcohol shops, giving up government jobs and embracing a life of social service, among other things. Some of them, like 'A Strange Holi' ('Ajeeb Holi') and 'Resignation' ('Isteefa'), show the discomfiture of British colonial officials at the hands of Indians and the sudden conversion of Indian loyalists or servants of the British Raj into patriotic Indians who jealously protect their honour and are devoted to the cause of Independence. Some of these stories, as also some others, have been criticized for a kind of contrived and easy plot resolution through the 'change of heart' device. Apart from the above two, there are stories like 'The Wine Shop' ('Sharab ki Dukaan'), 'Maiku and the Congress Volunteer' ('Maiku'), 'An Audacious Act' ('Dussahas'), 'Role Reversal' ('Patni se Pati'), 'The Night of the New Moon' ('Amavas ki Raat'), 'A Daughter's Possessions' ('Beti ka Dhan'), 'The Call of Dawn' ('Baang-e Sahar'), 'The Bankruptcy of the Bank' ('Bank ka Diwala') and 'The Salt Inspector' ('Namak ka Daroga') where this device has been used to drive a point home, or as an easy way out of various tricky situations. This is true of some of his peasant stories as well where the writer finds it 'safer' to use the 'change of heart' of the oppressive zamindar as the convenient device for plot resolution rather than showing the oppressed peasants finding solidarity among themselves and ranging against the zamindars for collective radical action.<sup>12</sup> He also uses suicide as a device for plot resolution for women faced with social opprobrium, something which might seem melodramatic and an easy way to arrive at a



denouement but on closer analysis seems to be historically accurate. In Indian society, this kind of honour suicide is quite rampant even now, as newspapers and television channels will testify.

Premchand's love for the countryside is evident in his fictional and non-fictional writings. He has written several extremely evocative stories such as 'Holy Judges', 'The Story of Two Bullocks' ('Do Bailon ki Katha'), 'Idgah' and 'Atmaram', which depict the pristine village life of simplicity, honesty and quiet contentment. In fact, his fictional corpus, if read uncritically, would lend itself to an easy binary between country life and city life, one good and the other almost irredeemably evil. Yet, we have to recognize that he does not depict country life as an idyll shorn of all evils. There are stories such as 'A Positive Change' ('Vidhwans'), 'A Home for an Orphan' ('Grihdaah') and 'Road to Salvation' ('Mukti Marg') that de-romanticize and demystify village life and depict the author's awareness of the imperfections and blind spots in the supposed idyll.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the apparent binary that seems to work in the case of some novels and stories cannot be stretched beyond a point.

Premchand's deep interest in the simple life of peasants extended to his love for animals, particularly draught animals, treated most cruelly in India. Very few writers have depicted such an intimate bond between animals and human beings. Premchand depicts animals as endowed with emotions just as human beings are, responding to love and affection just as human beings do, and are fully deserving of human compassion. Often, the duplicity, cruelty and betrayal in the human world is contrasted with the unconditional love and loyalty displayed by animals towards their masters and those who care for them. It is a heart-wrenching moment, as shown in 'Money for Deliverance' ('Muktidhan') and 'Sacrifice' ('Qurbani'), when a peasant has to part with his animals because of want and destitution. The deep compassion with which animal life has been depicted in 'Holy Judges' ('Panchayat'), 'Reincarnation' ('Purva Sanskar'), 'The Story of Two Bullocks' ('Do Bailon ki Katha') and 'The Roaming Monkey' ('Salilani Bandar') are treasures of world literature. Stories such as 'Turf War' ('Adhikar Chinta') and 'Defending One's Liberty' ('Swatva Raksha'), written in a humorous and symbolic vein, show how a dog fiercely protects his turf and how a horse defeats all the machinations of human beings to make him work on a Sunday, which is his day of rest, rightfully earned after working for six days of

the week! In 'The Roaming Monkey' the author shows how a monkey earns money by performing tricks of different kinds and thus looks after the wife of his owner, nurturing her and bringing her back from the brink of lunacy. In 'The Price of Milk' ('Doodh ki Qeemat') we have the spectacle of goats feeding a baby with milk from their own udders, thereby saving its life. The baby has been denied milk by its own mother because she considers it a *tentar*, an 'evil' child destined to be the cause of death of one of her parents or another member of the family, and wishes it dead. In 'A Daughter's Possessions' ('Beti ka Dhan') Sakkhū Choudhury finds tears streaming down the eyes of his oxen in his moments of grief when the zamindar is going to evict him from his home, and when his own sons are totally indifferent to his plight. In the story 'Two Brothers' ('Do Bhai') the narrator contrasts the greed and lack of empathy of the elder brother, Krishna, for his younger brother, Balaram, whose property he wants to grab, with the deep bond between two bullocks, one of whom refuses to touch any food for three days when the other is separated from it.

Several very popular stories of Premchand deal with Hindu-Muslim relations. He was deeply interested and invested in a cordial relationship between Hindus and Muslims, a fact which is evident in both his fictional and non-fictional writings. He had no doubt that the independence and progress of the country depended substantially on the harmonious relationship between these two dominant religious groups in India. Early in his life he was introduced to Muslim culture and Islam through his study of Persian and Urdu and the maulvi who taught him. He was also familiar with the ideals of Hinduism, the orthodox variety as well as the reformist trend of the Arya Samaj to which his family owed allegiance. This, coupled with his inherently secular temperament, provided him a unique vantage point from which he could write fairly and fearlessly about both communities in an even-handed way. In fact, he was the only writer of his generation in any Indian language, not excepting Tagore, to write about the external and internal lives of the members of both communities with an insight, empathy and intimacy that have not been matched since. I cannot think of any other Indian writer who possessed that kind of vision. During his lifetime, the relationship between Hindus and Muslims went through particularly volatile and turbulent phases, but he was always unwavering in his belief in pluralism and kept the faith. Stories like 'Holy Judges', 'Idgah', 'The

Greater Pilgrimage' ('Hajj-e Akbar'), 'Temple and Mosque' ('Mandir aur Masjid'), 'The Prophet's Justice' ('Nabi ka Niti Nirvaah'), 'Forgiveness' ('Kshama') and essays such as 'Islamic Civilization' ('Islami Sabhyata'<sup>14</sup>) demonstrate his deep knowledge of Islamic culture and the intimate lives of Muslim families, and how the daily lives of Hindus and Muslims were intertwined, particularly in the countryside. Towards the end of the second decade of the twentieth century when Hindu-Muslim relations were at their lowest ebb, Premchand wrote the play *Karbala*, on a deeply emotional subject for Muslims, to cement the bonds of Hindu-Muslim unity.

Premchand seems immensely relevant in today's India when history is being sought to be rewritten and Muslims are constantly cast in the role of the 'other' and held accountable for all the real and imagined atrocities of Muslim rulers of the past. In his own time, he saw with bewilderment how 'Whenever a Muslim king is remembered, we evoke Aurangzeb' (Premchand 1985:5), a remark that reverberates with contemporary resonance, indicating the agenda of some people who always sought to frustrate any attempt at a broader understanding and reconciliation between these two communities. He was opposed to religious sectarianism and orthodoxy in any form. This will be evident if one reads his stories in the Moteram series and a story like 'Holy War' ('Jihad') where he anticipates what goes today by the misleading and erroneous name of 'Islamic' terror. In this context, Syed Akbar Hyder's comments seem particularly apt:

Premchand archives Hindu-Muslim relationship in mutually respectable terms that move beyond Aurangzeb and his times into a temporal zone reflecting a more pluralistic Islam . . . By ideologically fracturing religious communities, he undermines the antagonistic communal bifurcation within the colonial milieu that posited Hindu and Muslim as age-old enemies whose scriptures determined their mode of thinking and living. (Hansen and Lelyveld, 2005, 276)

## **Evolution in Premchand's Art of Storytelling**

Premchand's art of storytelling evolved through his career encompassing three full decades, as did his language and vocabulary. As he evolved from a dastaanesque to a realistic mode, his language also changed in register and vocabulary, and the patches of purple prose likewise dwindled. Moreover, as he slowly moved from Urdu to Hindi, but still continued to write or translate in both languages (or forms or *shaili*, as some would characterize it), his language underwent visible changes. And later in life, when he became a strong advocate

of Hindustani, his endeavour was to craft a language that would be equally intelligible to the votaries of both Hindi and Urdu. He also moved from the earlier dense, lush narrative style incorporating multiple registers and a variety of characters as in ‘Holy Judges’, ‘The Sword of Loyalty’ (‘Khanjar-e Wafa’), ‘Atmaram’, ‘Idgah’, and so on, to a leaner, pared down narrative style focusing on one or two events and involving fewer characters. The earlier expansiveness was replaced by intensity of experience. The idealistic, sometimes even prescriptive, nature of his work evolved into a more robust and mature understanding of life’s pitiless ironies and unpredictability that did not always conform to poetic justice. Amrit Rai’s remark in this context seems the most pertinent:

In the year 1933–34, Premchand wrote several stories such as ‘Manovritti’, ‘Doodh ka Dam’, ‘Balak’, ‘Naya Vivah’ . . . which are entirely new from the point of view of both content and form . . . there isn’t in these later stories . . . a dense and tightly woven web of events as in the stories of an earlier phase. They have, instead, just a single focus of interest, just one little point to make, an unremarkable enough state of mind to describe, the author’s own way of observing a fleeting glimpse of truth or beauty—and this is presented in an informal and conversational manner . . . (Amrit Rai 1982, 311)

## **Language Issues: Urdu versus Hindi**

As indicated in the opening paragraph of this Introduction, a comprehensive understanding of Premchand’s stature as a writer demands that the reader is able to access his stories in both versions. One great advantage of this anthology is that it points to differences in the two versions of a story. These differences are sometimes trivial, at other times substantial, and provide added insights into the stories and expand their textuality.<sup>15</sup> Premchand began his career writing in Urdu and he produced a substantial volume of work in his first twelve years as a writer (1903–15)—five novels and close to four dozen stories to be precise—before he thought of writing in Hindi. His transition from Urdu to Hindi was gradual, though irreversible, given the social and political circumstances and the publishing scenario of the time.

Now, the question is, are the Hindi and Urdu versions of his stories exact replicas of each other? Not always and not necessarily. Premchand knew this too well, as he was aware of the changes that he made along the way. In a letter to Imtiaz Ali Taj, the dramatist, translator and editor in Urdu, he mentioned that he changed entire scenes while translating the text from one version to the other. As

usually happens with writer-translators, whenever they translate their own work, the creative impulse often takes over so that translation often turns into rewriting. In Premchand's stories one finds many minor changes that were done either for stylistic embellishments, or for the difference in perceived readership, or, quite probably, for the space constraints in the journal in which the stories were going to be published.

There is another dimension to this issue. It was not always Premchand himself who translated his work between Urdu and Hindi. Often, he took help from others, which might have meant he had the time to look over it only cursorily. Several translators, most notably Iqbal Bahadur Verma 'Saher', are known to have helped Premchand in preparing versions of stories both in Hindi and Urdu. Their style now passes off as Premchand's style. His younger son, Amrit Rai, excavated several stories in Urdu of which there were no Hindi versions. Amrit Rai published such stories in a two-volume anthology with the appropriate title *Gupt Dhan* (Hidden Treasure). In its Introduction he writes about the kind of changes he has effected while transferring the stories from one version to the other:

I thought it unfair to Hindi readers to publish these stories in their original form. So I clothed them in Hindi, in the style of Munshiji, as far as it was possible for me. How far I have succeeded in this effort to not only preserve the soul of the story but the language and style as well will be judged by you. As for me, I feel satisfaction in the thought that I have pulled all my resources in this endeavour.<sup>16</sup> (My translation)

It is both significant and debatable why Amrit Rai felt it necessary for the stories to undergo changes for the sake of intelligibility and readability in Hindi. Had the two languages changed so much within twenty-five years of Premchand's death that they needed to be interfered with? This also brings up the questions of ethics and authorship. Does anyone, be it even the writer's own son, have the right to tamper with the original works of a writer to make them suitable for a particular readership?

How radical these changes sometimes were can be illustrated through the two versions of his famous story 'A Night in the Month of Poos' ('Poos ki Raat'). The story is about a poor, destitute peasant, Halku, who is in permanent debt to the village moneylender. Halku spends the severe winter nights in the field to save the harvest from marauding beasts. But ultimately, he is unable to save the

crop when a horde of wild beasts descends on the field one night and despoils the harvest. In the Hindi version, which was first published in the journal *Madhuri* (May 1930), the story ends on a note of apparent relief for Halku, who decides to move away from the life of a peasant by becoming a worker in a factory. However, in the Urdu version, which was published later in *Prem Chaleesi 2* (1930), Premchand has added a section at the end where Halku ponders over the travails of peasant life but nevertheless decides to stay a peasant. Taking on the job of a day labourer, he thinks, would mean an insult to the land and to his forefathers who were peasants. So he resolves to stay a peasant whatever the challenges. Thus, the two endings of the story admit two radically different interpretations. It is clear that the Urdu version is not simply an expanded version of the Hindi, but it radically alters the perspective of the protagonist. In the Hindi version of the story Halku comes across as yielding to the pressures of being a peasant and surrendering to the fate of a wage-earner, whereas the Urdu version stresses his strong resistance to any such shift in his career. He confronts the challenges of a peasant's life, standing face-to-face with total ruin as the marauding animals destroy his harvest, but none of it can destroy his spirit. He is convinced that he should continue to be a peasant to carry on the legacy of his forefathers. Thus, while the Urdu version maintains the status quo in Halku's life, the Hindi version envisages his transformation into a factory worker. Changes of the kind signalled above, with variations and different degrees of emphasis, can be found in a number of Premchand's short stories.

'Atmaram' is a story that presented Premchand with the problem of cultural untranslatability. It was built on the Hindu philosophical concept of *maya* and *moha*,<sup>17</sup> and Premchand must have found that these concepts were not easily translatable in Urdu. The story is about a devout village goldsmith, Mahadev, who, disenchanted by his own children, becomes attached to a parrot which he symbolically named Atmaram. The story plays on the popular belief that *atma*, or the soul, is like a bird which flies out at the time of death. Mahadev's religious and spiritual inclinations are demonstrated by his constant chanting of two lines of a popular bhajan: *Sat gurudutt Shivdutt daata/Ram ke charan mein chitt laaga*. The villagers could identify him from a distance hearing the sound of the bhajan. It so happens that one of his sons accidentally opens the cage one

day and the parrot flies out. When Mahadev finds the cage empty, his heartbeat stops for a moment. All his attempts to tempt the parrot back into the cage bear no fruit. The parrot sits on the cage and flies about it, but cannot be made to enter the cage. Mahadev continues his effort. The climax of the story shows this tug of war between Mahadev and the parrot effectively:

[The parrot] would come and sit on the top of the cage and now sit at the door of the cage and look at the bowls for food and water, and then fly off. If the old man was moha incarnate, the parrot was incarnate maya. This went on till evening descended. The struggle between maya and moha was lost in darkness.

**Hindi:** [Tota] kabhi pinjre par aa baithta, kabhi pinjre ke dwar par baith apne daanapani ke piyalion ko dekhta, aur phir urh jata. Buddha agar murtiman moha tha, tau tota murtimayi maya. Yahan tak ki shaam ho gayi. Maya aur moh ka ye sangram andhakar mein vilin ho gaya.

**Urdu:** [Tota] kabhi pinjre par aata, kabhi pinjre ke darwazey par baith kar apne daanapani ki piyalion ko dekhta, aur phir urh jata, magar joonhi Mahadev uski taraf aata woh phir urh jata. Buddha agar paykar-e hawas tha, tau tota daayre aarzoo. Yahan tak ke shaam-e siyah ne hawas aur arzoo ki is kashmakash par parda dhal diya.

One would understand that Urdu words like *hawas* and *aarzoo* cannot adequately represent the philosophical concepts of maya and moha and Premchand must have realized this fact of cultural untranslatability. Similarly, the constant chanting of the bhajan *Sat gurdutt Shivdutt daata/Ram ke charan mein chitt laaga* would befit the genius of the Hindi language more than Urdu and appeal to someone brought up in the tradition of Hindu religion more than anyone else. That Premchand himself was conscious of this is evidenced by the fact that the story was originally intended for the journal *Kahkashan* published from Lahore. But as the story got written Premchand realized that it was probably not suitable for the predominantly Muslim readership of *Kahkashan*. He wrote to the editor, Imtiaz Ali Taj:

I have recently written another story, 'Atmaram'. I am sending it to *Zamana*. It has turned out to be so utterly Hindu that it is not suitable for *Kahkashan*. You may call yourself a Hindu but your readers certainly are not Hindu.<sup>18</sup>

This statement, however, appears to be at odds with the entire version of the Urdu story which Premchand seems to have written with far greater relish than the Hindi version. The Urdu version is longer by two dense pages—ten pages compared to the Hindi version's eight. The rhetorical flourishes, the deployment of metaphor and simile, the idiomatic turns of phrase—all these make the Urdu



of metaphor and simile, the idiomatic turns of phrase – all these make the Urdu version more urbane, supple and enjoyable than the Hindi one which seems somewhat stark and dull in comparison. Thus, reading the short stories in both Hindi and Urdu reveals several interesting facts.

In many cases, the Urdu version is longer than the Hindi version, showing the use of traditional rhetorical embellishments. This would encourage us to speculate that: (a) Urdu was Premchand's first love and, as he professes in his essay 'Sahitya ka Uddeshya', it came more naturally to him than Hindi. (b) As a language, Urdu lends itself to finer and more intimate shades of feelings and emotions in Premchand's hand in a way that Hindi does not; in comparison, Hindi is somewhat bare and unadorned. (c) In the Urdu versions one can find virtuoso passages, passages of purple prose designed to dazzle readers into an admission of the author's full control and command over the language. It is interesting to think about whether there is an organic relationship between theme and language form, whether language determines subject matter and styles or, at least, whether language and themes are intimately connected. Alok Rai says, 'It seems as though some utterances can be made most felicitously in Hindi and some in Urdu. What lies behind this—history, social and cultural predisposition or literary traditions? This can be a subject for research'<sup>19</sup> (Alok Rai and Mushtaq Ali, 2002: ii; my translation). He further says that the communalization of these two languages is evident, as one can see that in Hindi if the characters are given Hindu names, in Urdu they are given Muslim names.<sup>20</sup> I would argue that the reasons for the differing versions should be traced in the different readerships that Premchand was addressing. And these two readerships were different not only in their religious practices and cultural traditions and cultural symbols, but also in their class differences, in their reading habits, and the literary traditions they inherited. To quote Alok Rai again: 'Only a deeper study will reveal what was thought to deserve utterance in what tradition and what was considered redundant. One can see the emerging mental disposition of that period hidden in these differing utterances.'<sup>21</sup> (Alok Rai and Mushtaq Ali, op cit., my translation)

## **Premchand in English**

In an article, ‘Nirmala Translated: Premchand’s Heroine in English Dress’, Rupert Snell raises the question, ‘Is Premchand translatable?’ and then answers quickly, ‘In a word—no: the subtext of purity borne by the very title “Nirmala” is denied to those who access this novel only through English’ (Snell 2001, 307). Snell rightly underlines the fact that all the linguistic and cultural resonances evoked by a word or phrase cannot be transferred to the target language. But this is the translator’s challenge—not to produce a ‘perfect’ translation, which is an impossibility, but to gesture towards a universe of possibilities, of cultural nuances invested in the original text. Snell further surmises that few readers would be moved by Premchand if they were to read him only in English, a proposition that one finds contestable. After all, the most widely read fiction writers in contemporary times—Orhan Pamuk, Milan Kundera, Haruki Murakami—are read overwhelmingly in their English translations rather than the original languages, and readers are still profoundly moved by them.<sup>22</sup>

Snell’s proposition will not hold good for a multilingual country like India, where the richness of literature in many languages is accessed through English. The question one really needs to address concerns the kind of English that is employed to ensure that the voice of the original author is not drowned in what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak characterizes as ‘. . . a sort of with-it translatese, so that literature by a woman in Palestine begins to resemble, in the feel of its prose, something by a man in Taiwan.’<sup>23</sup> Any apparent unevenness and angularity should be retained, and cultural nuances must be preserved and not flattened out. In contemporary India, where the largest archive on Indian literatures and their interrelationships are being created not in any Indian language but in English, the importance of translation in this language cannot be overemphasized. In the multilingual classrooms and literary meets and festivals in India, English often acts as an ice-breaker and a catalyst for entry into the multilingual world, which is the Indian reality. English is also being moulded for this purpose by writers who are writing originally in English and translators who are translating works from Indian languages into English.<sup>24</sup>

Premchand has been translated by a number of translators with differing degrees of competence and success. Elsewhere, I have dealt comprehensively with the history of Premchand translations in English and the challenges thereof.<sup>25</sup> Most of the challenges articulated in the essay—like the varying

registers of the original, irregular punctuation, instability of the meaning of words and phrases in the original, and allusiveness—are valid for this anthology too. Premchand's world is culturally so rich that any translator will have to grapple with the phenomenon of cultural untranslatability. Not to speak of English, sometimes one finds that the cultural resonances of the phrases even in Hindi and Urdu are not the same. Gregory Rabassa, the famed translator from Spanish, has pointed to this phenomenon succinctly as follows: A 'language will load a word down with all manner of cultural barnacles . . . bearing it off on a different tangent from a word in another tongue meant to describe the same thing.' (Rabassa 2005, 6). Attempts have been made to preserve these 'cultural barnacles' rather than eliminate them, even if it means straining the idiom in English. Inevitably, it has involved a series of particular, contingent judgements and ad hoc decisions that could not always be anticipated. These decisions have also differed from story to story. And that is why there are sentence structures and turns of phrases which might seem infelicitous in English but will give the reader some clue to the linguistic varieties and speech patterns of the characters in the original and the ways in which some ideas are expressed in it. Rather than assimilating the foreignness and cultural specificity of the original in a universalist idiom, attempts have been made to preserve both linguistic and cultural nuances, allowing the English to attain a certain measure of both readability and 'bi-culturality'.

Premchand was writing at a time when the protocols of style, including punctuation, in both Urdu and Hindi were not yet settled. The editorial endeavour here has been to bring the text in line with the modern conventions of prose writing in English. That involved changes in the format of dialogue writing, the appropriate use of quotation marks, the use of italics for both interior monologue where characters internalize their thoughts, and emphasis, and splitting or joining paragraphs. Short, choppy sentences that come in a string without subjects or subordinating clauses in Hindi or Urdu have sometimes been joined together to make coherent, intelligible sentences in English. The Roman script has the advantage of having letters in both lower and upper cases and modern computer technology has made it easier to write the script in bold or italics for varying purposes that have been used discreetly. Translators are, after all, interpreters of the text they are translating, and if a certain device of the Roman script was helpful in expressing the intended meaning of the original

roman script was helpful in expressing the intended meaning of the original, they were encouraged to use this device to bring the text in line with modern prose. However, such instances are minimal and have been resorted to only after careful reflection.

## **A Plea for Humility**

Premchand scholarship is very much a work in progress. Textual research on him has remained bogged down by the lack of availability of original manuscripts. Scholars have tried to gather works from journals and magazines in Urdu and Hindi, and in the process committed errors because of logistical or linguistic inadequacy.<sup>26</sup> These journals and magazines often operated on a shaky and tight budget and had very little or no editing rigour. Mistakes of the calligrapher, compositor or proofreader often went unchecked and undetected, and thus became part of the text. All this makes it difficult to arrive at a definitive version of the text. On our part, too, there is no claim to finality, only an assertion that all efforts have been made to collate texts from different sources to arrive at the final version. We request discerning scholars and readers to bring any errors and inadequacies in our versions to our notice, however grave or trivial they may be, so that they can be corrected in later editions.

**New Delhi**

**November 2017**

**M. Asaduddin**

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## The Game

It was almost noon. The farmers were already in their fields. The shadows of the trees had shortened. The cranes were descending on the fields of ripening sugar cane. The sun was bright and the air warm. Children were still inside their homes for fear of the hot breeze. Suddenly, the door of a hut was flung open and a boy of barely five or six peered out. Sitting in the shadow of the neem tree in front of the hut, an old lady, despite her less than perfect eyesight, was weaving a basket. Seeing the boy, she called out, ‘Where are you off to, Fundan? Go inside and sleep, it’s very hot outside. All the other boys are still sleeping.’

Miffed, Fundan replied, ‘Mother has already left to plough the field. I am scared alone in the house.’

The old lady was the designated grandmother of the village children, whose job was to curtail their freedom: the ground near the water tank was littered with raw mangoes but no child could go there—they’d fall into the tank; the berry trees were laden with red and yellow berries but no little boy was allowed to climb the tree—he’d fall; the pond looked so beautiful with its clear water and fish jumping joyfully in it, lotuses were in full bloom but no child could go near the pond—he’d drown. The children did not like her watching them. They tried to find ways to slip past her. But with the experience of her eighty long years, the old woman could see through all their tricks and schemes, and nip them in the bud.

The old woman scolded him, ‘I am here. What are you scared of? Go and sleep or I’ll come over.’

The boy came out of the hut and said, ‘It’s time to get out anyway.’

‘Where will you go at this time of the day?’

‘Nowhere, Grandma.’

The boy took a few steps forward. Grandma put away her basket and the long needle but before she could get up, he ran out of her reach. The old woman changed tack. Gently, she called out, ‘Don’t go anywhere at this time, my child.’

Fundan shouted from where he was standing, ‘I am going to look for Jatin,’ and ran away.

Jatin was a hawker. He had started coming to this village recently. He was sure to come every evening. Instead of money for his goods, he would be paid in grain, somewhat higher than the cost of his fare. The villagers’ measure inclined towards generosity. So, he would walk four to five miles from the neighbouring village to ply his fare. His basket was laden with sweet-and-salty sev, *til* or *ramdana* laddu, some *batasha*, *khutti* and other local goodies. It was covered with an old, tattered cloth. To the children it seemed like manna from heaven and they would hunger for one glimpse of the basket. In their childish enthusiasm and curiosity, catching a glimpse of the basket was enough to fill them with pleasure. They would await his arrival anxiously. Although only a few were privileged to partake of this manna, it was still a source of great joy for the boys to gather around his basket, lift the cloth and peer at the delicacies sitting like coy princesses on a plate. Jatin’s arrival created a great commotion and, for half an hour, the village seemed caught in a storm. In truth, his arrival was more an occasion for despair than happiness, but the children were always excited to welcome the event anew. They waited impatiently; even the sight of sweets which may not find a way to their mouths gladdened their hearts. Fundan was one such poor boy. Other boys ate the sweets but he could only stare at them hungrily. No amount of crying, begging, entreating or flattering could grant his wish. He was destined for failure. But the failure never dampened his spirits.

Today, Fundan did not take his afternoon nap. Jatin had promised to get raw *gari* and *imarti*. In the boys’ world this was going to be a historic moment. They had been waiting since morning for Jatin. How could one close one’s eyes?

Reaching the garden, Fundan thought, *It’s not evening yet? Jatin is usually here by now, but maybe not. It’s still early. Chunnu, Sohan and Kallu are still asleep. Jatin must have reached the main road. He is sure to get the imarti—red and shiny. Once, long ago . . . yes, at the Dussehra mela, I had tried imarti. How sweet it was!* His mouth salivated at the memory. The longing grew. He had now

left the garden behind. There was a wide field that led to the main road. But no sign of Jatin.

For a while, Fundan waited for Jatin at the edge of the village. He was excited—he wanted to be the first to greet Jatin today. *I will lead him to the village. Everyone will be so surprised.* Such thoughts excited him further. His heart dancing, he moved towards the road, clapping his hands.

By chance, at that moment Genda joined him. He was the village dog—both a guard and a plaything for the children. He was on his evening round as this was when bulls and oxen got into the fields. When he reached Fundan, he stopped and wagged his tail as if to ask what he was doing there. Fundan patted him on the head but Genda was too busy to stop and chat. The dog raced ahead and Fundan ran after him, his excitement renewed in the company of his friend. Now he decided to meet Jatin on the *kaccha* road. But still there was no sign of Jatin. At times, he fancied he could spot Jatin but the next moment realized that it was not so. The road was full of other sights. Bullock carts were lined up. A few ekkas and bicycles occasionally passed by too. He even saw a camel and ran behind it for some distance, clapping his hands. But his one desire towered over all these sights.

Trees lined both sides of the road. Some were mango trees. He found another diversion, throwing stones at mangoes to knock them down but his eyes were still on the lookout for Jatin. Why was he not here yet?

Slowly, the shadows lengthened. Like a tired traveller, the sun seemed to retire for the day. He was still hoping that Jatin would show up. Hope was driving the time along. Disheartened, he squatted on the road. Tears fell unfettered at the dashed hopes. He sobbed uncontrollably. How cruel Jatin was—‘He comes to meet us every day but the day I come to meet him, he doesn’t show up. I won’t let him enter the village tomorrow.’ His heart constricted with such childish thoughts.

Suddenly his eyes fell on a broken *jhabba*—a cane basket—on the ground. Despite the gloom of dejection and failure, this was enough to rouse the child. Such is the carefree heart at this age. He lined the basket with some leaves. He picked up some gravel and stones and placed them in the basket. Then he took off his shirt and covered it all. He placed the basket on his head and started walking towards the village. No longer was he the boy who was looking for



Jatin. He *was* Jatin. The same manna from heaven on his head, he called out in the same way, his gait was the same and so was his diction. Would he have felt as happy leading Jatin to the village as he felt in this moment when he himself was Jatin? He was flying—believing the mirage real, the false true. Happiness devoid of reason. He danced rather than walked, his head held high in pride.

His innocent face reflected the truth of his belief with such intensity that nobody dared laugh at him. Such was his demeanour when he walked into the village. The boys heard his call and ran towards him. Just like Jatin, Fundan was surrounded by eager faces. Somebody asked: ‘What kind of a game is this?’ But one heart understood another. Sweets started selling. Pebbles became money and stones, and rocks became sweets. This game was much more fun. Rationality lacks romance, pleasure and the feeling of weightlessness.

Munnu handed him a pebble, saying, ‘Jatin, I’ll give you an anna for the sweets.’

Jatin placed a few stones on a leaf and gave it to him.

Sweets never tasted as good or as delicious.

*Translated from the Hindi by Payal Agarwal*



## The Holi Gift

### 1

Amarkant was heading out when Maikulal came over to play chess.

Maiku asked, 'Are you going out somewhere, bhai? Come, let's play a couple of games if you have the time.'

Keeping his mirror and comb in a chest, Amarkant replied, 'No, brother, I'm not free at all. I'm going to my in-laws' tomorrow. I've to pack my luggage.'

'And you're making preparations already? It's within walking distance from here. You're going there for the first time, I take it?'

'Yes, yaar, I haven't been there even once. I was in no mood to pay a visit right now but my father-in-law insisted on it.'

'Then you don't need to pack so much. You'll be there in half an hour even if you leave tomorrow evening.'

'I already have butterflies in my stomach. Till now, I had only been revelling in the thought of seeing my wife again. That thought is about to become a reality now. Thoughts are beautiful, who knows what the reality might be like!'

'So, have you picked up a present for her? Don't you dare go empty-handed there, else you'll be taunted endlessly.'

Amarkant had not thought of any presents. He was still a novice in this art.

Maiku advised, 'Oh dear, so pick one now! You're going there for the first time. Imagine what she'll feel like if you go there without any gift.'

Amar asked, 'So, what present should I pick for her? This never crossed my mind. Suggest something that is both economical as well as the finest, because I also have to send some money home. My father has asked for it.'

Maiku did not live with his parents. Sarcastically, he said, 'Of course! How can you say no when your father has asked for it! This is no ordinary matter.'

Without catching the drift of the irony, Amarkant replied, 'Indeed, that's why I didn't even go for new clothes this Holi. But because it's also compulsory to carry a gift, I'll have to pick something or the other. Suggest something inexpensive.'

An exchange of ideas followed between the two friends, for the subject was of utmost importance. It alone could ensure whether the future of conjugal life would be joyous or otherwise. If leaving a good impression on one's first visit to the in-laws' can have a lasting effect on your married life, is the first gift an insignificant matter? They kept racking their brains for quite a while but nothing came of it.

Just then a Parsi woman sporting a new-fashioned sari happened to pass by in her motor car. Maiku said, 'Now if you pick a sari like that, she'll definitely be very happy. Just how divine is its colour, how extraordinary its appearance! It has certainly caught my eye. You can purchase it from Hashim's shop for twenty-five rupees.'

Amarkant too had been irresistibly attracted by that sari. How happy would his wife be to see a sari like that! And how perfectly would it suit her fair skin! He was absorbed in such fancies. He replied, 'Yes, my friend, I too like it. But I'm afraid Hashim's shop is being picketed.'

'So be it. Those who want to buy, they always do. It's their wish. They buy whatever they feel like buying. It's not as if it's anyone's goddamn business.'

Amarkant replied, somewhat apologetically, 'That's true. But it won't be possible for me to go past the volunteers and enter the shop. On top of it, the place is always crowded with onlookers.'

Maiku said, as if making allowances for his cowardice, 'So go through the back door, then. There is no picketing there.'

'Can't it be bought from some indigenous shop?'

'You won't find it anywhere except Hashim's shop.'

## 2

Evening fell, and the charms of Aminabad were just beginning to reveal themselves. The sun had left traces of its splendour in what appeared like

themselves. The sun had left traces of its splendour in what appeared like glowing bubbles of light. Amarkant furtively arrived at Hashim's shop. The volunteers were picketing, and the spectators had turned up in large numbers. A couple of times or so, he made up his mind to go inside. But his spirit deserted him by the time he reached the footpath.

However, it was imperative to buy a sari. His mind had been fixated on it and he could not wait any longer. Finally, he decided to go in through the back door. He went near it and saw that there was no volunteer there. He quickly rushed inside and within twenty minutes or so, returned to the same spot, with a new-fashioned sari. But within this short span, circumstances had taken a dramatic turn. The volunteers had arrived. For a minute, Amarkant doubtfully stood there at the door. He then left in a hurry and kept running without caring for directions. But alas, misfortune still followed him. An old woman, leaning on a stick, was coming his way. Amarkant collided with her. The old woman fell and started swearing at him, 'Are you wilfully blind or what? Don't you see me? The flowers of your youth too shall wither someday.'

Amarkant's feet could not carry him any further. He helped the old woman to her feet and was apologizing to her, when three volunteers appeared from behind and surrounded him. One of them laid his hands on the new sari and said, 'You're not allowed to purchase foreign clothes. And on top of it, you didn't respond when we called you!'

The second one said, 'You ran away like a thief.'

The third one added, 'Thousands of men are being arrested and put in jail, isn't it? The entire country is facing a crisis and he hasn't had enough of foreign clothes!'

Amarkant tightened his grip on the sari with both hands and asked, 'Will you all just let me go or not?'

The first volunteer again reached out for the sari and answered, 'How can we? You can never leave from here with foreign clothes.'

Amarkant held the sari tightly in his hand and said, 'You can't stop me on any account.'

He started walking away, but two of the volunteers immediately lay down before him. The poor fellow was in a real fix now. He had been forced to face up to the very misfortune that he had wanted to avoid. In a trice, scores of men gathered there and began making snide remarks.

‘Seems like a gentleman.’

‘And these people call themselves educated. What a shame! Every day, around five to ten people get arrested at that shop. But what do you care?’

‘Snatch the sari and report this to the police.’

Amarkant stood there, like a poor fellow bound in chains. He could not think of a way out of this difficult situation. He was furious at Maikulal who had brought this affliction upon him. He had never cared about presents. It was that wretch who had suggested otherwise.

For some time, people kept commenting on him and then the ritual of ‘snatch and grab’ began. Someone made off with his cap. When Amarkant turned his attention towards him, someone else snatched the sari from his hands. And then, within no time, it disappeared into the crowd.

Exasperated, Amarkant said, ‘I’ll go and file a police report about this.’

One man replied, ‘Yes, yes, do that by all means and send us all to the gallows.’

Suddenly, a young woman wearing a plain khadi sari and carrying a *jhola* on her shoulder happened to pass that way. Seeing this quarrel, she inquired, ‘What’s the matter? Why are you all troubling this gentleman?’

Amarkant felt somewhat comforted. He went near her and began complaining, ‘These people have confiscated my clothes and have hidden it somewhere. This is nothing but plain robbery. It’s neither satyagraha nor proof of one’s love for the country.’

The young woman assured him, ‘Don’t worry. You’ll get your clothes back. These people must be having them. What clothes were they, exactly?’

One of the volunteers replied, ‘Sister, he has bought these clothes from Hashim’s shop.’

The young woman said, ‘He can buy it from wherever he feels like. You have no right to confiscate his clothes. Why don’t you return them to him? Who has them?’

Amarkant felt somewhat embarrassed and forgot everything about self-will—a topic that he otherwise boasted about with his friends. He said, ‘It was a woman’s wish, therefore I was helpless.’

‘Didn’t you reason with her?’

‘I did, but to no avail. But if you had done the same, some good sense might have prevailed.’

‘I’ll certainly do that if I get the opportunity. A man’s fate is in a woman’s hands now, is it? Which mohalla do you live in?’

‘In Saadatganj.’

‘And your name is?’

‘Amarkant.’

The maiden immediately pulled up the end of her sari a bit, to cover her face, bowed her head, and asked in a somewhat hesitant and affectionate tone, ‘But your wife hasn’t moved into your house, how could she possibly have ordered this?’

Amarkant inquired, ‘Which mohalla do you live in?’

‘Gasiyaari Mandi.’

‘And what are the odds of your name being Sukhda Devi?’

‘Quite good. There are so many women of this name.’

‘And is your father’s name Shri Jwala Dutt?’

‘There can be so many men of that name too.’

Amarkant took out a matchbox from his pocket and burnt the sari, right there, in front of Sukhda.

Sukhda asked, ‘Will you be coming tomorrow?’

Amarkant answered in a somewhat restrained tone, ‘No, Sukhda, I won’t. Not until I’ve made amends for this.’

Sukhda was about to say something more when Amarkant quickened his pace and walked to the other side.

### 3

Today is Holi but for those who are intoxicated with the spirit of freedom, there is neither Holi nor the season of spring. Even today, picketing is going on outside Hashim’s shop, and onlookers have gathered. Amarkant too is among the volunteers who are picketing today. He is sporting a khadi kurta and a khadi dhoti, and is carrying the tricolour in his hands.

One of the volunteers said, ‘The respected ones feel bad when they are accused of something. Just look at you! What you were yesterday and what you are now. Had Sukhda Devi not arrived, things would’ve been tricky.’

Amarkant replied, ‘And for that, I thank you all. I wouldn’t have been here

today had it not been for all of you.'

'You shouldn't have come here today. Sukhda behen was saying that "I won't let him go today."'

'After yesterday's humiliation, I'm not even worthy of showing my face to her. When a young woman like her can do so much, why can't we, who've been made to endure hardships of all kinds? More so, when we are not burdened with the responsibility of raising children.'

Just then, a police van arrived. A subinspector stepped out, approached the volunteers, and said, 'You are all under arrest.'

The cries of 'Vandemataram' and 'Hail Motherland' echoed all around. There was some commotion among the onlookers. The volunteers advanced a couple of steps; Amarkant was leading the pack. The van was about to leave when Sukhda came running out of somewhere.

Right then, Sukhda went and stood before the shop, and said, 'Buying and sporting foreign clothes is treason.'

*Translated from the Hindi by Shailendra Kumar Singh*



## Inspiration

### 1

In my class, there was no boy more rebellious than Suryaprakash; one can say that in my ten-year span of teaching I had not come across any student with such an odd nature. His heart was invested in playing pranks and disruptive games. He took great pleasure in placating or irritating his teachers while teasing and making ardent students cry. The kind of ploys he hatched, the traps he laid and the bonds he forged surprised everyone. He was a practised organizer.

He made a contingent of Khudai Faujdar—God's Own Police—and used it to terrorize and rule the school. Even the founder principal's orders might be defied but who could dare disobey his command! The peons and orderlies of the school too trembled out of fear of him. The inspector was supposed to visit and so the founder principal ordered that students should report to the school half an hour before the usual time. The intention was to brief the students about some necessary points regarding the visit. However, it was already ten, the inspector had arrived and was seated, but not a single boy was there in the school. At eleven the students rushed out in a flock as if a cage had been opened. The inspector sahib wrote in his report, 'The school's discipline is deplorable.'

Principal Sahib was pulled up, the teachers were defamed, and though Suryaprakash was behind this prank, even on rigorous inquiry, none of the students took his name. I was proud of my ability to administer order. I had earned a reputation for it in the training college, but here all my skills of management seemed to have turned rusty. I was at my wits' end trying to edify the arch-fiend. Many teachers' meetings were held but this knot could not be



unravelling. Following the new regulations in education, I was not in favour of taking punitive measures. My unwillingness to support punitive measures stemmed from my desire to prevent the disease from progressing beyond treatment. The proposal to rusticate Suryaprakash from the school was also raised, but then I did not have the courage to implement it as it would only further prove my incompetence. The opinion that twenty to twenty-two experienced teachers well versed in the field of education could not correct an errant boy of twelve or thirteen was utterly disappointing. Although the entire school sought deliverance from him, I was the one who was in a deep crisis as he was in my class and I had to bear the brunt of the repercussions of his pranks. I went to school daily with a sort of foreboding as I wondered what calamity awaited me that day. One day I opened the drawer of my desk to find a huge frog leaping out of it. Taken aback, as I retreated, there was commotion in the class. I stared at him in fury. The entire hour was then spent in advising the class, while that rascal lowered his head and kept smiling. I was surprised that he had been promoted from the junior classes.

One day I exclaimed in anger, 'You will never pass from this class in your life!'

Unperturbed, Suryaprakash responded, 'You don't worry about my promotion. I have always passed and this time too I will be promoted.'

'Impossible!'

'The impossible will become possible!'

I kept looking at his face in surprise. Even the most intelligent of boys could not make claims in such irrefutable terms about their success. I thought then that he must be flying off with question papers. I promised that this time I would not allow him to play any tricks. I would see for how many days he would remain in this class. He would leave in embarrassment then.

During the annual examination, I supervised everything with extraordinary care, but when I saw Suryaprakash's answer scripts, my surprise knew no bounds. I had set two question papers; he had secured the highest marks in the class in both. I knew very well that he could not have solved even one question from either of the papers. I could have proved the same, but what would I do with his answer scripts then? There was not much difference in the handwriting which could arouse suspicion. When I told the principal, he too became confused, he too had to swallow it despite knowing everything. I am hardly ever

pessimistic by nature. I did not find the other teachers at all perturbed by Suryaprakash. I understood that there was nothing new in having boys like Suryaprakash in the school, but for me, he was a big mystery. If his manners remained the same, then one day he would either be in prison or in a madhouse.

## 2

That very year I got transferred. Although the climate here suited me well, and I was friendly with the principal and other teachers, I was happy to move as Suryaprakash would no longer be a thorn in my side. The boys organized a farewell feast for me, after which each one of them came to see me off at the station. At that moment, all the boys had teary eyes. I too could not stop my tears from flowing. All at once my gaze fell on Suryaprakash, who was standing shamefacedly behind everyone. I got to see that his eyes too were misty. My heartfelt desire was to exchange a few words with him before I left. Probably he too wanted to tell me something, although neither did I speak nor did he; I regretted this for days together. His hesitation was certainly pardonable, but my resistance wasn't; it was possible that in a state of pity and remorse, a simple exchange of words might have impacted him emotionally, but it is the loss of such moments that is termed life. The train pulled out slowly and, for a while, the boys ran alongside it. I stood with my head sticking out of the window. For some time I saw the movement of their waving handkerchiefs. Then everything receded, but one slight figure seemed to be standing on the platform still. I presumed it was Suryaprakash. At that moment my heart felt like tearing and breaking apart the shackles of hatred, sullenness and apathy that bound me like an uneasy prisoner, and yearned to embrace him.

The new place and new worries demanded my attention quite quickly. The memories of days past made me wistful. Neither was there a letter from anyone nor did I write one to them. Perhaps this is the way of the world. For how many days does it remain green once the rains are over? Incidentally, I got a chance to study in England. I spent three years there. When I returned, I was made the principal of a college. This achievement was beyond my expectations. The dreams, even in my imagination, did not fly that high, but the lust for achieving better posts pushed me to climb higher up the ladder. I established a social

interaction with the education minister. The honourable minister was kind to me, but in reality, he had no knowledge of the basic tenets of education. Having found me, he placed the entire responsibility on my shoulders. There were attacks on me from all quarters. As a matter of principle, I was against compulsory education. In my view, every individual must have the freedom to pursue subjects in which they are interested. I felt there was a need for essential education in Europe but not in India. Materialism is the basic philosophy of the West. Economic gain is the basis of motivation for any work there. The needs in life are more numerous, that is why the struggle to live is gruelling. Parents push their children to start earning quite early because of their greed for worldly things. Instead of giving up booze and saving a shilling every day, they force their young children to work and earn a shilling as daily wages. Life in India has a plain simplicity. We do not send our children to work until we are forced by circumstances that render us helpless. Even the poorest of poor Indian workers understand the benefits of education. All of them wish in their hearts that their children should have the capability to read. It is not because they would then be able to lay claim to certain rights, but because learning embellishes one with humane virtue. Despite knowing this, when one does not send one's children to school, then one should understand that there are compulsions. In such a situation, slapping one with a rule of law, in my opinion, is not justified. Apart from this, according to me, we lack competent teachers in our country. One cannot expect that half-educated and meagrely paid teachers will work for any high ideals. The most that can happen is that within four to five years, a child will attain a basic level of literacy. I think that's equivalent to digging up a mountain to find a rat. When one comes of age, one can acquire such skills easily in a month. I can say from experience that what a youth can learn in a month's time takes a child more than three years; then what is it that one gains by imprisoning children in schools? By staying out of school, one could at least have breathed clean air and been close to nature. By shutting them in schools, you have cut off the roots of their mental and physical constitution. It was because of this that in the regional organizational meeting, when the proposal for compulsory education was tabled, the minister, inspired as he was by me, opposed it. The result was that the proposal was rejected. What was left then? Now don't ask me about the kind of exchanges that began between the minister sahib and me, following this. Private reproaches were issued. I was like a poor

man's wife; I had to take the blame for it all. I was called a traitor, an enemy of progress and a slave of bureaucracy. In my college, if there was even a little disorder of any kind, there would be a downpour from the council on me. I had suspended a peon. The entire council was after me, baying for my blood with claws out. Finally, the minister sahib was forced to reinstate the peon. This humiliation was too much for me to bear. Rarely could such a thing be tolerated. I have no complaints against the honourable minister. He was helpless. Yes, it had become extremely difficult for me, almost Herculean to continue to work in this environment. I did not have the power to control even the internal affairs of the college! Why wasn't that fellow sent for the exam? Why was this fellow, and not the other, given a scholarship? Why isn't this teacher assigned that class? Such baseless accusations were levelled to harass me. This new wound broke my backbone. I handed in my resignation.

I certainly hoped that the minister sahib would at least be just while looking into this matter, but he felt that policy was more important than fair play and, as a reward for my devotion, he removed me from my post. I had never had such a bitter experience of the world before. I had fallen on bad days; my wife had passed away. I could not even be with her in her last moments. In the evening, I had gone out for a walk by the riverside. She was somewhat unwell. I returned to find her dead body. Possibly it was a heart failure. This blow completely devastated me. It is a mother's boon and blessings that make men successful; whatever I achieved in life was due to the boon and blessings of my wife—she was like the divine providence that ruled my destiny. What extraordinary sacrifice, what great patience she had! In her sweetness there was not a trace of sharpness. I don't remember if I ever saw her eyebrows knitted in a frown; she did not know how to be a pessimist. Many a time had I fallen gravely ill. The physician had lost all hope but she, with her patience and calmness, wasn't perturbed even a bit. She had believed that she would die during the lifetime of her husband and that is what came to pass. It was with her support that I could bear everything in life. When even that support was no more, then what life was I to live? Eating and sleeping do not make up the definition of life. Life is defined by the perseverance that drives one to keep moving ahead. It is this determination that had died in me. I had become averse to the world. I then decided to live a secluded life in a small village. There were high hills surrounding it, and at one end the Ganga flowed. I made a small house on the

surrounding it, and at one end the Ganga flowed. I made a small house on the banks of the river and started living there.

### 3

But to work is part of human nature. How could I continue living doing nothing? I opened a small school under the shade of a tree; I gathered some boys from the village and taught them. It became so popular that students from neighbouring villages also turned up.

One day as I was teaching, a car approached and halted; the deputy commissioner of the district alighted from it. I was wearing only a kurta and dhoti. I was ashamed to meet a high official in such a modest attire. When the deputy commissioner came near me, I abashedly extended my hand but he, instead of shaking my hand, bent down and bowed his head at my feet. I was in such a fix that I became tongue-tied. I write well in English, I am a teacher of philosophy and I am good in allocution too. But none of them is worthy of veneration. It is the learned and the wise, the sadhus and the ascetics who deserve to be revered. Had I been a Brahmin, it would have been another matter. Although for a highly placed government official to bow his head at the feet of a Brahmin was quite unimaginable.

While I was still in a daze, the deputy commissioner lifted his head, looked at me and said, 'You may not have recognized me.'

Hearing only this was enough—it all came back to me in a flash, and I said, 'You are not Suryaprakash, are you?'

'Yes, sir. I am that same star-crossed pupil of yours.'

'It has been twelve or thirteen years.'

Suryaprakash smiled and said, 'Teachers forget their students but students always remember them.'

I too replied in a similar jocund vein, 'It is impossible to forget students like you.'

In a lowered tone, Suryaprakash said, 'I have come to beg forgiveness for all my misdeeds and to be of service to you. I had always inquired about you. When you went to England, I wrote a letter to congratulate you, but I couldn't send it. When you became principal, I was getting ready to go to England. There I read

your articles in newspapers. When I returned, I got to know that you had handed in your resignation and had left for somewhere upcountry. I have been in this district for more than a year now; I had no idea that you were here, living in seclusion. How can you live in this godforsaken place? For such a minor predicament, you have chosen *vanaprastha*, a life of retirement?’

I can’t express how surprised and happy I was to see Suryaprakash rise in life. Had he been my son, I could not have been happier. I took him into the shed and told him my entire story.

Suryaprakash said, ‘Then say that you are the victim of your brother’s betrayal. I have limited experience, but within this span of time, I have come to understand that we still do not know how to fulfil our responsibilities. If I meet the minister sahib, I will ask whether this was his dharma.’

I answered, ‘My dear, it is not his fault. It is possible that had I been in a similar situation, I would have done the same. I have been punished for my selfish desires and for it, I am indebted to him. I am not making this up; truthfully speaking, nowhere else have I felt the kind of peace that I have here. In this seclusion, I have attained such perceptions of life that were not possible when I was in the race for wealth and power. By lapping up books on history and geography and by taking refuge in the academies of Europe, I could not wipe out the affection in me. Rather, this was a disease that was getting increasingly irremediable. You cannot climb to the height of the terrace without first placing your feet on the step of the ladder. To attain a palace of wealth, it is the lives of others that become ladders. You can only reach your goal by squashing others. There is no place for either goodness or pity. I feel as though up to a point I was surrounded by wild animals and all my energy was focused on self-protection. Here I see simplicity and contentment everywhere. The people who come to me do not have any selfish interest and neither do I desire either praise or glory for the services I render.’

Saying this, I glanced at Suryaprakash. In place of a false smile, there was a shade of melancholia. He had possibly come to show me, the one in whom I had lost all faith now holds such a high post. He wanted me to appreciate his endeavours in a positive way. I realized my mistake then. It is not good to criticize prosperity in front of a successful man. I soon turned the tide of our conversation and asked, ‘How did this sea change happen to you? I still get alarmed when I remember your pranks. Unless you were blessed by some god

amused when I remember your pranks. Unless you were blessed by some god, this complete transformation would be impossible.'

Suryaprakash smiled and said, 'I had your blessings.'

After I pleaded with him several times, Suryaprakash began narrating his story to me: 'Some days after you left, my maternal uncle's son was admitted to the school. He was not more than eight or nine years of age. Principal Sahib refused to let him stay in the hostel, and my uncle was unable to arrange for accommodation for him. Seeing him in this state of crisis, I told Principal Sahib, "Please let him stay in my room." Principal Sahib said that this was against the rules. This upset me and I left the hostel that very day, rented a house and started living there with Mohan. His mother had died some years ago. He was such a thin boy, so weak and poor that from the very first day I started pitying him. Sometimes he had headache and sometimes fever. Each day some new ailment awaited him. By evening he would start feeling drowsy. He would get up with difficulty for his meal. He would sleep till late in the morning and would not get up until I made him sit on my lap. At night he would wake up suddenly in a state of shock and come into my bed. He would put his hands around my neck and sleep in a close embrace. I was never angry with him. I can't say why I started loving him. While earlier I used to sleep till nine in the morning, now I would jump up at the crack of dawn and boil milk for him. Then I would wake him up, make him wash his face and hands, and serve him breakfast. In order to improve his health, I took him out regularly for fresh air. I, who never sat down with my books, now sat for hours together to teach him. I was surprised at the sense of responsibility that I developed. If he had any complaints, I would be worried to death. I would run to the doctor, get medicines and plead with Mohan to make him take his medicines. I would keep brooding all the time, wondering if something was amiss with Mohan. Who did the poor kid have here except me? If any of my naughty friends teased him or troubled him, then my behaviour changed completely. Some boys teased me by calling me an old maid, but I used to smile and let it go. I would never utter a wrong word in front of him. I was always afraid that by imitating me, he might also become corrupt. I wanted to live in such a way that he would begin to consider me his idol, and for this, I realized that I had to rectify my character. My habits of waking up at nine in the morning, rambling around till noon, hatching new pranks, hoodwinking teachers and bunking school—all of them stopped one by one. I used to be an enemy of

nurturing both health and character, but now there was no stauncher guardian of those rules than me. I used to ridicule God, but now I was a confirmed believer. He used to ask in a very simple way that if God resides everywhere, then mustn't He also be present within him? It was impossible for me to make fun of such a statement. I used to say, "Yes, God resides in you, me and everyone else and He protects us." Being assured of this, his face would light up with joy; sometimes he felt the presence of divine providence. Within just a year Mohan had changed altogether. When uncle came the second time, he was surprised to see the change in his son. He told me with tearful eyes, "Son, you have brought him back to life; I had lost all hope. The Lord will bless you for this. His mother must be blessing you from heaven."

Suryaprakash's eyes even at this moment had misted over.

I asked, 'Mohan must love you very much?'

His teary eyes shone with a gleam of happiness and laughter, and he said, 'He doesn't leave me even for a minute. He sits with me, eats with me, and sleeps next to me. I was everything for him. Alas! He is no more in this world. But for me, he is still a living presence. Whatever I am today is because of him. If, as the gods ordained, he had not shown me the way, then probably I would have been languishing in some prison. One day I had said, "If you don't take a bath every day, I will not talk to you." God knows why he tried to skip taking a bath. My threat resulted in him bathing every morning. No matter how cold it was, how windy it was, he would always take a bath. He tried to gauge what made me happy. One day I went to see a play with my friends, ordering him to have his dinner and go to bed on time. When I returned at three in the morning, I saw him sitting up. I asked him, "You haven't slept yet?" He said, "I could not sleep." From that day on, I never thought of going to the theatres again. The hunger for affection that children have—that which is more intoxicating than milk, sweets or toys; a mother's lap is more precious than anything else in the world, this hankering for a mother's love was a hunger that Mohan had difficulty satisfying. Like the voice of the swan that rebounds from the hills, his desire for motherly affection used to echo within him constantly. Mohan's condition was like that of a creeper which spreads itself on the ground and clings to the support that comes its way. So closely did he stick to me that if one tried to separate him, then like the tender branches of the creeper, he would be torn to shreds. He lived with me for three years and, after illuminating me with a ray of light, he merged into the



darkness. In that slight figure what aspirations were embedded? Perhaps God had sent him into my life to create a peg for me to depend on. Once that objective was fulfilled, why should he stay on?’

4

‘The summer vacation was on. For two summer vacations Mohan stayed with me. Despite uncle’s entreaties, he did not go home. This time the students of my college decided to go on a trip to Kashmir and they made me their president. I had always wanted to visit Kashmir. I took this moment as opportune. After sending Mohan over to my uncle’s, I went to Kashmir. When I returned after two months, I found out that Mohan was ill. While I was in Kashmir, I was often reminded of Mohan and wanted to return. I understood how much I loved him only when I was in Kashmir, but my friends kept me back. Hearing the news of his illness, I became so anxious that the very next day I reached his place to see him. The moment he saw me, his pale, parched face perked up with a delightful sheen. I ran and hugged him. There was such a faraway look in his eyes, and on his face there was such an ethereal glow that they seemed to indicate his impending death. Overcome with emotion, I asked him in a quivering voice, “What state are you in, Mohan? In just two months you reached this state?” With a simple smile, Mohan said, “You went for a trip to Kashmir; I will go for a trip to the skies.”

‘But I do not want to either cry or make others cry by narrating this sad tale. After I had gone off, Mohan started studying so hard that it was as if he was doing penance. He put it into his head that he would cover the entire year’s course of study in these two months so that after school reopened, he would be rewarded by my words of appreciation. The thought of how I would pat him on his back, praise him and tell all my friends about him totally consumed his energies in childish delusions. How could my uncle keep an eye on him, busy as he was with his work in the office? Seeing him read something or the other every day might have made him secretly happy. Had he seen him playing, he would certainly have scolded him. What could he say when he saw him reading? The result was that Mohan started getting mild fever every day, but even in that state he did not stop studying. There were other omissions too, and the fever

escalated, but even when he was running a temperature, he would not stop reading. His heart was always with me. In that fevered state, he would ask the servants, “Is there any letter from my brother? When is he coming?” He had no other desire except this. Had I known that my trip to Kashmir would cost me so dear, I would never have thought of going there. I did whatever I could to save him but the fever was due to typhoid; it killed him. For me, his dreams of life were like the blessings of a saint that kept inspiring me, and today, the fact that you see me in this state is the happy result of it all. That I could realize the childish desires of Mohan makes me feel satisfied, thinking that perhaps his pure spirit is pleased to witness it. This was the inspiration that made me successfully overcome one difficult hurdle after another; otherwise I am still that half-witted Suryaprakash by looking at whose face you used to get irritated.’

After that day, I have met Suryaprakash several times. Whenever he comes to this part of the village, he never leaves without meeting me. He still thinks of Mohan as his Ishtadev, the most beloved household deity. Human nature is such a deep mystery that till today I have not been able to fathom it completely.

*Translated from the Hindi by Anuradha Ghosh*



## Love's Awakening

### 1

Drenched in sweat, Bhondoo came carrying a bundle of wood on his head. He threw it on the ground and stood in front of Bunti, as if to inquire if her anger had subsided.

It was evening, but the *loo*, the hot summer wind, was still blowing and the sky was shrouded in dust. Like a tuberculosis patient, the whole of nature appeared to be half-dead. Bhondoo had left his house in the morning. He had spent the afternoon under the shadow of a tree and thought that this penance would have improved the mood of the goddess at home. But when he came back, he found that she was still full of rage.

To break the silence, Bhondoo said, 'Give me a jug of water. I am very thirsty; I am almost dead. I will not get more than three annas when I go to the market.'

'You cannot earn the blessings of God as well as money, forget it!' said Bunti sitting in the tent.

Knitting his eyebrows, Bhondoo replied, 'Why do you bring in religion every time? Practising religion is not child's play. Religion is practised in the proper spirit only by those on whom God bestows his favours. How the hell can we practise religion? How can we follow religion when we do not have enough to fill our belly?'

Bunti, seeing that her attack had failed to hit the mark, reacted with another taunt.

The world has got such virtuous men who keep on throwing feasts for their

neighbours even though they are unable to fill their own belly. Otherwise they would not wander in forests cutting wood the whole day. 'Why the hell such virtuous men must think of bringing home wives, I wonder! Can't they drive the chariot of religion alone?'

This barb made Bhondoo wince. His veins became taut and the forehead was creased in a frown. He could shut Bunti's mouth only with one rebuke, but he had not learnt to do this. The man whose physical strength all the Kanjars so feared and who could single-handedly flatten fifty or even a hundred youths, could not open his mouth before a weak woman. 'One brings a wife not to lose religion, but to strengthen it.'

This Kanjar couple, along with several other Kanjars, had been camping in the orchard for the past three days. Tent after tent could be seen all over the orchard. In each of these three by four cubit-size tents, an entire family was conducting its daily life, with all its challenges. In one corner there was a hand mill, in another, there were kitchen items. There were jars of grain on one side and a small cot for children lay near the door. Every family had two buffaloes or two donkeys. When the caravan decamped, all the stuff was loaded on these donkeys and buffaloes. Such was the life of these Kanjars. The whole community moved together and stayed together. Their whole world lay within this community. Marriage contracts, business deals and quarrels and disputes would frequently occur among them. The wide world outside their community was nothing more than a hunting ground for them. As soon as they reached a place, the police were alerted. Security guards were deployed to keep watch over the camp. If any man or woman went to a nearby village, the policemen accompanied them. At night, their attendance was recorded. Even then people in the surrounding areas were scared. The reason was that the Kanjars would often break into homes and pick whatever they wanted, and nothing could be retrieved from them. They would frequently go out at night to steal. The watchmen were scared of them because they were ferocious. They were always ready to fight over trifles. Resisting them could put one's life in danger. They were not too afraid of the police either. In the whole community, Bhondoo was the only person who earned his livelihood through hard work, not because he was afraid of the police but because his self-respect did not allow him to fulfil his needs by unfair means.

Bunti had nothing but disdain for the virtuous nature of her husband. When her sisters wore new bangles and jewellery, she would be annoyed with her husband's cowardice. This led to quarrels between them many a time, but Bhondoo was not ready to spoil his hereafter. Even that morning, despite the tiff with his wife, Bhondoo went to the jungle to gather wood. Bunti could have been pacified if he had found something, but he could not find anything except wood—neither an animal nor *khus* or any herb.

Bunti said, 'Those who cannot do anything become pious, while the poor woman must be happy with whatever little she gets to eat.'

'Then, am I an idler?' asked Bhondoo.

Bunti did not answer this question directly. 'How do I know what you are? All I know is that we have to pine for every small thing. All the women here eat well and dress well, and enjoy their life. Am I the only one here who does not have a heart? By marrying you I have ruined my life.'

Bhondoo thought for a while and said, 'You know, I will not get anything less than a three-year imprisonment if I am caught.'

This did not impress Bunti. She said, 'Why should they catch only you? Why are the others not caught?'

'Other people flatter the police. They massage the feet of the watchmen. Do you want me to do the same?' asked Bhondoo.

Bunti remained stubborn. She said, 'I have not come here to commit sati for you. How long should one be afraid of your piety? Even an animal breaks away from the tether and rushes into a field when it is not given fodder. And I am a human being.'

Bhondoo did not reply. The thought that his wife could marry another man was unbearable to him. This was the first time that Bunti had given him such a threat. So far, Bhondoo had not been worried about this. But now he considered this new threat. He would never let such a black day into his life. He would do anything to avoid this. Bhondoo no longer had the same respect for Bunti, nor confidence in himself. Strong walls do not need any support. When the walls begin to shake, we worry about supporting them. That day, Bhondoo felt that the walls of his home were shaking. Until that day, Bunti had been his own. He did not worry about her, just as he did not worry about himself. He kept her the same way as he himself lived and fed her the same thing he ate. He was not particularly anxious about her. But that day he learnt that he could not take her

particularly anxious about her. But that day he learnt that he could not take her for granted, that he would need to take special care of her.

The sun was about to set. He saw that his donkey was returning home quietly after grazing in the field. Bhondoo never bothered about feeding it. That day he stroked the donkey's back and, taking the bucket and rope, went to the well to fetch water for it.

## 2

The following day, a theft took place in a rich Thakur's house in the village. That night, Bhondoo was not in the settlement. Bunti said to the constable that he had not returned from the jungle the day before.

Bhondoo arrived in the morning. There was a purse tied to his waist and he carried some gold jewellery as well. Bunti buried the jewellery under a tree. As for the money, it was something that belonged to the person who possessed it.

Bhondoo asked, 'What will you say if someone asks where you got the money from?'

Bunti rolled her eyes and said, 'I will say that it is none of their business. Do others tell us where they get their money from? Why should we be accountable?'

Bhondoo shook his head and said, 'You can't get away by saying this, Bunti! Tell them that for some months you have been saving three to four rupees every month. Our expenditure, after all, is not that much.'

Together they thought of many answers. *We sell herbs and get so many notes for every single herb. We sell everything from khus and grass to animal skins.*

Free from worry on this score, they went to the market. Bunti bought herself clothes, bangles, bindis, vermilion, paan, tobacco, oil and sweets. Then both went to the wine shop. They drank a lot and, taking two bottles for the night, came to the camp very late, singing and dancing. Bunti's joy knew no bounds. As soon as she got back, she adorned herself and went to the neighbours' to show off.

When she came back home and began cooking, the neighbours began to criticize them.

'They must've mounted a raid somewhere.'

'He used to act like a great saint.'

'He's a hypocrite.'

‘It seems as though Bunti is on cloud nine these days.’

‘Today she’s treating Bhondoo so well, otherwise she wouldn’t even get up to give him a jug of water.’

That night, Bhondoo remembered his Goddess. So far, he had never offered a sacrifice to her. It would be so difficult to handle the police; it would also hurt his self-respect. And the Goddess would only be pleased with a goat. Yes, he had surely committed a mistake. People of his community would usually offer sacrifices before a task. Bhondoo did not take this risk. It was, of course, mere folly to feed the gods before laying one’s hands on a booty. He wanted to hide his theft from the people, and that’s why he did not inform anyone. He did not tell even Bunti and went out in search of a goat.

Bunti asked, ‘Where are you going at mealtime?’

‘I will return quickly.’

‘Don’t go. I’m scared.’

Pleased with this new expression of love, Bhondoo said, ‘I won’t be late; keep this poleaxe with you.’

He took out the poleaxe, placed it in front of Bunti and went out. But where to find a goat? Eventually, he solved this problem in a unique way. In the neighbouring locality, a shepherd had several goats. He thought, *why shouldn’t he pick one from there? The Goddess was concerned only with the sacrifice, and not with where the goat came from.*

But he had barely reached the locality when four policemen arrested him, bound his hands and took him to the police station.

### 3

After cooking the meal, Bunti began adorning herself. She was in a state of ecstasy. She could not stop smiling. For the first time in her life, she had applied scented oil on her hair. Her mirror had cracked and she could not even see her face in it. She had bought a new mirror from the market. Sitting in front of it, she combed her hair and applied *ubtan* on her face. She had forgotten to buy soap. Rich people look fairer because they use soap. If she had soap, her complexion too would have become brighter. Of course, she wouldn’t become fair in a day, but her complexion would surely not have remained as dark. Come morning, she

would surely buy soap and wash her face with it daily. After adorning her hair, she applied *alsi* gum so that the hair would not fall hither and thither. Then she prepared a paan. She had put too much lime in it. As a result, she got blisters in her mouth, but she thought that was the real flavour of paan. After all, people relish eating hot chillies. Dressed in a pink sari and slipping a garland of flowers around her neck, when she looked at her face in the mirror, a tinge of red shone on her ebony complexion. She felt shy. The fire of poverty burns womanhood to black ash, not to mention the coy feelings associated with it. To be coy in dirty clothes is like eating fragrant grams.

All decked up, Bunti began to wait for Bhondoo. When it got too late and he did not return, she was annoyed. 'He used to hang around the door in the evening every day. I wonder where he's sitting today?'

A drop of water had fallen on Bunti's parched heart that day and awakened her womanhood. Although happy, she was becoming anxious now. So she came out and called out for him many a time. There had never been such sweetness in her voice before. A couple of times she felt that Bhondoo was coming and she ran back into the tent to look at her face in the mirror. She had never felt such trepidation and anxiety.

Bunti spent the night restlessly waiting for her husband. As the night passed, she grew more anxious. Her happy life had begun just that day, and this was her situation!

When she got up in the morning, it was still a little dark. Her body ached from lack of proper sleep. Her eyes were burning. Her throat was parched. Suddenly someone came and said, 'Hey, Bunti! Bhondoo was arrested last night.'

#### 4

Breathless, Bunti reached the police station, drenched in perspiration. She did not feel any sympathy for Bhondoo, rather she was angry. She thought, *People do all kinds of things in this world and remain safe. On my insistence, when he began this kind of work, he committed this blunder. If he had no idea how to pull it off, he should have clearly told me so. I never asked him to put himself in danger.*



*Seeing her, the incharge of the police station demonstrated his authority.*  
‘Here is Bhondoo’s wife; arrest her too.’

Bunti said defiantly, ‘Yes! Come on, arrest me. I’m not afraid of anyone. We haven’t done anything wrong, why should we be scared?’

The officer and all the constables stared at her. Their heart softened slightly towards Bhondoo. So far he had been standing in the sun, but now they brought him into the shade. He looked at Bunti several times, as if to say, ‘Don’t fall into their trap!’

The officer said in a harsh tone, ‘Look at her audacity, as if she is a goddess of purity. But don’t be under any illusion. I know you too well. I will send you in for three years. Three full years! Confess and return all the things. This will be for your own good.’

Bhondoo said as he sat down, ‘What can I say? Nobody even touches those who rob people, while everyone is ready to kill the poor man who lives by his hard-earned livelihood. Our only sin is that we do not have anything to offer as bribe.’

The officer said in a harsh tone, ‘Yes! Yes! Train your wife, lest she give away the secret. But this bluff cannot save you. If you don’t confess, you will go in for three years. That’s not my loss. Hey, Chhote Singh! Put him in the cell.’

Bhondoo said carelessly, ‘Officer! Cut me into pieces, but you won’t find anything. Your threat works with many stubborn fellows, but I’m made of different stuff.’

The officer realized that it was difficult to overpower the tough fellow. The expression on Bhondoo’s face reflected a martyr’s courage. But soon after the official order came through, two constables grabbed Bhondoo and put him in the cell. Witnessing her husband’s helplessness, Bunti felt as though someone were tearing her heart apart. She knew that it was utterly humiliating for Kanjars to confess after having committed robbery. Only God knew what it would lead to and how severe the punishment would be. It was possible that he’d be thrown into prison for three years. Mustering up courage, Bunti said, ‘Officer! You think that there is no one to support us poor people. But God sees everything. Set him free and God will bless you. If he’s sent to prison, my life will be ruined.’

The officer smiled, ‘What’s your problem? You can marry another man if he dies. Also, you will own everything that he has robbed. Why don’t you free him by confessing to the crime? I promise not to run a case against him. Just return

by confessing to the crime. I promise not to run a case against him. Just return all the goods. It is you who might have provoked him. You might have been longing for your pink sari, paan and scented oil. He is under trial and you are enjoying the sight! What a strange woman!’

Bunti thought for a while and then, lowering her head, she said, ‘Okay, officer. I’ll return everything; he should be safe.’

## 5

Bhondoo was let out. He inquired fearfully, ‘Why? What’s the matter?’

‘Your wife has confessed,’ replied a constable.

Bhondoo had been arrested for the first time in his life. His head was reeling and his voice choked. But this news brought him back to life as it were. He clenched both his fists and said, ‘What’re you saying!’

‘What am I saying? Well, your crime has been disclosed. The inspector has gone to recover the stolen goods. Had you confessed last night, you would not have been reduced to this state.’

‘She’s lying!’ roared Bhondoo.

‘The goods have already been recovered, and you’re still singing the old tune.’

Seeing the dignity of his ancestors sullied by his own character, Bhondoo felt utterly disgraced. After suffering such a bitter humiliation, he could not see anything except dishonour, hatred and ignominy in his life. *I won’t be able to face anyone in the community*, he thought.

Bunti suddenly appeared and stood before him. She wanted to say something, but did not dare after seeing Bhondoo’s face, red with rage. The moment he saw her, his injured pride fanned out like the hood of a crushed snake. He glared at Bunti with bloodshot eyes. They were burning like live coals. Bunti was shivering from head to toe; she retraced her steps and fled from there.

His burning eyes seemed to pierce her heart like a sharp weapon.

*Where should I go now?* thought Bunti after leaving the police station. With Bhondoo by her side, she could have put up with the taunts of her neighbours, but now she was left alone. Going home was not an option. Bhondoo’s burning eyes were haunting her. But her love for the luxury goods she had bought the day before drew her towards the tent. The wine bottle was still full. The *phulwaris* were still there in the pot hanging from the wicker basket. Unfulfilled

longings that draw a person to worldly objects of desire even in the face of death, drew her to the tent.

It was noon. When she reached the camp, it was quiet everywhere. The place which had been full of life a while ago looked like a vast wilderness. This was how the community took revenge on them. Bhondoo was now an outcaste in his own community. In the vast grounds, only his tent stood erect, as if shedding tears. When Bunti set foot in it, she felt like a thief breaking into an empty house. Which article should she pick up? She had spent five painful years in the same tent. But today, she felt the same love for it which a mother feels for her disobedient son who had returned home after a long time. The wind had displaced some objects. She picked them up and put them in their proper places. The pot of phulwaris too had been displaced, a cat might have pounced on it. Bunti took down the pot. Someone must have messed with it. The wet piece of cloth wrapped around the paan was now dry. She sprinkled water on it.

Bunti heard someone's approaching footsteps and was frightened. Bhondoo was coming. Oh, those flaming eyes! She was scared stiff. She had earlier seen his anger once or twice. She hardened herself. *Why should he beat me? He must listen to me first before hitting me.* She did not do any wrong by him. In fact, she had saved him from trouble. Honour was not more precious than life. It might be to Bhondoo, but not to her. He was not going to kill her for such a trifle.

She peeped out of the door of the tent. It was not Bhondoo, but his donkey. The sight of the donkey pleased Bunti as much as it pleased her when her brother came to visit with a gift. She stroked its neck and kissed its snout. She wasn't fond of it at all, but that day it seemed like one of her near and dear ones. She again felt that Bhondoo's flaming eyes were staring at her and shuddered.

*Won't he pardon me at all? She mused again. I'll sob my heart out and fall at his feet. Won't he forgive me even then? How profusely he had praised my eyes! Won't he feel any sympathy when he sees these eyes filled with tears?* Bunti poured wine in an earthen bowl and drank it. She also ate the phulwaris. *Why should she have unfulfilled desires in her heart when she had to die in the end?* The two burning eyes were still chasing her. She filled another bowl and swallowed it. It tasted bitter! The strong midday sun made it more potent. Slowly, it began to muddle her mind. She finished half the bottle.

She wondered what she would say if Bhondoo asked her why she drank so much wine. She would say 'Yes. I did drink. why shouldn't I? It was wine for

much wine. She would say, 'Yes, I did drink, why shouldn't I. It was wine for which everything happened.' She wouldn't leave even a drop, come what may. Bhondoo wouldn't be able to kill her. He was not so cruel and mean. She refilled the bowl and drank. She began to recall the happenings of the past five years. They had quarrelled hundreds of times. Bunti realized now that it was she who had been wrong every time. The poor fellow gave her all that he earned. Even if he had to buy a little tobacco, he asked for money from her. He wandered in the jungle from dawn to dusk. Why should he attempt what he couldn't manage?

Right then a constable arrived and said, 'Hey, Bunti! Where are you? Come on, let's see. Bhondoo is in a bad shape. He has been sitting quietly. No one knows why he suddenly began to bang his head against a stone. His head is bleeding. He would have killed himself if we had not stopped him.'

## 6

A week passed. It was evening. The sky was overcast with dark clouds. It was raining heavily. Bhondoo's tent was still standing in that wilderness. He was lying on the cot. His face was pale and his body had grown weak. Deep in thought, he observed the raindrops falling. He wanted to get up and take a look outside, but was unable to do so.

He saw Bunti returning to the tent with a bundle of grass on her head. She was drenched in the rain. She was wearing the same pink sari which had got tattered now. But her face looked like a flower in full bloom. Instead of sorrow and sadness, her eyes were filled with love. Her gait had a lightness and her eyes shone with joy.

Bhondoo said in a low voice, 'You've got totally drenched. No one will be there to help us if you fall ill. Why are you taking so much trouble? You have already sold two bundles. What was the need to go for this third one? What have you brought in that pot?'

Hiding the pot, Bunti said, 'There is nothing. What pot are you talking about?' Bhondoo got up from his cot with utmost effort. He took out the pot hidden in the pallu of her sari and, looking at its contents, said, 'Just return it, else I will break the pot.' Wringing out her wet sari, Bunti said, 'Just look at your face in the mirror. If you don't take butter and milk, how will you be able to stand? Do you intend to remain lying on the cot forever?'

‘You didn’t buy even a sari for yourself, and for me, milk and butter and everything! I am not going to take that butter.’

‘That’s why I feed you butter. You will buy a sari for me as soon as you start working,’ Bunti said with a smile.

Bhondoo said, ‘Should I break into someone’s house today?’

She slapped him gently on his cheeks and said, ‘You can. But first strangle me to death.’

*Translated from the Urdu by M. Asaduddin*



## The Last Gift

### 1

There was only one shop in the entire city where you could find European silk saris. All the other shopkeepers had embraced the Congress's ban on foreign clothes. But Amarnath's lover had specially asked for this, and it was important to fulfil that request.

For several days, he kept wandering about the shops and was even willing to pay double the price, but he remained unsuccessful even as the demands kept increasing every day. Holi was next on the calendar. After all, which sari would she wear on that day? Expressing his helplessness before her was difficult for Amarnath's manly pride. At her mere hint, he would be willing to do the impossible.

Finally, when his purpose could not be served elsewhere, he decided to go to that same special shop. He knew that the shop was being picketed. From morning till evening, the volunteers would be on the alert; even the spectators formed quite a crowd all the time. So it required a special kind of courage to barge into that shop. And Amarnath lacked it. He was educated, not unfamiliar with nationalistic sentiments either. He used indigenous goods to the best of his capacity. But he wasn't too orthodox in this matter. He was a votary of the principle that it would be better if he could find indigenous goods, otherwise he would settle for foreign ones. And there was no hiding his face now, especially when it was a question of her request. Had it been his own requirement, perhaps he could have postponed it for a few more days. But her demand was as inevitable as death. How could he be free of it!

He decided that he would certainly purchase the sari today. Why should anyone stop me? What right does anyone have to do so? Agreed that using indigenous goods is an admirable thing but what right does anyone have to act with coercion? How wonderful is this independence struggle which itself tramples over man's freedom!

Fortifying his heart thus, he went to the shop in the evening. He saw five volunteers picketing in front of it. Thousands of spectators also stood there. He wondered how to enter the shop. He would strengthen his heart several times and walk towards it. But his resolve would cave in by the time he reached the veranda.

Incidentally, he met a panditji who was an old acquaintance. 'Why, brother, till when will this picketing last? It's already evening.'

Panditji answered, 'What do these cranks care for? They won't budge an inch till the shop closes. Say, do you wish to buy something? You don't buy silk clothes, do you?'

Amarnath said helplessly, 'I don't buy it but how can I refuse a woman's demand?'

Panditji exclaimed, 'Wah! There is nothing easier than that. You can't even deceive women? There are hundreds and thousands of pretexts.'

Amarnath replied, 'Why don't you think of something?'

Panditji remarked, 'Why should I even think? Around fifty to hundred pretexts are always present in the pockets of my mind. My wife says, "Get me a necklace." I tell her, "I'll do it right away." After a couple of days or so, I say, "The goldsmith ran away with the valuables." It's a daily affair, brother. Women are meant to make demands, while men are there to evade them beautifully.'

Amarnath complimented him, 'You seem like an expert at this trade.'

Panditji defended himself, 'What should I do, brother, you have to uphold your honour somehow. If you give them dull replies, it will not only make you feel ashamed but will also infuriate them. They'll think that we don't care about them. It's all a question of honour. You do one thing. You must've told her that picketing is going on these days?'

'Yes indeed, I've already tried this one. But she simply doesn't listen to me. She says, "What? Have foreign clothes disappeared from this world or what? Trying to outwit me!"'

'So, it appears that she is an adamant woman. In that case, should I offer a

way out? Take an empty cardboard box, burn some old clothes and stuff those into the box. When you reach home, tell her, “I was bringing your clothes when the volunteers snatched them away from me and burnt them.” How does that sound? Huh?’

‘Somehow it’s not convincing. Oh man, she’ll raise scores of objections. I’ll be put to shame unnecessarily if the truth is revealed.’

‘So it appears that you are quite a timid person and indeed you are one. As for me, well, I make excuses with such pride that even the truth is humbled before it. I’ve spent my entire life making excuses and have never been caught. Though there is another way out too. Take an indigenous sample of this sari and tell her that it’s an imported one.’

‘Her ability to discriminate between indigenous and foreign goods is much better than mine and yours. Forget indigenous goods, she does not even trust that the foreign ones are imported.’

A gentleman, wrapped in cotton clothes, was standing near them listening to their conversation. He quipped, ‘Oh, sahib! It’s a simple matter. Go and tell her plainly that I won’t get foreign clothes for you. If she insists, then fast for a day and she’ll automatically come to her senses.’

Amarnath darted a glance which seemed to say—*You don’t know this thickheaded one*. He replied, ‘Only you can do this, I can’t.’

The gentleman continued, ‘Oh, even you can do it, it’s just that you don’t want to. As for me, well, I am one of those who’ll reject freedom granted out of the ruler’s charity.’

‘Perhaps you picket in your own house, then?’

‘Yes, Bhai Sahib, I first practise it in my house and then do it outside!’

When he went away, Panditji said, ‘He’s not only a big talker but also a clever one at that. So you do one thing. There’s another door behind this shop. When it gets a bit dark, follow that way without looking around.’

Amarnath thanked Panditji and, when it grew dark, he went behind the shop. He was apprehensive lest there be picketers there too. But the coast was clear. He leapt inside and purchased an expensive sari. As he came out, he saw a woman sporting an orange sari. Seeing her, his soul took a beating. He couldn’t dare to step out of the door. He hid for a minute, then saw the *Deviji* looking the other way, and quickly got out. He must have covered about a hundred steps.



But such was his fate that right then an old woman was walking towards him with the help of a cane. He bumped into her. The woman fell and started cursing him, 'Arré, wretched one, this youth won't last long. Your eyes have been blinded or what? Can't walk without pushing everyone around!'

Amarnath defended himself, 'Bhai, forgive me. My vision diminishes somewhat during the night. I've left my spectacles at home.'

The woman was somewhat appeased. She moved forward and Amarnath too plodded on his way. Suddenly a voice reached his ears, 'Babu Sahib, wait a minute,' and that same woman wearing an orange sari was walking towards him.

Amarnath developed cold feet. He fortified his heart and stood there like a schoolchild who is immobilized before the master's stick.

The woman came near him and said, 'You ran away as if I would bite you. It hurts when despite your education, you don't understand your dharma. Look at what state our country is in today. People can't afford hand-spun clothes and you are purchasing silk saris.'

Ashamed somewhat, Amarnath replied, 'I'm telling the truth, Deviji, I didn't purchase it for myself; rather it was a sahib's demand.'

The woman took out a bangle from her bag and, passing it to him, said, 'I come across such pretexts every day. Either return it or give me your hand so that I can put this bangle on your wrist.'

Amarnath quipped, 'By all means. I'll wear it with pride. Bangles symbolize the sacrifice that characterizes women's lives. Those women too have bangles on their wrists before whom we bow in respect. I don't consider it to be a matter of shame. If you want to put something else on my hands, then you are welcome to do that too. A woman is an object of worship and not of contempt. If women, who give birth to an entire nation, take pride in wearing bangles, then why on earth should the same be a matter of shame for men?'

The woman was surprised at this shamelessness, yet she wasn't someone to spare Amarnath so easily. She said, 'You appear to be someone who can only talk. If in your heart you believe that women are objects of worship, why don't you oblige me by fulfilling my request?'

Amarnath replied, 'Because this sari too is a woman's request.'

The woman said, 'Okay, come, I'll accompany you. Let me see what kind of a disposition your love has.'

Amarnath's heart sank. Poor fellow! He was still unmarried not because he

Amarnath's heart sank. Fool fellow. He was still unmarried, not because he couldn't marry, but because he considered marriage as life imprisonment. But he was of an amorous disposition. Despite being unmarried, he was familiar with the pleasures of married life. It was necessary for him to have someone to whom he could devote all his love, someone whose oasis could renew his dried-up life. He longed for someone whose love would give him respite, someone in whose heart he could scatter all the emotions of his swollen youth, and to see them grow there. His eyes had chosen Malti who was quite popular in the city. He had been courting her for a year and a half or so. For a moment, the woman's insistence had put him in a fix. He'd never been so ashamed in his life. He said, 'Today she has been invited somewhere else. She won't be at home.'

The woman smiled at him in disbelief and quipped, 'I can understand, then that it is not your lover's fault but rather yours.'

Amarnath said, somewhat embarrassed, 'I'm telling you the truth. She's not at home today.'

'Will she return tomorrow?'

'Yes, she will.'

'In that case, you give me this sari and come here tomorrow. I'll go with you. Two to four of my sisters will also be with me tomorrow.'

Amarnath gave the sari to the woman without any objection and remarked, 'Very well, then, I'll come tomorrow. But don't you trust me that you had to take this sari as a collateral?'

The woman smiled and said, 'The fact of the matter is that I don't trust you.'

Amarnath replied self-righteously, 'Fair enough, you can take it with you.'

After a moment, the woman said, 'Perhaps you're apprehensive that the sari will be misplaced. Take it with you, but do come tomorrow for sure.'

Amarnath headed towards his house, not saying anything out of self-respect. The woman kept repeating, 'Take it with you, take it with you.'

## 2

Amarnath couldn't go home and instead went to a shop for hand-spun clothes. He purchased two sets, took them to his tailor and said, 'Khalifa, prepare two sets overnight and I'll pay you handsomely.'

The tailor replied, 'Babu Sahib, these days my hands are full because of Holi.'

I won't be able to prepare it before Holi.'

Seeing him empty-handed, Malti knit her eyebrows and asked, 'Did you bring the sari or not?'

Amarnath answered plaintively, 'No.'

Malti looked at him in surprise and said, 'No!' She wasn't accustomed to hearing this word from his mouth. In him, she had found complete dedication.

Her mere suggestion was like a written decree for him. She asked, 'Why?'

'What do you mean why? I just didn't bring it.'

'You mustn't have found it in the market. Why should you find it? And that too for me!'

'No, ma'am, I found it but couldn't bring it.'

'For what reason, after all? You could've taken the money from me.'

'You're unnecessarily rubbing it in. I was ready to give my life for your sake.'

'Then perhaps money is dearer to you than life, isn't it?'

'Will you let me sit here or not? Should I go from here if you hate my very face?'

'What has come over you today? You never had such a bad temper!'

'It's all because of the things you are saying.'

'Then why didn't you get my sari?'

Amarnath looked at her with a brave face and said, 'I went to the shop, brought insult upon myself and was on my way with the sari when a woman snatched it from me. When I said, "It's my wife's wish," she replied, "I'll only give it to her when I come to your house tomorrow."'

Malti looked at him with mischievous eyes and quipped, 'Then why don't you just say that you were roaming around with your heart in your hand. You saw a woman and dedicated it at her feet.'

'She's not one of those who bear malice in their hearts.'

'She must be a Devi then?'

'At least I consider her as one!'

'Then you'll surely worship her.'

'The gates of that temple are closed for a vagrant like me.'

'She must be very pretty!'

'She's neither pretty nor does she have the graces. She isn't sweet-tongued or delicate either. Just an ordinary, innocent girl. But what could I do when she snatched the sari from my hands? My sense of honour didn't allow me to take it

snatched the sari from my hands. My sense of honour didn't allow me to take it back from her. You be the judge and tell me what she would've felt in her heart?'

'Oh, so now you care more about what she'd feel in her heart, do you? You didn't bother about what I'd say! I dare a man to snatch away something from my hand even if he is second to the god of love himself.'

'Consider it what you will—my cowardice, lack of courage or straightforwardness, I just couldn't pull it away from her hands.'

'Then why on earth will she bring the sari tomorrow?'

'She certainly will.'

'Then I suggest you wash your face and get a reality check. I never knew you were so ignorant. You've given the sari to her and tomorrow she'll come to give it back to you! Are you high on bhang or what?'

'This'll be tested tomorrow anyway. Why should you be suspicious at the very outset? You can accompany me home for some time in the evening.'

'So that you could then say, she's my wife?'

'How was I to know that she would be ready to come to my house? Had I known, I would've come up with some other excuse.'

'In that case, I bless your sari, but I won't go.'

'I come every day to your house. Can't you do the same for me even a day?'

Malti replied harshly, 'Answer me with your hand on your heart. Would you like yourself to be called my husband if such a situation ever arose?'

In his heart, Amarnath had been defeated. He prevaricated, 'Malti, you're being unfair to me. Don't mind, but there is still a gulf between us despite this show of love and affection. We both understood each other's situation and never tried to uncover this gulf. This mask was a necessary condition for our relationship. We had almost struck a merchant's deal between ourselves. We were scared to explore its depths. No, rather, I was scared and you deliberately didn't want to explore it. Had I been convinced that by marrying you, I would get everything that I consider myself to be worthy of, then by now I would've already proposed to you. But you never cared to let this trust germinate in my heart. You too doubt me on this account. I can't say that I haven't given you any reason for such doubt. But I can say this, that I can be much better as a husband than you can be as a wife. For me all that matters is trust but for you only weighty and materialistic things count. My fixed income isn't more than five

hundred rupees and you won't be satisfied with that much. The only assurance I need is that you're mine and mine alone. What do you say, you find that acceptable?'

Malti felt pity for Amarnath. She couldn't deny the truth that his words carried. She was even convinced that Amarnath's faithfulness had been shaken. She was sure that she couldn't have him chained but she couldn't prepare herself to be dominated by him either. Her life had been spent in juggling with love and making a show of it. Like a bird, she would sometimes hop to this branch, and sometimes to that—without inhibitions, free and without a cage. Could that bird whose mouth had been habituated to pleasures of various kinds be happy in a cage? Could she be satisfied with dry bread? This realization softened her. She said, 'Today you're displaying your knowledge in quite an elaborate way.'

Amarnath replied, 'I've only spoken the truth.'

Malti said, 'All right, I'll go with you tomorrow. But I won't stay there for more than an hour.'

Amarnath's heart was filled with gratitude. He remarked, 'I'm deeply indebted to you, Malti. Now my honour will be saved, otherwise it would've been difficult for me to step out of my house. Now what remains to be seen is how beautifully you play your part.'

Malti replied, 'Rest assured on that account. I'm not married but I've seen the nuptial ceremonies. However, I'm apprehensive lest you deceive me. What good are men when it comes to believing them?'

Amarnath said with guileless emotion, 'No, Malti, your apprehensions are baseless. I would've put on these chains way back had I been willing to do so. Moreover, what scope do we lecherous ones have there?'

### 3

The next day Amarnath reached the tailor's shop at ten and got the clothes readied. Then he returned home, wore his new kurta and went to call on Malti. He was delayed there. She had done her make-up as though some big frontier had to be won today.

Amarnath said, 'She isn't that beautiful that you are preparing yourself like this.'

Malti replied, combing her hair. 'You won't understand these things. so why

...don't you just keep quiet?'

Amarnath said, 'But what about the fact that we are getting late?'

Malti replied, 'Doesn't matter.'

The sense of doubt that characterizes all of women's anxieties had cautioned Malti all the more. Till date, she hadn't done any special favours for Amarnath. She would always behave indifferently with him. But yesterday, Amarnath's peculiar behaviour had intimated her about the impending danger and she wanted to confront it with all the strength she had. It's difficult for women to consider their enemies as worthless and insubstantial. Seeing Amarnath's ship sail away from her grip, she tried to tighten it. If one by one her possessions slipped away like this, for how long would she be able to maintain her honour? Why should someone else eye something which was under her control? Even a king is ready to give his life for the smallest piece of land. She wanted to remove this hunter from her path for good. She wanted to break her magic spell.

In the evening she went to Amarnath's house, like a fairy with her attendants. Till ten in the morning, Amarnath had worked to lend the colour of a woman's quarters to his apartment. He had made such elaborate preparations as if some officer was to conduct a round of inspection. When Malti stepped inside the house, she was happy to see how neat and well decorated it was. Several chairs had been placed in the rooms. She said, 'Now get Deviji here. But be quick or I'll go away.'

Amarnath rushed to the shop selling foreign clothes. There was a dharna today as well. The picketers formed quite a crowd, just like yesterday. The woman was not there. When he went to the back, he saw her wearing the same sari that she had on her the day before. She stood there with a girl.

Amarnath said, 'Sorry, I'm late. I'm here to remind you of your promise.'

The woman replied, 'I was waiting for you. Come, Sumitra, let's go to his house. How far is it?'

Amarnath answered, 'It's close by. I'll call a tonga.'

Within fifteen minutes, Amarnath reached his house with the two of them. Both Malti and Deviji looked at each other. One was like a rich man's magnificent palace, the other a hermit's shanty, small and insignificant. There was exhibition involved in the palace, while simplicity and purity reigned in the shack. Malti saw that Deviji was just an innocent girl who couldn't be called

beautiful in any way. But at the same time, she couldn't remain unaffected by the attractiveness of her simplicity and innocence. Deviji saw that Malti was just a fearless and vain woman, focused on appearances and make-up. For some reason, she seemed like a stranger in the house, as if some wild animal had entered a cage.

Amarnath stood there like an offender with his head bowed in shame. He prayed to God to save his day.

As soon as Deviji came in, she said, 'Sister, now you too are dressed in foreign clothes from head to toe.'

Malti looked at Amarnath and said, 'I don't care whether they are foreign or indigenous clothes. I wear whatever he brings for me. He's the one who purchases them. I don't even go to the market.'

Deviji looked at Amarnath with complaining eyes and said, 'And you were telling me that it was her demand, weren't you? But it appears that you are to blame now.'

Malti interrupted, 'Don't say anything to him in my presence. You can talk to the other men in the market too. When he leaves, you can talk and listen as much as you want. I just don't want to hear it.'

Deviji said, 'I'm not saying anything. And, sister, what can I possibly say to this? It's not as if it's compulsory. I can only request you.'

Malti replied, 'So it means that he doesn't care even a bit about the country's welfare, does he? You alone have taken it upon yourself to do such a thing. He's educated, is respected by quite a few people and can tell the difference between profit and loss. How dare you advise him or assume that you're the most intelligent one around here?'

The woman answered, 'Sister, you indeed misunderstand me.'

Malti rubbed it in. 'Yes, I do. But how can I have the brains to understand the true import of what you are saying? You can wear a hand-spun sari, carry a *jhola* on your shoulder, put on a badge and that's it! You have the right to go wherever you want, speak and laugh with whosoever you feel like. What dread can you have of the prison when no one inquires about you in the house itself? I consider this to be sheer playful and restive behaviour, something unbecoming of daughters and daughters-in-law of noble families.'

Amarnath's heart felt a prick with every passing moment. He was looking for a place to hide his face. Although he had no control over the Devi's problem, his

eyes were still tearful.

Amarnath told Malti in a slightly loud voice, 'Why are you unnecessarily hurting someone? Don't you even know that these devis have renounced every luxury and comfort to do this work?'

Malti said, 'Let it be, don't praise her too much. What can you or I do when the entire age is undergoing a change? You men have so badly captured women within the house that today they've come out, leaving behind traditions and customs and all feelings of shame and modesty. It won't be long before your dominance comes to an end. Foreign and indigenous clothes are just a facade. In effect, this is an aspiration for freedom. If you can marry twice or even more, why shouldn't the women do the same? This is the fact. Open your eyes if you have them. I don't want such independence. Here they flaunt their honour, while I'm supposed to consider shame and modesty as my true ornaments.'

Deviji looked at Amarnath with pleading eyes and said, 'It appears that my sister here has taken a pledge to humiliate women. I came here with high hopes, but I guess I'll have to return without any success.'

Amarnath gave the sari to her and said, 'No, you won't return as a complete failure, though it won't be the kind of success that you had hoped for.'

Malti rebuked him, 'It's my sari; you can't give it to her!'

Amarnath felt ashamed and said, 'Fair enough, I won't. Deviji, perhaps you'll forgive me in this situation.'

When the woman left, Amarnath frowned at Malti and said, 'You've blackened my face today. I never knew that you were so discourteous and foul-mouthed.'

Malti replied in an indignant voice, 'Then should I simply have given my sari to her? I'm not such a greenhorn. I was never discourteous and foul-mouthed when you fawned on me, but now I have these vices, don't I? This girl has enchanted you. Angels are what their souls make of them. Bless you.'

Saying this, Malti left. She had thought that with her words and her power of beauty, she'd be able to outdo that girl. But when she realized that Amarnath was not easy to control, she rebuked him. It wouldn't have been bad had she won over Amarnath at such a price. She couldn't afford a more expensive bargain than this!

Amarnath accompanied her to the door. When she sat in the tonga, he requested her, 'Malti, why don't you give me this sari? Tomorrow I'll get a



requested her, 'Mam, why don't you give me this sari? Tomorrow I'll get a better sari than this one.'

But Malti replied curtly, 'I can't give you this sari now for even a lakh of rupees.'

Amarnath frowned at her and said, 'Very well, then, take it with you. But consider this as my last gift.'

Malti bit her lip and replied, 'I don't care. Rest assured, I won't die without you.'

*Translated from the Hindi by Shailendra Kumar Singh*



## The Penalty

### 1

Just as Chhakaurilal opened his shop and began to arrange the bolts of cloth, in stepped a woman with two volunteers.

Chhakauri froze.

Scornfully, the lady said, 'So, Lala, you broke open the seal, did you! But let's see how you manage to sell even a scrap of cloth. My dear man, do you have no sense of shame? A freedom movement is on in the country and you are selling imported material. You should drown yourself. Even our women are participating, but you . . . If only our country did not have cowards such as you.'

At these reproachful words, Chhakauri hung his head. He did not know what to say. He had actually broken the Congress seal the previous day. His was a small shop. He stocked cloth on credit. It was his livelihood; on it depended his old mother, his ailing wife and five children. When the freedom movement began and all the merchants had their imported material stamped, he did the same. Then he bought ten bolts of Indian cloth on credit. But there was no comparison between the imported and the Indian cloth, and so he had hardly any business. If a customer walked in by chance, he might earn a rupee. After a hard day at the shop, he would return home at night. But this wouldn't take care of the household expenses. So he borrowed some money and managed for a few days. Then he was forced to sell off jewellery. Soon there was nothing left in the house which would help them quieten the demons of hunger. At the same time his wife was incurably ill. There was no alternative but to check with a specialist. He was floundering in these anxieties when he found a customer for foreign cloth willing

to buy ten rupees' worth of cloth all at once. He couldn't resist the temptation.

When his wife learnt what he was planning, she said, 'I will never agree to your breaking the seal. Why should you become an object of scorn? The doctor can't give me magic potion, can he? If I have to live, I'll live, if I must die, I will die. At least we'll face no disgrace. What good am I doing to this family by staying alive? I am nothing but trouble to everyone. Let the country win freedom, let the people be happy, so what if I die? Thousands of people are going to jail, so many homes have been ruined. Is my life more precious than any of theirs?'

But Chhakauri couldn't be so sure. As long as he could help it, he wouldn't leave his wife to her fate. Quietly, he broke open the seal and sold off the cloth at its cost price of ten rupees.

Now he had to find a doctor. But he couldn't hide the truth from his wife. So he told her the whole story and set off to get the physician.

His wife caught hold of his arm. 'I do not need a doctor. Do what you like, but I will not even look at the medicine.'

Chhakauri and his mother tried their best to talk her out of it, but she wouldn't agree to see a doctor. Exasperated, Chhakauri flung the ten rupees into a corner and, without taking a morsel of food, left for his shop, cursing his luck as he went along. Just as he reached there, some picketers arrived and began reprimanding him. The shopkeeper next door had tattled to the Congress Committee.

## 2

Chhakauri brought a broken, rusty iron chair from inside for the lady and rushed out to get her a paan. When she finished chewing the last bit and finally sat down, he asked to be forgiven for his transgression. He said, 'Behenji, no doubt I have been at fault, however, I had no option but to break the seal. Forgive me this time. I will not repeat this mistake.'

The *deshsevika* spoke up with all the arrogance of a police officer, 'This offence cannot be forgiven. You must pay a penalty for it. You have betrayed the Congress and you will be punished for it. This matter will be reported to the Boycott Committee right away.'

Chhakauri was an extremely meek and patient man. But the burden of anxiety

Chhakauri was an extremely meek and patient man. But the burden of anxiety had inflamed his heart to such a great degree that the slightest barb was enough to stoke its fire. He flared up. 'A fine I cannot pay, and will not even try to pay. I will shut the shop if I must. And why should I close down the shop? The shop is mine, the goods in it are mine. If I complain to the police, the Boycott Committee will not know what to do. The more I yield, the more you people oppress me.'

Finally, finding an opportunity to display her non-violent strength, the lady said, 'Of course, please go and report to the police. You must. You are threatening those very people who are sacrificing their lives for you. Have you become so blind in your self-love that you feel no shame in ruining the country for your self-interest? And to top it all, you are threatening me. It doesn't matter whether the Boycott Committee stays or goes, you will have to pay a penalty. Or else, close down your shop.'

The lady's face began to glow self-righteously. Many people had gathered around and they all began to abuse Chhakauri. Chhakauri realized that his threat to call the police had been a grave error of judgement. His head bent with shame and humiliation, his face fell completely. He remained like this long after.

The day went by and there wasn't even a scrap's worth of sale. Finally, completely defeated, he shut the shop and returned home.

The next morning the Boycott Committee sent a message through a volunteer that they had imposed a fine of a hundred and one rupees on him.

### 3

Chhakauri knew that he was utterly helpless against the Congress Committee. He deeply regretted the threat he had made earlier. But the arrow had already left the bow. It was pointless opening the shop now. He knew that he wouldn't be able to sell anything at all. And paying up a hundred and one rupees was beyond him. He sat quiet for a couple of days. One night he brought home all the cloth from the shop and began selling it on the sly. He was throwing away his precious goods for the price of dirt. But then one needs to live on something.

Even this plan of his, however, didn't remain hidden from the Congress for long. On the fourth day the agents conveyed the news to the committee. In the early afternoon of the same day, picketing started outside Chhakauri's house. In

fact, it was not mere picketing; it was a *syapa*, a full-blown public lamentation. Six female and six male volunteers had gathered to beat their breast and heap disgrace and abuse on the family.

Chhakauri stood in the courtyard, his head hung low. His mind refused to function. How was he to cope with this disaster? His bedridden wife lay close by under a thatched awning, while his aged mother sat at her head fanning her, and his children revelled in the *syapa* outside.

His wife said, 'Ask these people, what should we eat?'

'Who should I ask? Will anybody listen?'

'Go tell the Congress to do something for us; we'll burn all our cloth right now. They needn't give us much, just twenty-five rupees a month will be enough.'

'Nobody there will listen to us either.'

'Why don't you just go and ask rather than stand here and argue?'

'What, go! People will make fun of me if I go. As soon as anybody opens a shop, the others think he is a *lakhpati*.'

'So, you will keep standing here listening to their abuses.'

'Okay, I'll go if you insist but except ridicule, I will get nothing there.'

'Just go because I am asking you to. If no one listens, we will find another way out.'

A crestfallen Chhakauri put on his kurta and started for the Congress office, looking like a man going to fetch the doctor for a patient on his deathbed.

#### 4

After he had introduced himself, the Congress Committee pradhan asked Chhakauri, 'You are the one on whom the Boycott Committee has levied a fine of a hundred and one rupees?'

'Yes.'

'So, when will you pay it?'

'I cannot afford to pay a penalty. I am telling you the truth. No food has been cooked in my home for the last two days. Whatever we had saved has been used up. Now you have imposed a fine on me and I've been forced to shut shop. I began selling from home. But now they have set up a *syapa* there. If you desire to kill me without food, do so. I have nothing more to say.'

to kill us without food, do so. I have nothing more to say.

All that Chhakauri had intended to say when he started from home was left unsaid. He saw that there was no one here who would pay any heed to him.

The pradhan said gravely, 'You must pay a fine. If I let you off, there will be others after you. How will we then stop the sale of imported cloth?'

'Don't you believe what I just told you?'

'I know you are a wealthy man.'

'Why don't you search my house?'

'I'm not going to fall for these tricks.'

Chhakauri replied haughtily. 'So, why don't you just say that you are not serving the country but sucking the blood of the poor. The police take lawfully, while you do it illegally. The result is the same. They insult us and so do you. I swear that we don't have a morsel of food at home, that my wife is dying. But you still do not believe me. Why don't you employ me? Just pay me twenty-five rupees a month. What more evidence do you need of my poverty? Throw me out after a month if my work is unsatisfactory. Can't you see that I am ready to be your servant because I have no other choice? We are traders. If we can help it, we do not work for others. The times are bad or else I wouldn't grovel so much for a mere hundred and one rupees.'

The pradhan chuckled. 'This is a new ruse.'

'I am not trying to play tricks, I am just telling you of my misfortune.'

'The Congress does not have money to feed the fat.'

'You still call me prosperous?'

'But you are prosperous!'

'Don't you pity me at all?'

The pradhan responded profoundly, 'Frankly, Chhakaurilalji, I cannot believe what you say. And even if I did, I couldn't do anything for you. Many homes have been ruined in this great movement, many more will follow. All of us are being ruined. Can you see the enormous responsibility that I carry on my shoulders? If I pardon your fine today, tomorrow scores of your fellow traders will follow suit. We will be unable to dissuade them. You may be poor but not everybody is. Then all of them will try to give proof of their poverty. Should I search all their homes? Just go back and somehow arrange for the money. Then you can reopen your shop. God willing, a day will certainly come when you will make up for your loss.'

It was dark when Chhakauri got home. The syapa continued at his door. He said to his wife, 'It was just as I had predicted. The pradhan did not believe me.'

His wife's withered body became animated. She stood up and said, 'Very well, we'll make them believe us. Now I will die right outside the Congress office. My children will struggle in desperation in front of them. The Congress teaches us about satyagraha; let's teach it the same lesson as well. My lifeless body will tear them apart. Will those who are so cruel now do justice once they are in power? Call for an ekka. I don't need this bed. I will die on the pavement there. They exult because they have the strength of the people with them. I'll show them who the masses are with, them or me.'

Chhakauri's anger vanished when confronted with this fireball. He trembled at the very thought of taking on the Congress in this way. There would be panic in the entire town. Thousands of people would witness the scene. Even a riot might take place. His heart sank. Trying to pacify his wife, he said, 'This is no way to go ahead, Amba. I'll try and meet the pradhan one more time. It's late now and the syapa will stop soon. We'll see what to do tomorrow. You haven't even eaten yet. The poor pradhan himself is in a difficult situation. He says that if he pardons me, there will be no discipline left. All the shopkeepers will break their seals and when they are pulled up, they will give my example.'

Amba stood staring at Chhakauri, undecided for a moment. Then she lowered herself slowly back on the bed. Her excitement dissolved into deep reflection. She thought of the responsibility that the Congress carried, and which she did too. The truth of the pradhanji's words was no longer hidden from her.

'You didn't mention this when you came in.'

'I couldn't recall it then.'

'Did the pradhanji say this or are you making it up?'

'No, why should I make it up?'

'He does have a point.'

'We will be ruined anyway.'

'We are already ruined anyway.'

'Where will we get the money? We don't know where our food will come from, so how can we pay the fine?'

'At least we have a house. Let's mortgage it. And now don't sell imported

cloth under any circumstances. Let it rot. You brought on this disaster because you broke the seal. Don't worry about my medicines. Whatever the Almighty desires will happen. Let the children die of starvation if they have to. Crores of people in our country suffer a fate worse than ours. What does it matter if we die, at least the country will be happy.'

Chhakauri knew well that if Amba said something, she would surely act on it. She wouldn't listen to any excuses.

Thoroughly fed up with her, he started walking towards the moneylender's.

*Translated from the Hindi by Chandana Dutta*





## The Second Marriage

When I look at my four-year-old son, Ramswarup, it seems that he no longer has the innocence and allure of two years ago. He stares at me with stern, reddened eyes. Seeing him in this condition, I feel afraid and remember the promise I had made to his mother two years ago when she was on her deathbed. Man is so selfish and such a slave to his senses that he realizes his duty only at the direst of times.

The day the doctor lost all hope in her recovery, she cried and asked me, 'Will you marry a second time? You must not do it.' Then, with a start, she said, 'What would happen to my Ram? Look after him, if possible.'

I said, 'Yes, yes, I promise that I will never marry a second time and you need not worry about Ramswarup. Will you not get better?'

She threw her hands towards me, as if bidding me farewell.

Two minutes later, the world turned dark before my eyes. Ramswarup became motherless. For two to three days, I clung to him, holding him close to my heart.

After my leave was over, I left him with my father and resumed my duty.

For some three months, I was heartbroken. I went about my job as there was no way out of it. There were many ideas that came to my mind. For two or three years I would work for money and then go on a world trip; I would do this, I would do that, but now I was without any focus.

I was getting letters regularly from home mentioning the proposals for marriage that were coming for me from different places. The people were good, the girl was intelligent and beautiful; one would not get an offer from such a place again; after all, you will have to do it, so do it. For every little thing my opinion was sought.

But I would refuse every time. I was amazed at how people could agree to marry a second time when one's beautiful and committed wife, who was a gift from heaven, was suddenly snatched away by God!

Time passed. Then friends started pestering me. They said, 'Come on now, women are like the shoes that one wears. When one is torn, change to the other.'

I would shut them up by saying, 'What a terrible insult this is to womankind.'

When our society which has such renown does not allow a Hindu widow to marry a second time, then it is not becoming for me to marry a virgin. Till our community is redeemed from such shame, forget about marrying a virgin, I would refuse to marry even a widow. I thought it might be a good idea to resign from my job and start campaigning for such a cause.

But how should I put into words what my heart went through? I realized my limitations when I saw that I could not put my ideas into action, could not strengthen my character and could not practise what I preached. And six months later, I got married to a virgin.

Members of my household were happy that I had somehow agreed. That day, two or three of my educated relatives scolded me, saying, 'You had been going around making tall claims that you would marry only a widow; what happened to all those resolutions? You have not set a good example to which we could refer.'

It was like being drenched with cold water from clay pots. My eyes were opened. In the zest of my youth, what had I done? Old thoughts again surfaced and even today I wallow in them.

I thought: servants cannot look after my son; only women are suitable for the job. If I get married, a woman will come to stay in the house; I can bring Ramswarup over and take special care of him, but all such ideas got erased like badly written letters of the alphabet. I was again forced to send away Ramswarup to the village to stay with my father. The cause was not hidden. After all, it is impossible for a woman to love her stepson. At the time of my marriage, I had heard that the girl was very good; she would care for her near ones and even treat him like her own child, but it was a lie. No matter how right-minded a woman is, she can never love her stepchildren.

And this heartfelt sorrow is the punishment I have received for breaking the promise I made to a virtuous wife in her final moments.

*Translated from the Hindi by Anuradha Ghosh*



## The Mistress of the House

### 1

Shivdas tossed the keys of the storeroom to his daughter-in-law Rampyari and said with tears in his eyes, 'Bahu, I entrust the household to you from today. God cannot bear to see me happy, otherwise he wouldn't have snatched my son away in his youth. All the same, someone has to do his job. It wouldn't do if I were to abandon the plough. Now it's up to me to look after Birju's share of the work. Who is there to look after the home and attend to household affairs except you? Don't cry, my child! What happened was God's will and His will alone will prevail. There is nothing in our hands. Nobody can look askance at you as long as I live. Don't be anxious; Birju may have left us, but I am still here.'

Rampyari and Ramdulari were sisters, married to two brothers, Birju and Mathura. The sisters lived in their marital home in loving companionship, the way they had at their parents'. Shivdas was leading a retired life now. He would sit in front of his house all day and chat, happy at the sight of his flourishing home. He began to develop an inclination for religion. But it was God's will that his older son Birju fell ill. Today was the fifteenth day after his death. Now that the last rites were over, Shivdas, like a true soldier, braced himself to take on the affairs of the world. However much he may have grieved inwardly, no one had seen him cry. But today, on seeing his daughter-in-law, for a moment his eyes filled with tears. He controlled himself and in a shaky voice began to console her. He had perhaps thought that becoming the mistress of the house would help dry the widow's tears. At least it would lessen her drudgery.

Rampyari replied with a note of surprise in her voice, ‘How is this possible, Dada? You go out and slog while I stay at home as the *malkin*! Keeping myself busy with work will perhaps lessen my pain. What will I do but cry if I sit idle?’

Shivdas tried to explain. ‘Child, who has control over God’s will? What will weeping gain you apart from wearing you down? There is plenty to do at home. Some sadhu-sant may pass this way or some guest may arrive. Someone has to stay at home and attend to them.’

The daughter-in-law tried all kinds of excuses, but to no avail.

## 2

When Shivdas left, the ‘mistress’ picked up the keys. She experienced an overwhelming rush of authority and responsibility. The grief of separation from her husband briefly disappeared. Her younger sister and brother-in-law were both at work. The house was completely empty and she could now open the storeroom without any anxiety. She was curious to discover the store’s hidden treasures. This was a part of the house to which she had not had access before. Whenever something had to be given to or collected from someone, Shivdas would come and open the door, then lock it and tuck the keys back into his waist. Rampyari would peep into the room at times through the chinks in the door, but she could never see anything as it was always dark inside. That room symbolized a tantalizing mystery for the entire household and they imagined all kind of things about it. Today Rampyari had the chance to unveil that mystery. She locked the main door of the house so that no one would see her opening the door to that room and accuse her of doing so without reason. Her heart was beating fast lest anyone should start knocking. On stepping inside she felt the same kind of thrill she did when she opened her trunk of finery or her jewellery box, or even greater. Jaggery, sugar, wheat, barley and many such items were kept in a row of huge pitchers. On one side sat large utensils which were usually brought out on occasions like weddings or when someone needed to borrow them. In another place were receipts of wealth tax and other papers regarding the give and take of business. The room radiated prosperity and wealth. Rampyari drank in this glory for about half an hour. A sense of intoxication crept over her minute by minute. When she emerged from that room, she was changed, as if

under a spell.

Just then, someone called out from the entrance. She immediately locked the store and opened the front door. It was her neighbour Jhuniya who had come to ask for a loan of one rupee.

Rampyari replied rudely, 'There isn't a single paisa in the house at the moment, sister. It was all spent on the last rites.'

Jhuniya was taken aback. It was impossible to believe that the Chaudhary's house didn't have even a rupee. How could a house where transactions worth hundreds of rupees were carried out, not have some money lying around? She wouldn't have been surprised if Shivdas had made this excuse. But Rampyari was known in the village for her guileless nature. She would often help neighbours with things they needed without Shivdas's knowledge. Only yesterday she had given a seer of milk to Janki. She would even go so far as to loan her own jewellery. People regarded it as their good fortune that such a large-hearted daughter-in-law had come into the house of the miserly Shivdas.

Shocked, Jhuniya said, 'Don't say no, sister, I'm really in a jam, otherwise you know well that I'm not in the habit of borrowing money. I have to pay the revenue. The man is at the door, badgering us. Somehow, I have to get rid of him by paying the money. I will return it in eight days from now. Where else can I go begging?'

But Rampyari did not budge.

As soon as Jhuniya left, Rampyari began preparing the evening meal. Earlier the task of sifting the dal and rice had seemed a nuisance, and going into the kitchen no less a misery than being sent to the gallows. The two sisters would go on bickering between themselves until Shivdas came and asked whether any cooking would be done. Then one of them would get up and make some thick, shapeless rotis only fit for fodder. Today, now that she is mistress, Rampyari is cooking the food with her heart and soul.

As she stepped out, she noticed garbage lying around.

'The old man whiles away the entire day shamelessly. Can't he sweep the area once! Can't he even keep the entrance clean enough to please the eye and not make one feel sick? If I point this out to him, he'll resent it. Hey! Why is that Munni standing away from the trough?'

She went close to Munni, the cow, and peered into her trough. It was smelly.

'I see, it seems the water hasn't been changed for months. This is no way to

keep a cow. As long as your belly is full, that's enough, who cares for anyone else? True, everyone enjoys drinking milk. Dada sits there smoking chillum at the front door but it would not cross his mind to pour a few pots of water into the cow's trough. They have hired a three-paisa worth labourer who eats seers of food but whose spirits sink to his ankles when it comes to work. Let him come back, I'll ask him why he didn't change the water in the trough. Let him go if he wants to. Who cares? There are plenty available, hordes of people looking for work.'

At last, not able to put up with it, she picked up the pitcher to fetch water.

Shivdas called out, 'Why do you need water, Bahu? The trough is already full.'

Pyari said, 'This water is going bad. Munni refuses to even go near it. See now she is standing miles away.'

Shivdas smiled. He hurried to take the pitcher from the bahu's hands.

### 3

Months went by. With the passing of authority into Pyari's hands, it seemed that spring had arrived in the house. Indoors or outdoors, wherever one looked, signs of good housekeeping, the love of cleanliness and the good taste of an able administrator were evident. Pyari had oiled the cogs of the housekeeping machine so well that all its parts began to function smoothly. The food was better than before and made on time. There was abundance of milk and ghee. Pyari does not rest herself nor does she allow others to. There seems to be a kind of blessing on the house; ask for anything and there it is. From the human to the animal, all are in good health. Gone are the days when someone would be in tatters while another hankered after jewellery. If someone is sad, worried or troubled, it is Pyari. Despite this, the entire household envies her, even the ageing Shivdas speaks ill of her at times. Nobody likes to wake up so early that it is still night. They all shirk hard work; nevertheless, everyone concedes that the house cannot function smoothly without Pyari. To top it all, the two sisters are no longer as close as they used to be. It was only this morning that Dulari came and banged her *karas* before Pyari and said angrily, 'Here, you can lock these *karas* in the storeroom as well'

Pyari picked up the pair and said gently, 'I've already told you, let me get

Pyari picked up the pan and said gently, 'I've already told you, let me get some money into my hands, I'll get you new ones. These aren't that worn out that you have to throw them off right now.'

Dulari had come prepared to fight. She said, 'Why would you ever get some money and why would new karas get made? You enjoy hoarding every penny.'

Pyari replied laughing, 'If I try to save every single penny, who do I do it for? If it is not for you, who else? Or do I spend most on myself? My armlet has been lying broken since I don't know when.'

Dulari said, 'You may not eat or dress properly, but you earn a good name. What is there for me except to eat and dress? I don't know about your housekeeping calculations. Send for my new karas today.'

Pyari asked jokingly, 'Where do I procure money from, if I don't have any?'

Dulari screamed, 'I couldn't care less, I simply want my karas.'

In this manner, all the members of the household at some time or the other would speak their minds to Pyari and the poor thing would tolerate all their overbearing behaviour with a smile. After all, it is the malkin's duty to put up with everyone else's high-handedness but act only in the interest of the household. Her sense of duty as mistress was never affected by any taunt, sarcasm or threat. Her sense of mistress-hood became all the stronger for these attacks. She is the administrator of the house. Everybody brings their complaints to her. The fact that what she decides is carried out is enough to keep her satisfied.

They praise Pyari in the village. She is hardly any age and yet she looks after the house so ably. She could have married again and enjoyed life but she has effaced herself for the sake of this house. Never laughs or jokes with anyone, as if she is altogether a different person now.

A few days later Dulari's new karas arrived. Pyari herself made many trips to the jeweller's for this work.

It was evening. Dulari and Mathura returned from the fields. Pyari gave the new karas to Dulari, who was overwhelmed with joy. She put them on quickly and ran to her room to show them to Mathura. Standing outside the door to their room, Pyari watched the scene. Her eyes filled with tears. Dulari is only three years younger but what a vast difference there is between the two. Her eyes were glued to the scene—the ecstasy of married life, the warmth of their loving self-absorption, their exhilaration! Pyari could not stop gazing. In the dim light of the



lamp the couple gradually faded from view and every single incident of her past life rose before her eyes anew.

Suddenly, Shivdas called out to her, 'Badi Bahu, give me a paisa, I need tobacco.'

Pyari's reverie was broken. Wiping her eyes, she went to the storeroom to get the money.

#### 4

Pyari had started pawning her ornaments one by one. She wanted her house to be regarded as the most prosperous one in the village and it was she who had to pay the price for this desire—whether it was to repair the house or for buying a pair of oxen, extending hospitality to relatives or paying for the treatment of someone's illness. When it became impossible to accomplish all this despite her careful spending, she would bring out something or the other from her personal possessions. And once it came into use, it would never find its way back to her treasury.

Had she wanted to she could have avoided many such expenses. But when it was a question of the family's honour, she spent generously. What if they lost face in the village? It was she who would get a bad name. Dulari too had jewellery; even Mathura owned a couple of things. But Pyari would never touch what belonged to them. It was their time to enjoy life to the fullest, why should they get caught in this trap?

When Dulari gave birth to a son, Pyari decided to celebrate the event on a grand scale.

Shivdas opposed the idea. 'What's the use? By the grace of God, when the time comes for the wedding you can have all the celebrations.'

But Pyari's ambitious heart could not agree.

'What are you saying, Dada? If we can't celebrate the birth of the first son, when else will we do so? So what if it's reckless? What will people say if we don't live up to our name? I won't ask you for anything, I'll manage it all myself.'

'Your ornaments will again be sold off, what else?' Shivdas said anxiously. 'At this rate you won't be left with even a pin. I've tried to tell you so many times that brother and sister-in-law can never be relied upon. If you have

times that brother and sister-in-law can never be relied upon. If you have something of your own, everyone will show concern, otherwise no one will even talk to you.'

Pyari made a face, as if she were well aware of such sermons, and said, 'Those who are our own remain so even if they don't bother about us. I will follow my dharma, whether or not they adhere to theirs. Will I carry all this with me on my chest when I die?'

The birth was celebrated with great fanfare. The entire community was feasted on the twelfth day. When the guests had all left, Pyari lay down on a coarse mattress in the courtyard to rest her strained muscles after the day's hectic activities. She had just dozed off when Mathura came in. His heart was beating excitedly at the thought of seeing the newborn. Dulari was now out of the birthing room. During the pregnancy she had lost weight and her face had dulled. But today her face was radiant with health. The pride and grace of motherhood had instilled a new spirit into her limbs. Her body had become silken after the care and nourishing food she had enjoyed in her confinement. Seeing her in the courtyard, Mathura went to her at once. He looked at Pyari and thought she was asleep. He took the child into his arms and started kissing him.

Pyari woke up at the sound but pretended to be asleep as she watched the beautiful scene with half-open eyes. Both mother and father were kissing the child in turns and holding him close and looking at his face lovingly. What an intoxicating joy was it! Pyari's unfulfilled desires pushed her awareness of her status as the mistress to the background for a moment. Just as a tired muzzled horse, bent under a heavy load and running listlessly under his master's cracking whip, cocks his ears on hearing the whinnying of another horse, forgetting his condition, Pyari too responded intuitively. Her maternal instincts, which had lain caged, silent and lifeless, stirred awake at the call of this motherhood so near her and started demanding release from their constraining anxieties.

Mathura said, 'He is my son.'

Dulari pressed the child close to her heart and said, 'Yes, why not? It was you whose body nurtured him for nine months. I bore the hardships and you come to claim the title of father!'

'If he were not my son, why should he resemble me? Doesn't he look just like me?'

'So, what does it matter? The bania sells the seed but the crop belongs to the

farmer. The produce never belongs to the bania, it belongs only to the farmer.'

'No one can beat you at words. When my son grows up I will smoke my hookah peacefully at my door.'

'My son will obtain a high position. He will be an educated man. He will not drive oxen like you do. I have to ask malkin to get a cradle made for him.'

'Now don't get up early in the mornings and tire yourself out.'

'As if Her Majesty would let me do otherwise.'

'I feel bad for the poor soul. Who does she have after all? She sacrifices everything for us. Had bhaiya been alive today she would have been the mother of two or three children by now.'

Pyari felt such a surge of tears in her throat that her whole body started trembling from the effort of suppressing it. The loneliness of her widowhood stood ready to devour her like a dangerous animal. Her imagination began to grow a garden of desire on the barren land of her life.

Suddenly Shivdas came in and said, 'Are you asleep, Badi Bahu? The musicians haven't got their food yet. What should I say to them?'

## 5

Time passed. Shivdas was now dead. Meanwhile Dulari gave birth to two children and was increasingly caught up in the care and work of raising them. The farm work fell largely upon the workers. Mathura was a good worker but not an able administrator. He had never had the chance to supervise work independently. He had worked under his brother's supervision initially and later his father had taken over. So he wasn't too familiar with the ways of farming. The only workers who lasted at his farm were the ones who weren't as hard-working as they were good at flattery. Now Pyari had to make a couple of rounds of the fields as well. Though mistress in name, she had actually ended up as the servant of the entire household. The workers would harass her continually. The zamindar's man would hold her to ransom, and she would have to stint on the food. The children wanted something to eat every now and then. Dulari had borne children, so she too needed a proper diet. Mathura was the head of the home, who could deny him this status? And why would the workers relent? Poor Pyari bore the brunt of all these troubles alone. She was the only superfluous entity there. It made no difference to anybody if she ate even half a meal. At

charity there. It made no difference to anybody if she ate even half a meal. At thirty, her hair was already greying, her body had grown slack and her eyesight weak, yet she was content. The consciousness of being the malkin was like a balm to her wounds.

Mathura said one day, 'Bhabhi, one feels like going to the city. It no longer pays to stay here. We barely manage to sustain ourselves and only after such effort. Many people have come from the north. They say that one can earn two to three rupees a day there. I will become really wealthy if I hold out for just four to five years. One has to think about providing for the children now.'

Dulari supported him and said, 'We can educate the children if we have some money in our hands. We have spent our lives somehow but we have to give the children a future.'

Pyari was absolutely stunned. She stared at them helplessly. Such a topic had never been discussed before. How had this idea got hold of them? She began to suspect that they had thought of it because of her. She said, 'I will never ask you to leave. Do as you wish. There are schools here for the children too. Things will not always remain the same. In a couple of years, if the fields yield a good crop, we'll manage everything.'

Mathura said, 'We've been farming for so long. It hasn't borne fruit all these years, yet you expect it to do so now? We'll carry on like this, and leave the world one day with our desires unfulfilled. Besides, we no longer have the same strength. Who will take over the farming? I don't want to bind the boys to the same grindstone and ruin their lives.'

With tear-filled eyes Pyari said, 'Bhaiya, better to be satisfied with half a meal at home than hanker after a full one elsewhere. If the problem is with me, take over the running of your household; I will lie in one corner content with whatever little you can spare.'

Mathura replied in a choked voice, 'Bhabhi, don't talk like this. It is only through your efforts that this house has survived till now, otherwise it would have perished long ago. You have worn yourself out for the sake of this house. Even your body has wasted away. I'm not blind, I understand everything. Allow us to go. God-willing, the house will see better days once again. We will send you money regularly.'

Pyari said, 'If that is so, then you go. Why make the children tag along with you?'

To this Dulari replied, 'How is this possible, Sister? What will the children study in this village? Further, he won't be at peace without the children and will keep running back to the village every now and then. All his earnings will be spent on travelling. Besides, the money he will spend in living there alone won't be any less than the amount required to keep the whole family together in the city.'

Pyari persisted, 'Then what will I do here alone? Take me with you.'

Dulari was not ready to take her sister along. She wanted to enjoy life for some time. What was the fun in going away if the same arrangement continued there too? She said, 'Sister, it would have been great if you could have come along but if you leave as well things will fall to ruin here. You can at least see to the land here.'

The day before they were to leave, Rampyari stayed up all night and cooked halwa puri for them. She had never had to stay alone since the day she came to this house. Both sisters had always been together. As she saw the terrible moment of separation draw near, Pyari felt her heart sinking. When she saw how happy Mathura was, and that the children had even forgotten food and drink in the excitement of going away she too longed to be similarly free of grief and like them to crush her own feelings of love and longing for Shivdas. But she could not help but feel upset when she saw that the love that had sustained her for all these years would no longer be available to her. Dulari was behaving as if she were going to visit the fair. The desire to travel to a new world and see new things had almost driven her crazy. Pyari was busy with the arrangements. Has the laundry been collected from the washerman? Which of the utensils have to be taken along? How much money would be needed for travel expenses? One of the boys had a cough; the other had been suffering from diarrhoea for quite a few days. She was up to her neck in grinding their medicines and a hundred other chores. Though childless, she was better than Dulari in caring for and bringing up children. 'Look, don't beat the children too much. Children become stubborn and shameless with beatings. One has to become a child along with children and sometimes play or laugh with them. If you wish to sit quietly and you want the children to sit still as well, you are expecting the impossible. Children are full of energy. One needs to keep them busy with something or the other. A one-paisa toy is worth more than a thousand scoldings.' Dulari listened to this advice as detachedly as one would to a madwoman's chatter.

The day of departure was the day of Pyari's trial. She would have liked to go away somewhere so that she would not have to see them leave. Alas, the house would become deserted in a single moment. She would lie in the house alone all day long. With whom would she laugh and talk? Her heart trembled at the thought. As the time approached, a strange numbness enveloped her. She would get lost in thought while doing some work and stare at something or the other blankly. Or, in a free moment, she would steal away to a quiet corner and cry to herself. She consoled herself: Had they really been her own, would they have left her and gone away like this? True, they were closely related, but that didn't justify any claim on them. However much you may sacrifice for others, they can never be your own. No matter how long water remains mixed with oil, the two will always remain distinct. The children were strutting about in new clothes like nawabs. If Pyari tried to catch them in an embrace they would grimace and run away, freeing themselves from her grip. Little did she know that even children turn away in this fashion on such occasions.

The bullock cart arrived at the gate by ten. The boys went and sat on it in advance. Many men and women came from the village to see them off. Pyari was really irked by their arrival at such a time. She wanted to weep silently in her sister's embrace in private. She wanted to entreat Mathura to remember her and keep in touch as she didn't have anyone else in the world. But she didn't get a chance to say or do any of this in the confusion. Mathura and Dulari climbed into the bullock cart and Pyari kept standing at the door, weeping silently. Her senses were so disturbed that she didn't even remember to go with them up to the village boundary.

## 6

For many days Pyari remained almost numb. She neither left the house nor lit the stove or bathed.

Her ploughman Jokhu would come to her over and over and say, 'Malkin, get up and take a bath. Eat something. How long will you remain this way?'

Other women of the village also offered such advice. But their words had a hidden note of malice in them while Jokhu's voice contained real concern. Jokhu was lazy, talkative and a drunkard. Pyari would often scold him. She had even

sacked him a couple of times but reinstated him at Mathura's request. Even today she found herself getting irritated by Jokhu's sympathetic chatter. Why doesn't he go to work? Why is he bothering me? But she didn't have the heart to scold him. She needed sympathy at this time. Does one refuse the fruits that grow on thorny bushes?

Gradually, her frayed nerves calmed. The business of life resumed. The entire burden of farming was now on Pyari's shoulders. The villagers advised that one plough be abandoned and the fields be given out on contract. But Pyari's sense of pride would not allow her to admit defeat in such an open manner. Things went back to the earlier pattern. On the home front, there was hardly any news of Mathura. This further strengthened her resolve. He thinks I'm beholden to him for support. In fact, I could rightly claim that I have the ability to feed him as well. Had he sent me any money, it wouldn't have made me rich. If he doesn't care one bit for me, why should I care for him?

There wasn't much work in the house these days. Almost all of Pyari's time was taken up by farming chores. She had sown watermelons which gave a good yield and sold well. All the milk which was earlier consumed within the house was now sold. Pyari's mind also underwent a strange transformation. She began to pay more attention to her dress and was no longer careless about the way her hair looked. She became interested in jewellery too. The moment she had some money to spare, she got back her pawned ornaments. She also took care to eat better food. Earlier, the lake emptied itself in watering the fields. Now, all the outlets were blocked and the lake filled up again. It also had some soft ripples and blooming lotuses.

One day when Jokhu returned home from work after dark, Pyari asked him, 'What were you doing there all this time?'

Jokhu replied, 'Four beds remained to be watered, I thought might as well draw out ten more buckets. No point postponing till tomorrow.'

For some time now Jokhu had been paying more attention to his work. As long as the master had kept a keen eye on him, he had been in the habit of making excuses. Now everything fell on him. Pyari couldn't possibly stay at the well all day. So a new sense of responsibility had arisen in him. Giving him a bucket of water, Pyari said, 'Okay, go and wash now. One should not exert oneself beyond a limit. No point in fussing too much over things. The fields could well have been watered tomorrow, what was the hurry?'

Jokhu thought that Pyari was annoyed. In his view, he had done a commendable job and expected to be praised for it. Cut to the quick, he replied, 'Malkin, I don't understand you. Why do you jump into things you know nothing about? The upper fields need watering tomorrow. We got our turn at the well today after much difficulty. Had I not reached there in the morning, someone else would have reserved it and we would have had to wait a week. The entire cane crop would have been ruined by then.'

Pyari laughed at his simple reasoning and said, 'As if I have anything against you. I only want you to exert yourself within limits, for if you fall ill, it will be really difficult for us.'

Jokhu said, 'Who's going to fall ill? I haven't even had a headache the last twenty years. I don't know about the future. But I can work all night if you say.'

Pyari said, 'How do I know? You used to report sick every now and then and when asked, you would say you had a fever or a stomach ache.'

Jokhu replied sheepishly, 'That was when the masters wanted to overexploit me. Now I know it is my responsibility. If I don't take care, everything will be ruined.'

Pyari said, 'Don't I keep an eye on things?'

Jokhu said, 'The most you will do is to pay two visits. You can't sit there all day.'

Pyari was bowled over by his sincerity. She said, 'You will have to cook very late at night. Why don't you get married?'

Jokhu replied, 'You're great, malkin! I can't afford my own meals, why should I add another mouth to feed? I eat more than a seer at one meal, do you hear that? More than a seer. I need two and a half seers for two meals.'

Pyari said, 'You eat in my kitchen today. Let me see how much you can eat.'

Jokhu replied in a voice full of emotion, 'No, malkin, you'll wear yourself out making roti after roti. All right, you can prepare two rotis for me, half a seer each. I do the same thing. I just knead the dough and roll out two thick rotis and cook them on the fire. I eat them either with buttermilk or onion and go to sleep after that.'

Pyari said, 'I'll make *phulkas* for you today.'

Jokhu replied, 'Then the night will pass eating only *phulkas*.'

Pyari remonstrated, 'Stop your nonsense and sit down.'

Jokhu answered, 'Let me just give the oxen their feed before I sit down.'



Jokhu answered, 'Let me just give the oxen their feed before I sit down.'

7

Jokhu and Pyari were at loggerheads. Pyari said, 'I say there is no need to sow paddy. The crop drowns if there is continuous rainfall. It dries up if there is no rain. We already have millet, bajra, flax and *arhar*. Paddy or no paddy, it does not make a difference.'

Shouldering his axe, Jokhu said, 'If everyone's survives, mine will too, if everybody's drowns, mine will as well. Why should I fall behind anyone? We never planted less than five bighas in Baba's time. Birju Bhaiya added two more bighas. Mathura also sowed at least a few. So am I the worst of the lot? I will not sow less than five bighas.'

'We had two young men of the house to help out.'

'I eat as much as two of them alone. Can I not work as much as them both?'

'Go on, you liar. You used to brag that you eat two to four seers. All that you eat is half a seer.'

'You will get to know the day you weigh my flour.'

'I've done that, you great glutton! I'm telling you, you must not plant paddy. You won't get labourers and you'll end up wearing yourself out.'

'What's it to you if I have to sweat it out! When will this body serve any use?'

Pyari took the axe from his shoulder and said, 'You'll have to remain in the fields for nights on end and I'll fret here alone.'

Jokhu didn't know what 'fretting' was. If one was free from work, one could relax and sleep. Why the hell should one fret? He said, 'Go to sleep if you feel uneasy. You will fret even more if I stay at home. I can think of nothing but eating when I'm idle. This chatting is taking up a lot of time and the clouds are gathering fast.'

Pyari said, 'Okay, you can go tomorrow. Stay a while today.'

Jokhu said resignedly, 'Here, now, I'm here. Say whatever you want to say.'

Pyari said a little jokingly, 'What have I to say to you? My question is, why don't you get married? I slog and fret here alone, at least there'll be two of us then.'

Embarrassed, Jokhu said, 'Malkin, you have brought up the old subject again! Whom should I marry? What will I do with a wife who'd fry my brains for

jewellery?’

Pyari said, ‘That’s a really tall order! Where will you find such a woman who doesn’t care for jewellery?’

Jokhu said, ‘Who says she shouldn’t care for jewellery! But I don’t want her to pester me. You never made unreasonable demands for jewellery. Instead, you gave away your own.’

Pyari blushed. ‘All right. What are your other requirements?’

Jokhu said, ‘You’ll get annoyed if I get talking.’

A surge of modesty flashed in Pyari’s eyes. She said, ‘If it is something to get annoyed about, I’ll show my displeasure.’

Jokhu said, ‘Then I won’t say anything.’

Giving him a gentle shove, Pyari said, ‘How will you not say anything? I’ll see to it that you do.’

Jokhu said, ‘Okay, listen. I want her to be like you. Modest, the way you are, and intelligent, just like you. She should cook like you and be just as thrifty. As pleasant a personality as yours. I’ll only marry someone who is like this. Or else I’ll remain as I am.’

Pyari’s face flushed with bashfulness. Moving away a little she said, ‘Go on, you are a rogue! A heart-stealer.’

*Translated from the Urdu by Baran Farooqi*



## The Story of Two Bullocks

### 1

The jackass is taken to be the most stupid of animals. Whenever we want to say that someone is a fool of the first order we call him a jackass. One cannot really say whether the jackass is stupid, or his harmless nature has earned him this title.

Cows strike with their horns, and a newly calved one can easily assume the aspect of a lioness. The dog is also a helpless creature, but he too feels angry at times. One has, however, never heard or seen a jackass getting into a rage. Thrash him as much as you want, give him the worst kind of grass that has gone stale—but you will never see the merest shadow of discontent in his face. He might prance around a bit in the month of Baisakh, but I have never seen a jackass to be truly happy. Melancholy sits on his face permanently. He does not change in moments of joy or sorrow, profit or loss. The attributes of godmen and sages seem to have reached their climax in the jackass, yet people call him a fool. Such disrespect for virtue cannot be seen anywhere else.

Sometimes, simplicity does not help in this world. Look now, why are Indians in Africa in such a pitiable state? Why aren't they allowed to enter America? The poor fellows do not drink liquor, they save up some money for bad times, they work really hard and never get into brawls with anyone. Even when insulted they do not retaliate, but still they are given a bad name. It is said that they lower the standard of living. If they had learnt to fight back they would probably have been called civilized. The example of Japan is there—a single victory and they are now treated among the civilized nations of the world.

But the jackass has a younger brother who is just a little lower in the scale of

stupidity, and he is the bullock. We use the phrase 'calf's uncle' in more or less the same sense that we use jackass. Some people might call the bullock the greatest among fools, but our views are different. Sometimes the bullock strikes back, and one also witnesses the spectacle of a raging bullock. In several other ways he does express his discontent; hence he must be ranked lower than the jackass.

Jhuri, the vegetable farmer, had named his two bullocks Hira and Moti. They were of western stock—good-looking, of good stature and agile in work. Having lived together a long time, they had become like brothers. Facing each other or sitting side by side they would exchange views in their silent language. How one understood the other's feelings we cannot say. They must have been endowed with a secret power, unknown to human beings who claim to be the noblest of all beings. They expressed their love by licking and sniffing each other. Sometimes they would lock their horns, not in enmity but in affection and familiarity, the way intimate friends hug or slap each other's backs tightly. Without it the friendship lacks verve, as if it was hollow and cannot be trusted. When these two were yoked together in the plough or the cart and they walked along swinging their necks, each strove to carry the greater part of the burden on his shoulder. After the day's work they would unwind in the afternoon or the evening, and tried to alleviate their fatigue by licking one another. When the oilcakes and the straw were thrown into the manger they would stand up together, thrust their muzzles into the manger and then sit down side by side. When one withdrew his mouth from the trough, the other did the same.

It happened on one occasion that Jhuri sent the bullocks to his father-in-law's. Now, how would the bullocks know why they were sent away? They thought that they had been sold off by their master. No one knew whether they liked being sold off in this way, but Jhuri's brother-in-law, Gaya, had a tough time leading them away. If he hollered from behind they would run right or left, and if he pulled them holding the rope from the front they would pull back. If he thrashed them they would lower their heads and bellow. If God had given them speech they would have asked Jhuri, 'Why are you driving us, poor wretches, away? We have tried our best to serve you. If you were not satisfied with the amount of work, we could've done more. We would have preferred to die in your service. We never complained about the fodder. We ate whatever you gave us. Then why did you sell us off to this tyrant?'

The two reached their new home in the evening. They had been starving the whole day but when they were brought to the trough, neither of them so much as sniffed the fodder. Their hearts were heavy; they had been separated from the place they regarded as home. The new house, new village, new people—all seemed alien to them.

They consulted each other in their mute language, glanced at one another from the corners of their eyes and then lay down. When the entire village was in deep slumber, they pulled hard, broke the tether and set out for home. The tether was a tough one, no one could have thought that any bullock could break it. But the two bullocks found their energy redoubled at the moment and the tether gave way to their violent jerks.

When Jhuri got up in the morning he saw the two bullocks standing at the trough, a part of the tether dangling from their necks. Their legs were covered with slush up to the knees and their eyes shone with rebellious affection.

His heart welled up with affection at this sight. He ran to the trough and threw his arms around them. The spectacle of him kissing and hugging them by turns was a heart-warming sight.

The children of his house and the village gathered there and welcomed the bullocks by clapping their hands. This incident, though not without precedent in the village, had its significance. The assembly of boys decided that these two animal-heroes deserved formal congratulations. They brought bread, molasses, bran and chaff from their houses.

One of them said, ‘No one has bullocks like these.’

Another boy replied, ‘Yes indeed. They managed to come back from so far on their own.’

A third one butted in, ‘They aren’t bullocks. They must have been human beings in their earlier birth.’

No one dared to dispute this.

When Jhuri’s wife saw the bullocks at the door she flared up. ‘How ungrateful these bullocks are! They didn’t work even for a day before running away.’

Jhuri could not listen to this accusation hurled at his bullocks. ‘Why are you calling them ungrateful? Your people must not have given them food, so what they could do?’

His wife said aggressively, ‘Yes, it is only you who know how to feed the bullocks. Other people simply feed their animals whatever’

bullocks. Other people simply feed their animals water.

Jhuri mocked her, 'Why would they run off if they were given fodder?'

His wife was peeved. 'They ran off because my people do not fondle them like fools as you do. If they feed them, they also make them work hard. These two are shirkers, so they ran away. Now, I'll see who gives them oilcakes and bran. I'll give them nothing but dry straw. They can eat it or die!'

This is exactly what came about. The servants were told that the bullocks should be given only dry straw.

When the bullocks thrust their mouths in the trough their food seemed insipid. No flavour, no juice. How could they eat? They began to gaze at the door with longing eyes.

Jhuri said to a servant, 'Hey, why aren't you throwing some oilseeds?'

'The mistress will kill me.'

'You can do it on the sly.'

'No, Dada. Later you'll also side with her.'

## 2

The brother-in-law of Jhuri arrived the next day and took away the bullocks. This time he yoked them both to his cart.

Twice or thrice Moti tried to pull the cart to the ditch along the road but Hira held him back. Hira was more patient.

Reaching home in the evening Gaya tied them with thick ropes as a punishment for the previous day's mischief. Then he threw the same dry straw at them. To his own two bullocks he gave oilseed cakes and other delicacies.

The bullocks had never faced such humiliation. Jhuri wouldn't strike them even with a flower stick. He would merely click his tongue and they would run. Here they were thrashed. Their honour was bruised; on top of it they were given only dry straw to eat.

They didn't even look at the trough.

The next day Gaya yoked them to the plough. But it was as if they had sworn not to budge from where they stood. Once when the cruel fellow struck Hira on his nostrils, Moti went mad with rage and ran away with the plough. The ploughshare, the yoke, the rope, the harness were all smashed to pieces. But for the thick ropes around their necks no one could have caught them.

Hira said in his mute language, 'It is useless to run away.'

Moti replied, 'But he almost killed you.'

'Now he'll beat us to his heart's content.'

'Let him. We were born bullocks, how long can we escape beating?'

'Gaya is running towards us with two other fellows. They've sticks in their hands.'

Moti said, 'Shall I show him a few tricks. He's coming with a stick.'

Hira reasoned with him, 'No, brother. Stand still.'

'If he beats me, I'll knock one or two down.'

'No. This isn't our dharma.'

Moti stood there resentfully. Gaya arrived and led them away. Fortunately, he didn't beat them, for if he had, Moti would have struck back. Seeing his frown Gaya and his companions decided that it was better to put it off this time.

The same dry straw was thrown at them again, but they stood immobile. The people in the house started their meal. At that moment, a small girl came out holding two rotis in her hand. She fed them the rotis and went away. One roti was scarcely sufficient to appease their hunger but they felt a sense of contentment in their hearts. Here, too, lived someone who was decent and humane. The girl was Bhairo's daughter who had lost her mother. Her stepmother used to beat her often, so that is why she felt a kind of kinship with the bullocks.

Both remained yoked to the harness throughout the day, were thrashed and sometimes they acted stubbornly. In the evening, they were tied up at their stall, and at night the same small girl fed them two rotis. For them, it was like blessed food, consecrated by love, which gave them strength so that they didn't grow weak on the daily dole of a few mouthfuls of straw. But their eyes and every pore of their body exuded rebellion.

One day, Moti said in his mute language, 'I can't put up with it any more, Hira.'

'What do you want to do?'

'Want to lift one or two on my horns and toss them.'

'You know very well that the owner of this house is the father of the dear girl who feeds us rotis. Won't the poor girl become an orphan?'

'Should I toss the mistress, then? It is she who beats the girl.'

'You're forgetting that it is forbidden to strike a womankind.'

you're forgetting that it is forbidden to strike womankind.

'You leave no way out for me. Tell me, shall we break the rope and run off?'

'Yes, I'd agree to that. But how can you break such a strong rope?'

'There's a way. First chew the rope a little, then give a tug.'

At night when the girl left after feeding them rotis, both started gnawing at the rope. But the big rope slipped away from their mouths. They tried again and again without any luck.

Suddenly the door opened and the girl came out. Both lowered their heads and began to lick the girl's palm. Their tails stood up as she stroked their foreheads. Then she said, 'I'm untying the rope. You must run away quietly, or these people will kill you. Today, they were talking about putting rings in your noses.'

She untied the knot, but they stood there transfixed.

Moti said in his own language, 'Why don't you move now?'

Hira said, 'We can run away, but tomorrow this girl will be in trouble. Everyone will suspect her.'

Suddenly the girl yelled out, 'Uncle's bullocks are running away! Daddy, daddy, hurry up! They're running off!'

Gaya rushed out of the house and ran to catch the bullocks. They broke into a sprint with Gaya in hot pursuit. They ran faster and Gaya raised an alarm. Then he turned back to fetch some fellows from the village. The two friends took the opportunity to make good their escape. They ran straight ahead, oblivious of the right way. They could not find any trace of the familiar way they had come through. They encountered new villages. Then they stood at the edge of a field and began to think about what they should do next.

Hira said, 'It seems we've lost our way.'

'You ran without thinking. We should have knocked him dead right there.'

'If we had done that what would the world say? He abandoned his dharma, why should we abandon ours?'

They were going numb with hunger. The field had peas growing in it and they began to help themselves, at times stopping to listen if anyone was coming.

When they had had their fill they were overwhelmed by their new-found independence and began to caper and jump about. First, they belched, then they locked their horns and began to push one another around. Moti pushed Hira back several steps until he fell into a ditch. That made even Hira angry. He somehow managed to get up and clashed with Moti. Moti saw that what began as a game



was turning into a brawl and drew aside.

### 3

Now, what did they see? A raging bull was heading towards them. Yes, indeed, it was a bull and it had almost reached where they stood. The two friends were in a tight spot and looked for an escape route. The bull looked like a veritable elephant. To clash with him would be fatal. But even if they did not clash with him, there did not seem to be any chance of their survival. He was heading straight towards them. It was a monstrous sight!

Moti said in his mute language, 'We are in a tight spot. Can we save our skin? Think of some way.'

Hira said in a worried voice, 'He is blind with pride and won't listen to our pleas.'

'Let's run.'

'Running away is cowardice.'

'Then you die here. I'm taking to my heels.'

'And if he chases us?'

'Then think of something else.'

'The only way out is—we pounce on him together at once. I'll lead the attack from the front, you take him from behind. Cornered from both sides, he'll take to his heels. If he jumps on me, you thrust your horns in his belly from the side. Our lives are on the line, but there's no other way.'

Taking courage in both hands the two friends mounted the attack. The bull had no experience of facing a united army. He was accustomed to fighting duels. The moment he leapt at Hira, Moti gave him chase from behind. The bull turned back to face him when Hira pounced on him. The bull wanted to knock them down one by one, but these two were masters of their craft and did not give him the opportunity. Infuriated by this two-pronged attack, the bull at one point moved menacingly towards Hira, determined to make short work of him, but right at that moment Moti came from sideways and thrust his horns into his belly. The bull turned back furiously when Hira attacked him with his horns from the other side. Badly injured, the bull took to his heels and the two friends chased him for quite some distance until the bull collapsed on the ground, unconscious. Then they left him

unconscious. Then they fell into.

Intoxicated by the victory the two friends walked triumphantly, swinging from side to side.

Moti said in his symbolic language, 'I really wanted to finish off the fellow.'

Hari reprimanded him, 'One should not strike a fallen enemy.'

'This is rubbish. The enemy should be struck down in a way that he does not rise again.'

'Now, how to get back home—think about that.'

'Let's first eat something and think later.'

The pea field was spread right before them. Moti went crashing in. Hira forbade him but he didn't listen. He had barely taken two or three morsels when two men appeared with sticks and surrounded the two friends. Hira was standing on the embankment and ran away, but Moti was deep in the soggy field. His hooves got stuck in the mud so he could not escape and was caught. When Hira saw that his friend was in trouble he came back. If they were going to be trapped, they would be trapped together. The watchmen caught him too.

In the morning the two friends were shut up in the pound.

#### 4

The whole day passed by and they were not given even a single straw to eat—this was the first time in their lives that such a thing had happened. They did not understand what kind of master it was. There were several buffaloes, goats, horses and donkeys, but no one had any fodder before them. All were lying on the ground like corpses. Some of them were so weak that they could not even stand. The two friends kept their gaze fixed at the gate the entire day but no one appeared with food. Then both began to lick the sultry clay of the wall but that could hardly bring them any satisfaction.

When they were not given any food in the evening too, the flame of rebellion flared up in Hira's heart. He said to Moti, 'I can't bear it any more.'

His head lowered, Moti answered, 'I feel as though my life is ebbing out.'

'Don't give up so quickly, buddy. We must find some way of getting out of here.'

'Come, let's break the wall.'

'I'm not good for anything now.'

‘Well, why did you then brag about your strength?’

‘All bragging has gone out of me now.’

The wall of the enclosure was built of clay. Hira was strong, he thrust his pointed horn against the wall. When he dug deeper a big chunk of clay came loose. This encouraged him. Running again and again he hit the wall and with every blow he knocked off little chunks of clay from the wall.

Right at that hour the pound watchman came holding the lantern in his hand to take his daily count of the animals. When he saw Hira in his rebellious mood he dealt him several blows and then tied him up with a thick rope.

Moti said from where he lay, ‘What did you get out of it except a beating?’

‘Well, at least I tried to use my strength.’

‘What use was it when you got tied up as a consequence?’

‘Well, we must use our power whatever the consequence.’

‘In that case, you may end up paying with your life.’

‘I don’t care. We’re going to die anyway. Just think if the wall had come down how many lives could have been saved. So many of our brothers are locked up here. There is hardly any life left in their bodies. If it continues like this for a couple of days more, they’ll all die.’

‘That’s true. All right then, let me also use my strength.’

Moti also struck the wall at the same spot. A lump of clay fell down which gave him encouragement. He began to strike the wall repeatedly as though it was his sworn adversary. Finally, after about two hours of struggle the top of the wall came down by about a foot and a half. He dealt a final blow with redoubled strength and this time half of the wall came crashing down.

As soon as the wall came down, the animals who have been lying like corpses for so long got up. The three mares galloped away first, followed by the goats. Then the buffaloes slipped away, but the donkeys were still lying there as before.

Hira asked, ‘Why aren’t you two running away?’

One of them replied, ‘What if we get caught again?’

‘What does it matter? At least now you’ve got the opportunity to escape.’

‘We’re scared. We’d rather stay where we are.’

It was well past midnight. The two donkeys were still thinking whether they should escape or not. Moti was busy trying to chew his friend’s rope. When he gave up, Hira said, ‘You go. Let me stay here. Maybe, we’ll meet again sometime.’

SOMEONE.

With his eyes brimming over, Moti said, 'Do you think I'm so selfish, Hira? You and I have been together for such a long time! If you're in trouble today can I just run away and leave you alone?'

Hira said, 'They'll thrash you really hard. They will understand that it's your handiwork.'

Moti said proudly, 'If I get thrashed for the crime for which they have tied you, I don't give a damn. At least this much has been achieved that the lives of nine or ten animals have been saved. They'll bless us.'

Saying this Moti shoved the two donkeys with his horns and drove them out of the enclosure. Then he lay beside his friend and went to sleep.

There is no need to describe the chaotic scene that ensued in the morning when the clerk, the watchman and the other officials saw what had happened. Suffice it to say that Moti was roundly thrashed and he too was tied up with a large rope.

## 5

For a whole week the two friends stayed tied up there. No one gave them even a bit of straw. They were just given water once which helped them survive. They grew so weak that they could hardly stand, and their ribs stuck out of their skins.

One day, they heard the sound of drums in front of the enclosure, and by noon about fifty to sixty people gathered there. Then the two friends were taken out and the inspection began. People came to have a look at them and went back disappointed. Who would be interested in buying bullocks that looked like corpses?

Suddenly a bearded man appeared there whose eyes were red and who had a ruthless look. He poked his fingers at the haunches of the bullocks and began to talk with the clerk. The appearance of the man made the two friends shudder. They had no doubt who he was and why he was groping their bodies. They looked at each other with frightened eyes and lowered their heads.

Hira said, 'It was futile to run away from Gaya's house. We can't save our heads now.'

Moti said irreverently, 'It is said that God is kind to everybody. Why isn't He kind to us?'

‘For God, it does not matter whether we live or die. In a way, it’s good that for a while we’ll be with Him. Once God had saved us in the form of that little girl. Won’t He save us now?’

‘This man is going to slash us with his knife. Just watch out.’

‘Well, why worry? Our flesh, hide, horns and bones will be of use to someone or the other.’

After the auction both friends went off with the bearded fellow. Every pore of their bodies trembled in fear. They had no strength to lift their hooves but they were so frightened that they staggered along—for if they slowed down a little, the fellow would serve them a sharp lash.

Along the way they saw a verdant meadow where cows and bullocks were grazing. All the animals were happy, good-looking and full of zest. Some were leaping while others were joyfully chewing the cud sitting leisurely. How happy they were! And how selfish! In their blissful state, they did not care that two of their brothers . . .

Suddenly it seemed to them that the road was familiar. Yes, it was the same road by which Gaya had led them away. They saw the same fields, orchards and villages. With every step their pace quickened. Their fatigue and weakness disappeared. Oh, look, here was their own pasture, and here was the well from which they pulled water by working the winch. It was the same well.

Moti said, ‘Our house is close by.’

‘It’s all God’s kindness,’ responded Hira.

‘I’m making a run for home.’

‘Will he allow you?’

‘I’ll knock him down.’

‘Oh no! Let’s run and reach our stalls, and we won’t budge from there.’

They seemed to go crazy with delight, and like calves, leaped and ran towards the house. ‘That’s our stall!’ They reached the spot and stood there. The bearded fellow also followed them.

Jhuri was sitting in his doorway sunning himself. As soon as he saw the bullocks he ran to them and began hugging them over and over again. Tears of joy streamed down the eyes of the two friends, and one of them started licking Jhuri’s hand.

The bearded fellow came up and grabbed the tethers tied to the bullocks’  
necks

HOOKS.

Jhuri said, 'They are my bullocks.'

'How can they be? I bought them over in the auction at the animal pound.'

'I think you have stolen them,' said Jhuri. 'Just leave quietly. They are my bullocks. Only I have the right to sell them. No one else has the right to sell my bullocks in an auction.'

'I'll complain at the police station.'

'They're mine. The surest proof is that they're standing at my door.'

Infuriated, the bearded fellow advanced and tried to drag the bullocks by force. Right at that moment Moti struck with his horns. The fellow stepped back. Moti chased him. He stopped only when he drove the fellow out of the village, and then stood there guarding the way. The man stood at some distance threatening, cursing and pelting stones at Moti. And Moti stood there like a victorious hero, blocking the way. The villagers had gathered there to see the spectacle and had a hearty laugh.

When the butcher admitted defeat and went away Moti walked back swaggering.

Hira said, 'I was afraid you might bump him off in anger.'

'If he had grabbed me, I would've certainly killed him.'

'He won't come back now.'

'If he does, I'll take care of him. I'll see how he takes us away.'

'What if he gets us shot?'

'Well, I'll die but I'll be of no use to him.'

'Nobody thinks our life is worth anything.'

'Just because we're so simple.'

Soon the trough was filled with oilseed cakes, straw, bran and grain, and the two friends began to eat. Jhuri started stroking them affectionately while a troupe of boys witnessed the spectacle.

Just then the mistress of the house emerged and kissed the two on their foreheads.

*Translated from the Hindi by M. Asaduddin*



## The Writer

### 1

Early in the morning, Praveen brewed his tea twenty times, poured it in his cup and finally drank it without milk and sugar. This was all that he would have for breakfast. It had been months since he had had tea with milk and sugar. For him, these were the unnecessary things of life. He had gone inside the bedroom to wake up his wife and ask for money, but when saw her fast asleep under the torn and dirty quilt he changed his mind. He thought perhaps she might not have slept at all last night because of the cold and must have dozed off just then. Waking her up wouldn't be right. Silently, he left the place.

After having tea, he picked up his pen and inkwell, and occupied himself in writing that book which in his opinion would be the greatest literary work of this century and whose publication would pull him out of anonymity and take him to the heaven of fame and prosperity.

Half an hour later, his wife came, rubbing her eyes, and said, 'Have you had your tea?'

Praveen replied with a cheerful face, 'Yes, I have. It was a finely brewed cup of tea.'

'But where did you get the milk and sugar from?'

'I haven't had milk and sugar for days. I prefer plain tea more these days. Mixing it with sugar and milk ruins its taste. Even the doctors recommend that one should only have plain tea. And in Europe, people normally do not use milk in their tea. This is simply an invention of the pleasure-seeking and the wealthy people of our country.'

‘I wonder how you can like plain tea! Why didn’t you wake me up? I had some money.’

Praveen went back to writing. In his youth, he had been intoxicated with this passion for writing and had been nurturing it for twenty years now. But in the bargain, his body and health had taken a beating. At forty, he already felt like an old man. But this obsession with writing simply had no cure. From dawn to dusk, this devoted follower of literature would drown himself in the inner recesses of his creative cosmos (*antar-jagat*), turning away from the entire world to dedicate himself completely to his vocation. But in India, to worship Saraswati is to be irreverent towards Lakshmi. After all, he had only one mind. It was impossible to please them both at the same time, much less earn their benedictions. And Lakshmi’s disfavour was not merely restricted to a lack of riches, but went beyond it. Her most cruel sport was that even the editors and publishers of books and journals were not favourably disposed towards his works. Perhaps the entire world was conspiring against him. This constant deprivation reached a point where it almost seemed to crush his self-esteem. Perhaps it was becoming clear to him that his works were devoid of both essence as well as genius, and this feeling was immeasurably heart-rending. *This precious human life has all been wasted for nothing! There is not even the consolation that although the world may not have respected them, at least his literary works were not worthless, after all.* The necessities of life had been successively decreased to a point where it even crossed the limits of asceticism. If at all there was some comfort left, then it was there in the fact that his life partner was much ahead of him when it came to devotion and sacrifice. Sumitra was happy even in her present situation. Praveen may have complaints against the world, but Sumitra protected him from its blows. She did not even show displeasure, let alone cry over her misfortune.

Sumitra picked up the teacup and said, ‘Then why don’t you go out for a walk for half an hour or so? Why do you go on racking your brains pointlessly when it’s obvious that even sacrificing your life for work won’t yield any results?’

Praveen did not raise his head; he continued writing and said, ‘Writing gives me the semblance of satisfaction that at least I’m doing something. Walking around simply gives me the impression that I’m wasting my time.’

‘So many educated people here take a walk on a daily basis, so are they wasting their time too?’



‘But most of them are those whose earnings remain unaffected by these walks. The majority of them are either government servants who receive monthly incomes or are from such professions as are respected by the people. I am like a millworker. Have you ever seen a worker taking a leisurely stroll? It is needed only for those who don’t have to worry about their bread and butter. People who cannot afford a square meal can’t afford it. Also, longevity and health are desirable only for those whose lives are full of flavour and happiness. Life for me is quite a burden. I don’t want to live long with this burden on my head.’

Sumitra’s eyes welled up as she heard these words which were steeped in despair. Her heart said: *This ascetic’s fame and glory would certainly spread everywhere some day even though Lakshmi’s disfavour may continue.* But Praveen had reached that point of despair from where the rays of hope that emanated from his wife were not even visible.

## 2

There is some ceremony at a wealthy gentleman’s place here. He has invited Praveen too. Today, Praveen was beside himself with joy. All through the day he was absorbed in his fantasies. In what words would Raja Sahib welcome him and how would he thank him for that! What would be the subjects of discussion there and who would be the eminent personalities to whom he’d be introduced—all day he wallowed in those fantasies. He even wrote a poem for this occasion in which he compared life to a garden. Today, he ignored all his woes against the world because he couldn’t afford to hurt the sentiments of the wealthy.

He had begun preparing since noon. He had a shave, took a shower and applied oil to his hair. The only problem was his clothes. It had been a while since he got a jacket made for himself. Like its owner, the jacket too was in a worn-out and shabby state. Just as Praveen caught a cold or had a headache at the slightest hint of a change in weather, the jacket too had an almost sensitive temperament. Praveen took it out and brushed it clean.

Sumitra said, ‘You should not have accepted this invitation. You could’ve told them that I was unwell. Going there in these tattered clothes is even worse.’

Praveen replied with philosophical solemnity, ‘People who are blessed by God with a heart and a sense of judgement do not look at one’s clothes but rather

at one's qualities and character. There must be something special about me, after all, that Raja Sahib invited me. I'm neither an officer nor a landlord, neither an estate holder nor a contractor. I'm a simple writer. A writer's works are his true worth. This confidence is enough to make sure that I don't feel ashamed before any author.'

Sumitra pitied his simplicity and said, 'By living in your world of imagination and fantasies for too long, you've lost touch with the real world. I say, people will be eyeing each other's clothes the most at Raja Sahib's place. Simplicity is obviously a good thing, but this doesn't mean that one should appear uncouth.'

Praveen felt that these words carried a speck of truth in them. Like all learned men, he too was one who immediately accepted his faults. He said, 'I understand. So should I go after the lamps are lit?'

'I say, why go there at all?'

'Now how should I explain this to you that every man has an appetite for honour and respect? Now you'll ask as to why is there this appetite Because it is one of the goals for our self-growth. We are a minute part of that great existence that pervades the entire universe. That a part will have the qualities of the whole is only inevitable. Therefore, we are naturally inclined towards fame and honour, self-growth and knowledge. I don't consider this desire as something bad.'

To extricate herself from the discussion, Sumitra said, 'Achcha, bhai, go. I'm not arguing with you, but do make some arrangements for tomorrow on your way back because I'm left with only one anna now. I've already borrowed money from those who could've given it to us even as our older debts have still not been cleared. I can no longer think of any option now.'

Praveen replied after a moment, 'I'm due for some payment for my essays from a couple of journals. I'll probably get it by tomorrow. And even if we were to fast tomorrow, why should we worry? Our dharma is to do our work. We do that with our heart and soul in it. It's not my fault if we have to starve even after doing all this. At worst, I'll die. Lakhs of people like us die every day. But the world carries on like ever before. Then why should we grieve about the fact that we'll starve to death? Death is not something to be afraid of. I'm a believer in people belonging to the Kabir Panth, who sing and play music while carrying the bier. I'm not afraid of death. Okay, you tell me whether I'm capable of doing anything more than what I already do. The entire world sleeps peacefully while I just keep on writing. People joke around, they have their diversions and

pastimes, but I don't allow myself any of that. It's been months since I last had the opportunity to have a laugh. I didn't even celebrate Holi last time. Even when I'm ill, I'm hell-bent on writing. Just recall, how when you were ill, I didn't even have the time to go to the doctor. If the world does not respect me, let it not. It's not my loss, rather it's the loss of the world. The lamp is only supposed to burn; it is not concerned whether its light spreads or not.

'And who amongst my friends, acquaintances and relatives are left to whom I do not owe something? I am ashamed to even step out of the house. The only respite is that people at least do not consider me malevolent. They may not be able to help me any more, but they do sympathize with me. Today, a wealthy gentleman has honoured me with an invitation—this alone is enough to make me happy.'

Then he had a sudden rush of blood. He proudly said, 'No, I won't go there in the night now. My poverty has reached the limits of disgrace. Covering it is simply futile. I'll go right away. He cannot be an ordinary person who is invited by kings and wealthy gentlemen. Raja Sahib is not just ordinarily rich; he is amongst the most eminent and wealthy gentlemen not only of this city, but also of this entire country. If anyone still treats me as lowly and inferior, then it would only mean that he himself is so.'

### 3

It was evening. Praveen stepped out of his house, sporting his old and tattered jacket, his worn-out shoes and his clumsy hat. He looked like a boorish pickpocket. This style too would have had its own grandeur had he possessed good looks and a sturdy build. Corpulence is itself awe-inspiring. But corpulence and a life dedicated to literature are directly opposed to each other. If you find a writer who is plump and well fed, then rest assured that his writings have no charm, suppleness or even heart in them. The lamp is supposed to burn. The ones with oil full to the brim remain unburnt. Praveen walked haughtily all the same. Every limb of his body exuded pride.

Usually when he stepped out of his house, he would avert the eyes of shopkeepers and take lanes and alleys. But today, he passed right before them, with his head held high. Today, he was prepared to give a fitting reply to their

demands for payment. But it was evening and there were customers sitting at the shops. Nobody cared to look at him. The paltry sum that he owed and which bothered him was not so important in the eyes of the shopkeepers that they would question him about it in the open market, especially when it appeared as though he was on his way to meet someone today.

Praveen walked through the entire market, but was not quite satisfied. He did it again, but even then nothing happened. Then he stood before Hafiz Samad's shop. Hafizji traded in miscellaneous goods like haberdashery and trinkets. Many days back, Praveen had purchased an umbrella from this shop and had been unable to pay for it till now. On seeing Praveen, Hafiz Samad said, 'Gentleman, I still haven't received the amount for the umbrella. I'll go bankrupt if there were to be around fifty to a hundred customers like you. It's been so long now.'

Praveen was delighted. His heartfelt wish had been fulfilled. He said, 'I haven't forgotten about it, Hafizji. I had so much work all these days that it was very difficult to step out of the house. I am unable to earn much, but thanks to your good wishes there are many who appreciate and value my work. I am always surrounded by two to four people. Even now I'm going to Raja Sahib's—oh, that very one who lives in the bungalow at the corner of the street. There is a party tonight. Some or the other occasion comes along every day.'

Hafiz Samad was quite impressed. 'I see! You are on your way to Raja Sahib's. It's only fair. Who else but the rich can actually value gifted people like you? God's ways are wonderful! You are quite unique in today's world. Don't forget this poor one if you find an opportunity there. If Raja Sahib were to be favourably disposed towards this shop, then there is nothing else to be asked for. He alone would need one complete stock of these goods at a time. His yearly income must be around two and a half to three lakh rupees.'

To Praveen, this amount seemed insignificant. But what harm could be there in saying that it must be around ten to twenty lakh when it was mere words as opposed to deeds? He said, 'Only two and a half to three lakh! You are almost insulting him. His income must not be less than ten lakh. A gentleman even estimates it at around twenty. He has a bungalow, an estate, several shops and contracts, trusteeship funds and, above all, enjoys the favours of the Sarkar Bahadur.'

Hafiz replied politely, 'My only submission to you is that consider this as your

very own shop, Your Excellency! Listen, Muradi, get a good paan of two paise for this gentleman here. Please come and sit here for at least two minutes. Should I show you anything that you might be interested in? You are like family to me.'

Praveen said, 'I'm sorry, I'll be late. I'll stay some other time.'

He took his leave and stopped before a cloth shop. The owner's name was Manohar Das. Seeing Praveen, he raised his eyebrows. The wretched fellow had anxiously wanted to meet him. He had consoled himself thinking that Praveen was not even in town. But now he thought that the writer had come to pay off his debts. He said, 'Bhai Praveenji, I haven't seen you for days. I tried sending you a note so many times, but my man simply couldn't find your address. Munimji, just check how much amount is due in his name.'

Praveen would be half-dead with fear whenever somebody asked him to cough up the money he owed them. But today, he stood there as though he was armoured and nothing could pierce him. He said, 'Just let me return from Raja Sahib's and then I'll sit here at leisure. I'm in a rush right now.'

Raja Sahib owed several thousands of rupees to Manohar Das. Still, he clung to him. He would collect thrice the amount that he lent. He put Praveenji in that same group of high-class people whose chief occupation was to cheat the rich. He said, 'Have a paan at least, gentleman! Raja Sahib is there for you for just a day. But we are here for the entire year, bhai Sahib! Take some clothes with you if you need them. Now Holi too is fast approaching. If you get an opportunity, tell Raja Sahib's treasurer that the older debts have been due for many days. At least now they should be settled! It's not as if we earn so much that we can forgo two years' dues.'

Praveen said, 'Brother, I can't have a paan right now. I'll be too late then. When he is so inclined towards meeting me and respects me a lot, then it becomes my dharma to not put him in any inconvenience. We want only admirers of quality, and not those who are hungry for wealth. I'll be a slave to anyone who'll respect me. But I simply don't care if someone is proud of his estates.'

The lamps had already been lit when Praveen reached Raja Sahib's large mansion. The rich and the wealthy had parked their cars outside. Two janitors, clad in their uniforms, stood at the door. A gentleman was welcoming all the guests. Seeing Praveen, he hesitated a bit. He examined him from head to toe and said, 'Do you have the invitation card?'

Praveen had the invitation card in his pocket. But he was angry at this sort of discrimination. *Why should he alone be asked for the invitation card? Why not others?* He said, 'No, I don't have one. But I can show it to you if you ask for it from the other gentlemen as well. Otherwise, I'll consider this sort of discrimination as an insult. Tell Raja Sahib that Praveenji came and returned from the door itself.'

'Oh no, gentleman. I didn't know you. I apologize for my discourteous gesture. It's only because of eminent persons like you that a gathering gets its charm. God has blessed you with such a voice that others are left speechless.'

That man had never met Praveen. But whatever he said could be said about any writer and no one could ignore this due praise.

Praveen went inside and saw electric lanterns illuminating the elaborately decorated courtyard of the summerhouse. In the centre, there was a fountain and a marble statue of a fairy. The fountain that flowed from the fairy's head and the droplets of water that sparkled in the light of coloured lanterns appeared as though the rainbow itself had melted and was raining from above. Tables had been placed all around the fountain with white tablecloths spread over them. On top of them, beautiful flower vases had been arranged.

Raja Sahib greeted Praveen as soon as he saw him, 'Welcome, welcome! I was completely stirred on reading your article in this issue of *Hans*. It was astonishing. I never knew that excellent men like you were hidden in this very city.'

Then he introduced Praveen to the gentlemen that were present there. 'I'm sure you all must have heard about this gentleman Praveen. He is right here before you. His writings have such charm, brilliance and emotion, such language, vision, splendour and fluency that it's amazing! My goodness! It's simply overwhelming!'

A gentleman, wearing an English suit, looked at Praveen in such a manner as though he was some creature from the zoo and said, 'Have you even read some of the English poets such as Byron, Shelley and Keats?'

Praveen replied indifferently, 'Yes, I have read some of them.'

'You'll be rendering great service to the Hindi language if you were to translate the works of any of these great poets.'

Praveen never considered himself even a wee bit less than Byron, Shelley and the others. He was an English poet himself. His language, style and narration—all of these were in accordance with the taste of the English poets. He may not consider translating his own works as something honourable in the same way that he did not consider translating the works of these poets as something noble. He answered, 'There is not so much of a dearth of vision in our country at present that we have to borrow from these foreign poets. In my opinion, at least this is an area in which India can still teach quite a few things to the West.'

This was an illogical response. The gentleman, who was an admirer of the English language, thought Praveen was mad.

Raja Sahib looked at Praveen with such eyes as seemed to be saying: *Just be mindful of the place and the occasion before you say something!* Raja Sahib said, 'English literature is incredible. It's simply matchless when it comes to poetry.'

The gentleman who admired the English language looked haughtily at Praveen and said, 'Our poets haven't grasped the true meaning of poetry. The theme of longing in separation and other such conventional descriptions form the basis of their poetry even today.'

Praveen gave him a fitting reply, 'I think you haven't read the contemporary poets or even if you have, you did so perfunctorily.'

Raja Sahib now decided to shut Praveen up and said, 'This is Mr Paranjape, Praveenji! His articles are published in English journals and are looked at with respect.'

What he really meant by this was: *Stop deluding yourself any more.*

Praveen understood Raja Sahib's intentions. He had to face humiliation before Paranjape. It was completely unbearable to him that this devoted supporter of foreign clothes, adornments and language would be treated with respect despite being a traitor to the nationalistic cause. But what could he have done?

Another gentleman who had a similar appearance joined in. Raja Sahib greeted him warmly, 'Come, Dr Chaddha. How do you do?'

Dr Chaddha shook hands with Raja Sahib while looking inquiringly at Praveen. He then asked, 'And you are . . .?'

Raja Sahib introduced him, 'His name is Praveen. He is an eminent poet

Raja Sahib introduced him, 'This name is Praveen. He is an eminent poet writing in English.'

Dr Chaddha replied in a peculiar way, 'I see! You are a poet!' Without asking anything further, he moved on.

Another gentleman with a similar get-up appeared on the scene. He was a renowned barrister. Raja Sahib introduced Praveen to him too. He also replied in the same fashion, 'I see! You are a poet!' And he too left the scene. Every time, Praveen got this same reply: 'I see! You are a poet!'

Each time this was uttered, it struck a new blow to Praveen's heart. He clearly understood the sentiment that was behind it. It obviously meant: *Build castles in the air if you want to. But you are not needed here. How dare you boldly march in here in this sophisticated society?*

Praveen was cross with himself. He was quite thankful to Raja Sahib for the invitation. But considering the way he was being insulted here, his home where there was contentment seemed like heaven. He reproached himself: *Serves you right. You, who was so greedy for respect! Do you realize now how worthy you are of it? You can't be of any use to anyone in this selfish world. Why should the lawyers and barristers respect you? You can't be a potential client to them nor can they expect any lawsuits from you. Why should the doctor or the hakim respect you? They won't visit your house without a fee. You just go on writing since that's what you've been made for. That's it! You have no other role in this world.*

Suddenly there was a commotion among the crowd. The chief guest for the day had finally arrived. This gentleman had been appointed as the judge of the high court; the function was being held on account of this occasion. Raja Sahib shook hands with him warmly and asked Praveen, 'You did write your poem, didn't you?'

Praveen replied, 'No, I didn't write any poem.'

'Really? This is outrageous. Oh, fine gentleman, why don't you write something now? Just two to four lines will suffice. That's it! It's only appropriate that a poem should be read out on an occasion like this.'

'I can't write anything on such a short notice.'

'So I introduced you to so many of these gentlemen in vain?'

'Absolutely.'

'Arré, Bhaijaan, why don't you recite something written by our ancient poets?'



No one will make a big deal about it.'

'Oh no. Forgive me, but I'm neither a village minstrel nor a narrator.'

Saying this, Praveen immediately left the scene. His face lit up when he reached home.

Sumitra asked happily, 'How come you returned so early?'

'I wasn't needed there.'

'Come on! Your face is all lit up which means you got quite a bit of respect there.'

'Yes, but not in the way I had expected it to be.'

'You seem very happy.'

'Because I learnt my lesson today. I am like a lamp that is only meant for burning. Today, I forgot this basic principle. But God didn't allow me to delude myself for long. This shack itself is heaven for me. Today, I learnt the fundamental principle that a life dedicated to literature is complete asceticism.'

*Translated from the Hindi by Shailendra Kumar Singh*



## The Co-wife

### 1

After Razia had two to three children who died and she had lost her youth, Ramu's love for her started diminishing. The desire for a second marriage occupied his thoughts.

He started bickering with Razia every day. He would find one or the other excuse to lose his temper and beat Razia. And then, finally, he got home a new wife. Her name was Dasi or Dasia. She was youthful, big-eyed and as fair as the *champa* flower. How could the pale and feeble Razia compete with this girl! Even so, she tried to retain her authority and maintain her slackening hold over the household for as long as she could. But this was like trying to prevent a crumbling roof from falling with inadequate support. She had painstakingly built this house. She could not bear to leave it so easily. And she was not so stupid that she would leave the house and go, thereby allowing Dasi to rule over it.

### 2

One day, Razia told Ramu, 'I don't have saris; go and get one for me.'

Only a day before Ramu had got a Chanderi sari for Dasi. Hearing Razia's demand he said, 'I don't have money now.'

Razia did not crave much for saris; what she really wanted was to put obstacles in the way of Ramu and Dasi's happiness. She said, 'If you did not have money, why did you buy the Chanderi for your darling? In place of that, you could have bought two saris with the same money; then I could have used

one.'

Expressing his independence, Ramu said, 'It's my will. I will do what I want. Who are you to question me? She's young, it's time for her to have fun and enjoy herself. You want her to be engrossed in the worries of the household right now? I can't do this. If you want to wear fineries then go and work. Hasn't God given you hands and feet? Earlier, you used to wake up at the crack of dawn and start working. Now, you keep gloating in spite and malice against her the entire day. Will money fall from the skies? Why should I give up my life for you?'

Razia asked, 'Am I her maid that I should do all the work in the house while she sits like a queen? All these days I have worked really hard and this is the result I get. I am not going to take it any more.'

'You will have to stay the way I keep you.'

'I will stay if I want to, or I will live separately.'

'Do what you want but get off my back.'

'Well said. From today, I relieve you. I will think that I'm a widow now.'

### 3

Ramu knew that the household was put together by Razia, even though she lacked beauty that pleased the eye. It was quite possible that he would have made up with Razia after a while, but Dasi too was no less cunning. She decided to strike while the iron was hot. She said, 'What got madam angry today?'

Ramu replied with an air of carelessness, 'It was because of your Chanderi that Razia raised hell. Now she says that she will stay separately. I have told her to do what she wants.'

Rolling her eyes, Dasi said, 'These are all tantrums to make one plead with her, to beg before her. You sit quietly. In a day or two, she will cool down. You don't say anything; if you do then her temper will shoot sky-high!'

Ramu said in a serious tone, 'Dasi, you have no idea how proud she is. Once she says something, she does it.'

Razia did not expect Ramu to be so thankless. She wasn't as beautiful as she once was, which is why Ramu did not love her any more. This was not an unusual thing for a man to do; but Ramu separating from her was something she couldn't believe. This house had been put together bit by bit with the money she had saved. The household had been put together bit by bit with the money she had saved. The household had been put together bit by bit with the money she had saved.

had saved. The household too had been put together by her. It was she who had started selling vegetables. She had to face great hardship after coming to this house. And for what? Only to eat a coarse meal and retire into a corner after a weary day! Today she was thrown out of the house with such unkindness, as if she was a fly in the milk! Ramu didn't even say this much: 'You cannot stay separately. Either I will die here or I will kill you, but I will not let you live separately. You are married to me. This is no trivial matter.'

When Ramu did not care for her, why should she worry about him? Do all men with wives keep sitting, doing no work? Everyone else has their mothers or fathers, sons or grandsons. Had his sons been alive, would he have dared to bring in a new wife? Would I be so distressed then? What a heartless fellow that he did not have even a trace of mercy for me!

The woman in her rebelled against such torture owing to her situation of dependence. The same fire that cannot light a log of wood can set a flower aflame!

#### 4

The very next day, Razia left for another village. She took nothing with her. The sari draped across her body was all that she owned. God had already snatched her sons from her. Today, He took away her house.

When she left, Ramu was so engrossed with his young wife that he hardly noticed that Razia was leaving for good. At least that is what Razia thought. She did not want to leave like a thief. She wanted to show Dasi and her husband and the entire village that she was not taking a thing from the house. Her objective was to humiliate Ramu before the village. If she left quietly none of this would happen. Instead, Ramu would claim that Razia had taken away everything from the house.

She called out to Ramu and said, 'Now look after your house. I am going. I am not taking a thing from your house.'

For a moment, Ramu was rendered speechless. He could not fathom what to say. He did not think that she would go like this. He had expected her to try and take everything from the house and seek the sympathy of the villagers. What to do now?

Dasi said, 'Go and blow your trumpet in the village. Here nobody fears

anything. What did you get from your house when you came here that gives you the right to take away something ?’

Instead of bickering with her, Razia said to Ramu, ‘Do you hear what your darling says? I will still not open my mouth. I am going but, Dassorani, you too will not rule for long like a queen. In the divine court of the Lord, wrongdoings don’t bear fruit. The haughtiness of many a man has been broken to bits by Him.’

Dasi laughed but Ramu lowered his head. Razia went away.

## 5

The new village that Razia went to shared borders with Ramu’s village. The people there knew her. They knew how skilled a housewife she was, how hard-working and how honest she was. She faced no obstacles in getting work there. The one who works double compared to others on the same wage is hardly deprived of employment.

If one starts describing how Razia spent three long years, how she built another household and how she started farming, then one could write a book. She knew the secrets of saving well. She gained confidence and did not need any male patronage to survive on her own. Seeing her work tirelessly, the villagers thought that she was trying to show Ramu that ‘I can live without you in comfort’.

Razia was no longer a dependent woman. She lived off her earnings.

She had a pair of sturdy bulls. She did not merely give them fodder; she also fed them two rotis every day and would stroke them for hours. Sometimes she would place her head on their shoulder and weep, saying, ‘And I tell you, you two are all that I have—you are my sons as well as my husband. My honour is in your hands now.’

The bulls probably understood Razia’s language and emotions, but they were not human beings. Lowering their heads, they would keep licking Razia’s hands to console her. When they saw her, they would look at her with a lot of fondness in their eyes; they would swing their shoulders happily, allowing her to yoke them together, and would work very hard for her. Those who have looked after bulls and loved them wholeheartedly can alone understand this.

Razia was the *chaudhurain* of the village now. Earlier her mind was always searching for an anchor and she could not develop freely. But now, as she came out of the shadow, she improved and matured.

One day, after Razia returned home, a man told her, 'Did you not hear, chaudhurain, that Ramu is very ill? I heard that he has been unable to eat for ten days.'

Razia said with an air of indifference, 'Is it an ague?'

'No, it is not an ague. It is some other disease. He was lying on a cot outside the house. I asked, "How are you, Ramuji?" and he started crying. He is in bad shape. There is not a penny in the house for him to get medicines. Dasi has a son now. She never tried working before, and now that she has a child how can she go to work? All the blame is on Ramu's head. And she keeps demanding ornaments and clothes—she is still a new bride!'

Stepping into her house, Razia said, 'One has to suffer for one's actions.'

But she didn't feel at ease inside. She was out in a moment. Probably she wanted to ask the man something in a way that would not reveal her concern.

But the man had left. Razia looked for him everywhere, but he was not to be found. She sat on the threshold and remembered her words from three years ago when she had decided to leave Ramu's house. At that time, she had cursed him out of jealousy. Now, there was no heartburn. Time had calmed her down. The miserable plight of Ramu and Dasi did not evoke envy any more; they deserved mercy.

She thought that if Ramu had not been able to eat anything for ten days, then certainly his situation was not good. He had never been very stout or healthy; these ten days of fasting must have weakened him further. The farms too must have been neglected. He may not have got adequate food either . . .

A woman from the neighbourhood, who came on the pretext of borrowing fire, asked, 'Heard that Ramu is very sick. You get what you deserve. One would not turn out one's enemy as cruelly as he turned you out of his house.'

Razia cut in, 'No, sister, it was not like that. The poor man had said nothing. Whatever he did was because he was being controlled by Dasi; he never said anything to me on his own. Why should I speak ill of anyone? Which man does not come under the spell of women? Dasi is responsible for the state he is in.'

The neighbour went away without borrowing the fire she had come for. Instead she turned her face away and left

Instead, she turned her face away and left.

Razia picked up an earthen pot and the line to draw water from the well. It was time to feed and water the bulls, but her eyes were fixed on the road that led to Malsa, Ramu's village. Certainly someone would come to call her. After all, how could she visit him without being asked to? People would say, 'See! Didn't she finally come back running?'

But Ramu must be unconscious. Being without food for ten days is not a small matter. What must his body be left with? And then, who would call her? What interest did Dasi have to do so? She could start another family. There would be hundred clients ready. Oh yes, there is someone coming. Yes, someone is coming. He looks like a disturbed soul. Who is this man? I never saw him in Malsa, but then I have not been there for so long. Some new people must have settled down there.

Suddenly a man appeared beside the well. He was possibly a wayfarer. Razia kept the pot down and advanced towards the stranger. She asked, 'Has Ramu Mahto sent you? All right, come home But I will take some time. I have to feed and water the bulls and light the evening lamp. I will give you money; go and give it to Dasi. Tell her to send word if she needs anything.'

What did this footslogger know of Ramu? He belonged to another village. First, he was surprised, but then he understood. Quietly, he went with Razia.

On the way, Razia asked him, 'And what is his condition like now?'

The wayfarer speculated and said, 'He is slightly better.'

'I hope Dasi is not crying too much?'

'She didn't cry.'

'Why should she cry? She would understand later.'

After the traveller went away after taking the money, Razia fed the bulls. But her mind was preoccupied with Ramu. Fond memories resurfaced like little starlets in her mind. She remembered the time she had fallen ill. It was ten years ago. How he had sat beside her all through the day and night. He had even forgotten to eat and drink. It came to her mind then, why not go and see him? Who will say what? Who would dare to say anything? I am not going to steal. I am going to the man I stayed with for fifteen to twenty years. Dasi would wrinkle up her nose. Let her do so. What do I have to do with her?

Razia latched the door and left the house in the care of a worker. She set off to see Ramu, trembling and hesitating, with the gift of forgiveness.

Ramu realized within a few days that the soul of his household had left. He knew that no matter how hard he tried, he could not get his energy back. Dasi was pretty and fashionable, but snobbish. When the first phase of passion died down, the bickering began. The farms started yielding less and whatever there was got squandered away in sundry expenses. Loans had to be taken. It was this worry and sorrow that affected his health. In the beginning, he did not bother much. What could he do by bothering? There was no money in the house. The treatment by quacks led to the disease becoming deep-rooted. Now for ten to twelve days he had been unable to eat or drink. He lay moaning on his cot, waiting for death.

His situation was such that he was certain about his future, so he rested in thoughts of the past like a vehicle that goes into reverse on finding the road ahead blocked. He kept crying, remembering Razia and cursing Dasi, saying, 'It is because of you alone that I turned her out of the house. With her departure, Goddess Lakshmi too went away. I know that if I call her even now, she would come running, but what face do I have to call her? If she comes just once and I can seek her forgiveness, I will die happy. I have no other desire.'

Just then Razia came in. Placing her palm on his forehead, she asked, 'How is your health? I came to know about your condition today.'

Ramu looked at her with tearful eyes but could not say anything. He folded his hands to greet her. And that was when his eyes rolled up and his hands remained folded.

The corpse was in the house. Razia was weeping but Dasi was worried. There was no money in the house. Wood was needed for the pyre and arrangements had to be made for refreshments for at least those who would shoulder the corpse. And how could the body be taken away without a shroud? It would cost at least ten rupees. But there were not even ten paise in the house. She was scared that she would have to sacrifice her jewellery. The ornaments weren't even that precious! After all, what capacity did a farmer have? One could



perhaps get ten rupees by selling one or two pieces. What else could be done? She called the headman's son and said, '*Devarji*, how do I cross this hurdle? There is not a soul in the village who would place a jot of trust in me. I have some ornaments. Tell the headman to keep them as security so that we can tide over the crisis today; after that God is our keeper!'

'Why don't you ask Razia?'

All at once, Razia came from within, wiping her eyes. Their exchange wafted into her ears. She asked, 'What is it? What are you discussing? Is this the time to talk; shouldn't you take the body for cremation?'

'Yes, of course, that is what we are arranging for.'

'There wouldn't be any money here. Everything must have been spent to treat his illness. He has left this wretched one midstream. You run to the other house, Brother. How far is it after all. Take the keys. Tell the worker there to take out fifty rupees from the store. Tell him that it is kept on the top of the stave.'

When he left, Dasi fell to her knees weeping, holding Razia's feet. Razia's sisterly words touched her. She saw how kind and forgiving Razia was.

Razia embraced her and said, 'Why do you cry, Sister? He has gone, but I am still here. Don't worry about anything. In this very house, both you and I will live in his name. I will look after here as well as there. It is only half a mile away. If anybody asks for your ornaments, don't give them.'

Dasi felt like banging her head and killing herself. How she had tortured Razia and made her cry, and how she had rested only after turning her out of the house!

Razia asked, 'Make a list of those whom you owe money to and tell me. I don't want to maintain any quarrel. Why is the child looking so weak?'

Dasia said, 'I have no milk in me. The cow you had left behind died. The child does not get milk.'

'Oh God! The poor thing has wilted! Tomorrow I will get a cow. I will get the entire household here. What is there to hold me back?'

The corpse was taken for cremation amidst a lot of bustle. Razia went with it. She conducted the last rites. There was feasting. It all came to some two hundred rupees. There was no need to borrow any money.

The precious qualities in Dasi too were revealed during this crisis, in this burning flame of sacrifice. The pretty coquette had turned into an icon of service

Today, it has been seven years since Ramu's death. Razia is looking after the house. She does not consider Dasi to be her co-wife; she considers her a daughter. She ensures Dasi has enough clothes before buying any for her own use. She ensures Dasi eats before she does. Jokhu goes to study now. His engagement is almost final. In their caste, marriages are fixed during childhood.

Dasi said, 'Sister, what is the need to get ornaments made? My jewellery is all intact.'

Razia replied, 'No, dear! I will make new ornaments for her. I can still work. When I am tired, do what you want. You are still in the age to wear fine things; you keep your ornaments.'

Nayin Thakur wistfully said, 'Had Jokhu's father been here today, things would have been different.'

Razia said, 'He is not here, but I am. I will do double of what he would have done. When I die, then say Jokhu's father is no more.'

On the day of the wedding, seeing Dasi weep, Razia said, 'Bahu, why do you cry? I am still alive. This house is yours. You live as you like. Give me some morsels to eat, that's it. What else can I do? My husband has died. But yours is still alive.'

Dasi placed her head on Razia's lap and cried her heart out. 'Sister, you are like my mother. If you were not here, whose door would I be standing at? Rats would have returned to the house. In his tenure, I had to suffer a lot. The happiness of married life, I enjoyed during your tenure. I am not crying out of sadness; I am crying over God's kindness towards a hapless one like me; where am I and where is this prosperity!'

Razia smiled as tears rolled down her eyes.

*Translated from the Hindi by Anuradha Ghosh*



## The Funeral Feast

### 1

Lying on his sickbed, Seth Ramnath cast a frustrated glance at his wife, Susheela, and said, 'I'm very unfortunate, Sheela. You always had to bear hardships with me. When there was nothing in the house, you were toiling day and night for household duties and the children. When things got a little better and your days of peace were at hand, I'm leaving you thus . . . Until now I had hopes of surviving, but now all my hopes are shattered. Look here, Sheela, don't cry! Everyone dies in the world, a couple of years sooner or later. Now the responsibility of the household is laid upon you. I have not left any money behind, but your life will sustain somehow with whatever remains. Why is Raja weeping?'

Susheela wiped her tears. 'He's become obstinate, what else? Since morning he's insisting on buying a motor car. Will a motor car cost any less than five rupees?'

Since the past few days, Sethji had become very affectionate towards the two children.

'So why not get him one? The poor thing is weeping since long; what lofty desires he must have hid in his heart. All are turned to dust now. Also get an imported doll for Rani. She keeps yearning after others' toys. The wealth that I held dearer than life has been consumed by the doctors in the end. How will the children remember me, that they had such a lousy father! The unfortunate father who considered wealth dearer than his children. I never bought them things worth a paisa.'

At the final moment, when the worthlessness of life stands out as a harsh truth, the regret for whatever one had left undone and the remorse for whatever one had done makes the heart generous and guileless.

Susheela beckoned Raja and holding him close to her heart, started weeping. The maternal affection which lay agonizing within her heart over her husband's stinginess, raged over. But where was the money to buy a motor car?

Sethji said, 'Will you buy a motor car, *beta*? Take some money from your amma and go with your sister. Buy a good-quality one.'

Raja's childish obstinacy melted looking at his mother's tears and his father's affection.

'Won't buy it now.'

Sethji asked, 'Why?'

'Will buy it once you get well.'

Sethji broke into inconsolable tears.

## 2

Seth Ramnath passed away on the third day.

The life of the rich pains many and pleases very few. Their death pains very few and pleases many. On the one hand, the Mahabrahmin Mandali is appeased, the panditji is happy on the other, and perhaps the people of the community are also pleased that another equal among them is no more. A thorn is removed from the heart. And what to speak of the close associates? They will now settle old scores. Such an opportunity to soothe the aching heart has cropped up after long.

Today is the fifth day. The vast house lies deserted. The children neither cry, nor laugh. They sit half-heartedly near their mother, while the widow lies in a deathly state, weighed down by the countless uncertainties of the future. Whatever money had remained was given up for the cremation ceremony, and all other rituals were yet to be performed. Oh God, how will the raft sail through?

Someone called out at the gate. The servant informed about the arrival of Seth Dhaniram. Both the children ran out. Susheela's heart grew hopeful for a moment. Seth Dhaniram was the head of the community. The troubled heart of the helpless woman turned optimistic at Sethji graciousness. *After all, he's the*

*head of the community. If these people don't take heed of the orphans, who will? These righteous people who protect the destitute in difficult times are blessed.*

Thinking thus, Susheela drew out her veil and came to stand in the entrance hall. She saw that many other gentlemen apart from Dhaniramji had assembled there.

Dhaniram began, 'Bahuji, only our heart knows the grief that we've suffered at the premature death of Bhai Ramnath. He was still young; but all is God's will. Now our only duty is to have faith in God and find out a way for the future. It should be ensured that the honour of the house is preserved and the soul of Bhaiji too is content.'

Kuberdas looked at Susheela from the corner of his eye and said: 'Dignity is a big thing. Our duty is to protect it. But it is improper to spend beyond one's means. How much money do you have, bahu? What, nothing?'

Susheela replied, 'Where is the money, Sethji? Whatever little was there, got spent during the illness.'

Dhaniram reacted, 'So there is a new problem. What should we do in such a situation, Kuberdasji?'

Kuberdas answered, 'Whatever you say, the feast will have to be organized. Yes, one should work according to one's capabilities. I'll not advice taking a loan. But yes, we shouldn't leave any stone unturned for whatever money can be arranged at home. We do have a duty towards the dead. Now that he'll never return, the ties with him are being severed forever. Hence, everything should be in accordance with the social status. A feast will have to be offered to the Brahmins to preserve the decorum.'

Dhaniram asked again, 'So do you have absolutely nothing, Bahuji? Not even two or four thousand?'

Susheela replied, 'I'm telling you the truth, I don't have anything. Will I utter falsehood at such a time?'

Dhaniram looked at Kuberdas with partial disbelief and said: 'Then this house will have to be sold.'

Kuberdas proposed, 'What else can be done? It is not good to be disgraced. Ramnath was so popular, he was a pillar of the community. This is the only way out now. I have twenty thousand rupees on mortgage. Accounting for the interest and the discount, around twenty thousand will be payable to me. The rest will be spent on the feast. If anything remains, it will be useful for the children.'

spent on the feast. If anything remains, it will be useful for the children.

Dhaniram asked, 'How much was your mortgage on?'

Kuberdas replied instantly, 'On twenty thousand rupees. Interest of a hundred rupees.'

Dhaniram prodded, 'I've heard it was a little less.'

Kuberdas stood firm. 'Its credit deed is there. It's not an oral transaction. I'll not lie for the sake of a couple of thousand.'

Dhaniram replied, 'No, no, when did I say that? So have you heard it, Bhai? The Panch Council suggests that the house be sold off.'

Susheela's younger brother Santlal too came in at this moment. The last sentence fell into his ears. He spoke out, 'Why should the house be sold? For the feasting of the community? The community will go its way after the eating and drinking, but how will these orphans be protected? Some thought must be spared for their future too.'

Dhaniram looked at him angrily. 'You have no right to poke your nose in these matters. Merely thinking about the future will not work. The hereafter of the departed must be secured somehow through proper rituals. What will you lose? We are the ones who will be laughed at. Nothing is dearer than dignity in the world. People lay down their lives for the sake of honour. What remains once honour is lost? If you ask for our suggestion, this is what we say. The rest is Bai's choice. She may do as she pleases; but it will have nothing to do with us. Come, Kuberdasji, let's go.'

Frightened, Susheela said, 'Don't bother about my bhaiya's words, it is his habit. I haven't ignored your suggestion; you are my elders. You know the state of the house. I don't wish to agonize my husband's soul, but when his children face hardships, won't his soul be pained? The daughter *has* to be married. The son *needs* to be educated. Let the Brahmins be feasted, but I can't afford to serve the community.'

It seemed as if both the gentlemen had been slapped—such a great injustice! Is such a thing fit to be uttered? The Panch Council will not let their faces be blackened. The world will not laugh at the widow but the Panch Council will be mocked. How can they tolerate ridicule from all quarters? It is a sin to even peep at the door of such a house.

Susheela wept. 'I am an orphan, I'm naive, please don't be angry with me. How will I fend for myself if all of you desert me?'

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In the meantime, two more gentlemen came and seated themselves. One was very fat and the other too thin. Their names were according to their features: Bheemchand and Durbaldas. Dhaniram explained the situation to them in brief.

Durbaldas said sympathetically, 'Why don't we do this: that we all contribute some amount? Once her son grows up, we'll get the money back. Even if we don't get it back, bearing the loss for the sake of a friend is no big deal.'

Santlal became happy. 'If you have such mercy, what else can we ask for?'

Frowning, Kuberdas raised his brows. 'You are speaking without any rhyme or reason, Durbaldasji. In the market condition of these times, whoever has any money to spare?'

Bheemchand concurred. 'That's true, such a slack market has never been seen before. But one has to carry on.'

Kuberdas became numb. He had his heart firmly set on Susheela's house. Such discussions stalled his selfish designs. *Now he wanted to recover his money at all costs.*

Bheemchand somehow woke him up 'But the feast will have to be offered. Not fulfilling that duty is bringing disgrace to the society.'

Susheela saw a hint of sympathy in Durbaldas. She looked at him miserably. 'I am not an outsider in your circle. You all are the masters, do as you all deem fit.'

Durbaldas quizzed her. 'You will at least have some ornaments, bai?'

Susheela replied: 'Yes, there are ornaments. Half of them were sold off during the illness, the other half remains.'

Susheela brought out the ornaments and placed them before the Panch; but these would only fetch three thousand with difficulty.

Durbaldas weighed the pouch in his hand. 'How will they fetch three thousand only? I will get them sold for three and a half thousand.'

Then Bheemchand weighed the pouch. 'My bid is for four thousand.'

Kuberdas again got the opportunity to rake up the issue of the house.

'What will come out of just four thousand? Is it a feast for the community or just for wiping off the sins? There is an expenditure of at least ten thousand for the community feast. The house will have to be sold.'

Santlal chewed his lips. 'I say, are you people so ruthless? Do you people feel no pity for the orphaned children? Will you leave them as beggars on the street?'

But no one paid attention to Santlal's appeal. The discussion regarding the

house could not be avoided any further. The market was sluggish. More than thirty thousand could be found, and twenty-five thousand was for Kuberdas. Five thousand would remain. Four thousand would come from the ornaments. Thus, within nine thousand, with great economy, both the Brahmins' feast and the feast for the community could be managed.

With folded hands, Susheela put the two children in front of the Panch Council: 'O Panch, look at the faces of my children. Whatever is there in my house, you can take all of it; but let the house be, for I'll not get a foothold anywhere. I fall to your feet, please don't sell the house now.'

What can be said of such stupidity? The Panch Council itself wanted that the house be not sold; the members did not harbour enmity towards the orphans, but was there another way to arrange for the community feast? If the widow is able to somehow arrange for another five thousand rupees, the house can be saved, but she cannot.

Kuber said in the end, 'See, Bai, the condition of the market is bad at the moment. If it is written in the destiny of the children, then God will provide from another source. God creates pretexts for livelihood as for death. Don't worry about the children. He arranges beforehand for the survival of those who are born. We're tired of making you understand. If you still don't leave your obstinacy, we won't ask about anything. Then it will be difficult for you to live here. The city dwellers will be after you.'

What more could the widow Susheela do? How could she survive having fought with the Panch Council? Who can afford the enmity of a crocodile while living in water? She stood up to return to her house, but fainted on the spot. Till now, she had harboured some hope. She could have forgotten her widowhood in bringing up her children, but now there was darkness all around.

### 3

Seth Ramnath's friends had complete rights over his house. If not for the friends, who else had the right? Of what worth is the woman? When she can't understand something as simple as the fact that offering a community feast and doing it with pomp and show is a general necessity, it is useless to say anything else to her.

Who should buy the ornaments? Bheemchand had bid for four thousand, but



now he felt that he had made a mistake. Durbaldas had bid for three thousand, hence the deal went to him. Durbaldas and Bheemchand had a conflict in this matter; but in the end, Bheemchand had to eat humble pie. Justice was in favour of Durbal.

Dhaniram remarked derisively, 'Durbaldas, you are taking away the booty, but it is worth more than three thousand. I won't allow justice to be compromised.'

Kuberdas said, 'Aji, so what, it is within the home only, it hasn't gone outside. One day all the friends can feast on it.'

On this, the four gentlemen laughed. Getting respite from this work, the question of the house arose. Kuberdas was ready to give thirty thousand, but without legal documentation, there was scope for suspicion. Why should this probability be retained? A broker was called. A dwarfish man with a toothless mouth, in his seventies. His name was Chokhelal.

Kuberdas introduced him. 'My friendship with Chokhelalji is thirty years old. He's a gem of a person.'

Bheemchand said: 'Look, Chokhelal, we have to sell this house. Get us a good buyer. Your commission is guaranteed.'

Kuberdas added, 'The market condition is not good. But we will have to see that Ramnath's children do not suffer. 'And then he whispered to Chokhelal, 'Don't go beyond thirty.'

Bheemchand interrupted. 'Look, Kuberdas, this is not good.'

Kuberdas reacted, 'So, what am I doing? I am just asking to fix a good rate.'

Chokhelal said, 'You don't need to tell me this. I understand my duty. Ramnathji was my friend too. I also know that not a paisa less than a lakh was spent in building this house, but the condition of the market is not unknown to you. At such times, it won't fetch more than twenty-five thousand. Usually, from the right buyer, one can get five to ten thousand more; but at this time, any buyer will be hard to find. Also, this is the very nature of buying or selling transactions. While buying something, you end up paying more, and while selling something, you have to settle for the buyer's rate.'

Dhaniram pressed further. 'Twenty-five thousand is too less, bhai, if not more, at least get us up to thirty thousand!'

Chokhelal replied, 'What's thirty, I will get forty if a buyer is found. If you people say, I will negotiate for thirty thousand rupees.'

Dhaniram said thoughtfully, 'If it has to sell for thirty thousand, why shouldn't Kuberdasji get it? Why should such cheap goods be given to others?'

Kuberdas agreed. 'If you all think so, this can be done.'

Dhaniram said, 'Yes, yes' and agreed. Bheemchand was left yearning within his heart. This deal was also fixed. The same day, the lawyer wrote the sale deed and the registry was done immediately too. The sale deed was brought in front of Susheela. She let out a cold sigh and, teary-eyed, put her signature to it. Now she does not have shelter anywhere except this. Having given her company in her good days, this house too is deserting her in bad days, like an unfaithful friend.

The Panch Council, sitting in Susheela's courtyard, is preparing a document for the community, and sitting on the lattice window the orphaned widow is crying out her fate. When the document was completed, tears escaped from the widow's eyes and fell upon it.

Dhaniram looked up and said, 'Where did this splash of water come from?'

Santlal replied, 'Bai is sitting and crying. She has stamped the document with her bloodied tears.'

Dhaniram addressed Susheela loudly, 'Arré, why are you weeping, Bai? This is not the time to weep, you should be happy that the Panch have gathered in your house to do this auspicious deed. Why are you feeling aggrieved in amending the hereafter of the same husband with whom you indulged in worldly pleasures for many days?'

The document was circulated in the community.

Elsewhere, the Panch members spent three to four days in preparations for the feast. Ghee came from Dhaniram's warehouse. The *maida* and sugar too came through him. In the morning of the fifth day, the *Brahm-bhoj* was held. In the evening, the community banquet was spread. Queues of carriages and motor cars stood at Susheela's doorstep. There were rows of guests inside. The courtyard, the drawing room, the balcony, the entrance hall, the upper terrace, every place was filled with guests. People relished the food and praised the Panch Council.

Everyone spends money, but skilful arrangement is found wanting. Such tasty food is seldom found.

'After Seth Champaram's funeral feast, a similar feast has happened only for Seth Ramnath.'

'The imartis are so crunchy!'

'The rasgullas are stuffed with dry fruit!'

The rasgullas are stuffed with dry fruits:

‘The entire credit goes to the Panch Council.’

Dhaniram said politely, ‘It is your generosity to say so, brothers. We were on brotherly terms with Ramnath. Who else would do this, if not us? For four days, we couldn’t catch a wink of sleep.’

‘You are blessed! Friends, if any, should be like you.’

‘How wonderful! You have upheld the dignity of Ramnathji’s name. The community only notices such food and offerings, it doesn’t go after the money.’

Praising and commenting thus, the guests were lapping up the food, while elsewhere, sitting in the cellar, Susheela wondered: ‘There are such selfish people in the world! The entire world has become selfish! Everyone is having food, stroking their bellies. No one bothers to ask whether anything is left for the orphans.’

#### 4

One month passed. Susheela was hard up for money. There was no cash, while the ornaments had been sold. Now a few utensils were left. On the other hand, many small bills had to be settled. Susheela owed some money to the doctor, the tailor and the grocer each. Susheela had to repay them by selling the remaining items of the house. By the end of the month, nothing was left. Poor Santlal was a *munim* in a shop. Sometimes he stopped by and gave a rupee or two. Here the expenditures were getting out of hand.

The children understood their plight. They never bothered their mother, but whenever a street vendor passed by and they saw other children having fruits or sweets, their mouth watered and their eyes brimmed with tears. They stared with such greedy eyes that it evoked pity. The same children who, till a few days back, did not even look at dry fruits or sweets, were now craving for things worth a mere paisa. The same gentlemen who had organized the community feast, now passed by the house but no one bothered to peep inside.

It was evening. Susheela was making chapattis on the *chulha*, and both children perched near the *chulha*, were looking at the chapattis hungrily. Cooking on the other side of the *chulha* was the dal. They were waiting for the dal to get prepared. The girl was eleven years old, while the boy was eight.

Growing impatient, Mohan said, 'Amma, give me the dry chapattis itself. I am very hungry.'

Susheela replied, 'The dal is still uncooked, bhaiya.'

Revati said, 'I have a paisa. I shall buy some curd.'

Susheela answered, 'Where did you find the paisa?'

Revati said, 'I found it yesterday in my box of dolls.'

Susheela replied, 'But return soon.'

Revati ran outside and in a while returned with a little curd on a leaf. Ma gave him the chapatti. He started eating it with the curd. He too was selfish like other boys. He did not even ask his sister.

Susheela looked at him sternly. 'Give some to your sister. Will you eat it alone?'

Mohan felt ashamed. His eyes welled up.

Revati said, 'No, Amma, see how little came of a paisa. Eat, Mohan, you have a habit of sleeping early. I'll eat once the dal is ready.'

At that moment, two men called from outside. Revati went out and inquired. These were Seth Kuberdas's men. They had come to get the house vacated. Susheela's eyes turned red with anger.

She came to the entrance hall and said, 'It is barely a month since my husband's death, and now he is bent upon evacuating the house? My house worth fifty thousand was bought for thirty thousand, five thousand was charged as interest, and still there is no peace? Tell him I won't vacate now.'

The munim said politely, 'Baiji, what is my authority? I'm merely a messenger. Once a thing belongs to someone else, you are bound to let go of it. What is the use of wrangling?'

Susheela also realized what the man said was true. After being marked out for slaughter, how long can the cow graze?

Softening, she said, 'Tell Sethji to give me a respite of five to ten days. But no, don't say anything. Why take someone's favour for five to ten days? If my destiny was to live in this house, it wouldn't have slipped away in the first place.'

The munim asked, 'So will it be vacant by tomorrow morning?'

'Yes, yes, I am saying so; but why wait till morning, I'll vacate it right now. What great items have I got? Your Sethji's rent of the night should not be wasted. Go fetch a lock, or have you brought it already?'

‘What is the hurry, bai! You can vacate it tomorrow taking your time.’

‘Why keep the trouble for tomorrow? Munimji, please get the lock and latch it up.’

Having said this, Susheela went inside. She served food to the children, and somehow swallowing a chapatti herself, washed the dishes; then, hailing a tonga, she loaded her sparse belongings on to it and, with a heavy heart, bid farewell to the house forever.

The house had been built upon the foundation of many cherished aspirations. For the *griha pravesh* ceremony many thousands of Brahmins were feasted. Susheela had to work so hard that she had been unwell for an entire month. Two of her children had died in this house. Her husband had passed away here. The memories of the dead had purified each brick of the house. It was as if each stone was happy in her happiness and saddened in her sorrow. Now she was being forced to leave that house.

She spent the night at a neighbour’s house, and the next day, she rented a house in a lane for ten rupees a month.

## 5

The difficulty with which the orphans spent three months in the new house can only be understood by those with empathy. Poor Santlal be blessed! He was helping them as far as his means permitted. Had Susheela hailed from a poor family, she would have ground spices, stitched clothes, served at someone’s house, but how could she lean upon works considered inferior by the community? People would have commented, ‘This is Seth Ramnath’s wife!’ The honour of that name had to be preserved too! There is no respite from the *chakravyuh* of society. A few of the girl’s ornaments had remained, but they too were sold off. When the food itself was hard to manage, how to arrange the rent? Three months later, the landlord and owner of the house, who was an honourable member of the same community, and who had heartily enjoyed the funeral feast, became impatient. Poor man, how long could he persevere? It was a matter of thirty rupees, not of a mere rupee or eight annas. Such a big amount could not be just given away.

Finally, one day, Sethji came around and, showing his anger, said, ‘If you

cannot pay the rent, vacate the house. I showed such consideration towards you for the sake of the community. Now there is no way to work things out.'

Susheela pleaded, 'Sethji, if I had any money, I would have first paid your rent before even drinking water. You have shown such consideration, for this, I lay my head at your feet, but right now, I'm empty-handed. Consider that you are nurturing a brother's children, what else can I say?'

Sethji was adamant. 'Go, now, I've heard many such statements. If one is a member of the community, suck him dry. If it were a Muslim, you would have paid him secretly every month, otherwise he would have thrown you out, and since I belong to the community, it is not essential to pay me the rent? I shouldn't even ask for it? This is what should be done with one's own community!'

At that time, Revati arrived and stood watching. Sethji looked at her from head to toe and then for some reason said, 'Okay, so this girl has come of age. Haven't you fixed her engagement somewhere?'

Revati bolted straightaway from the scene. Susheela felt a twinge of kinship in these words and said elatedly: 'There hasn't been any discussion yet, Sethji. I can't even pay the rent, how will I get her engaged? And then, she's still young.'

Sethji immediately gave references from the scriptures. 'This is the correct age for the marriage of young girls. One should never forget dharma. The rent is not an issue. We had no idea that this was the state of Seth Ramnath's family.'

Susheela asked, 'Is there a suitable family in your mind? You know the fact that I have nothing to give.'

Jhabarmal answered (for this was the name of the seth), 'There is no question of dowry, baiji. It is the kind of house where the girl will be happy forever. Her brother can stay with her too. The family is of good lineage, prosperous in every way. But he is a widower.'

'He should be of a decent age. How does it matter if he is a widower?'

'He's not that old, it is just his fortieth year. But he is good, hale and hearty to look at. A man's age is calculated according to his food intake. Just understand that your family will be liberated.'

Susheela said unwillingly, 'Okay, I will think about it and then reply. Show him to me once.'

'No need to go anywhere to show him, bai, he is standing in front of you.'

Susheela looked at him with disgust. *This fifty-year-old man is so lusty! The flesh of his chest has hung to his belly and still he nurses the ardent desire for marriage! This wretch thinks that giving in to temptations, I will tie my daughter to his neck.*

Susheela would keep her daughter a virgin all her life, but she would not spoil her life by marrying her to this corpse of a man. But she controlled her anger. It was these troubled times, otherwise how would such an old man even dare to make such a proposal to her. She said, 'Thank you, Sethji, but I cannot marry my daughter to you.'

'So what do you think, that you will get a virgin man in the community for your daughter?'

'My daughter will remain a virgin.'

'And tarnish the name of Ramnathji?'

'Don't you feel ashamed saying such things to me? For the sake of the name, I lost my house, my possessions, but I can't push my daughter into a well.'

'Then give me my rent.'

'I don't have the money right now.'

Jhabarmal entered the house and threw out every household item into the lane. The earthen pot burst and the smaller pots broke into pieces. The clothes in the trunk lay scattered. Susheela stood rooted, looking at the cruel way her misfortune was playing out.

After destroying the household, Jhabarmal locked the house and left, threatening to extort the money through the court.

## 6

The high and mighty have wealth, while the low and humble have a heart. With money, big businesses are run, palatial houses are made, there are servants, and travels and hunts are undertaken. Sympathy emanates from the heart and tears flow out.

Adjacent to the same house was the shop of an old woman vegetable seller. Old and a widow, she was a childless woman, fire without and water within. Unleashing hundreds of curses on Jhabarmal, she picked up each one of Susheela's items and carried them to her house.

'Live in my house. Babu. I restrained out of courtesy, else I would've pulled

LIVE in my house, Bahu. I restrained out of courtesy, else I would've pulled out his moustache. Death is hovering on his head, he has no kith or kin to look after, and he is still dying after wealth. As if he will load it on to his chest as he leaves the world. You can come and stay in my house. There is no problem here, I live alone. You could give me a piece or two of whatever you cook.'

Susheela was scared and said, 'Mata, I don't have anything except a seer of flour. How will I pay your rent?'

The old woman said, 'Bahu, I'm neither Jhabarmal, nor Kuberdas. I understand that life has its share of happiness and sorrow. Don't be proud in happy days and do not worry in the hard days. From people like yourself, I manage to earn four paise and fill my belly. I have seen you when you lived in that palace and I am seeing you today as well when you are an orphan. You have the same temperament. I'm fortunate that you have come to my house. Have I turned blind that I should ask you for rent?'

Those simple words of consolation eased Susheela's heart. She saw that true goodness and humanity lay with the poor and downtrodden. The pity shown by the rich and mighty is simply another form of arrogance.

Susheela had been living with the old vegetable-seller for six months. Susheela's affection towards her grew every day. She placed her entire earnings in Susheela's hands. Both the children were as dear to her as her eyes. No neighbour could dare to look at them harshly—the old woman would raise a storm. Santlal brought something or the other every month. They could manage the food on that.

It was the month of Kartik. Fever was in the air. One day, the usually lively Mohan fell ill and lay unconscious for three days. His fever was so high that a person standing close to him could feel the heat. The old woman ran from *ojhas* to experienced men, but the fever did not subside at all. Susheela feared it to be typhoid. The very thought scared her to death.

On the fourth day, she asked Revati, 'Beti, you have seen the senior Panchji's house. Go tell him that bhaiya is sick and request him to send a doctor.'

Revati only had to be told. She ran over to Seth Kuberdas.

Kuberdas said, 'The doctor's fees is sixteen rupees. Will your mother be able to pay?'

Hopelessly, Revati replied, 'How would Amma have any money?'



Kuberdas retorted, 'Then with what face does she call for my doctor? Where is your *mama*? Go and ask him to bring a doctor from the *Seva Samiti*. Or why doesn't your mother take the boy to a charitable hospital? Or is her old pride intact? What a stupid woman, doesn't have a penny at home, and is ordering for a doctor. She must be thinking that Panchji will pay the fees. Why should Panchji pay the fees? The money of the community is for pious deeds, not for throwing away like this!'

Revati returned to her mother. But she couldn't bring herself to say whatever she had heard. Why rub salt into a wound? She made an excuse: the senior Panchji had gone somewhere.

Susheela replied angrily: 'So why didn't you tell the munim? Was anyone gorging on sweets here that you rushed back?'

That moment Santlal arrived with Vaidyaji.

## 7

The vaidya too came only once and did not come again. The doctors from the Sewa Samiti too came for two days after much pleading. Thereafter they were too busy, and Mohan's condition deteriorated every day. A month had passed, but the fever did not drop a bit. His face had shrunk so much that it evoked pity. He couldn't talk, or say anything, and was even unable to turn on his side. Lying thus, his skin cracked and the hair from his head started falling. His hands and feet turned wooden. Santlal turned up whenever he got leave from work, but nothing came of it as caretaking is not the same as medicine.

One evening Mohan's hands fell cold. The mother's spirit was already broken. Seeing her son in such a condition, she started beating her chest and weeping. Many prayers and vows had already been offered. Crying, she took seven rounds of Mohan's bed, folded her hands and said, 'O God, this is the sole earning of my life. Having lost my all, I was still contented holding my son to my heart; but I will not be able to bear this blow! Heal him and take my life instead. That's all, I desire just this much mercy, O merciful!'

Who can understand the mysteries of the world! Don't many of us have the experience of losing twice the amount whenever we swindled some money? Susheela caught fever that night, and Mohan's fever was gone. She had already reduced to half her size in taking care of the child, and now this illness gripped

reduced to half her size in taking care of the child, and now this illness gripped her. Who knows whether the gods were listening and taking note, but her prayers came true, just as she had spoken them.

On the fifteenth day, Mohan got up from his charpoy, came to his mother and, placing his head on her chest, started weeping. Mother put her arms around his neck, pressed him to her chest, and said, 'Why do you weep, son? I will get well. What worries do I have now? God is the nurturer. He is your protector. He is your father. Now I'm reassured from all sides. I'll get well quickly.'

Mohan said, 'Jiya says, "Amma will not recover."'

Susheela kissed the boy. 'Jiya is mad, let her say. I'll not go anywhere and leave you. I'll always be with you. But, yes, the day you commit a crime, or pick up someone else's things, I will die.'

Mohan became happy. 'So you will never leave me, Ma?'

Susheela said, 'Never, my son, never.'

That night, the widow, struck by sorrow and adversity, passed away, leaving her two orphaned children in the custody of God.

## 8

It is three years since that incident. Mohan and Revati stay with the same old woman. The old woman is not their mother, but she means much more to them. Every morning she feeds Mohan the chapattis left overnight and leaves him at Guruji's school. Then she fetches him back after school hours. This is Revati's fourteenth year. She does all the household chores—grinding, pounding, cooking, washing the utensils, dusting and sweeping. When the old woman goes off to sell the wares, Revati manages the shop too.

One day the senior Panch, Seth Kuberdas, summoned her. 'Aren't you ashamed of sitting in the shop, disgracing the entire community? Don't you dare sit again in the shop from tomorrow! I have secured Jhabarmalji for your *panigrahan*.'

His wife, the *sethani*, supported him. 'You've grown up now, beti, it's not good for you to sit in the shop like this. People are saying all kinds of things. Seth Jhabarmal wouldn't have agreed at all, we've persuaded him with great effort. Simply understand this, you'll live like a queen! He has assets worth

lakhs—lakhs! You are fortunate to have found such a groom. You have a younger brother, he'll also be found a shop.'

Seth Kuberdas added, 'Such a disgrace to the community.'

Sethani agreed. 'So it is.'

Revati was embarrassed. 'What do I know, you should talk to my maama.'

Seth retorted angrily, 'Who is he to interfere? Does accountancy for barely a penny. What should I ask *him*? I'm the Panch of the community. I have the right to act for the welfare of the community. I have taken the opinion of the other Panch members. Everyone has agreed. If you don't agree this way, we will begin court proceedings. You will need money for expenses—here, take this!'

Saying this, he threw twenty-rupee notes at Revati.

Revati picked them up, tore them into pieces right there and, her face turning red with anger, said, 'The community did not ask about us when we were struggling for food. My mother passed away, but no one did as much as peep in. My brother fell sick, no one bothered to inquire. I don't care for such a community.'

After Revati left, Jhabarmal came out of the cellar where he was hiding. His face bore dejection.

The sethani remarked, 'The girl is very arrogant. She has lost all shame.'

Jhabarmal wailed, 'My twenty rupees are wasted. They are torn so badly that they can't even be glued back together.'

Kuberdas consoled him. 'Don't worry, I'll settle her through the court. Where can she go?'

Jhabarmal conceded. 'You are my only hope now.'

How can the words of the senior Panch of the community be untrue? Revati was a minor. Her parents were no more. In such a case, the Panch Council had full authority over her. If she doesn't wish to stay within the community's diktat, let her not. The law cannot disregard the community's authority.

Santlal heard about the matter and ground his teeth. 'When will God terminate this community!'

Revati asked him. 'Can the community forcibly take me under its authority?'

'Yes, beti, the law also rests in the hands of those who have money.'

'I'll say clearly that I don't want to live with him.'

'What will come of your statement? If this is written in your fate, who can

change it? I am going to the senior Panch.'

'No, Maamaji, don't go anywhere. If the only hope lies in destiny, then whatever is destined will happen.'

Revati somehow spent the night at home. She repeatedly hugged her sleeping brother. Her heart grew distressed thinking about how this orphan would live alone; but remembering Jhabarmal's face, her resolve became firm.

In the morning, Revati went for a bath in the Ganga. This had been her daily ritual since the past many months. Today, it was a bit dark, but this was nothing strange. Suspicion grew when she did not return home till eight in the morning. By the third quarter of the day, the news of Seth Ramnath's daughter having drowned in the Ganga had spread in the entire community. Her body was recovered.

Kuberdas said, 'Okay, it is good. At least the community will no longer be disgraced.'

Jhabarmal said with a heavy heart, 'Please find some other way out for me.'

Elsewhere, Mohan was banging his head and weeping, and the old woman was consoling him. 'Beta, why do you cry for that Devi? Her life was full of sorrow. Now she is resting in her mother's lap.'

*Translated from the Hindi by Kalyanee Rajan*



## The Story of My Life

### 1

My life is a flat, level plain. There are pits here and there but no hills, mountains, thick forests, steep slopes or ruins. Those fond of mountaineering are sure to be disappointed. I was born in 1880. My father was a clerk in the post office and my mother was an ailing woman. I also had an elder sister. My father earned about twenty rupees a month in those days. He died by the time it reached forty rupees. Although he was very thoughtful and treaded carefully on the roads of life, he eventually stumbled in his last days. What's more is that he brought me down too. He got me married when I was fifteen and died scarcely a year after that. I was in the ninth grade then. In the house, there was my wife, my stepmother and her two children but not a paisa's worth of income. Whatever savings we had were spent during my father's six-month-long illness and the funeral ceremonies. I, meanwhile, wanted to pursue an MA degree and become a lawyer. Finding a job in those days was just as tricky as it is now. With some effort, one could get a post on a salary of ten to twelve rupees a month. But I intended to study further. My feet were shackled not with iron chains but with *ashtadhaatu*—all the eight metals—and I wanted to climb the mountains!

I did not have shoes, or even decent clothes, for that matter. On top of this there were the high prices—barley cost half a rupee for ten pounds. I studied at Queens College, Benares, where the headmaster had waived the fees. My exams were fast approaching. When my school finished at half-past three, I would go to a part of the town known as Bamboo Gate to teach a boy. It was winter. I would reach at four, tutor till six and then leave for my house, which was five miles

away in the countryside. I could not reach before eight no matter how fast I walked. And I had to leave the house again at eight the next morning. I could never make it to school on time. At night, after dinner, I would sit down to study in front of the oil lamp. I never knew when I fell asleep. Nonetheless I was determined.

Somehow I managed to clear my matriculation exams. But I only got a second division and lost all hopes of getting admission in Queens College since the fees was waived only for those who had a first division. Incidentally, Hindu College opened in the same year. I decided to study in this new institution. The principal's name was Mr Richardson. I went to his house and found him dressed in Indian clothes. Sporting a kurta and dhoti, he sat on the floor writing something. But he was very difficult to please. After listening to my request—I was only halfway through it—he told me that he did not discuss college affairs at home and that I should meet him in the college. I went to the college and met him but our meeting was a disappointment. He could not remit the fees. What could I do now? Had I come up with distinguished recommendations, he might have considered my request. But who in the city knew a youth from the countryside?

Every day, I would set out to get a recommendation from somewhere or the other. But after a strenuous journey of twelve miles I would return in the evening. To whom could I have told all of this? No one bothered about me.

After several days, I finally managed to get a recommendation. His name was Thakur Indranarayan Singh and he was on the board of directors of Hindu College. I went to him and pleaded my case. He took pity on me and gave me a letter of recommendation. In that instant, my happiness knew no bounds. I returned home, quite pleased with myself. I had decided to meet the principal the next day, but as soon as I reached home I came down with a fever. I couldn't get rid of it for two weeks. I was tired of drinking medicinal extracts prepared from neem leaves. One day, I was sitting at the doorstep when my family priest came along. Seeing my condition, he asked me about it and went off into the fields. He dug up a root and brought it home. He washed it, ground it with seven grains of black pepper and made me drink it. It had a magical effect. It was only an hour before the fever would usually shoot up, but it was as if this herb had caught it by the neck and strangled it. I asked Panditji many times for its name but he would not tell me. He said that if he did, it would no longer be as effective.

After a month, I met Mr Richardson again and showed him the letter of recommendation. Giving me a stern look, he asked, 'Where on earth were you all this while?'

'I was ill.'

'What was the nature of your illness? Would you care to elaborate?'

I was not ready for this question. If I told him it was a fever, then perhaps the sahib would have thought I was lying. In my opinion, a fever was a trivial matter, not enough to account for so long an absence. I wanted to name some disease that by its very acuteness would cause him to sympathize. But on the spur of the moment, I could think of none. When I had met Thakur Indranarayan Singh, he had mentioned that he suffered from palpitations of the heart. I remembered those words now.

'Palpitations of the heart, Sir,' I replied.

Astonished, the principal looked at me and asked, 'Are you completely all right now?'

'Absolutely, sir.'

'Very well. Fill out the entrance application form and bring it here.'

I thought my problems were over. I took the form, filled it out and brought it back. The principal was in a class. At three in the afternoon, I got the form back. On it was written: 'Look into his ability'.

This was a new problem that had cropped up. My heart sank. I could not hope to pass any subject other than English; algebra and geometry gave me the shivers! I'd completely forgotten whatever I'd learnt. But what else was there to do? Reposing faith in my destiny, I went to class and presented my application. The professor, a Bengali, was teaching English and the topic was Washington Irving's *Rip Van Winkle*. I took a seat in the last row and within a few minutes I could tell that the professor was competent. When the lecture was over, he asked me several questions about the day's lesson and then wrote 'satisfactory' on my form.

The next hour was about algebra. Here too the professor was a Bengali. I showed him my form. More often than not, only those students who are unable to get admission elsewhere come to a new school. This was the case here too. The classes were full of incompetent students. Whoever came in first had been enrolled. To the hungry, even the most distasteful greens are appetizing. But

now the stomach was full and students were chosen only after careful selection. The professor examined me in mathematics and I failed. In the box marked 'maths' on the form, he wrote 'unsatisfactory'.

I was so disappointed that I did not take the application back to the principal. Instead, I went straight home. For me, mathematics was like the peak of Mount Everest, which I was never able to climb. In the intermediate exams, I had already failed the subject a couple of times and, discouraged, gave up taking the exam. Ten years later, when it was made optional, I took another subject and cleared it easily. But until then, who can say for sure as to how many young people's aspirations had been frustrated! Anyway, even though I returned home disappointed, the desire for learning was still strong. What could I do sitting at home? My ardent desire was to improve my maths somehow and get enrolled in college. For this, I would have to live in town.

Incidentally, I got a job as a tutor for a lawyer's sons with a salary of five rupees a month. I decided to make do with two rupees and give the other three to my family. There was a small, unfinished attic above the lawyer's barn. I got permission to stay there. A mat was spread out as a bed. I bought a small lamp from the market and began life in the town. I also brought some vessels from home. Once a day I cooked khichri and after washing and scouring the vessels, I would go to the library. Maths was just a pretext for reading novels and the like. It was in those days that I read Pandit Ratannath Dar's *Fasana-e-Azad* (The Romance of Azad) as well as Devkinandan Khatri's *Chandrakanta Santati* (Chandrakanta's Children). I also read everything of Bankim Chatterji's that I could find in Urdu translation in the library.

The brother-in-law of the lawyer's sons had been a fellow student during matriculation. It was on the basis of his recommendation that I had got the job. We were good friends, so when I needed money I would borrow from him. The accounts were settled when I got my salary. Sometimes I would have only three rupees left, sometimes two. On the day I received my pay, I would lose all sense of restraint. The tormenting desire for sweets would draw me towards the sweet-maker's shop. I would leave only after consuming sweets worth two to three annas at once. On the same day, I would go home and give my family the remaining two or two and a half rupees. The next day, I would begin to borrow again. But at times I was embarrassed to do that and would have to fast for days!

In this way, four to five months went by. Meanwhile, I had purchased two-



and-a-half rupees worth of clothes from a draper on credit. Every day, I would walk by his place for he had complete confidence in me. But after a couple of months, when I had not been able to pay him, I gave up going that way and took a detour instead. It was only after three years that I could pay off this debt. In those days, a labourer from the city would come to me to learn Hindi. His house was behind the lawyer's residence. 'Know this, brother!' was his pet phrase. We had all come to call him that by way of a nickname. Once I borrowed eight annas from him too. He could only recover this amount five years later when he came to my house in the village.

I was still eager to study but despair increasingly got the better of me with every passing day. I wanted to find a job somewhere but I had no idea how and where to find one.

That winter I was left with no money. I had spent a couple of days eating a paisa's worth of parched grains. Either the moneylender had refused to lend me anything or I could not ask him out of embarrassment.

The lamps had been lit. I went to a bookseller's shop to sell a book—*The Key to Chakravarti's Mathematics*. I had purchased it two years earlier and held on to it with great difficulty, but today, after being disappointed from all sides, I decided to sell it. Although I had bought it for two rupees, the bargain was settled at one. After receiving the money, I was about to leave the shop when a gentleman with big moustaches—he had been sitting there all this while—asked me, 'Where do you study?'

I replied, 'I don't study anywhere but I hope to get enrolled Too loose somewhere.'

'Have you cleared your matriculation exams?'

'Indeed, I have.'

'Are you interested in a job?'

'I can't find one anywhere.'

This gentleman was the headmaster of a small school and was in need of an assistant teacher. He offered me a salary of eighteen rupees, which I accepted. Eighteen rupees at that time was way above the highest flights of my despair-ridden whims and fancies. I promised to meet the headmaster sahib the next day and was completely beside myself with delight. This happened in 1899. I was ready to face all circumstances. Had I not failed in mathematics, I would have certainly gone ahead in life. But the biggest problem was the university's total

certainly gone ahead in me. But the biggest problem was the university's total lack of understanding, which then and for several years later led it to treat everyone in the manner of the thief who made everyone, tall and short, fit into one Procrustean bed.

## 2

I began writing stories in 1907. I had read many of Tagore's stories in English and got their Urdu translations published in Urdu newspapers. As early as 1901, I had begun to write novels. One of them came out in 1902 and another in 1904, but until 1907 I had not written a single short story. The title of my first story was 'The Most Valuable Treasure in the World' and it was published in *Zamana* in 1907. I wrote four to five stories more after that. In 1909, a collection of five stories was published under the title *Soze Watan* (Lament for the Country). The partition of Bengal had taken place at that time. In the Congress, the radical faction had already developed. In these five stories, I glorified patriotism.

I was a sub-deputy inspector then with the department of education in Hamirpur district. It had been six months since my stories were published. One evening, while I was sitting in my tent, I received a summons to see the district collector at once. It was winter in those days and the sahib was on a tour. I harnessed the bullock cart, travelled thirty to forty miles through the night and met him the next day. A copy of my book had been placed before him. My head started ringing. I was writing under the name of 'Nawab Rai' in those days. I had some knowledge that the secret police were after the author. I understood that they must have tracked me down and that I was being held accountable.

The sahib asked me, 'Did you write this book?'

I told him I did. He asked me about the intention behind each of the stories, was angry towards the end, and said, 'Your stories are completely seditious. Consider yourself lucky that this is the British government. Had it been the Mughals ruling, both your hands would've been cut off. Your stories are one-sided and you have belittled the British government.'

It was decided that I should hand over all copies of *Soze Watan* to the government and never write anything else without the collector's permission. I thought I got away lightly. Of the thousand copies printed, hardly three hundred

were sold. I sent for the remaining seven hundred from the *Zamana* office and handed them over to the collector.

I thought that the danger was past. But the authorities were not satisfied so easily. Later, I learned that the collector had discussed the matter with other officials in the district. The superintendent of police, two deputy collectors and the deputy inspector, whose subordinate I was, sat down to decide my fate. One of the deputy collectors had picked up quotations from my stories to prove that there was nothing in them except sedition and that it was not just ordinary sedition but an infectious variety. The superintendent of police had said, 'Such a dangerous man must be severely punished.'

The deputy inspector sahib was favourably disposed towards me. Afraid that the matter might turn out to be long-drawn, he proposed that he would assess my political opinions in a friendly way and present a report to the committee. His idea was to reason with me and write in the report that the author was radical only with his pen and had nothing to do with any political movement. The committee accepted his proposal although the superintendent of police continued to square up to me like an adversary. All of a sudden, the collector asked the deputy inspector, 'Do you expect him to tell you what he really thinks? You want to find out his views by pretending to be friendly? That's spying. I consider it contemptible.'

Completely at a loss, the deputy sahib stammered, 'But I was . . . Your Highness's order . . .'

'No,' the collector interrupted, 'it's not my order. I have no intention of giving any such order. If the author's sedition can be proved from his book, then he should be tried in an open court, else let him go with a warning. I don't like this business of having a honey tongue and a heart of gall.'

Several days later, when the deputy inspector told me this, I asked him, 'Would you really have spied on me?'

He laughed and said, 'No way! I wouldn't have done it even if somebody gave me one lakh rupees. I only wanted to prevent legal proceedings and that has been done. You certainly would've been sentenced had there been a court case. You wouldn't even have found anyone to plead your case. But the sahib is a noble gentleman.'

'Very noble indeed,' I said.

I was still in Hamirpur when I started suffering from dysentery. During the summer, one could not find greens of any kind in the countryside. Once, I had to continuously eat dry yam for several days. Normally, I consider yams to be as disagreeable as scorpions, and did so even then, but I do not know why I had this notion that carom seeds could control the flatulence they caused. I ate a lot of carom seeds. Nothing happened for the next ten to twelve days. I thought that the climate of the hilly region of Bundelkhand had strengthened my weak digestion. But then I had a stomach ache and kept tossing like a fish all day. I took a mouthful of carom seeds but the pain never stopped. The next day, I started suffering from dysentery. However, the pain eventually got better.

A month passed. When I reached a large village, the sergeant there insisted that I stay and have lunch at the police station. I had grown sick and tired of eating *moong dal* and observing a moderate diet. I thought to myself: *What harm will come of it? Stay here today. At least you'll get delicious food.* I stayed at the police station that day. The sub-inspector ordered for sweet potato with curry, fritters, dahi vadas and pulao. I ate with caution and only had a couple of pieces of sweet potatoes! But after finishing my meal, when I went to the sub-inspector's bungalow—it was thatched and opposite the police station—to rest, the stomach ache returned within a couple of hours. I kept moaning the entire night and the day after. It was only when I vomited after drinking two bottles of soda water that I felt better. I was convinced that this was the handiwork of the sweet potatoes. I had already severed my friendship with yam and now I was ill-disposed towards sweet potatoes! I have always shuddered at the sight of those two items ever since. The pain got better but dysentery had overpowered me. I always felt a tension around the stomach area, which felt swollen. With great discipline, I would go for a four-to five-mile walk, exercise regularly and stick to a moderate diet. I would even take medicinal herbs but the dysentery showed no signs of improvement, even as my health took a beating. I went to Kanpur several times for treatment and spent a month trying allopathic as well as Ayurvedic medicines in Prayag, but to no avail.

I then got a transfer. I wanted to move to Rohilkhand but was instead dumped in the district of Basti, in the region which forms the low-lying lands of Nepal.

Luckily, I became acquainted with the late Pandit Mannan Dwivedi Gajpuri who was a subcollector in the revenue department in Domariyaganj. We would discuss literature every now and then. The dysentery, meanwhile, got worse. I then took six months' leave and went to Lucknow Medical College for treatment. However, disappointment followed and I next went to a hakim in Benares. After three to four months, I felt better but the disease could not be cured completely. It was back to square one when I reached Basti. I then left this job that involved going on tours and took up a schoolmaster's post at the Basti High School. Once again I was transferred, this time to Gorakhpur. The dysentery persisted. It was here that I became acquainted with Mahaveer Prasadji Poddar, an industrious man and a true servant of the nation. Many of my stories were published in *Saraswati* while I was in Basti. It was because of Poddarji's encouragement that I began writing novels again, starting with *Sevasadan*. Through a private university, I also completed my BA. The overwhelming response that *Sevasadan* received inspired the composition of *Premashram*, even as I continued writing stories regularly.

It was on the advice of some friends, Poddarji in particular, that I also turned to water therapy. But owing to my misfortune, three to four months of bathing and a moderate way of living only resulted in further swelling of the stomach. I felt weak even while walking. Once I had to climb a flight of stairs with my friends. While the others managed it easily, I was not even able to move my feet. I eventually reached the top with great difficulty, relying on my hands for balance and support. It was then that I realized the true extent of my weakness. I now knew that I was just a guest in this world and stopped the water therapy altogether.

One day, in the evening, I met Shri Dashrathprasadji Dwivedi in the Urdu bazaar. He was the editor of the journal *Swadesh*. We too had literary discussions every now and then. Looking at my pale face, he said, 'Babuji, you've turned completely pale. Get some treatment.'

I hated it when anyone mentioned my illness. I wanted to forget the fact that I was unwell. *Why shouldn't I die smiling when life was just a matter of another two to four months?* I replied, somewhat irritated, 'What will happen, bhai? At worst I'll die. Well, I'm ready to embrace death.' Dwivediji was embarrassed. I regretted my fury later. This happened in 1921. The Non-Cooperation movement

was at its peak and the Jallianwala Bagh massacre had already taken place. It was in those days that Mahatma Gandhi visited Gorakhpur. A platform was prepared in the Ghazi Miyan ground. The gathering boasted no less than two hundred thousand people. There was no difference between the city and the countryside that day; only the devoted populace that thronged the ground mattered. I had never seen such a ceremony. Seeing Mahatmaji had such a profound effect that even a dying man like me was roused to action. A few days later, I tendered my resignation from my twenty-year-old government job.

I now wanted to promote the use of indigenous goods in villages. One of Poddarji's houses was in the countryside. Both of us went there and got spinning wheels made. The dysentery too started showing signs of improvement within a week of my arrival there; to the extent that after a month there was no mucus in the faeces. I then went to Banaras and through the promotion of indigenous goods and creative writing, invested my life with a sense of meaning and purpose. Freedom from the slavery of government service also released me from the clutches of illness that had lingered for nine years.

This experience turned me into an orthodox believer in fatalism. I'm now firmly convinced that everything that happens is God's will and that the efforts of human beings too cannot succeed in the absence of desire.

*Translated from the Hindi by Shailendra Kumar Singh*



## The Miracle

### 1

After graduating with a BA degree, Chandraprakash could not think of doing anything else but giving tuitions. His mother had died long ago and his father too died this year. The sweet dreams that Prakash had about life grovelled in dust now. His father had occupied a high post. He had hoped that his efforts could have secured him some good job, but now all such wishful thinking was of no use. It was difficult to survive with a paltry monthly sum of thirty rupees that came from tuitions. His father had left behind no property, but had placed the burden of a wife on his head; and the woman too was something. She could read and write, was fashionable and sharp-tongued. She thought it was better to die if one could neither eat well nor be clothed well. Chandraprakash did find it humiliating to do a job for only thirty a month but Thakur Sahib alleviated his grief by giving him a place to stay in. This house was right next to the one in which Thakur Sahib lived. It was a pukka house—clean, airy, equipped with all necessities. Such a house would not be available for anything less than twenty, and the work was of two-hour duration only. The boy was slow-witted and lazy. He studied in class nine. The best thing was that Thakur and Rama Devi, his wife, were both very fond of Prakash and treated him like their own son. He was treated not as a servant but as a member of the house. His opinion was sought before any decision was taken. Thakur Sahib did not know English. He felt that a lad who knows English was certainly more intelligent, smarter and more experienced than him.

It was evening time. Prakash prepared to leave as his lessons with his student Virendra were over when the *thakurain* came in and said, 'Don't go now, son. Come here for a moment. I have to discuss something with you.'

Prakash thought to himself *What kind of discussion was it today that it could not be done in front of Virendra?* Taking him inside, she said, 'What is your opinion, should we get Viru married? A very good proposal has come to us from an established family.'

Prakash said with a smile, 'You should ask Viru Babu about it.'

'No, I am asking you.'

Prakash was in a fix. He said, 'What opinion can I have on such a matter? He is in his twentieth year. You should understand that his studies would be over once he gets married.'

'Then we should not proceed now. Is that what you think?'

'Whatever you think is best. I have given my opinion.'

'Then should we go ahead? I fear that the boy might go astray.'

'You needn't worry about it when I am there. Yes, if you so desire, then go ahead. There is no harm in it.'

'Hope you understand that you must do all the preparations.'

'When have I ever refused anything?'

The final word was given and the preparations for the wedding started. Thakur Sahib was like those men who had little faith in themselves. In his view, Prakash's degree was far more valuable than his experience of sixty years. All the arrangements for the wedding were in Prakash's hands. To have the authority to spend ten to twelve thousand rupees was not a small matter that one wouldn't take pride in. Gradually, the shabby youth turned into a responsible manager. While the cloth-sellers always greeted him with respect, the petty traders of the locality would gather around him and the dealers in gas and tent-house would start buttering him up whenever they saw him. Had he so desired he could have easily made some two to four hundred rupees, but he was not such a dishonest man. And how could he cheat someone who had left everything in his care? But the day he bought jewellery worth five thousand rupees, his mind vacillated to a great extent.

On returning home, he told Champa. 'Here I am dependent on someone for



my rotis—a total destitute—and on the other hand there are men in this world who can get ornaments made for some thousands or lakhs of rupees. Today Thakur Sahib bought jewellery worth five thousand rupees to offer his daughter-in-law. One is bedazzled by the beauty of the pieces. In truth, I couldn't withstand the glitter of some of the things.'

Champa, with a jealous tone of disaffection, said, 'Oh no! What have we to do with it? Let them wear it; gods have been kind to them. Here we are born to weep till we die.'

Chandraprakash added, 'These people enjoy their life. They don't need to work or earn a livelihood. Their forefathers have left behind a legacy, so they are happy to live in ease and comfort. That is why I say that the gods are very unfair.'

Champa said, 'It is one's own labour and valour; how are the gods to be blamed? Had your forefathers left behind an inheritance, you too would have enjoyed yourself. Here it is difficult to even manage two square meals; who cares about clothes and jewellery! There is hardly any hope for it at all in this life. I don't even have a good sari that I can wear to the house of a respectable man. I am caught in thought now of how I would attend the wedding at the thakurain's place? I hope I fall ill and be saved from the disgrace.'

Tears welled up in her eyes when she said this.

Prakash comforted her, 'I will get you a sari. Shall I not be able to do even this much? Will such difficult times last forever? If I am alive then one day you will be covered from head to toe with ornaments.'

Champa smiled and said, 'I don't give in to such sweet talks. It is enough if we have what we need to survive. I have no desire for ornaments.'

Hearing these words, Prakash lowered his head in sad humiliation. Does Champa take him to be so worthless?

### 3

At night, when the duo retired to bed after dinner, Prakash brought up the topic of the ornaments again. They were deeply ingrained in his mind. He said, 'I had no idea that such wonderful ornaments could be made in this town.'

Champa said, 'Talk of something else. This talk about ornaments makes my

heart burn.'

'If you wear such things then you will be taken for a queen.'

'Is one's beauty enhanced by wearing ornaments? I have seen several women who look awful wearing ornaments.'

'Thakur Sahib is also a man who is driven by self-interest. He could have asked me: "Take whatever you like here for Champa."'

'Come on! You keep talking like a child.'

'What is so childish about this? A benevolent man would never have been so stingy.'

'I have not seen any generous man who would give the ornaments of his own daughter-in-law to a stranger.'

'I am no stranger. We live in the same house. I teach his son and I am making all the arrangements for the wedding. Had he given something worth a hundred or two, it would not have gone waste. But people with wealth are so burdened by it that their hearts contract under its weight. There is no place in it for being charitable.'

It was already past twelve. Prakash still couldn't fall asleep. Time and again the glittering ornaments flashed before his eyes. Sometimes his vision got clouded and then like lightening, they flashed before him again and again.

All of a sudden he got up from his charpoy. He felt sorry to see Champa unadorned. This is the age to eat and wear good things, and in this age, the poor thing had to keep hankering for everything. With careful, soundless steps he came out of the room and went to the terrace. The terrace adjoining his was Thakur Sahib's. There was a five-foot-high wall in between. He climbed the wall and landed gently on the terrace of Thakur Sahib's house. There was total silence in there.

He thought: *First I will go down the stairs to Thakur Sahib's room. If he wakes up then I will laugh loudly and tell him that I was playing a trick! Or perhaps that I saw a man walking towards this side from my terrace and came after him to see what he was up to. If I get the keys to the chest then I win. No one will be suspicious of me. Everyone will suspect the servants, and I too will say, 'Sahib, this is the work of the servants; who else would take it but them?' I would escape unscathed. After the wedding I will shift to some other house. Then*

*I will give these ornaments to Champa one by one so that she too isn't suspicious.*

Still, his heart beat loudly as he climbed down the stairs.

The sun had already risen. Champa woke Prakash up and said, 'A very strange thing has happened. A theft took place in Thakur Sahib's house at night. The thieves have stolen the cabinet containing the ornaments.'

Still lying in bed, Prakash asked, 'Didn't someone catch the thieves?'

'Is anyone aware of the news yet? No one knows how they got the keys and how they learnt that the cabinet was kept in that particular chest!'

'It must be one of the servants. It is not the work of thieves from outside.'

'All the three servants of the house have been here for a long time.'

'Does it take long to change one's motives? He saw the opportunity today and took it.'

'At least go and offer some words of comfort. The poor thakurain was crying. She was repeatedly mentioning your name. She said that you had been running around for months for these ornaments, had checked each and every item personally and now all your efforts have been rendered useless.'

Prakash got up quickly and went to their house, looking confused, and said, 'What a calamity has befallen us! Champa just told me what happened.'

Thakur Sahib was sitting with his hand on his head. He said, 'There is no sign of a break-in, no lock has been broken, no tenon on any door has come down. I don't understand from where the thief came in.'

The thakurain said, weeping, 'I have lost everything, brother. The wedding is just round the corner. Oh God, how can things be managed now? You had been running around so we could get everything together. Who knows what evil shadow has caused this!'

Prakash whispered in Thakur Sahib's ear, 'I think it is the handiwork of one of the servants.'

The thakurain dismissed the idea and said, 'Oh no, brother, there is none among the servants who would do such a thing. There are tens and thousands of rupees lying out there; not a single penny has been ever amiss.'

Thakur Sahib wrinkled his nose and said, 'What do you know of people? How quickly do their minds change! You cannot say with any certainty that one who has so long not stolen would never steal. I will report the matter to the police and get each and every servant searched. It could be that the goods have been taken

get each and every servant searched. It could be that the goods have been taken away. When they are beaten by the police, they will automatically admit the truth.'

Prakash felt that the entry of the police in the house might prove to be dangerous. If they searched his house, then it would be a disaster. He said, 'To report to the police and get them to inquire the matter is useless. The police will not be able to retrieve the goods. Yes, they might beat up the servants. But one has to reward them too; otherwise they will create some other hurdle. My suggestion is to call each servant and question him individually.'

Thakur Sahib made a face and said, 'You talk so childishly, Prakash Babu! Why should the one who stole admit to his crime? And you can't beat them to get a confession. Yes, I do think reporting it to the police is useless. The goods would hardly ever be retrieved; instead, one would be harassed for months.'

'But something or the other has to be done,' said Prakash.

'It's of no use. Yes, if there is a secret police who would investigate the matter stealthily, then of course the goods would come out. But where is such a police team here? Curse your fate and sit idle, what else is there to do?'

'You keep sitting; I am not one to remain idle. I am going to make these servants confess the name of the thief.'

Thakurain butted in. 'I have full trust in the servants. Even if one of their names come up, I would still be uncertain. This is the work of some outsider. He certainly came from outside. He could have come from your house too.'

Thakur Sahib consented. 'Yes, just look up your house to see if there is any evidence. The door wasn't left open yesterday, was it?'

Prakash's heart started thudding. He said, 'I close the door at ten. Yes, if someone seized the opportunity and went to the terrace and hid himself there, then it is a different matter.'

All three of them went to the terrace and in the middle of the parapet they saw footprints—as if someone had rubbed his feet there. The whitewash had come off in the place where Prakash had landed. When they went to the roof of Prakash's house and looked over the parapet, they saw similar footprints on his terrace. Thakur Sahib hung his head low and could not say anything. Prakash stated what was in his mind—'This makes it clear that the thief had come from my house. Now there is no doubt at all.'

Thakur Sahib said, 'Yes, that is what I think too, but what is the use of

knowing this? The goods that were taken are gone forever. Now let's go and find some means to raise money.'

'I will leave that house today,' Prakash declared.

'Why? This is none of your fault,' Thakur Sahib reassured him.

Prakash said, 'You might say so, but I feel that it is all my fault. The blame lies on my head. The door of my house is left open till nine or ten. The thief must have noticed it. It is possible that he would come again in two or three days. A lone woman in the house can hardly keep an eye on everything. While she is sitting in the kitchen, someone can easily go upstairs and one will not hear a sound. I come home sometimes at nine or ten in the night. During the days of the wedding, I will be further delayed. The entry to this house from that side must be blocked. I feel that I am to be blamed for this theft. I take full responsibility for it.'

The thakurain said fearfully, 'If you go away, brother, then this house would be split apart.'

'Whatever it is, Mataji, I have to leave the house soon. The theft happened because of my negligence; I have to atone for it.'

When Prakash left, Thakur Sahib said to his wife, 'What a worthy man!'

The thakurain said, 'How amazing! The thief came from that side, and this fact hurt him.'

'If he is able to catch the thief, then it seems he will eat him alive.'

'He will kill him.'

'You see, he will retrieve the goods.'

'He will certainly not stay in this house, no matter how much one pleads with him.'

'I will give him twenty rupees more for his rent.'

'Why should we pay for his rent? He is leaving the house on his own. We have not told him anything.'

'We will have to pay him for his rent. One doesn't mind doing so for a man like him.'

'I think he will not take the money.'

'One cannot live on thirty rupees a month.'

Prakash left the house the very same day. It was risky to stay there. But as long as the wedding celebrations were on, he was present there almost the entire day. He told Champa, 'I have got another job with Sethji for fifty rupees a month. I will keep depositing the money with him. That money will be spent only on buying jewellery. I will not take a single penny from it for household expenses.' Champa's heart missed a beat. When she saw her husband's love for her, she praised the gods; her faith in them increased manifold.

Till now there was nothing that Prakash and Champa had kept from each other. Whatever he had, she had it too. His boxes, chest, cabinet and keys to the almirah were all in Champa's custody. But now one of his chests always remained closed. Champa did not know where the keys to it were. When she asked him, he casually said, 'There is nothing; some old books that were lying here and there have been locked in it.' There was no reason for Champa to feel suspicious.

One day, when she went to give her husband paan, she saw him sitting with the chest open, peering into it. Seeing her, he quickly closed the chest. His face had turned pale. Seeds of suspicion sprouted but without any water, they soon shrivelled up. She could not imagine a reason good enough to feel suspicious.

But it was impossible for Prakash to set this matter aside and not think at all of the possessions worth five thousand rupees. Whenever he returned home, he opened the chest at least once to reassure himself.

One day there was a theft in the neighbourhood. From that day on, Prakash started sleeping inside the room. It was the month of Ashad. The humidity was suffocating. There was a neat and clean veranda upstairs, made perhaps for sleeping during the rainy season. Champa told him several times to sleep upstairs but he paid no heed. How could he leave the room unattended?

Champa then said, 'Theft doesn't take place in houses like ours. Thieves risk their lives only after seeing something in the house. What is there worth stealing here?'

Prakash retorted in anger, 'There is nothing here! What about utensils and other household essentials? For a poor man his pot too is indispensable.'

One day, Champa, while sweeping the room, dragged the chest and kept it on the other side. Finding the position of the chest changed, Prakash asked her, 'Have you moved the chest?' He sounded uneasy.

There was no reason to inquire about something like this. While cleaning the

There was no reason to inquire about something like this. While cleaning the room, it was normal for things to be moved around. She said, 'Why should I be moving it?'

'Then who moved it?'

'I don't know.'

'You are the one who stays in the house. Who else would know?'

'Okay, if I had moved it then what is there to ask?'

'Nothing. I just asked.'

But how could Prakash be at peace until he had opened the chest and checked if everything was there? As soon as Champa went to cook their meal, he opened the chest.

Champa had made pakoras that day. They are good when served hot. Prakash liked them too. She transferred a few on to a plate and went to give them to him. Seeing her, Prakash slammed down the lid of the chest and locked it up, and then, with the intention of distracting her, asked, 'What have you got in that plate? Okay, they are pakoras, aren't they?'

Champa became suspicious. She wanted to know what was in the chest. She soon started thinking of ways to whisk the keys away. One day a hawker came to sell different kinds of keys. Champa took the key that fit the lock of the chest and opened it. Arré! These are ornaments! She took them out one by one and examined them. Where did these come from? She thought, Prakash had never mentioned anything about it. Suddenly it struck her—are these not Thakur Sahib's ornaments? The ornaments were just like how he had described them. Now she had no doubt; but such a terrible downfall! She hung her head in shame and regret.

She immediately closed the chest and lying down on the charpoy, began to think. *How did he have such courage? Why did such an evil thought enter his head? I have never demanded any ornaments from him. Even if I had insisted, should he have stolen them? Stealing—and that too for ornaments! Why did his mind become so feeble?*

She felt like picking up the ornaments, going to the thakurain's house and placed them at her feet. She wanted to tell her, 'Don't ask me how these ornaments came to me. Your goods have come back to you. Please be satisfied with it.'

But the outcome of it would be terrifying!

From that day onwards, Champa remained somewhat listless. She neither had that ardency in love nor respect for Prakash. They quarrelled over small things. The good faith that existed between the two despite their poverty had vanished by then. They used to have open-hearted exchanges, plans about the future and were sympathetic towards each other. Now they both lived dispirited lives. For several days together they did not even exchange a word with each other.

Some months passed by. In one of the banks in the town, there was a vacancy for the post of assistant manager. Though Prakash had studied economics, he had to deposit a sum of ten thousand rupees in cash as security to get the job. Where could one get such a large sum of money from? He squirmed in agony at the thought.

One day he broached the subject with Thakur Sahib.

Thakur Sahib asked, 'Why don't you hand in your application?'

Prakash lowered his head and said, 'They want a security deposit of ten thousand rupees in cash. Where is the money?'

'My dear, you give in the application first. If they accept it and all other formalities are done, then the security deposit will be given too. Don't worry about it.'

Prakash said in utter disbelief, 'You will give the security deposit?'

'Yes, of course. What is so unbelievable about it?'

Prakash went home in a very sorrowful state. He was sure he would get the job but yet he could not be happy. Thakur Sahib's simplicity and the kind of faith he had in him wounded him. His nobility trampled upon his meanness.

On returning home, he told Champa the good news. Hearing it she turned her face away from him. After a moment she said, 'Why did you take the security deposit from Thakur Sahib?' Prakash retorted sharply, 'Then from whom should I have taken it?'

'If you did not have it, you would have lost the job. But you would still be having two square meals a day, wouldn't you? It is a matter of money. If you commit errors then his money goes down the drain with you.'

'Why do you think I will make mistakes? Am I a novice?'

Champa said with an air of indifference, 'The intentions of a man do not always remain the same!'



Prakash was hit by her words. He peered at her, but Champa turned her face away. He could not be certain about her feelings but her coldness even on hearing this good news made him uneasy. The question that came to his mind was, was there an insinuation hidden in her words? Was it that Champa had opened the chest and seen everything? To get an answer to this question at that moment he could even risk wagering one of his eyes.

While having his meal, he asked Champa, 'What was in your mind when you said that the intentions of a man do not always remain the same?' It was as if his life depended on her answer to this question.

Champa was in a state of confusion. She said, 'Nothing. I was talking about the ways of the world.' Prakash was not satisfied.

'Is it so that the intentions of those who are employed in banks keep changing?' he asked.

Champa wanted to be rid of him. 'You keep holding on to my tongue. You could not keep your intentions clear when it came to the wedding at Thakur Sahib's house. You have kept back goods worth a hundred or two.'

Prakash felt like a burden had been lifted from his heart. He smiled and said, 'Okay, so you were hinting about this then. But apart from my commission, I have not touched a single penny of his. And it is not a sin to take commission! All big government officials openly hoard money in the name of commission.'

Champa said in a reproachful tone, 'I think taking even a penny from a man who has such faith in us is a sin. I would have considered you a gentleman if you had not taken any money. Do you even realize how kind he has been to you in the past six months? You left the house and he still keeps giving you twenty a month. When he receives gifts from his neighbours, he certainly sees to it that they are also sent over to you. When you did not have a watch, he gave you the one he had. When your house-help does not turn up, he sends his servant the moment he hears the news. He footed the doctor's bills when I fell ill and came twice a day to find out how things were. Is this gesture of giving a security deposit a small matter? One does not stand as guarantor even to one's own relatives but for your security deposit, he took out ten thousand rupees and gave it to you. Do you consider this a trivial thing? If you make any mistake now, his money would be certainly confiscated. We should be prepared to even give our lives for this man who has been so generous to us!'

When Prakash retired for the night after having his meal, his conscience pricked him. One realizes how much pus is in a boil when a catling is put to it. One comes to understand one's corruption of the mind when someone lays it bare for us. Why do we react when we see a satirical presentation of some social or political injustice? It is because that image brings to light our own bestiality. The mental abyss in which he lay utterly scattered intensified to assume gigantic proportions. It is in such situations that a sigh escapes our lips—*oof!* Champa's reproachful words instilled remorse in Prakash's mind. His chest was burdened several times by its weight and like a heavy rock it now pressed him down. The guilt that had spread in his mind now converged at a point and started stabbing him.

## 6

Several days went by. Prakash got the job at the bank. Guests were invited to a feast in the house to celebrate it. Thakur Sahib and his wife, Viru and the new bahu—everyone had come. Champa was busy attending to all respectfully. There were two or three friends who were singing and playing musical instruments. After his meal, Thakur Sahib prepared to take his leave.

Prakash said, 'You will have to stay here today, *Dada!* I will not let you go at this hour.'

Champa found something amiss in this insistence of his. There were no charpoys or bedding and not enough space in the house. She could not fathom the need to make them stay back for the night, discomforting all of them. But Prakash kept appealing and Thakur Sahib agreed in the end.

It was past twelve. Thakur Sahib was sleeping upstairs. Viru and Prakash were in the veranda outside. The three women were in the innermost chamber. But Prakash kept himself awake. The bunch of keys lay near Viru's head. He picked it up and then he opened the room to take out the chest containing the ornaments and set out towards Thakur Sahib's house. Some months ago he had stealthily entered Thakur Sahib's room with his heart racing. His feet were shaking then too. But then it was the pain of being pricked by a thorn and now it was the pain of taking it out. Then the fever was on the rise—it was discomforting; and now the fever was abating—it was cool and peaceful. Then his footsteps faltered, but today it was moving ahead.

today it was moving ahead.

On reaching Thakur Sahib's house, he quietly opened Viru's room and went inside. He kept the chest under the bed and immediately came out, gently closing the door behind him, and returned home. Prakash felt as happy as the mythical Hanuman of the Ramayana, who, with great pride, had lifted the entire Dhaulagiri mountain to bring the life-giving *sanjivani* herb. At the time of taking the ornaments home, he had felt as if his soul was parched, as if he was falling down a deep, bottomless chasm. After returning the chest, he felt as if he was sitting in an airplane and soaring high up in the skies—higher and higher!

When he returned home, Viru was still asleep. He left the keys near his head.

## 7

Thakur Sahib left early in the morning.

Prakash used to go to teach in the evening. But on that day, out of impatience, he reached there at three. He wanted to see what was going on there that day.

Seeing him, Virendra happily said, 'Bapuji, the party at your place was a great success. The ornaments that were stolen have been found.'

Thakur Sahib came in and said, 'The party turned out to be auspicious. The whole chest has been found. Not a single item has been touched.'

How could Prakash believe these words till he saw the things in the chest himself? Has it ever happened that goods that were stolen six months ago have been returned as it is?

Seeing the chest, he said, 'It is indeed a miracle. I am at my wits' end.'

'Everybody is puzzled. Viru's mother says that it is a divine occurrence. From today I have also started having faith in gods.'

'Had I not seen it with my own eyes I would never have believed it.'

'To mark our happiness we will invite everyone for a party.'

'You hadn't performed any rituals, did you?'

'Rituals? Several were done.'

'Yes, then it is the result of it all.'

On coming home, he gave Champa the news. Hearing it, she ran and clung to him and, God knows why, started crying as if her estranged husband had come back home after many days.

Prakash said, 'We are invited to their house today.'

‘Tomorrow I will feed one thousand poor people.’  
‘You are making an expenditure of a few hundreds.’  
‘I am so happy today that even if I spend a few lakhs it will not be enough.’  
Tears rolled down Prakash’s face.

*Translated from the Hindi by Anuradha Ghosh*



## A Wife's Testimony against Her Husband

I've spent most of my life in this house, but I've never found any peace here. People might consider my husband to be a thorough gentleman—enlightened, good, courteous and generous. But only the wearer of a shoe knows where it pinches the most. The world is fond of praising those who are ready to ruin themselves for strangers while making their own homes a living hell. People do not praise a man who is ready to die for his family; they consider him selfish, stingy, narrow-minded, stupid and vain. So why should a man's family praise him if he is ready to die for strangers?

Look at my husband. He inflicts miseries on me from morning till night. Ask him to get something from the market and he'll go to a shop where no one else would even dream of going. In such shops, you find nothing in good condition. They neither give you the full weight of the commodity you purchase nor do they sell things at a fair price. It is precisely because of all these drawbacks that they have a bad name. But my husband is drawn to these shops like a magnet—it's similar to a disease. I've told him time and again, 'Go to a shop that's doing brisk business. Their stuff gets sold quickly, and so the supplies you get there will be fresh.' But his heart goes out to these petty, struggling shopkeepers, and they cheat him. He'll bring home the worst quality of wheat in the market, mixed with weevils; rice so coarse that even an ox wouldn't look at it; and lentils full of grit and so hard that they won't soften even if you use a full stack of firewood to cook them. He'll bring ghee that is half oil, the price of which is only a little less than pure ghee. The hair oil will be adulterated—apply it on your head and your hair will become sticky. And he'll pay the same price for it as that of the best-quality jasmine oil. You can't be blamed for thinking he's scared to go to any

shop that's thriving. Perhaps he goes by the maxim, 'Expensive hotel, tasteless food.' My experience tells me that you get stale food only in seedy restaurants.

If it were something that happened once in a while you could still put up with it. It annoys you no end when it happens day after day. I ask him why he goes to these wretched shops. Has he taken responsibility for their livelihood? He says, 'When these shopkeepers see me, they call out to me.' Wonderful! All they have to do is call him and flatter him a little, and that makes him oblivious to the rotten stuff they foist on him. I ask him, 'Why do you go that way at all? Why don't you go some other way? Why do you encourage these thieves?' No answer. Silence wards off a lot of trouble.

Once I wanted to have a piece of my jewellery redone. I knew the temperament of his lordship, and didn't see any need to seek his help. I decided to call a goldsmith I knew. It so happened that he was present there at the moment. He said, 'You can't trust this pack. They'll cheat you. I know a goldsmith. We went to the same school and when we were children we used to play together all the time. He won't cheat me.' I thought, *Well, if he's his friend, and a childhood friend at that, he's sure to have some regard for that friendship.*

So, I handed him the gold ornament and fifty rupees. Only god knows what scoundrel he gave it to. I had to chase him for years together, and finally, when it did come, the gold was heavily mixed with copper. Moreover, the object looked so ugly that I detested the very sight of it. My longing for years came to this sorry end, and I could do nothing except cry over it and curse my fate. Such are his faithful friends that they wouldn't stop at slitting his throat. And he only makes friends with destitute, half-starved, penniless creatures whose job it is to make friends with purblind people like him. Every day, one or other of these fellows turns up to fleece him, and they don't leave until he gives them something. But I've never seen any of them pay back what they've borrowed.

When you're cheated once or twice, you learn your lesson; but my good man is cheated a thousand times and still doesn't learn anything. I tell him, 'You lent him the money. Why don't you make him pay back? Has he left the earth?' Silence again.

He can never bear to decline the request of a friend. I tell him, 'All right, don't be rude, don't sound unkind. But surely you can put them off a bit, can't you? Can't you make some excuse?' But he can't say 'no' to anyone. A friend asks him for something and it begins to weigh on him. How can he refuse? If he did

him for something and it begins to weigh on him. How can he relax? If he did, people would think he was broke. And he wants the world to think he is well-off even if he has to pawn my jewellery to give that impression. There are times when we've been almost penniless, but this good man can't rest in peace until he's squandered whatever little money I've saved up.

How long can I go on talking about his stupid deeds? I am totally fed up with him. Every day some visitor lands up from whom there's no escape. God knows where all these good-for-nothing friends of his come from. They seem to come from everywhere and turn our home into a madhouse. It's only a tiny house; we can hardly place two string beds. But as we don't have a lot of bedding, we manage. Since he shares a room with the guest, he needs a bed and bedclothes. Otherwise we can't keep up appearances. And it's me and the children who suffer as we have to spend the night huddled together on the floor. In the summer it's still bearable, but in the winter, it's sheer torture. In the summer, the guests occupy the open roof and the children and I remain trapped in the cage-like house. He doesn't understand that when this is how things are at home, he shouldn't invite people without bedding to stay with them. By the grace of god, all his friends are of this kind. There's not a single one who could help him with a penny should he need help. And he's had some experience of it—extremely bitter ones. But it's as if this creature of God has sworn never to open his eyes. He's drawn to only penniless people. He makes friends with those whose names you're too ashamed to mention, people whom you wouldn't even allow near your door. There are quite a few affluent, influential people in the town, but he has no contact with any of them. He never goes to meet them. These rich people are vain, self-important and want you to flatter them. How can he go to them? No, he'll make friends only with people who don't have even a morsel to eat in the house.

Once, our servant left us and we couldn't find a replacement for some time. I wanted a competent and reliable man. But my husband just wanted to get someone as quickly as possible. The affairs of the house went on as usual, but he felt as though everything had stopped. One day he caught hold of some country bumpkin from somewhere and brought him home. One look at him and you could tell that he had come out of a jungle, but my husband praised him no end. 'He's obedient, honest and hard-working. He knows how to take care of things and he's extremely well mannered.' Well, I took him in. I don't know why time

and again I allow my husband to persuade me. It surprises me. The servant, Ghora, could be called a man only because he was a creature in human form. Nothing else about him indicated that he was one. He didn't have any clue about how to do anything. He wasn't dishonest, but he was an idiot of the first order. If he'd been dishonest I'd at least have had the consolation that he had some intelligence to be so. But the wretched man was an easy target of all the shopkeepers' tricks. He couldn't even count up to ten. If I sent him to the market with a rupee in hand, he will take the entire day to work it out but still wouldn't be able to tell me how much he had spent on what item. I'd be left with no option but to swallow my anger. I would feel like plucking his ears off, but I never saw my lord saying even a word to him. After his bath he would fold his loincloth, while Ghora would just stand and stare at him from some distance. It made my blood boil, but he wouldn't even notice it. And after a reprimand from me if Ghora did offer to fold it, my husband wouldn't let him be anywhere near it. He would try to present his faults as if they were virtues, and if he couldn't manage to do that, he'd conceal them. The wretched servant didn't even know how to sweep the floor.

The men's sitting room is the only decent room in the house. When Ghora swept it, he turned everything topsy-turvy. It was as though an earthquake had swept through the floor. And he'd kick up so much dust that you would hardly be able to breathe. But my husband would sit there happily in the room as though what was happening was perfectly normal. One day I gave Ghora a sharp reprimand and an ultimatum, 'From tomorrow onwards if you don't sweep the room properly, I'll fire you on the spot.' When I got up the following morning I saw that the room had already been swept—everything was in its proper place and there was not a speck of dust anywhere. My husband laughed and said, 'Just look at this! Ghora got up very early to sweep the room. I patiently explained to him how to do it. You do not instruct him properly, and then you scold him.'

Just see his ways! That too was my fault. Anyway, I thought, *Well, at least there's one thing the useless man has learnt to do properly.* From that day on I found the room clean every day and I began to look upon Ghora kindly. Then one day it so happened that I got up earlier than usual and as I went into the room, what did I see? Ghora was standing by the door and his lordship was sweeping the floor with great care. I couldn't restrain myself. I snatched the



broom from his hand and landed it on Ghora's head. I ordered the bastard to get out right away. My husband said, 'All right, but pay him his dues.' Wonderful! He won't do his work properly, he's supercilious—and my lordship wants that I pay him! I didn't pay him a penny. I'd given him a shirt to wear, which I then snatched it back from him. This made my lordship sulk for quite a few days. He was on the point of leaving the house, and was persuaded to stay back with great difficulty.

One day a sweeper begged us to give him our cast-off clothing. Who has any clothes to spare in these times of unemployment? The rich might, but we don't even have all the clothes we need. My lordship's complete wardrobe will fit in a small packet and could be sent by post. And that winter we hadn't been able to get new clothes made. I said a clear 'no' to the sweeper. I knew that it was extremely cold. I also knew very well what the poor must be going through. But what can you or I do except feel sorry for them? When the rich and powerful have clothes enough to fill a railway wagon, then of course the poor have to suffer the ignominy of nakedness. Anyway, I refused the sweeper point-blank. And what did my husband do? He took off his coat and gave it to him. I was furious beyond measure. It was the only coat he had. He didn't bother to think what he would wear through the winter. The sweeper saluted him, invoked God's blessings upon him and left. He faced the cold for some days. Earlier, he used to go for a walk every morning, but now he had to give that up. But God has given him a strange disposition. He's not ashamed to go out wearing rags. If people laugh at him, let them. He couldn't care less. I would die of shame, but he doesn't even notice. In the end, I couldn't stand it any more and got a coat made for him. I was in a mind to let him suffer the cold, but I was afraid he might fall sick. If that happened, we'd be in greater trouble. After all, he's the breadwinner.

He might consider himself to be a generous and amiable soul, but I do not think so. It's simply his naivety or plain stupidity. I've seen the sweeper he gave his coat to, several times dead drunk, wandering in the street. He has also seen him in that condition. So, why should we pay for the fault of others? If you're really kind and generous, first show your generosity to your own family. Or is your generosity reserved only for strangers? Doesn't your family deserve even a fraction of it?

We've lived together for so many years but he's never bought me a present. Granted whenever I've asked for something he's never once objected to giving

started, whenever I've asked for something he's never once objected to going and buying it for me, provided I gave him the money for it. He's never felt the urge to pay for it himself. The poor fellow never buys anything for himself either; he's quite content to make do with what I get for him. But a person does sometimes fancy something beyond daily necessities. I see other men always bringing something home for their wives—jewellery, clothes, cosmetics . . . but such indulgence is forbidden in this house. I don't remember him ever having bought sweets or toys or a trumpet for the children. It's as if he'd taken a vow not to. So I'd say that he's stingy and cold-hearted, not benevolent. And I attribute his generosity to others to the fact that he's a simpleton, he's greedy for others' approval and likes to show off.

As for his amiability, let me tell you that he doesn't mix with anyone in his office. It's against his rules to greet them, let alone give them presents. He doesn't call on them at their homes. And it's none but he who faces the consequences. Others are given leave on special considerations, not he. His salary is deducted if he is on leave. Other people are promoted. He is simply ignored. If he's even five minutes late for work, he's slapped with a notice for an explanation. The poor man works himself to death. If there's a difficult or complicated issue to sort out, the work is foisted on him, and he never objects. People in his office make fun of him secretly and call him all kinds of names. And no matter how difficult the task he accomplishes, no matter how tough the problem he solves, it's written in his fate that he'll be given the same dry grass at the end of it. I don't call that modesty; it's just plain ignorance of the ways of the world.

And why should anyone be pleased with him? Reciprocity and consideration for others smoothen social relationships. If you keep your distance from people, then they'll keep their distance from you. And once your colleagues aren't pleased with you, that shows in office relationships. Subordinates who take extra effort to keep their superiors happy, who make sure that their superiors get some personal advantage from them, and whom their superiors can rely upon—it is they who win the favour of their superiors. Why should the superiors feel any sympathy for a man who does not seek any favour from them? After all, they too are human. How is their longing for honour and adulation to be fulfilled if their subordinates are so independent? Everywhere he's worked, he's been shown the door. He's never lasted in any office beyond a year or two. He's either quarrelled

with his superiors or complained about the excess workload.

He claims that he looks after his extended family. He has several brothers and nephews. They never ask about his well-being, but he cannot stop thinking of their needs. One of his brothers is a *tehsildar* and he takes care of all the family property. He lives in great style. He's bought a car and has several servants, but he never thinks of writing letters to us. Once we were in a really tight spot financially. I said to him, 'Why don't you ask your respectable brother?' He said, 'Why should I bother him? He too has got to meet his needs. How much can he save after all?' I kept pressing him till he was compelled to write. I don't know what he wrote in the letter, but there were no expectations that money would arrive, and none did. After some days, I asked him whether his great brother had found time to answer his letter. He sounded annoyed and said, 'He would have got the letter only last week. How can you expect a reply so soon?' Another week went by, no answer. And then there was a noticeable change in his behaviour. He never gave me the chance to question him further about it. He looked too pleased with himself. He would return home from his outside jaunts in perfect spirits, and had some jokes to share with me. He was evidently making a lot of effort to keep me in good humour—flattering me and praising my family. I knew very well what he was up to—all this was merely to ward off any questions from me about his illustrious brother. In his endeavour to divert my attention from the matter at hand, he would talk to me about national, economic, moral and cultural issues in elaborate detail, with his thoughtful commentary on them that would have astonished even a learned professor. But I was not one to be palmed off like this.

When another two full weeks had passed and the last date to send the insurance premium to the company was approaching as inexorably as death, I asked him, 'What's the matter? Has your great brother taken the trouble to say something? Or, hasn't the letter reached yet? After all, we too have our share in the family property, don't we? Or are you the offspring of one of the family's maidservants? Ten years ago, the property was earning a profit of five hundred rupees annually. Now it must be earning at least a thousand. But we've never seen even a penny of it. At a rough estimate, we should get two thousand. If not two thousand, let it be one thousand, and if not one thousand, five hundred, or two hundred and fifty, or if nothing else, let him give the amount needed for the insurance premium. A *tehsildar* earns four times the amount we do. On top of it,

he takes bribes. So why shouldn't he pay us what's our due?'

He began humming and hawing. 'The poor man is renovating his house. He has to spend quite a bit on the hospitality of visiting friends and relatives.' Wonderful! It's as though the property exists purely for managing the expenses incurred on these things! And my good man is not good enough at inventing convincing excuses. If he'd asked me I could have provided him with a thousand. I'd have said that his house with all his belongings had been gutted in a fire; or that his house had been broken into and the thieves had decamped with everything; or that he'd invested ten thousand rupees in grain, but had to sell it at a loss; or someone had filed a lawsuit against him which had made him bankrupt. Even the excuses he can think up are very poor ones. He has such poor imagination—and yet he pretends to be a writer and a poet. I cursed my fate and tried to forget about it. I finally borrowed money from a neighbour's wife and managed to tide over the crisis. After all this, when he begins to sing the praises of his brothers and his nephews, it makes me fly into a rage. May God save us from brothers like his, who are as wicked as Joseph's brothers.

By the grace of God we have two sons and two daughters. Should I call it God's grace or God's wrath? Each one of them is a little devil, mischievous to the core. But this good man will never so much as give them a stern look.

One day, our eldest son was wandering outside like a vagabond and hadn't returned home even after the clock had struck eight. I was deeply worried, but his lordship was sitting there nonchalantly reading the newspaper. I moved forward, snatched the paper from his hand and said, 'Why don't you go out and look for him? See what scrape he's got himself into, the brat? Don't you have any concern? You didn't deserve to have children. This time when he comes home give him a good thrashing.' Hearing this, he looked angry. 'Isn't he back yet? He's really gone to the dogs. This time I'll pluck his ears off. I'll flay him alive!' And went off in great rage to look for him.

But it so happened that he had only just gone out when the boy returned home. I asked him, 'Where have you been? Your father, the poor man, has gone out to look for you. Just wait and see what's in store for you today! You'll never dare do it again. He was gnashing his teeth. He'll be back any minute now. He's got his stick with him. You've got so wild that you do not listen to what we say. Well, today you'll be taught a lesson. You'll learn what's good for you.' The boy was scared stiff. He lit the lamp and sat down to study. His father returned

boy was scared stiff. He lit the lamp and sat down to study. His father returned two hours later, looking distressed and woebegone. The moment he got in he asked, 'Is he back?' I wanted to fuel his anger, so I said, 'Yes, he's back. You go and ask him where he's been. I've stopped asking him. He won't give me a straight answer.'

He growled, 'Munna, come here!'

The boy was terribly frightened. He went out and stood in the courtyard, trembling all over. The two girls scurried inside the house, wondering what calamity was going to befall them. The younger boy was peeping out of the window like a mouse from its hole. Their father was in a rage and held the stick in his hand. Seeing his angry face, I began to regret having complained about the boy. He marched towards the boy—and then, instead of striking him with his stick, he placed his hand gently on his shoulder and said in mock anger, 'Where on earth have you been, mister? You're told off again and again but you don't listen. Mark my words, if you ever come home so late again, you'll be in trouble! Good people come back home in the evening, and don't go roaming the street like loafers!'

I thought, *That must be the preamble. Not a bad one! Now he'll come down to the serious business.* But it's both the preamble and the denouement. He calmed down. The boy ran off to his room. He would have probably danced in relief at being let off so lightly. I was disappointed and began to protest. 'Seeing you in action, anyone would think you're scared of him. You might at least have given him a tight slap or two. This treatment will make him wilder. Today he came home at eight. Tomorrow he'll return at nine. Do you have any idea what he must be thinking now?' He said, 'Didn't you hear how I scolded him? He must have been scared to death. Let me assure you, he won't come home late again.'

'Scold him? You didn't scold him. You wiped his tears for him.'

A fancy idea has got hold of him, which is that corporal punishment is bad for boys. He thinks boys should be free. There should be no restriction or pressure on them. He thinks that restrictions hinder their cognitive development. The consequence of this was there for everyone to see—the boys were behaving like unbridled horses. They wouldn't sit still for a minute and concentrate on a book. Sometimes they're playing tipcat, sometimes it's marbles and sometimes it's kites. And his highness joins in too. He's past forty now, but still harbours boyishness in his heart. None of my brothers would have dared to fly kites or

play tipcat in my father's presence. He'd have drawn their blood. At the break of day, he'd make them sit down at their tables and teach them, and as soon as they were back from school the same routine would follow. There was a break for just half an hour in the evening. At night, they'd be made to work again. It was not like this—that the father is reading the newspaper while the sons are roaming in the streets.

Sometimes my husband forgets his age and sits down to play cards with the boys. How can such a father inspire any awe in his children? It's a far cry from my papa. My brothers wouldn't have dared to look him in the eye. We'd start trembling at the sound of his voice. He stepped into the house and all of us became quiet. The boys felt as though they were taking their lives in their hands when they faced him. Thanks to such an upbringing, all of them are now settled with good jobs. It is true that none of them enjoys good health, but then Papa's health was not very good either. Poor man, he used to always get sick. So how could his sons' health be good? Anyway, whatever the circumstances, he gave them an education and brought them up in a disciplined manner.

One day, I saw his lordship teaching our elder son how to fly a kite. 'Turn it like this, plunge it like that, pull it like this, let it go like that.' He was teaching with such single-minded devotion, as if he were a guru teaching sacred mantras to his disciple. That day I gave him a piece of my mind which I am sure he won't forget for a long while. I told him plainly, 'Who do you think you are, ruining my children's life? If you've got no interest in your family, fine. But don't spoil my children. Don't inculcate bad habits in them. If you can't improve them, at least don't ruin them.' He tried to defend himself. My father would never take any of his boys to any fair or spectacle. No matter how much fuss the boys made he would never relent. But this good man is not only ready to take them but begs each one of them to go with him. 'Come on! It'll be great fun! There'll be fireworks and balloons and English giant wheels. You'll enjoy a ride on them!' As though that were not enough, he doesn't even stop them from playing hockey. These English games are frightening. Cricket, football, hockey—each more fatal than the other. If the ball hits you, you might even die. But he has a fascination for these games. When one of the boys comes home and announces that his side has won, he is overjoyed, as though they have won a battle. He's not concerned in the least, never thinks of what will happen if one of them gets hurt. What kind of life will they lead if they break an arm or a leg.

...from good men, and some of the men they meet in the street are men of rank,  
poor boys?

Last year, we got our daughter married. He was determined he wouldn't give even a penny in dowry, not even if the girl had to remain unmarried all her life. He sees the sordid reality of life every day, but fails to learn from it. So long as our social system does not change and people continue to point fingers at girls who remain unmarried after puberty, this custom isn't going to disappear. You might find a handful of people ready to marry without demanding a dowry, but that doesn't make much of a difference and the social evil continues to persist. If a time ever comes when girls, like boys, can remain unmarried at twenty or twenty-five without inviting social opprobrium, then this custom will disappear automatically. The question of dowry always came up wherever I tried to get her married and every time he threw a spanner in the works. After this went on for an entire year, and the girl was nearly seventeen, I was able to strike a deal with a party. His lordship too consented to it, because they didn't make any formal demand, even though they felt sure in their minds that they'd be given a decent amount. I too had made up my mind to make the utmost effort to ensure that nothing was found wanting. I had no doubt that the wedding would take place without any hindrance. But his majesty, the great social reformer, ruined everything. 'This custom is evil, that custom is irrational. Why should we spend money on that? Why do we need singers?' I was on tenterhooks. 'Why this? Why that? That's dowry by another name. You've disgraced me. You've ruined my good name.' Just think of it, the bridegroom's party is waiting at the door and we're splitting hairs over every little thing. The appointed time for the marriage was midnight. The girl's parents are expected to fast on that day. I did, but he stubbornly refused. 'When the parents of the groom don't fast, why should the bride's parents do so?' Not only me, but the whole family tried to stop him from eating, but no, he had his breakfast and meals as usual. Night came, and it was time for the *kanyadaan*. He considers it absurd and has always objected to this ceremony. 'A girl isn't an object to give away. You could give away money or even animals, but "giving away" a girl is surely to hit rock bottom!'

I tried my best to persuade him. 'It's an ancient custom, sir. The shastras ordain it in unequivocal terms.' His relatives and friends tried to bring him round, but to no avail. I reasoned with him, 'What will people say? They'll think

we've given up faith and become atheists.' But he stood stubborn like a mule. I fell at his feet and pleaded with him, 'All right, don't do anything if you don't want to. I'll do all that's required to be done. But just come and sit in the mandap next to the girl and give her your blessing.' But this man simply turned a deaf ear to all my entreaties. In the end, I couldn't take it any more and broke into tears. I couldn't accept the fact that when the girl's father was alive and present there his brother or my brother should give her away. So I managed all the rituals of the kanyadaan on my own. He didn't take any interest in the proceedings. On top of it, he was annoyed with me. He wouldn't speak to me for months after the event. And in the end, it was I who had to make the effort to reconcile with him!

But it's quite surprising that in spite of all these things I can't bear to be away from him for a single day. I love him despite all his faults. I don't know what is there about this incomprehensible man that makes me so crazy about him. There must be something that makes me a slave to him. If ever he's a bit late to come home, I get worried. If he gets a headache, I panic. If fate today were to offer me in his place a man vastly learned and intelligent, and as rich and handsome as a god, I wouldn't even look at him. And it's not just the fetters of duty. Not by any means. It's not conventional loyalty either. It's just that something has happened to both of us, something that has made us codependent, like the moving parts of a machine which, through long use, has adapted to working together so perfectly that no new part, however well formed and beautiful, could ever replace them. We walk sure-footed along a familiar road, without fear, even without looking, because all its ups and downs and twists and turns are stored in our memory. Just imagine how difficult it would be to walk along some strange road! I would be scared all the time of losing my way at every step or of being robbed. In fact, today I don't think that I even wish to exchange his faults for virtues.

*Translated from the Urdu by M. Asaduddin*





## The Vestal

### 1

Chinta Devi's name still endures, more than two centuries after her death. Even now, in one of the rugged regions of Bundelkhand, myriads of people come to worship her on Tuesdays. This uninhabited area resonates with songs on that day. The cliffs are adorned with the colourful fabrics of the devotees. The goddess's temple is built on a very steep hill. A red flag is visible on its urn even from a great distance. The temple is so small that it can barely accommodate two people together. There are no idols inside, only a small altar. There is also a stone staircase, leading to the place of worship. It is surrounded by pillars on both sides lest devotees fall down when shoved by the crowd. It was here that Chinta Devi became a 'sati'; but contrary to the popular custom, she did not immolate herself on the pyre of her deceased husband. He stood in front of her with folded hands; however, she did not even raise her eyes to look at him. She became a 'sati' with her husband's spirit. More than his body, it was his reputation that was reduced to ashes.

### 2

There was a small town named Kalpi on the banks of the Yamuna. Chinta was the daughter of a gallant Bundel of that area. After her mother died when she was a mere infant, the responsibility of bringing her up fell on her father's shoulders. It was a time of hostilities, and warriors couldn't afford even a moment's rest. They had all their meals on horseback and dozed off right on the

saddle. Chinta spent her childhood with her father on the battlefields; he would hide her in some grotto or behind some tree before leaving. Chinta would sit there unquestioningly, build castles out of earth and demolish them afterwards. She had erected clay houses and her dolls were never muffled with tippets. She would also make toy soldiers and put them on the battleground. There would be times when her father would not return until dawn. But Chinta was never scared. She would sit in desolate places, without food and water. She had never heard stories of mongooses and jackals. Rather, she had become an idealist, having listened to stories of self-sacrificing heroes, narrated by the warriors themselves.

Once, Chinta did not receive any news of her father for three days. Sitting in a cave, she made plans in her mind that her enemies could never know about. Throughout the day, she mulled over the design of the fortress and dreamt of it during the night. On the third day, her father's comrades arrived at dusk and started weeping in front of her. Chinta asked with a sense of dismay, 'Where is my father? Why are you all crying?'

No one gave her an answer; they just bawled. Not a single drop of tear rolled down the cheeks of that thirteen-year-old girl; her face didn't turn pale, not even a sigh escaped her lips. She said with a smile, 'He has attained martyrdom, so why do you all weep? What better death can a soldier have? What greater reward could he get for his valour? This moment occasions celebration, not mourning.'

One of the soldiers said in a worried tone, 'We are concerned about you. Where will you live now?'

Chinta replied solemnly, 'Don't bother about me, Uncle! I am the daughter of a worthy father. I shall follow in his footsteps. He forfeited his life trying to free the motherland from the clutches of its adversaries. I also have the same ideals. Please go and take care of your men; arrange for a horse and some armaments for me. God willing, you will never find me lagging behind. But if you find me retreating, put an end to my life with a single stroke of the sword. This is my humble request to you. Go now and don't delay any further.'

The soldiers weren't surprised by Chinta's heroic words. But they were apprehensive whether this tender-hearted girl would be able to remain steadfast in her resolve.

Five years went by. Chinta Devi was now admired by the entire province. The enemies started retreating. She was the living image of victory; her fearlessness in the face of arrows and bullets was enough to motivate other soldiers. How could they give up under her leadership? When a tender-hearted maiden could lead from the front, who amongst the male warriors could even think of turning back? Warriors become invincible in the presence of beautiful maidens. Their sharp words are disguised messages of self-sacrifice for the soldiers. Even among cowards, their mere looks can inspire virility. Chinta's beauty attracted warriors with amorous dispositions. They were like bees who could even risk their lives to be around the flower.

Amid them, was a young man called Ratan Singh.

Though every soldier in Chinta's army epitomized military prowess—they could lay down their lives at the slightest of opportunities, jump into the fire at her mere suggestion, attempt the impossible at her command—Ratan Singh was the bravest of them all. Chinta too loved him from the core of her heart. Unlike the others, Ratan Singh wasn't contumacious, brash or haughty. The others narrated their heroic deeds with considerable exaggeration; they never stopped short in their acts of self-commendation. They did all this to impress Chinta. Rather than performing their duty, their objective was to win her heart. But Ratan Singh did everything silently. Even if he would've killed a lion, he wouldn't have discussed it, let alone indulged in self-adulation. His humility and courtesy didn't help his hesitant nature either. While others' advances were amorous, Ratan Singh's love embodied sacrifice and perseverance. The other soldiers would sleep peacefully, but Ratan Singh would spend sleepless nights. They considered Chinta as their prospective bride; only Ratan Singh was disconsolate. He neither bore malice, nor was envious of anyone. Their behaviour would astonish him; his despair would deepen when he would hear their rhetoric in front of Chinta. At times, he would fret at his own peculiarities; why did God deprive him of the attributes that captivate the hearts of young and beautiful maidens? Who would care for him? Who would know his mental anguish? He could only resent and do nothing; he was simply not capable of pretence.

It was past midnight. Chinta was resting in her camp. After a hard day's labour, the soldiers too were lying listlessly after their dinner. There was a thick forest ahead. A group of enemies had encamped at the other end. Chinta had

forest ahead. A group of enemies had encamped at the other end. Chinta had come running when she had heard the news of their arrival. She had decided to attack her opponents early in the morning. She was certain that they would be unaware of her arrival; but it was her fallacy. One of her men was a turncoat and served as an ally to the adversaries. They had planned a strategy in order to get rid of Chinta; three brave soldiers had been deployed to murder her. Like wild animals, they silently crossed the forest. They stood under the trees and wondered where Chinta's tent would be. Since the soldiers were asleep, certain about the success of their plan, the enemies came out of their hideouts and started crawling on the ground like crocodiles, inching towards Chinta's camp.

The entire troop was in deep slumber. The soldiers on guard too were asleep, overwhelmed by fatigue. Only one soldier sat awake behind the camp, shivering with cold—Ratan Singh. This wasn't unusual for him. He usually spent his nights in a similar way in these encampments, sitting behind Chinta's tent. He became alert when he heard footsteps and drew out his sword. He could see three people advancing furtively. 'What should I do now? If I shout, there will be a tremendous commotion amongst the soldiers, and they will end up killing each other in the dark. On the other hand, confronting three men single-handedly might put my life in danger,' he thought. However, there was not much time for contemplation. He quickly pulled out his sword and attacked his opponents. The clashing of swords continued for several minutes. Then silence descended. While the three soldiers lay wounded, Ratan Singh too fell unconscious.

The next morning, Chinta saw the soldiers lying on the ground. Her heart started pounding. She came close to find that three of her enemies were dead; but Ratan Singh was still breathing. She guessed what had happened. Her womanhood prevailed over valour. The very eyes that didn't allow a single drop to flow even on the death of her father shed endless tears. She placed Ratan Singh's head on her lap; it felt as if she lay in a passionate embrace of love.

#### 4

For a month Ratan Singh didn't open his eyes. Chinta too suffered equally. She never left his side. She was neither concerned about her people nor worried about the advancing troops of the enemy. She bestowed all that she could on Ratan Singh. He finally opened his eyes after a month. He saw Chinta standing

with a fan in her hand despite there being a spare cot in the room. In a feeble voice, he said, 'Chinta, don't trouble yourself; give me the fan.'

Chinta was overwhelmed; she felt like she was in paradise. The very tattered body, by whose side she had sat and lamented in despair, was now a source of boundless joy for her. It had recovered and Ratan Singh could now speak. She said with sweet affection, 'You are the lord of my life. So, if this is suffering, then I don't know what happiness would be like. "Lord of my life" sounds like a magical form of address.' Ratan Singh's eyes lit up. The same body that had been feeble a month ago was now glowing; a new life had been infused in its veins, and how full of vitality that life was! How vivacious, how pleasant, how exulting and tender! A pulsating sensation spread through his body. He felt as if he had superhuman powers in his arms; as if he could conquer the whole world, fly and reach the sky, make his way through the mountains. For a moment, there was such contentment, as if all his aspirations had been fulfilled; and he didn't want anything from anyone. Perhaps, he would turn his back on Lord Shiva without asking for a boon. He had no desire for prosperity or for anything else. He felt like there was no one happier and more fortunate than him.

Ratan Singh said, 'Success is impossible without perseverance.'

Chinta added in a similar vein, 'Yes, surely you had to endure this pain for my sake.'

Putting him to rest with her delicate hands, she added, 'You hadn't practised any austerity for this. Why do you lie? You were merely protecting a vulnerable woman. Had there been someone else in my place, I'm sure you would've saved her in the same spirit. Let me tell you the truth, I had vowed to myself to spend my entire life as a celibate. But your devotion has shaken my resolution. I was brought up in the company of warriors and can only surrender before the soldier who can stake his life for a noble pursuit. I simply don't care for the revelry of amorous people, the mannerisms of hooligans, and the skilful moves of pretenders. Their acrobatics are nothing more than mere pretences. I discovered true dedication only in your heart. I have become a servant of yours, not now, but ever since.'

It was their first night of romance. Silence pervaded. Only the hearts of these two lovers beat for each other. In the scintillating hue of the cool moonlight the two lovers engaged in courtship.

Suddenly, it was discovered that one of the enemy troops was advancing towards the fort. Chinta was taken aback; Ratan Singh stood up and drew out his sword.

She looked at him affectionately and said, with awe, 'Send some of our men, why do you need to go?'

Putting a gun on his shoulders, Ratan Singh replied, 'I am afraid they are coming in large numbers this time around.'

Chinta responded, 'I shall come with you.'

'No, I'm sure they won't last long. I will force them to retreat with a single attack. God willing, our night of romance will also be our night of victory!'

'I don't know why I'm so apprehensive today. I don't feel like letting you go!'

Ratan Singh was overwhelmed by her simple, devoted entreaty. He embraced her and said, 'Dear, I shall be back by morning!'

Embracing him with tears in her eyes, Chinta said, 'I am afraid you'll take longer to come back. My mind will always be with you. Go, but keep me informed about everything. Attack only when you are sure about your enemy's movements. You have a tendency to get restless and attack without caring for your life. I request you to act with discretion. Go and face them as confidently as you turn your back on me.'

Chinta was getting anxious. Earlier, she only wanted victory, but now the call of the flesh reigned supreme. The very brave girl who had intimidated her adversaries by roaring like a lioness had weakened in spirit to such an extent that when Ratan Singh mounted his horse, she prayed in her mind for his safety. Her eyes followed him till he disappeared behind the trees. She then climbed the tower of the fortress and stood there for hours, her eyes not giving up. Nothing was visible as Ratan Singh had disappeared behind the mountains. It was only at daybreak, when the rays of sun started peeping through the trees, that she came out of her state of enchantment. She realized that there was a vacuum all around. She got down from the tower in tears; later she lay on her bed, weeping.

There were not more than a hundred soldiers with Ratan Singh. But all of them were ruthless, skilled and considered opportunity and numbers insignificant. They were charged by the spirit of bravery. As they advanced, they sang songs of their heroic splendour:

*May your turban be on your head, do save its dignity,  
The swords of Tomars serve no purpose,  
The shields and armours are rendered futile,  
Keep the passion alive.*

The mountains reverberated with these heroic notes. The hooves of their horses gave a rhythm to them. This continued till night melted and the sun blessed these valiant soldiers with its golden hue.

In that sanguine light, they could see an enemy troop encamped on a mountain.

However, Ratan Singh moved slowly, his head hung, and his aggrieved heart pining in separation. His feet moved ahead, but his mind turned backwards. Today, for the first time in his life, anxiety had rendered him irresolute. Who knew what the outcome of the battle would be? The bliss of the memories that he had left behind troubled him, time and again. He remembered Chinta's sparkling eyes and felt like returning to the fort. Every instant his enthusiasm for war diminished. Suddenly, a soldier emerged and said, 'Brother, look there, the enemies have encamped on that high mountain. What do you say now? I think we should attack them immediately. They are lying there listlessly; they will run for their lives. If we delay, they'll be alerted and things will go out of hand. There are not less than a thousand.'

Ratan Singh anxiously looked at the enemy's troops and said, 'Indeed, it appears so.'

The soldier asked, 'So, shall we attack now?'

Ratan Singh replied, 'As you wish. But keep in mind that they are in larger number.'

The soldier said, 'It doesn't matter. We have defeated bigger armies than this.'

Ratan Singh argued, 'That's true; but leaping into the fire might not be the right decision.'

The soldier quipped, 'Brother, what are you saying? A soldier is meant to take risks. Just give us your orders, and then you will see our spirit.'

Ratan Singh replied, 'At present, we are all very exhausted. A little bit of rest

shall do us good.'

The soldier added, 'No, brother, if they get even an inkling of our presence, the fortunes will turn in their favour.'

Ratan Singh said, 'Then go ahead, let's attack.'

In an instant, they loosened the reins of their horses, and charged towards the enemy troops. Whatever conjectures they had about their adversaries proved wrong when they reached the mountain. The enemy was not only vigilant but was also preparing to attack the fort. Even though they were left with no other option, they weren't disappointed. With as skilful a warrior as Ratan Singh by their side, they had no fears. He had been victorious on even more difficult occasions than this. Wouldn't he display his military prowess today? All eyes searched for Ratan Singh; but he was nowhere in sight. Where had he gone? Nobody knew.

But he couldn't have gone anywhere. He couldn't have deserted his comrades in this moment of crisis. No, that was impossible. Certainly he was somewhere here and was only trying to think of a way to retrieve a lost battle.

In a trice, the enemies arrived right before them. What could a mere handful of soldiers do before such a huge army? From all directions, Ratan Singh's name was called out, 'Oh brother, where are you? What orders do you have for us? Don't you see, they've already come here; yet you stand in silence. Come in front, and show us the way, revive our enthusiasm.'

But Ratan Singh didn't come forward. The troops had arrived and both the sides drew out their swords to fight. The Bundelas fought fearlessly. But, one to one is fair; one to ten is rather too much. This wasn't a battle, it was a gamble of lives. Desperation filled them with superhuman powers, and they fought fiercely. They were no longer organized; they advanced as much as they could. No one bothered about the consequences. Someone entered through the files of the enemy, while another got killed as he tried to mount an elephant. Their remarkable courage elicited praise even from their enemies. But such warriors can only earn names, not victory. Within an hour, the curtain fell; the spectacle was over. It was a storm that came and went, uprooting trees. Had they been organized, these men could have defeated their arch-rivals. But the one on which the onus of this unity rested was nowhere to be seen. The triumphant Marathas looked closely at every corpse. Ratan Singh had been a constant thorn in their flesh. He was their principal target. They couldn't sleep peacefully as long as



fresh. He was their principal target. They couldn't sleep peacefully as long as Ratan Singh was alive. They looked for him all over the mountain; but couldn't find him. They had triumphed, but it was an incomplete victory.

7

Today, Chinta's heart was inundated with all sorts of doubts. Never before in her life had she felt so debilitated. She couldn't figure out why the Bundelas had lost. She had not enjoyed the bliss of love because her mother had died when she was a mere infant and so she had to roam the forests with her father, and live in dens and grottoes. And even that shelter did not last for long. Her father, too, had died. Since then, she had not had even a day's rest. When will the heavens stop being cruel? Ah! In her frail heart, a strange feeling occurred: *If God brings back her beloved safely, she'll settle with him in a far off village. She'll spend her life in the service of her husband. She'll turn her back on this battle.* For the first time in her life, she thought she had the powers of a woman.

It was evening, and the Sun God was looking for shelter, with his head drooping like that of an exhausted warrior. All at once a soldier, with bare head and feet and without weapons, came and stood in front of her. Chinta was shocked. At first she just sat there, heartbroken. Then she came close to the soldier and asked anxiously, 'Who survived?'

The soldier replied, 'No one.'

'No one? No one?'

With her hands on her head, Chinta fell to her knees.

'The Marathas have come close.'

'Come close?'

'Very close!'

'So prepare the funeral pyre immediately. There's hardly any time left.'

'We can still put up a struggle.'

'Do as you wish. This is the end of my duties.'

'We could fight for months from inside the fort.'

'I have no one to fight for.'

As the darkness overpowered the day, the Marathas strode towards the fort, trampling the crops beneath their feet. Meanwhile, the pyre was being prepared in the castle. The moment the lamps were lit, the pyre was set ablaze as well.

Chinta, the 'sati', decked in her finery, was ready to unite with her husband through the path of fire.

## 8

The pyre was surrounded by men and women from all sides. No one was worried about the fact that the castle had been encircled by the enemy's troops. Their faces were sad and their heads hung in lament. In this very courtyard, the marriage pergola had been decorated yesterday. There had been a *havankund* then, there was a pyre now. For both the occasions, people had gathered and the flames had risen in a similar manner. But what a striking difference now! Apparently, there may be a difference but in reality, it was the conclusion of that very sacrificial ceremony; the fulfilment of the same cause.

Suddenly, the sound of a horse's hooves could be heard. It seemed as if a soldier was approaching the fort. In an instant, the sound of the hooves stopped, and a soldier came running into the courtyard. People looked at him in astonishment. It was none other than Ratan Singh!

He went near the pyre and said, panting, 'Dear, I'm still alive. What are you doing?'

The pyre had already been set ablaze. Flames rose from Chinta's sari. Frantically, Ratan Singh jumped into the pyre and tried to rescue Chinta. People from all sides grabbed the wooden sticks of the pyre and started removing them; but Chinta didn't even open her eyes to look at her husband. She just waved him away.

Ratan Singh said regretfully, 'Alas dear, what has happened to you? Why won't you look at me? I'm still alive.'

A voice emerged from the pyre, 'Your name is Ratan Singh; but you are not the Ratan Singh I knew.'

'Just look at me, I am your very own slave, your devotee, your husband.'

'My husband has achieved martyrdom.'

'Alas! How shall I explain! O folks, do put out this fire. Dear, I am your very own Ratan Singh. Don't you recognize me?'

By now, the flames had reached Chinta's face. The lotus had blossomed in the fire. Chinta said in a clear voice, 'I recognize you very well. You are not the

Ratan Singh I had known. My Ratan was a true soldier. He couldn't have repudiated his duties of a warrior for the sake of self-preservation. The person at whose feet I was a mere slave is ensconced in heaven. Don't bring any discredit to his name. He was a valiant Rajput, not a coward, who would flee from the battlefield.'

She had hardly uttered these words when the fire engulfed her completely. Then, in an instant, that unrivalled beauty, the lover of ideal bravery, that true 'sati' disappeared amidst the flames.

Ratan Singh silently watched this tragic sight in bewilderment. Then all of a sudden, he took a deep breath and jumped into the burning pyre.

*Translated from the Hindi by Shailendra Kumar Singh*



## The New Wife

### 1

Although our body grows old, new blood surges through its veins. In fact, the entire structure of life rests on the flow of this new blood. And the wave of this newness surges through every particle of the earth like the musical notes latent in a stringed instrument. So the earth, with its primordial system, continues to stay as young and adorned as a new bride.

Lala Daga Mal's new marriage not only restored him his youth and renewed his vitality, but also awakened fresh passions and emotions in him. During the lifetime of his first wife, he seldom had time to stay at home. After his daily religious rituals from early morning to eleven o'clock, he would eat his food and leave for his shop. He would return past midnight, around one o'clock. Dog-tired, he would fall into a deep sleep. If Leela ever dared ask him to come early at night, he would flare up, yelling, 'Should I close down the business for you? Gone are the days when a devotee used to earn Goddess Lakshmi's bountiful blessings by offering just a jug of water as a token of worship. Today, the devotees prostrate themselves in obeisance so many times but fail to earn Lakshmi's generous pleasure.' Driven to despair, poor Leela would have no option but to stay quiet.

Once, just six months ago, Leela was running a fever. When Lalaji was about to leave for his shop, she gathered up courage to say, 'Look, I am not feeling well today. Come a little early.'

Daga Mal took off his headgear, hung it on the peg and said dryly in a tone dripping with sarcasm, 'All right, if my staying back at home makes you feel

better, I will not go to the shop.'

Quailed before Lalaji's anger, Leela stuttered, 'I do not mean to hold you back at home. It is a humble request to you to come back home a little early.'

Lalaji reacted sharply, 'Perhaps you believe that I go to the shop to enjoy myself over there?'

Leela, with a woebegone expression, preferred to keep silent. Of course, her husband's habitual loveless behaviour was by no means shocking. She had been distressed for quite some years to think that her existence was of little consequence. Quite often, she would be lost in contemplation, fumbling through her past to grab the genesis of the loveless attitude of her husband, but in vain. Moreover, she never found herself in the wrong. Guilty of no transgression and disobedience as she would find herself, she had, in fact, grown more devoted and sincerely assiduous in her duties to him. She genuinely cherished to share the burden and responsibilities shouldered by her husband, maintaining her cheerful self to win his favour and love. She never dreamt of going against his wishes. But it was in no way fair to hold her culpable for the dissipation and waning of his youth. For that matter, no one is blessed with eternal youth. Similarly, it was not her fault if she no longer bloomed in her previous health. If she was guilty of no crime and offence, why at all was she meted out punishment?

Ideally, their twenty-five-year-long life and companionship should have developed into a marvellous compatibility and a sound understanding of each other's natural propensities and inmost desires, leading to a condition where even demerits were treasured as merits and the relationship was savoured as a luscious ripe fruit. But Lalaji's intrinsic predilection for materialistic gain measured everything in terms of materialism. Needless to say, when an old cow stops giving milk and conceiving, she is consigned to the cowshed, the most ideal place for her.

Lalaji also believed that Leela must feel fairly content with her life and status as a housewife, eating her fill and leading a comfortable life at home. Obviously, she was free to buy as much jewellery as she wished and go for pilgrimage to as many holy places as she could. But he wanted her to keep herself away from him. It seemed incongruous and inconsistent when Daga Mal ardently craved the pleasure which he denied Leela. How intriguingly mysterious and complex is human nature!

Leela was barely forty years of age. Relegated to seclusion, she was treated as old and decrepit by Daga Mal. On the other hand, he was forty-three but believed himself to be young, bubbling with youthful vigour, vitality and passion for life. Much to Leela's chagrin, he felt a deep aversion to her when she resorted to make-up and toiletries in order to hide the heartless blotches and scars left by callous time. Whenever she wore make-up, he said with heavy sarcasm, 'What a rapacious appetite for looking young! Though a mother of seven children, hair grizzled and face puckered, she is seized by a craving for wearing *mahawer*, sindoor, and applying *ubtan*. How strange the nature of women is! God knows why they always take make-up to be a thing to die for. If only someone asks what else they pine for. Why don't they accept the fact that youth once lost can't be restored with the help of a wide range of cosmetics?' How interesting! Daga Mal thought he was young with desire raging on. During the winter, he fed on food prepared with dried fruit, used mixture and powder with medicinal properties, dyed his hair black twice a week and also had a correspondence with a doctor regarding this monkey gland.

Seeing him in a fix, Leela asked in a subdued tone, 'Could you tell me when you will be back?'

Lalaji asked her, oozing loving care, 'How are you now?'

Leela was in a dilemma, not knowing what to say, for if she said that she was not feeling well then he would sit there, letting out pungent taunts at her. But if she said she was feeling well, he would relax and come back home at two in the night. On the cusp of a strange dilemma, she preferred to say, 'Although I was feeling a little better, now I'm feeling slightly unwell.' Then she hastened to tell him, 'Go to the shop, the customers will be waiting for you. But for God's sake, come back before two. The children go to sleep. Left all alone to myself, I feel bored and listless.'

'I will surely come back by twelve.' Lalaji made his sugar-coated promise.

But the colour drained from Leela's face when she heard him say twelve. 'Can't you come back by ten?' she implored.

'No, not before eleven-thirty,' Lalaji replied.

'By ten-thirty?' she entreated.

'All right, by eleven,' he said.

Lalaji left for the shop. But on the way, one of his friends invited him to a *mujra* at ten at night. And he could not dare reject the invitation. Of course, it is not gentlemanly to let someone's invitation meet with flat refusal.

Lalaji went to the *mujra* or a *nautch* session. He came back home at two o'clock and entered the house stealthily, tiptoed and woke up the servant and crept inside his room only to fall into a deep slumber. Poor Leela had already fallen asleep while waiting.

The illness took its toll, killing Leela. Lalaji felt her death. His friends sent him telegrams offering their condolences and a daily newspaper published an obituary, expressing deep sorrow and extolling her religious and personal virtues. Lalaji expressed his sincere gratitude to his friends and instituted five scholarships in a girls' school in memory of her. He also threw several exceptionally unique after-death feasts, making them the talk of the town for a long time.

But hardly a month had passed when his friends started cajoling him for remarriage. He was lured into marrying again after undergoing six months' hardship as a widower. To be truthful, the poor fellow had no option because he needed a life partner—it was indispensable at his age.

## 2

The arrival of Lalaji's new wife revolutionized his life. He was no longer enamoured of his shop. His business suffered no losses even after he stayed away from his shop week after week. His strength, which had once begun to wane and deplete with every passing day, was revived, burgeoning like green shoots poking from the parched earth after fresh showers. A new car and a radio were bought and the rooms were lavishly furnished. More servants were employed to take care of the household chores. Lalaji's decrepit youth looked more radiant than that of a young man, exactly like the effulgence of electric lights, which look seemingly more attractive and sparkling than the moonlight. When his friends congratulated him on his eternal youth, he felt a great sense of pride and boasted, 'I have always been in the flower of my youth and would continue to stay eternally young. If old age dares come near me, I will blacken its face, seat it on a donkey and deport it from the city. One thing I don't understand is why people compare youth with age. Youth has a correlation with

understand is why people correlate youth with age. Youth has a correlation with age but to the extent religions have a correlation with ethics, money with honesty and beauty with make-up. I wonder why people call these modern young people young. Believe me, the vigour and strength of thousands of youths will cringe and cower before mine. It seems these young men have no interest in life. To them, life feels like drums around their necks.’ Needless to say, these are the words that he repeated to Asha Devi time and again, longing that they be etched on her heart and memory. Though he would ask her with great interest to accompany him to the cinema, theatre and for boating, his proposals never excited her curiosity. Of course, she did accompany him but half-heartedly, that too after his persistent cajoling.

One day, Lalaji told her, ‘Let’s go boating.’

It was the rainy season. The river was in spate. Patches of clouds drifting in the sky looked like regiments of soldiers from various countries marching forward in their multicoloured uniforms. The roads thronged with people moving towards their destinations while singing Malar and Barahmasa. Swings were hung from garden trees.

‘I don’t feel like going,’ Asha said indifferently.

Lalaji insisted with a touch of reproach in his tone, ‘What kind of nature do you have? You do not feel inclined to go out anywhere.’

‘You go boating. I have some other work at home,’ she replied.

‘By the blessings of God, we have so many servants to do the household chores. You are not required to stay back in order to do anything here,’ Lalaji said.

‘Mahraj does not cook a tasty curry. I am sure you will leave the food cooked by him after the very first morsel,’ she said.

Asha passed most of her leisure time in cooking delicious dishes and savouries for Lalaji. She had learnt from others that men of Lalaji’s age tended to be more interested in the gratification of their taste buds. Lalaji’s happiness knew no bounds after learning that Asha was so caring that she was ready to deny herself the pleasure of entertainment trips and her comfort for the sake of cooking sumptuous and healthy food for him. Suddenly, he remembered Leela with distaste and muttered under his breath, ‘Leela, in sharp contrast to Asha, would always tug at my sleeve, ready to accompany me everywhere. She used to spoil my mood. Sometimes, it was so difficult to shake her off. I had to put her



off with one excuse or the other.’

Liberated from the oppressive thought, Lalaji told Asha, ‘Do not be so fussy about the food. It doesn’t matter if there is no tasty curry for one day. Moreover, if you unduly tend to my personal whims and pamper them, you will give a long rope to my luxurious lifestyle, leading me to get spoilt. Besides, I won’t go if you are not ready.’

‘You take me for so many pleasure trips, fun and gaiety. Don’t you think you are also spoiling me?’ Asha spoke in an endearing tone, though actually longing to shake him off. ‘Who will do the household chores, if I get used to such habits?’ she added.

Lalaji said with an air of large-heartedness, ‘I do not give a damn about the household chores. I want to spoil you so that you stay away from the drudgery of housework. And look, do not address me with the word “*aap*”. Address me as “*tum*”. You know, I wish you to wantonly spout abuse, play pranks and blow up at me. But to my frustration, you address me with “*aap*”, making me a deity. I do not want to be treated as a god. I crave to behave like a naughty urchin at home.’

Asha replied with an effort to smile, ‘Good gracious! How can I address you with the word “*tum*”. It is used for one who is of the same age, not for someone older.’

Asha’s disarmingly naive words stung him, making him feel dizzy. He would not have felt such terrible shudders down his spine even if his *munim* had told him that he had suffered a loss of one lakh rupees in his business. His excitement evaporated. He felt as if his immaculately perfect look—colourful cap with flowers sewn on it, saffron-coloured silk shawl draped loosely around his shoulders and the embroidered kurta with gold buttons—howled derision and scoffed at him. He felt deflated and downcast.

Broken-hearted, he asked dolefully, ‘Are you coming with me or not?’

‘I do not feel like going,’ said Asha.

‘It means that I shouldn’t go,’ Lalaji said.

‘I am not stopping you from going,’ Asha replied while addressing him with the formal “*aap*”.

Cut to the quick, Lalaji said sharply, ‘Again you’re addressing me with “*aap*”.

‘Tum,’ Asha said with great effort, blushing.

‘Yes, like that. From now onwards, address me with “*tum*”. So, you are not

... yes, I am. From now onwards, address me with 'tum'. So, you are not going. But if I command you to go, what will you do?' Lalaji asked.

'Of course, I shall have to go. It is my bounden duty to obey you,' Asha answered.

But Lalaji could not command her. The words 'duty' and 'order' jarred on his ears. He felt sheepish and took a step to leave. Asha pitied him and said, 'When will you come back?'

Seething with indignation, he said, 'I am not going.'

'All right, I will accompany you,' she said.

He scowled, behaving like a stubborn child who after getting what he wants, throws it away. 'You don't need to go if you don't want to. I am not in the habit of forcing my will on others,' he said.

'Aa . . . p . . . I mean, tum will feel bad,' she said.

Asha went for the outing, but half-heartedly, not even dressed for the occasion—wearing neither any jewellery nor make-up looking like a widow. Lalaji had a malignant dislike of such habits. He had remarried to enjoy life to the fullest, to pour oil in a lamp so it burnt brighter. But if the lamp failed to burn brightly, then what was the point of pouring oil in it? In fact, he was unable to understand why she was so indifferent and nonchalant, always wearing a dejected look. Sometimes, he thought she was like an *usar* tree that never sprouted any green shoots no matter how much one watered and tended it carefully. He had bought expensive jewellery and saris for her from various places like Delhi, Calcutta and France. But they sat in the boxes, the jewellery gathering dust and the saris eaten by moths. 'This is the problem with girls from poor families. Stingy to the core, they neither eat good food nor wear good clothes even if they are favoured with a large fortune. Moreover, they are also unwilling to give them to others. If they get hold of some buried treasure, they will shrink away from spending a penny,' Lalaji opined resentfully.

Although they went boating, it was dull and dreary.

### 3

Having strained every nerve to arouse her interest in fun and entertainment, Lalaji realized that Asha was naturally disposed towards melancholy. But interestingly, he did not lose heart. Sanguine of success in his attempts, he kept

cajoling her with his stubborn persistence to bring her around. Of course, it was not expected of him to lose sight of the profit he had to earn after the sound investment in the form of his marriage. He was bent on deploying one or the other new method and means of exciting her interest. He was well aware of the fact that if one's gramophone did not work properly, one had better get it repaired rather than allow it to gather dust.

In the meantime, the old cook, Mahraj, suddenly fell ill and went back home. A young boy, Mahraj's son, was employed temporarily as his replacement. In his mid-teens, the boy was strangely funny, rustic and a little uncouth. Unable to understand anything, he made unshapely chapattis, leaving one or the other part under-baked. Sometimes, he cooked dal as runny as tea and sometimes as thick as yogurt. He would at times put just a pinch of salt and at times a ladleful of it, letting the dal taste as salty as lemon pickle. So, Asha frequently visited the kitchen with an intention to train him. Sometimes, she gave him severe reprimands for being a straggler. Once, she said, 'What a dullard you are, Jugal! You have wasted your life doing nothing. Shame on you! You can't even make flat, round and properly baked chapattis.'

Jugal replied with tears in his eyes, 'Bahuji, I am still young—just seventeen.'

Asha burst into laughter. 'What do you mean? Does it take a decade or two to learn how to make chapattis?'

'Just train me for a month. I will make chapattis to your taste. Once I learn how to make round chapattis, I will bag a handsome reward from you. Look, my curry tastes slightly better now.'

'Stop boasting! You have yet to learn how to cook a tasty curry. You know, you had overdone the salt even yesterday,' said Asha, but smiling encouragingly at him.

'Bahuji, you were not here when I was cooking the curry.'

'You mean I have to sit here for you to cook a tasty curry?'

'I am in my senses when you are here.'

'And when I am not here . . .'

'Then my wit goes to sit on your doorstep.'

'You will go back home after your father returns, won't you?'

'Bahuji, provide me with some other job here. Make me learn how to drive a car. I will take you around. No, Bahuji, no. I will take the pan away from the stove. Stay away lest your nice sari gets stained.'

never stay away from you and your station.

‘You had better stay away, you untrained fellow. If the pan falls on your feet, you’ll suffer from burns for months.’

Jugal held back despairingly, his frail face looking drawn.

Instantly, Asha asked him with a smile, ‘Why did your highness now pull a long face?’

‘Bahuji, I feel heartbroken when you rebuke me. I do not mind when Lalaji gives me a severe reprimand. But when I find you rolling your eyes, my heart sinks.’

‘I did not rebuke you. I simply wanted you to be careful lest the pot fell on your feet,’ said Asha, gently soothing him.

‘But look, Bahuji, you also used your hands to hold the pan. If you had lost the grip, then . . .’

In the meantime, Lalaji came in. He stood at the threshold and shouted, ‘Asha, come here! Look at the beautiful flower pots I have bought for you. They will be tastefully placed in front of your door. Just tell me why you take pains to stay in the kitchen? Ask this fellow to call Mahraj back otherwise I will employ someone else. There is no dearth of Mahrajs. How long will one go on waiting for him? And this slovenly stupid fellow awfully lacks in manners. Listen to me. Write to your father today asking him to come back soon.’

The iron plate for baking chapattis was ready on the hearth. Since Asha was rolling chapattis and Jugal was waiting for his turn to bake them, she was not free to go see the flower pots. ‘Wait. I am rolling chapattis. If I leave them to Jugal, he will make unshapely ones,’ said Asha.

Quite irritated, Lalaji said, ‘If he makes unshapely chapattis, he will be dismissed.’

Turning a deaf ear to Lalaji, Asha said casually, ‘He will learn within a week or so. There is no need to sack him.’

‘Come. Tell me where and how the flower pots will be placed.’

‘Wait. I am not done yet. Now do not kick up a fuss.’

Frozen in shock, Lalaji glanced at her in stupefaction. Asha had never before retorted so curtly and discourteously. He felt hurt and beat a hasty retreat.

Seething with indignation, he felt like smashing the flower pots and hurling the plants into the hearth.

Jugal cringed at the sight of Lalaji, and spoke in hushed tones, ‘Bahuji, go.

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Sarkar is turning.'

'Stop talking nonsense. Bake the chapattis or else you will be sacked. Take some money from me today and get yourself new clothes and a haircut. Do not stay shabby like a beggar. How bad of you! You can't even afford to go to a barber.'

'If I buy myself new clothes, how will I be able to account them to my father?'

'What a fool I have to deal with! Didn't I tell you to take the money from me?'

'If you are going to give me money, I will buy expensive clothes—a fine khaddar kurta, a khaddar dhoti, a silk shawl and a nice pair of footwear.'

Asha smiled warmly at him. 'And if you have to spend your money then . . .'

'Then I will not buy new clothes.'

'How clever!'

'Look, Bahuji, one can go to sleep on dry chapattis at home but would not want to have the same in a feast.'

'All right. I do not want to listen to these excuses. Go and get a kurta made of some coarse cloth and a cap as well. But do not forget to take two annas for your haircut.'

'Leave it. I do not want anything. If I wear good clothes, I will remember you fondly; but if I wear poor clothes, it will be dispiriting for me.'

'How selfish! You want clothes for free and of high quality.'

'Give me your photograph at the time of my departure from here.'

'What will you do with my photograph?'

'I will hang it on the wall of my room and look at it every day. But wear the sari you were wearing yesterday for the photo. And do not forget to wear a pearl necklace. I do not like a bare neck. I know you have a lot of jewellery. Why don't you wear them?'

'Do you like jewellery?'

'Too much.'

Just then, Lalaji came and shouted at Jugal. 'You are not yet done with your chapattis, Jugal! If you don't make good chapattis from tomorrow onwards, I will sack you.'

Asha rushed to wash her hands and then accompanied Lalaji with great pleasure to see the flower pots. She radiated extraordinary bloom, her

conversation sparkling with charm. Lalaji consigned the humiliation inflicted on him to oblivion. Obviously, Asha spoke from within, 'I want each flower pot to be placed tastefully in front of my room. How beautiful they are! Wow! Tell me their names in Hindi as well.'

'What will you do with all these plants? Keep a few of them. I will ask them to put the rest in the garden,' Lalaji said light-heartedly.

'No, not at all. I won't part with even one of them.'

'How greedy!'

'All right. Let me be greedy. But I am not going to give you any.'

'Give me a few. I took a lot of pains getting them here.'

'No, not at all. You will get none.'

#### 4

The following day, when Asha came out in her turquoise-coloured sari, adorned with jewellery, Lalaji's eyes flashed. He thought his persistent and passionate cajoling was finally working. Earlier, no matter how much he would implore her, she wouldn't wear any jewellery. Sometimes, she would wear the pearl necklace, that too in a clumsy way. Today, embellished with the jewellery, she was putting on airs and graces. It seemed as though she wished people to look at her, and praise her beauty.

Lalaji was beside himself with pride. He wished his relatives and friends would visit his queen, adorned with gold, and see that he was leading a satisfied and enjoyable life. He wanted to dispel the doubts lingering in the minds of his kith and kin and wished them to see how confidence, tolerance and broad-mindedness had made his life lovely and pleasant.

He proposed, 'Let's go for a leisurely stroll. It is quite pleasant outside.'

But Asha had work in the kitchen. She was sure that she would not be finished before twelve o'clock. She felt a mild pain in her liver. She had never had such a pain before. It had started only last night.

Lalaji was ecstatic after learning of the pain. He thought of the Raj Vaidya and that his pills had possibly produced the intended result. Needless to mention, the efficacy of the pills had already been measured. They were made from a mixture prescribed by the Raj Vaidya's father, who was once the family doctor

of the Maharaja of Banaras.

Staring at her in complete perplexity, Lalaji said, 'So you have been suffering from the pain since last night. If you had told me, I would have taken you to the vaidya.'

'I thought that it would subside without any medicine. But it is getting aggravated now.'

'Tell me the exact spot where it's paining.'

Lalaji stretched his hands towards Asha but she shrank back instinctively. With her head lowered, she said, 'I do not like such overtures. Bring me the medicine now.'

Lalaji felt elated to have got the certificate of his being young. He would not have been this happy even if the title of Rai Bahadur had been conferred on him. He ardently wished to bag the appreciation of his friends for his remarkable achievement. He also thought that he had grabbed the opportunity to scoff at those who had muttered under their breath about his new marriage. First of all, he went to Pandit Bhola Nath and told him sadly, 'Brother, a new problem has cropped up. Asha has a chest pain since last night. I do not know what to do. She said that she has never felt such pain before.'

Bhola Nath said, 'I believe it is nothing serious. She must have been hurt by some evil spirit.'

Lalaji disagreed and said, 'No, she has not been hurt by some evil spirit. It seems that she has some internal problem. You know, she is young. I think I had better take some medicine from the Raj Vaidya.'

'But I think it will subside without any medicine.'

'You understand nothing. And this is your shortcoming.'

'As you like. But you are wrong. Go to the vaidya. Take the medicine but do not forget to take some medicine for yourself as well.'

Lalaji got up and left to visit another friend, Lala Phag Mal. He repeated the story with the same grim face. Astutely playful, Phag Mal said with a smile, 'I believe this is the result of your naughtiness.'

Though greatly elated, Lalaji said, 'I am telling you about my woes and you are in a playful mood. You disregard others' feelings.'

'I am not joking. I know she is young and tender. But you are a veteran, I bet. If it isn't good news, I will get my moustache shaved!'

With a façade of seriousness, Lalaji added, 'Honestly speaking, I take every

precaution. I swear by your head.'

'Do not swear by my head. I have children. Except me, there is no one to look after them. All right, go and take some medicine.'

'I will take some medicine from the Raj Vaidya.'

'The vaidya has no medicine for it. None but you have the remedy.'

Lalaji's eyes lit up. As he felt the tidal surge of youth, his chest swelled. He trod firmly, with a slight swagger, his cap slanting, his face radiating youthful lustre and wantonness. When Lalaji gave the good tidings to the Raj Vaidya, he said, 'I had already asked you to take the pills carefully. But you paid no heed to my advice. Take the pills for a month or two and take preventive measures, you will witness the miracle. Due to great demand, there is an acute shortage of these pills. It takes a lot of time to prepare them—sometimes even a month. It requires thousands of herbs that we have to bring from faraway places such as Kailash, Nepal and Tibet. Needless to say, its preparation is not easy. You had better take a bottle.'

## 5

Asha looked gorgeous. Jugal said, 'Bahuji, you should always dress like this. Today, I won't let you come close to the hearth.'

Glancing naughtily at him, Asha said, 'Why are you ordering me about today? You have never stopped me earlier from going near the hearth.'

'Today's different.'

'What is it? Tell me.'

'I fear lest you get angry at me.'

'Tell me. I won't be cross.'

'Today you are looking awfully beautiful.'

Although Lala Daga Mal used to praise her beauty to the skies quite sincerely, yet Asha found his eulogy to be artificial and hollow. His words of appreciation seemed like a sword held by an effeminate man. On the contrary, Jugal's words sent her into raptures. She felt an intense pleasure, her eyes betraying passion and desire.

'Your eyes will harm me. Do not stare at me, Jugal.'

'I will miss you a lot after I go back.'

'Where do you go after making the chhattis? You are not here to be seen.'



where do you go after making the chapattis? You are nowhere to be seen.

‘Since Sarkar is around, I fail to muster up the courage to approach you. Bahuji, I am going to be dismissed now. Let’s see where I am fated to find a job.’

Asha flew into a rage and said, ‘Who is going to dismiss you?’

‘Sarkar himself said, “I will sack you.”’

‘Go on doing your duties. No one is going to dismiss you. You have already started making properly baked and shapely chapattis.’

‘But the master loses his temper easily.’

‘Don’t worry. His temper will abate.’

‘When he walks with you, he looks like your father.’

‘You are taking liberties with me. Beware. Think before you speak.’

Her apparent annoyance failed to cloak her furtive feelings. They shone like the rays of light. Moreover, Jugal added with a disarming frankness, ‘You can command me to stay silent. To be honest, everyone says so. As for me, if I am married to a fifty-year-old woman, I will either run away from home or consume poison or give her poison. I know the result—it won’t be more than capital punishment.’

Asha’s false annoyance vanished into thin air. Jugal had touched a raw nerve. She could not contain her woes. ‘Jugal, one cannot escape one’s fate,’ she said despairingly.

‘May such fate perish!’

‘Wait, I will get you married to an old woman.’

‘I will consume poison.’

‘Why? An old woman will love you more than a young one. She will be more devoted to you and will keep you on the right path.’

‘Those are the jobs of a mother. A wife is not meant for them—she is for something else.’

‘What is a wife for? Tell me.’

‘If you had not been my employer, I would have given you the answer.’

Suddenly, they heard the sound of a car outside. God knows how and when the part of Asha’s sari covering her head had slipped down to her shoulders. She hurriedly pulled it over her head and rushed out of the kitchen, instructing Jugal, ‘Come when Lala goes away after taking his meal.’

*Translated from the Urdu by A. Naseeb Khan*



## The Ailing Sister

Sevti has been sick for the past several days. She cannot get up from her charpoy. She cannot go out to play.

Bhondu is her little brother. When Sevti asks for water to drink, he rushes to fetch it for her in a tumbler.

When Sevti gets restless because of the hot weather, he begins to fan her with a hand fan. He wants his dear sister to recover as soon as possible. He cannot play games alone.

The moment Bhondu's school gets over, he rushes to his sister's side and reads stories to her. Sevti listens to him eagerly and feels happy.

Last evening, Sevti's health worsened. She started groaning loudly. Bhondu was scared. He had heard from his parents that God is very kind. Wouldn't He listen to the prayers of a little boy?

The moment services began in the temple, he reached there and bent down before the image of god. 'Oh God, You are kind to the needy. Please cure my sister soon.'

*Translated from the Hindi by M. Asaduddin*



## Slander

One can curse even the king in the privacy of one's home.

One day I was sitting with a couple of friends and talking about the functionaries of national organizations. We felt that anyone working for the nation should be above greed and self-interest. One can serve one's nation truly only when one is pure of heart and has a lofty sense of ideal. The behaviour of several people had upset us and we were letting out pent-up steam. It was possible that in their positions we might have done worse, but we were passing judgement on others and, as judges, we couldn't afford to be lenient. A judge quickly forgets that he too may have weaknesses. The only difference between a judge and an accused is that the former had never faced a situation as the accused, and even if he did he had wriggled out of it without a blemish by way of cunning.

Padma Devi said, 'Mr A works very hard, there's no question about it. But if you look at the accounts, you'll find that he owes the organization no less than a thousand rupees.'

Urmila Devi said, 'Well, Mr A may be forgiven. After all, he has children. How can he bring them up? If he devotes all twenty-four hours of the day to the service of the nation, he must get something in return. You can't find a person of his competence by paying a salary of five hundred rupees a month. Even if he has spent a thousand in the whole year, it's not much. But how about Mr B? He has no wife or children to look after, no strings attached. But he too must've spent as much. What right does anyone have to spend the money contributed by the poor in car rides and organizing dinners for one's friends?'

Shyama Devi said with aggression, 'Mr C must answer for this. He can't be

spared. Do we gather money from people by begging so that he can invite friends over, drink liquor and go for musical soirées? He has to go to a movie every day. This is not the way poor people's money should be spent. He has to account for every paisa. I'll bring the matter up in the general meeting. He can go where he gets a salary of five hundred rupees. There'll be others willing to serve the nation.'

I was the secretary of the organization for a term. I take pride in the fact that no one levelled such allegations against me. Nevertheless, people weren't happy with me. They felt that I gave very little time to the organization and that I didn't do anything during my tenure to enhance its reputation. I resigned in a fit of pique. I had to leave even though there were no allegations against me. But Mr C is well ensconced in his post even after embezzling thousands of rupees. Wasn't it enough for me to bear a grudge against him? Like an artful player, I didn't want to be openly resentful but was willing to pull strings from behind.

'Deviji,' I said, 'you're being unjust. You can't find anyone more generous than Mr C . . .'

Urmila cut me off in mid-sentence, 'I don't call a person generous who spends public money in drinking secretly. He gets his drinks from the same wine shops we picket during day time. What can be a more dastardly act than this? I call such a person a traitor.'

I provoked her further, 'But even you'll accept the fact that Mr C raises funds worth thousands of rupees because of his personal influence. One can't compliment him enough for his efforts to stop the use of British clothing.'

Urmila Devi was not one to be easily convinced. 'People donate money because of the reputation of the organization. He can't raise a paisa in his own name. As for British clothing, people love hero worship. He's being praised. But to tell you the truth, he never went to any shop for picketing.

'People all over the city are discussing this. Wherever one goes for donations people throw these facts at us. How many people can you shut up. He pretends to be a servant of the nation, but his lifestyle is just the opposite. The country cannot be saved by such licentious people. One needs to make sacrifices for it.'

The discussion was still on when another lady arrived. She was Bhagwati Devi. She had gone to collect donations and had now returned, exhausted. Seeing the gathering she stopped by. With her was her ten-year-old daughter who used to accompany her in this good work. She was starving. The house key

who used to accompany her in all good work. She was staying. The house key was with Bhagwati Devi. Her husband would also return from office shortly. It was necessary that the house be opened. I volunteered to take the girl home.

After walking for a couple of minutes, the girl asked me, 'Are you aware that Mr C indulges in drinking?' I couldn't say yes. Even a jealous person like me didn't feel it proper to sow the seeds of bitterness, envy and duplicity in the mind of an innocent girl. At this age, she should radiate simplicity, faithfulness and sweetness and not slander and pettiness. A deity should not be adorned with a garland of thorns.

'Who told you that Mr C drinks liquor?'

'He does drink, you may not know of it.'

'How did you know?'

'All the people of the city talk about it.'

'All of them are telling lies.'

The girl looked at me with mistrust. Probably she was wondering whether I was a friend of Mr C.

'Can you claim that Mr C doesn't drink liquor?'

'Of course. He doesn't drink.'

'And Mr A hasn't embezzled people's money?'

'This is also untrue.'

'And Mr B doesn't go for car rides?'

'It's not a crime to go for car rides.'

'It may not be a crime for kings, aristocrats and officers who suck people's blood. It's a heinous crime for those who swear by patriotism.'

'But just think how much they need to travel. How long can they walk?'

'They can use bicycles. But no, they want to travel in style, so that people would know how big they are! Our organization is formed by poor people. Here, we should use motor cars only when no other means of travel is available. And there should be no place for drunkards here. You don't go to ask for donations. You've no idea how much embarrassment we have to face.'

I said in a solemn voice, 'You should tell people that all these are absolute lies. You and I are the well-wishers of the organization. We shouldn't humiliate our own functionaries. We should appreciate their services. I do not say that Mr A, Mr B and Mr C do not have faults. Who in the world doesn't have faults? But their good qualities far outweigh their faults. All of us work with self-interest.

We build houses, buy property, or stay at home enjoying our leisure. But these poor fellows keep worrying about the country all twenty-four hours of the day. All three of them have come out of prison only a few months ago. It is through their efforts that the hospital and the library have opened. It is through their movement that the tax on the farmers has been reduced. If they had to drink alcohol and amass wealth why would they come in this line?’

The girl looked at me with searching eyes and asked, ‘Just tell me this—does Mr C drink?’

I said unequivocally, ‘No. Whoever says this tells lies.’

Bhagwati Devi’s home was in sight. The girl went in. Today I was happy telling lies, in fact happier than telling the truth. I had saved the mind of an innocent girl from being polluted by the muck of slander.

*Translated from the Hindi by M. Asaduddin*



## Thakur's Well

### 1

The moment Jokhu put the lota to his lips, the water smelled foul. He asked Gangi, 'What sort of water is this! It stinks so much. My throat is burning and you give me water that stinks.'

Gangi fetched water every evening. The well was far off; it wasn't easy to go time and again. The day before when she had fetched water, there had been no smell in it. How come this stink today? She sniffed the water. It really was stinking. Some animal must have fallen into the well and died. But where would she get water from now?

There was the Thakur's well, but would anyone let her even step on to it? People would shout at her and shoo her away. The Sahuji's well was at the other end of the village but even there they wouldn't allow her to draw water. There was no other well in the village.

Jokhu had been ailing for quite some time. He lay there for a while, controlling his thirst, and then said, 'I'm so thirsty I can't stand it. Bring me some water, I'll hold my breath and drink a little.'

But Gangi didn't give him the foul water. She knew that it would make him worse. She did not know that boiling the water would make it safe. She said, 'How can you drink this water? Who knows what kind of beast has died in the well? I'll go and get some fresh water.'

Surprised, Jokhu stared at her. 'From where will you get the water?'

'What about the two wells of the Thakur and the Sahu? Won't they let me fill just one lota?'



‘You’ll only get your hands and feet broken. Nothing will come of it. Leave it. The Brahmin will curse you, the Thakur will beat you with a stick and the Sahu will charge five for one. Who understands the pain of the poor? Even if we die no one bothers to look in at our door, let alone lend a shoulder to carry the dead. You think they’ll let us draw water from their well?’

This was the bitter truth. What could Gangi say! Yet she didn’t give Jokhu the water.

## 2

It was nine o’clock at night. The exhausted workers had gone to sleep. Only a few idlers lingered near the Thakur’s doorstep, chatting. Gone were the times and occasions for physical valour. Now there was only talk of legal prowess. How smartly the Thakur had bribed the inspector in a case and come out clean! How very cleverly he had got a copy of a landmark judgement, even after both the clerk and the administrator had said that it could not be attained. Somebody wanted fifty for it, some a hundred. But he had acquired a copy without spending a single paisa! One had to know the ways of the world.

Just then, Gangi reached the well to draw water.

A flicker of light fell on the well. Gangi hid behind the stone platform, awaiting the right moment. The entire village drank the water of this well. No one was forbidden except for these unfortunates.

Gangi’s rebellious heart struck against the traditional restrictions and taboos. *Why are they high and we low? Just because they wear a sacred thread around their neck! Each one is more crooked than the other! They are the ones who commit thefts and fraud and file false cases. Only the other day this Thakur stole a sheep from a poor shepherd, slaughtered and devoured it. Gambling goes on round the year in Panditji’s house. And Sahuji adulterates ghee with oil and sells it. They make you do the work but when it comes to wages, every paisa hurts them. How are they any better than us? True, they are better at praising themselves. We don’t go from street to street, proclaiming our worth: ‘We are superior! We are superior!’ If I happen to come to the village they eye me with lust, their heart burns with malice and yet they think that they’re superior!*

There was a sound of someone’s footsteps approaching the well. Gangi’s heart started beating fast. If they saw her, the heavens would fall! They’d give her an

started beating fast. If they saw her, the heavens would fall. They'd give her an awful beating.

She picked up the jar and rope and, stooping, quickly moved away and stood under the dark shadows of a tree. Do these people ever feel sorry for others? They thrashed poor Manghu so hard just because he refused to work for them without wages. He kept spitting out blood for months afterwards. And yet they think they're superior to others!

Two women had come to draw water and were talking to each other.

'The moment they sit down for food, they order us to get fresh water. No money for an additional jar.'

'Our few moments of leisure make these men jealous.'

'Yes, it wouldn't occur to them to pick up the jar and fetch the water themselves. They merely order us to get the fresh water as if we're slaves.'

'If we aren't slaves then what are we? Don't you get your food and clothes from them? Somehow or the other you also manage to get ten or five rupees. In what way are slaves any different?'

'Don't embarrass me, sister! How I long for a moment's rest! Had I worked as hard as this in anyone else's house, I'd have been better off. On top of that they'd have been grateful. Here one may die of working far too much and yet no one has the decency to speak a kind word.'

Once they had filled their jars and left, Gangi stepped out of the shadows and walked up to the well. The idlers had left by then. The Thakur was ready to lock the door and go to sleep in the courtyard. Gangi heaved a sigh of relief. The coast was clear. Even the legendary prince of bygone times who had gone to steal holy water from the gods had not taken as much care and precaution as she was taking.

Softly, Gangi climbed up to the platform of the well. She had never before experienced such a feeling of triumph.

She tied the knot around the jar and quickly looked around, much like a soldier trying to bore a hole into the wall of the enemy's fort. If caught now, there would be no room for forgiveness or leniency. At last, praying to the gods, she braced herself and lowered the jar into the well.

The pitcher disappeared into the well gently. Not a sound. Quickly Gangi drew up the rope. The jar came up to the mouth of the well. Not even a well-built wrestler could have pulled it faster.

As Gangi bent to retrieve the jar and place it on the platform, the Thakur's door opened all of a sudden. Not even the mouth of a lion could be more terrifying.

The rope slipped from Gangi's hand. The pitcher fell with a loud splash into the water below and for some moments the sound reverberated.

The Thakur advanced towards the well, crying out loudly, 'Who's that? Who's that?'

Gangi jumped from the platform and ran away as fast as she could.

When she reached home, she saw Jokhu with the pot to his lips, drinking the same foul water.

*Translated from the Hindi by M. Asaduddin*



## The Spectacle

### 1

For the last few days, the atmosphere in the house had been quite unpleasant. My mother had thrown a tantrum, so had my wife. It was as though the air had been poisoned. At night, the meal wasn't cooked. I made khichri the following day, but there were no takers. Even the kids did not eat. The little one would sidle up to me at times, then to her mother, and then go to her grandma. But no one uttered a kind word to her. No one hugged her, as if she too was at fault. In the evening, my son returned from school. No one offered him food or looked after his needs. The brother and the sister were sitting in the veranda. They never had to go without food or sit in such uncomfortable silence. What kind of quarrel was it that wouldn't end even after twenty-four hours, they wondered.

It was a tiff without a reason. My wife didn't like the elaborate list of items that Amma had prepared for the festival of Teej, to be sent to my sister's family. Amma knew about it. So, she struck off a few items, but my wife wanted more items to be excised from the list. What's the harm if there are three saris instead of five! What's the need for so many toys and sweets! Her argument was: when the income was meagre and one had to cut back on daily necessities such as milk and ghee, why squander money on Teej. One lights a lamp in the house first and then in the mosque, and not the other way around. This led to arguments between the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law and then sparks began to fly. One thing led to another, skeletons in the closet were dragged out. Innuendos were made, sarcastic comments were hurled, which finally ended in an ominous calm.

I was in a dilemma. If I said something in favour of Amma, then my better half would start howling and cursing her fate. And if I supported my wife then I was branded as henpecked. So, I had no option but to adjust my stance to suit both the sides. Nevertheless, my sympathies lay with my wife as it suited my interests. It was almost a year since I had had to give up watching films and downsize my expenses on paan. My carefree wanderings in the market had come to an end. I didn't have the courage to say all this to my mother, but I knew well that she was not totally fair. As for income from the shop, there were days when even a single customer wouldn't show up. The customers never paid up, so it was quite useless pursuing this profession and making my own life miserable.

I was totally fed up with these frequent family squabbles. There were just three members in the family, but they were unable to live cordially. To hell with such domesticity! At times, I felt a strong urge to run away from home. If they were called upon to bear the responsibility of running the family, they would realize what it meant. That would bring them to their senses. If I knew of this, I wouldn't have ever thought of getting married. A host of ugly thoughts crossed my mind. It rankled me that amma wanted to add to my miseries. How could I be blamed if my wife didn't massage her feet or oil her hair? I hadn't asked her not to. In fact, I would be delighted if the daughter-in-law and the mother-in-law grew fond of one another. But it was not in my power to make them love each other. If Amma, when she was a daughter-in-law, had washed her mother-in-law's sari, pressed her feet and surrendered to her abuses silently, then why should she want to settle scores with her bahu? Why couldn't she understand that times had changed. Now, daughters-in-law aren't afraid of their mothers-in-law. With love, you can make them dance to your tune, but those days are gone when you could order them about.

While the world celebrated Janmashtami, we had a war raging at home. It was evening but the house was enveloped in darkness. An inauspicious air hung about the house. I felt annoyed with my wife. Argue as much as you want, but why should the house be in darkness. 'Won't the lamps be lit today?' I asked her.

'Why don't *you* light them up? Don't you have two hands?' replied my wife.

I was furious at her insolence. 'Hah, do you think lamps were not lit in this house before you came here?'

Amma added fuel to the fire, 'Oh yes, we were languishing in darkness before

she came into the family.'

Amma's remark made my wife go off her handle. 'Well, I've been here for ten years and don't remember seeing any lanterns. So, you must have been managing with those cheap earthen lamps!'

'That's enough, just stop it here,' I tried to scold her down.

'Oh, you shout as if you've bought me over.'

'Just shut up.'

'Why should I shut up? If you can chide me, I too can give you a piece of my mind.'

'Is that behaving like a good wife?'

'You got what you asked for.'

Defeated, I slunk into a dark corner cursing the day I got married to this ill-omened woman. Images of my ten-year-old married life floated across my mind as if on a film screen. There was not even a ray of light, nor a moment of tenderness.

## 2

Pandit Jaidevji, my friend who had come visiting, called out, '*Arré*, why is it so dark here? I don't understand. Where are you?'

I did not reply, wondering why he had chosen to land up on that day.

Jaidev again yelled, 'Where are you, brother? Why don't you speak? Is anyone at home?'

I gave no answer.

Jaidev banged the door so hard that I feared it might come off its hinges. I still did not speak. His visit was not welcome at that hour.

Jaidev left and I heaved a sigh of relief. The evil was warded off; otherwise he would have bored me for hours.

However, within five minutes, I heard footsteps again and the beam of a torchlight flashed across my room. Surprised to find me sitting, Jaidev asked, 'Where were you? I shouted for hours, but no one replied. What's the matter! Why haven't the lamps been lit?'

I made an excuse, 'I've no idea. I had a headache, so after returning from the shop, I lay down and fell fast asleep.'

‘And you really slept like a log, oblivious of everything?’

‘*Haan*, yaar, just dozed off.’

‘At least you should have lit the lamps. Or are you going for a *retrenchment*<sup>1</sup>?’

‘Family members are fasting today. They might be busy.’

‘Anyway, come let’s go watch some *jhanki*. Seth Ghurelal’s temple has arranged a spectacular one. An elaborate display of mirrors and electric lights will dazzle your eyes. The Ashoka pillars have been decorated with an array of red, green and blue lights. A fountain, right in front of the throne, sprays rose water. I was so thrilled to see it that I came running to you to share my excitement. You must have seen many a *jhanki*, but this is quite something else. The whole world has converged there. I heard that some expert artisan from Delhi has come, who has done this miracle.”

I said disinterestedly, ‘Bhai, I’m not in a mood to go. I’ve a terrible headache.’

‘All the more reason for you to come. I assure you, your headache will disappear.’

‘Yaar, You’re too stubborn. I was lying quietly in the hope that you’d leave me alone, but you’re still bothering me. I’ve told you that I do not want to go.’

‘And I’m telling you that I’ll take you along.’

My friends know how to get the better of me. No one can defeat me in wrestling or fisticuffs, but if anyone tickles me then I’m done for. Completely overpowered, I start cringing and pleading, sometimes bursting into tears. Jaidev tried the same old trick and won. I agreed to go with him to watch the *jhanki*.

### 3

Seth Ghurelal is regarded as an inauspicious person. People believe that if you see his face in the morning you may not get anything to eat throughout the day. Scores of tales about his proverbial stinginess thrive in the town. People say that once a *bhikshuk*, a wandering beggar, from Marwar, stood before his door, adamant that he wouldn’t leave without alms. Sethji was also equally stubborn and determined not to give alms, come what may. The beggar had come from Ghurelal’s home town. First, he praised Ghurelal’s forefathers, then he started cursing them and finally slumped himself at the doorway. The seth was

unmoved and the beggar too stood his ground. For seven days, he lay there without food or drink and ultimately died at the spot. Sethji softened towards him after his death and performed his last rites with fanfare, as was unheard before. One lakh Brahmins were invited for a feast and offered one lakh rupees as *dakshina*. The beggar's 'satyagraha' turned out to be a blessing in disguise. A stream of devotion began to flow in Ghurelal's heart. He gave away all his wealth to charity.

When we reached the temple complex, it was teeming with spectators. People rubbed shoulders with each other. The entrance and exit routes were separate, yet it took us half an hour to enter. Jaidev was greatly impressed by the decor, but I felt that Krishna's soul had got lost in the extravagant pomp and show. The bejewelled idol, shimmering in electric lights, left me cold. Can love dwell in such a form? I have always seen jewels exuding arrogance and pride. But I had forgotten that it was a millionaire's temple and the rich can only think of a god wallowing in wealth. They can feel devotion only for a rich deity. Those without wealth can be objects of pity, not of devotion.

Jaidev was a familiar face at the temple. In fact, he was known everywhere. A group of singers were present at the temple complex. Kelkarji, along with his disciples from Gandharv Vidyalaya, was sitting with his tambourine. The students had pakhawaj, sitar, sarod, veena and many other musical instruments in their hands of which I did not know the names. They were preparing for a performance. Kelkarji called out to Jaidev as soon as he saw him. I also joined in. Soon they began singing. The ambience was set. A minute ago, the crowd was jostling about, and people couldn't hear each other's voices, but now everyone seemed to be drowned in the sweet stream of music. Everyone stood there transfixed. I could have never imagined it so vividly. The glistening electric lights, the lustrous glow of wealth, the sacred figurine, none of these were before my eyes. I dreamt of the Yamuna, its shoreline veiled with tendrils and creepers. I could visualize the gentle cows, the *gopis* splashing about in the lake, the melodious strain of a flute, the soothing moonbeam and the adorable Nand Kishore! One whose face evoked love for children, whose very sight cleansed hearts.



Lost in this state of happy oblivion, I did not realize when the concert ended and a young pupil of Acharya Kelkar began singing a Dhrupad composition.

Classical singers often tend to twist the words of a song in such a way that it becomes difficult for most of the listeners to understand them. I could not understand even a word of the song, but the lilting melody had such a pleasant appeal that each note charmed me. For the first time, I realized the magical power of a song. A new world was created before my eyes filled with contentment, love and sacrifice. Sadness appeared to be just a passing feeling and happiness became the real truth.

A pure, pitiful tenderness began to tear my heart. I felt that everyone sitting there was my own, as though we were one. From the memory of a distant past rose an image of my brother. Long ago, my younger brother had fought with me and run away with our savings to Rangoon and had died there. The memory of his awful conduct drove me crazy. I could probably have killed him if I had met him alive but now his memory made me nostalgic. I longed to hug him. His bitter, mean and odious conduct towards me, my wife, mother and my children was all forgotten. Just a single thought lingered—my brother was so sad. I had never felt this kind of tenderness for my brother.

Now, my heart went out to him as if it was cleansed of enmity. Those who were hostile to me and hurled invectives at me, those I had fought and conducted litigations with, now appeared to be embracing me with smiles! Then, the image of Vidya passed through my mind, my wife whom I had seen for the first time ten years ago. She looked like a lotus in full bloom—with her tremulous eyes, her misgivings and the faint blush on her cheeks. I remembered how I welcomed her into my life on that unforgettable night with my heart filled with longings and emotions.

A stream of fond memories gushed forth. I felt an irresistible desire to fall at Vidya's feet and cry my heart out, until I fell unconscious. My eyes brimmed with tears. The harsh words, which I had uttered, now began to rankle my heart. While I was in this state, I could feel the presence of my loving mother, taking me into her arms tenderly. That day, I experienced filial love, the like of which I had never experienced as a young boy.

The recital had ended and the people were dispersing. I kept sitting, lost in the world of my imagination.

Suddenly Jaidev called out 'Are you coming or not?'

Suddenly, Sardar called out, Are you coming or not.

*Translated from the Hindi by M. Asaduddin.*



## Life Sentence

### 1

Ten o'clock at night, a richly decorated room in a sprawling house, an electric fire, electric light—Christmas had come.

Seth Khubchandji was arranging gifts in large, round baskets to be sent out to officials. Before him stood mountains of fresh and dry fruit, sweets and toys. His *munim* was reading out the names of the officials and Sethji was filling the baskets with his own hands.

Khubchandji was the owner of a mill, a major Bombay contractor. He had also served as mayor. He was still the secretary of several business associations and the chairman of the chamber of commerce. Who was to say what part these gift baskets played in the acquisition of his wealth, public esteem and honour, but this festive occasion consumed five to ten thousand rupees of Sethji's money. If some people cared to call him a flatterer, toady or sycophant, then what did that cost him? Let them do so. Sethji was not a man to do a good deed and fail to capitalize on it.

His pujari came to the door and said, 'Sarkar, it is very late. Thakurji's food offering is ready.'

Like other men of wealth, Sethji had built a temple. He had employed the pujari to perform the rituals for Lord Krishna, or Thakurji.

Casting an angry glance at the pujari, he replied, 'Can't you see what I'm doing? This is work too, not a game—your Thakurji is not going to give us everything. A man can only think about religious rituals when his stomach is full. Your Thakurji won't starve if he waits an hour or so.'

The priest departed with a long face and Sethji again busied himself filling the baskets.

Sethji's main work in life was to accrue riches and his main duty was to safeguard the means by which he accrued them. His entire business depended upon this principle. He would meet his friends to take their help in furthering his prosperity. If he took part in any entertainment it was with business in mind. He gave a lot away in charity but always to the same purpose. Only when he was free from all other duties would he stand before the deity and sip the sacred water that had washed its feet.

An hour later the pujari came to disturb him again. Khubchandji took umbrage at the sight of him. Wouldn't anybody be annoyed to be repeatedly interrupted in the middle of the rituals that brought immediate reward? He said, 'I told you I don't have time now. And now you've come to sit on my head! I am not a slave to ritual. Thakurji is only worshipped when there's money in the house. If there were no money then even Thakurji wouldn't come asking after us.'

The pujari left in despair and Sethji recommenced his activities.

Suddenly his friend Keshavramji arrived. Sethji rose and embraced him. 'Where are you coming from? I was just about to call you.'

Keshavramji smiled. 'You're still working on gift baskets this late at night? Put them away now. You've got the whole of tomorrow to finish them. I'm amazed at the amount of work you do. Don't you remember the programme for today?'

Sethji raised his head, scouring his memory. 'Was there anything special? I don't recall . . . (then suddenly it struck him) . . . Oh yes, that! Yes, I remember. It's still not too late. I was so engrossed in this that I totally forgot.'

'Then come along. I'd thought you would've been there already.'

'Laila wasn't annoyed at my absence?'

'That you'll discover when you get there.'

'You apologize on my behalf.'

'Why should I apologize for you? She was sitting there, frowning like anything, and then she said to me, "If he does not care for me, then I don't care for him." She wasn't prepared to let me come here. I managed to pacify her but you'll have to make some excuse or the other.'

Khubchandji winked. 'I'll say I had urgent business with the Governor Sahib.'

'No, that won't work. She'll say, "Why didn't you ask me before you left?"'

She doesn't rate the Governor much compared to herself. Beauty and youth are the great things, Bhai Sahib. Don't you know that?'

'Then you suggest an excuse.'

'Oh, there are dozens. Tell her you had a temperature of 106 degrees in the afternoon and you've just risen from your sickbed.'

The two friends laughed and headed off to listen to the courtesan's music performance.

## 2

Sethji's Swadeshi Mill was one of the country's biggest. Since the movement for Indian-made goods had begun, its sales had doubled. Sethji had increased the price of his cloth by two annas in the rupee but sales hadn't dropped. However, the prices of grain had come down and so Sethji had announced that he was cutting wages. For several days, workers' representatives had been discussing the issue with him. He was not inclined to budge an inch. When he could find new men prepared to work for half the wages, why should he keep on his old labour force? The fact was that this was his gambit to rid himself of them.

Finally, the workers decided to go on strike.

It was morning. There was a crowd of workers within the mill compound. Some were perched on the surrounding wall, some were sitting on the ground and others were strolling here and there. Police constables were on duty at the gate. The entire mill came to a standstill.

At the sight of a young man entering the compound, hundreds of workers came running and gathered around him. Everyone was asking, 'What did Sethji say?'

This tall, thin, swarthy young man was the workers' representative. There was such inner strength, resolve and gravity in his features that all the men had accepted him as their leader.

'Nothing. He won't listen.'

Around him voices rose. 'Then we're not going to grovel to him either.'

The youth spoke again. 'He's determined to cut our wages whether we work or not. This year the mill has made profits of ten lakh rupees. This is the result of our hard labour but still it's our wages that are being cut. The bellies of the rich

are never satisfied. We are weak and helpless, who's going to listen to us? The chamber of commerce is on his side, the government is on his side, the shareholders are on his side—who's on ours? Only God can help us.'

One worker said, 'And Sethji's a great man of God as well.'

The young man smiled. 'Yes, a great man of God! Nowhere around here is any temple so lavishly decorated as his, nowhere are the rituals so strictly observed, nowhere are there such festivals, such tableaux of the gods. It's the reflected glory of all this devotion that makes him so respected in the city. Other people's goods lie unsold and his are sold before they reach the warehouse. Yet, this great servant of God is cutting our pay. If the mill were to run at a loss, we would work for half pay but when profit worth lakhs are involved, what reason can there be to cut our money? We cannot bear injustice. Swear to stop any outsider from entering the mill, even if he brings an army with him. We don't care if lathi blows rain down on us, or bullets fly . . . '

A voice shouted, 'Sethji!'

Every man turned to look at the owner. Each one's face turned pale. Many of them, panic-stricken, began to entreat the constables to let them into the mill, others hid behind bales of cotton. A very few, looking rather scared, held their places beside the young man.

Sethji summoned the constables as he climbed out of his motor car and told them, 'Thrash these men and get them out of here this minute.'

Lathis fell on the workers. Over half a dozen fell, while the rest ran for their lives. The young man, and two others with him, stood unmoved.

Might is intolerant. That Sethji should come in person and these men should remain there constituted open rebellion. 'Who could endure such disrespect?' *Just look at that boy, thought Sethji, he doesn't have clothes to cover his body and yet he stands there as if I am nobody. He must imagine that I can't touch him.*

Sethji reached for his revolver, approached the three men and ordered them to leave. They held their ground. Sethji was beside himself with rage. Who were they to threaten him! He called the head constable and ordered him, 'Arrest these men!'

The constables bound them tightly with rope and led them towards the gate. The moment they were arrested a thousand-strong crowd streamed out of the

mill and rushed towards the prisoners. The constables realized that they couldn't save themselves even if they opened fire. They left their prisoners and ran. Sethji was in such a fury that he felt like blasting them all with cannons. In his ire, he was oblivious to all thought of self-protection. With the prisoners freed, the crowd was now pressing towards him. Sethji thought, *They all want to take my life. And that chap Gopi heads them! Taking himself to be their leader here too! A wet cat before me, now he dares stand at the front of the mob!*

Even now Sethji could have reached a compromise; but it was insufferable for him to submit and plead for mercy from rebels.

At this moment, he noticed that the crowd had stopped halfway. The young man had conferred with the men with him and then walked alone towards him. Sethji said to himself, 'Perhaps he's coming to set terms for letting me out alive. They all got together to plan this. Just look at his confidence, like a victorious general. How those constables ran with their tails between their legs. I wouldn't have spared you but now we'll see what happens. As long as I have my revolver what can you do to me? I am not going to kneel to you.'

The youth had approached him and was about to speak when Sethji lifted his revolver and fired. The young man fell to the ground, writhing in pain.

The moment he fell, the crowd of workers turned into a mob. Until that point, they harboured no intentions of being violent. They merely wanted to show Sethji that he wouldn't be able to sit in peace if their pay was cut. But violence begot violence. Sethji recognized that his life was in danger and on level ground he wouldn't be able to save himself for long even with a revolver—but there was nowhere to run! Unable to think of anything else, he climbed on to a bale of cotton and pointed his gun at the men below to stop them from climbing after him. He was surrounded by five or six hundred of them. Sethji stood alone with his revolver. There was no sign of help arriving from anywhere and with every moment his hopes of saving his life were being crushed. The constables couldn't even have informed their officers of the situation. Why else would no one have come yet? How long could he protect himself with just five bullets? They would all be finished in a few seconds. He had made a mistake. He should have brought a rifle and cartridges. Then he would have seen how brave they were. He would have liked to shoot them one by one. But how could he have known that a situation as terrifying as this would arise?

One of the men below said 'Set fire to the bales. Get out your matches. He's

One of the men below said, 'Set fire to the bales. Set out your matches. He has earned his riches from cotton, let him burn on a pyre of it.'

Immediately another man took out a box of matches and was about to set the bales alight when the wounded young man made his way through the crowd. A bandage had been tied around his leg but the blood was still flowing. His face was yellowish and from the tension written there it appeared he was in unbearable pain. The men at once thronged around him. Even in their violent frenzy, the sight of their leader alive flooded them with limitless joy. The sky resounded with cries of 'Victory to Gopinath! *Gopinath ki jai!*'

The wounded Gopinath raised his hand, gesturing to the workers to be silent, and addressed them. 'Brothers, I have come to say a few words to you. I cannot tell if I will live or die. It is possible that this is my last request to you. What are you doing? The house of the poor man is the house of God. Do you want to prove that a lie? A rich man can be made arrogant by his wealth. What have you to be arrogant about? Where is there room for anger and false pride in your huts? I beg you, all of you, go back. If you have any love for me, if I have ever been of any service to you, go to your own homes and let Sethji go to his.'

From all sides voices rose in objection but no one had the courage to oppose Gopinath. Gradually they began to retreat. When some space was cleared, Gopinath turned humbly to Sethji.

'Sarkar, please leave. I know you were deceived into shooting me. I was just coming to say to you what I am saying to you now. It is my misfortune that you suspected me. It was God's will also.'

Sethji began to have faith in Gopinath. He was certainly doubtful about coming down but there was no hope of saving his life on top of the bale either. He descended, his eyes darting anxiously back and forth. The crowd stood some ten yards away. Each man's eyes burnt with rebellion and violence. Some were making crude remarks in low voices—but loud enough for Sethji to hear. Still, not one of them dared to come before him. That was the power in the orders of that dying youth.

Sethji had climbed into his motor car and was just driving away when Gopinath collapsed and fell to the ground.



The image of the wounded Gopinath flashed before Sethji's eyes as fast as his motor car was travelling. All manner of thoughts assailed him. In his heart stirred feelings of guilt. If Gopinath had been his enemy, then why had he saved his life when he himself was in the grip of death? Sethji had no answer. It was as if the innocent Gopinath were standing before him with his hands bound asking. 'Why did you kill me when I meant you no harm?'

Licentiousness blinds a man to all but his own desires. Still, Sethji was not so inveterate and hard-hearted that he felt no remorse at killing an innocent man. He reasoned with himself, offering a hundred arguments in his defence, but his sense of justice would accept none of them. It was as if the memory of his deed was sitting in protest at his door and would not be satisfied until it was granted a boon. By the time he reached home, he was as troubled and despairing as if he had been clamped in irons.

Pramila asked nervously, 'What happened to the strike? I've been very frightened.'

Khubchand sank into an armchair and took a deep breath. 'Don't ask. My life was saved somehow. Just be satisfied with that. The police ran away; the men surrounded me. Finally, I managed to escape. When I was surrounded what could I do? I used my revolver.'

Pramila asked, terrified, 'Was anyone hurt?'

'That Gopinath was wounded, the one who used to come to meet me on behalf of the workers. The moment he went down a thousand of them came after me. I ran and climbed on to a cotton bale. There was no hope of saving myself. They were setting the bales on fire.'

Pramila trembled.

'Suddenly, that wounded man stood up, came before them and persuaded them to let me live. If he hadn't there's no way I would have survived.'

'God saved you! That was why I told you not to go alone. They must have taken that man to hospital?'

Sethji said sorrowfully, 'I'm afraid he may be dead. When I was in my car I saw him fall and the men gathered round him. I don't know what happened to him.'

Pramila was one of those good women in whose veins faith runs instead of blood. Ritual bathing and worship, renunciation and fasting were the bases of her life. In happiness in sorrow or in comfort her devotion was her shield. At this

...in happiness, in sorrow or in comfort, her devotion was her shield. At this time too, faced with difficulty, who but God would help her! As she stood facing the doorway her faithful heart fell at the feet of the Almighty and pleaded for forgiveness.

Sethji spoke, 'That worker must have been a truly great man in his former birth. Otherwise why would he have braved everything to save the life of the man who had shot him.'

Pramila said reverently, 'Through God's inspiration, what else? God is merciful and that is why good thoughts enter our minds.'

Sethji showed interest. 'So then wrong thoughts must also be inspired by God?'

Pramila swiftly retorted, 'God is bliss Himself. A lamp can never shed darkness.'

Sethji was thinking of a reply when he was startled by a noise outside. Opening the window that faced the road, they both looked out and saw thousands of men carrying black flags approaching from the right. Behind the black flags was a bier. This was Gopinath's funeral procession. After Sethji had left for his home, the workers had sent messages to other mills about the murder. The news had spread like lightning around the city and workers had gone on strike in several mills. The entire city was gripped by this sensational development. Shopkeepers closed their shutters for fear of rioting. The funeral procession wound around the important places of the city to Seth Khubchand's house, the marchers bent on avenging Gopinath's blood. Meanwhile, the police had resolved to protect Sethji even if a river of blood had to flow. Behind the procession, two hundred armed police men were marching at the double to suppress the rioters.

Sethji had not yet decided where his duty lay when the protesters forced their way into the office rooms at his residence and began burning ledgers and account books and breaking open the safe boxes. The *munim* and other employees, as well as the guard, all fled for their lives. At that moment, from the left the police contingent arrived ready for action and the police commissioner ordered the protesters to leave the area within five minutes.

With one voice the crowd roared, '*Gopinath ki Jai!*'

If the same situation had arisen an hour earlier, Sethji would have allowed the protesters to become the targets of police bullets with total equanimity. But

Gopinath's God-like generosity of spirit and self-sacrifice had relieved the disorders of his mind and now even the most ordinary medicine had the effect of a miracle cure.

He said to Pramila, 'I am going to admit my crime before all of them. Otherwise who knows how many homes will be ruined because of me.'

Pramila replied, her voice trembling, 'Why don't you try and make them understand from here by the window? Give them whatever wages they demand.'

'They're thirsty for my blood now, increasing wages will have no effect on them.'

'Then you'll be charged with murder,' said Pramila, tears in her eyes.

Sethji replied resolutely, 'If that be the will of God, what can I do? One man's life is not so valuable that countless lives be lost for his sake.'

It seemed to Pramila as if she were in the presence of God Himself. She clung to her husband. 'What are you saying?'

Sethji embraced her and replied, 'God will protect you.' He uttered no other word. Pramila was sobbing. Leaving her behind, Sethji walked downstairs.

This day the wealth for which he had done whatever he should have done and whatever he should not have done, for which he had flattered, manoeuvred, committed injustice and which he had considered the boon he had won for a life of single-minded dedication, that wealth was, perhaps forever, slipping from his grasp; but he felt not the slightest attachment to it, nor the slightest sorrow at its loss. He knew that he faced life imprisonment, that his whole business would be ruined, his wealth would be reduced to dust, that there was no knowing if he would ever meet Pramila again or which of them would die and which of them would survive. It was as if of his own free will he was summoning the emissaries of the God of Death. The anguished helplessness which oppresses us at the time of death oppressed him too.

Pramila followed him downstairs. She wanted to remain with him until the people separated him from her, but Sethji parted from her quickly and stepped outside, leaving her in tears.

Once it had received a sacrifice, the demon of revolt was quietened. Sethji remained in police custody for a week. Then the case against him commenced.

remained in police custody for a month when the case against him commenced.

The most renowned barrister of Bombay represented Gopinath. The workers had collected an unprecedented amount in donations and had resolved that, even if the court freed Sethji, they would have him murdered. Every day several thousand labourers thronged the courthouse. The charge was in any case proved. The accused had pleaded guilty. His lawyers presented arguments to lessen his crime. A sentence of fourteen years' imprisonment in the Andaman Islands across the cursed Kaala Paani, the black waters, was handed down.

The moment he was deported it seemed as though the goddess Lakshmi had turned away in anger, as if the spirit had left the immense body of wealth and grandeur that had been his. In less than a year, only its skeleton was left. The mill was already closed. By the time the creditors had been paid off, nothing was left, to the extent that they lost their house. Pramila had lakhs of rupees worth of jewellery. If she had wished, it could have provided her a secure income but abandoning herself to a life of renunciation, she surrendered it. Seven months later, when her son was born, she was living in a small rented house. With a gem of a son bestowed on her, she forgot all her troubles. The only regret she had was that her husband would have been overjoyed had he been with her.

The story of how Pramila brought up her son despite enormous hardship is a long one. She bore everything but never begged from anyone. The alacrity with which she had settled all her debts had inspired a devoted respect in many people. Several good souls were prepared to give her a monthly allowance, but Pramila took favours from none of them. She of course was acquainted with the women of good households and managed to eke out a living by visiting them and promoting the use of Indian-made goods. As long as she was breastfeeding she found this work very trying but once the baby was weaned off, she put him in the care of a local midwife when she went out to work. Returning home in the evening after a hard day's labour, she would put her child in her lap and her heart would fill with joy and fly to her husband who lay, who knew in what condition, thousands of miles away across the Kaala Paani. She felt not a trace of pain over the way her property had been appropriated. All she wanted was for her lord and master to return well and to see his son with his own eyes. Then she could be happy even in this poverty. Every day she bowed her head at God's feet and prayed for her husband. She was certain that whatever God would do it would be for his good. In her worship, she found a rare fortitude and courage

and the light of life. Prayer was now the foundation of her hopes.

## 5

Fifteen years of adversity passed in the cool shade of this hope.

It was dusk. Young Krishanchand was sitting beside his mother, preoccupied. He resembled neither his mother nor his father.

Pramila asked, 'Beta, your exams are over, aren't they?'

Her son answered downheartedly, 'Yes, Amma, they are but I didn't do well. I don't like studying.'

His eyes filled with tears. Pramila said lovingly, 'That's not good, beta, you should put your heart into your studies.'

His eyes glistening, he looked back at his mother and said, 'I keep thinking of Father all the time. He must be very old by now. I keep thinking that when he comes back I will look after him with all my heart and soul. Amma, no one has sacrificed like him and still people call him cruel. I have found out where Gopinath's wife and family are, Amma—his wife, mother and one daughter, two years older than me. His wife and daughter work in the same mill. The mother is very old.'

Pramila was taken aback. 'How did you find them?'

Krishanchand replied enthusiastically, 'I went to that mill today. I wanted to see the place where the workers had surrounded Father and the place where Gopinath had been shot. But I couldn't. Buildings have been put up there. The mill is doing very well. The moment I appeared, lots of men gathered round me. They all said, "Bhai, you're the image of Gopinath." The workers had hung a photograph of Gopinath there. I was amazed, Amma, it was like me—the only difference was the moustache. When I asked about his wife, a man ran off and called her. She burst into tears at the sight of me. And I don't know why, but I cried too. The poor women of his family are in real distress. I feel so sorry for them that I want to help them.'

Pramila was apprehensive that her son would get involved with their troubles and leave his studies. 'What help can you be to them now, beta? If we had money I would tell you to give them five or ten rupees every month, but you know how we live. Just concentrate on your studies. When your father comes, you can do whatever you please.'

Krishanchand didn't answer but from then on, he began to visit Gopinath's family every day on his way back from school. He spent the pocket money his mother gave him on them. Sometimes he bought fruit, sometimes vegetables.

One day, he was late coming home and Pramila was very worried. Asking for directions, she made her way to the widow's damp, dilapidated house in a narrow alley where she found the woman lying on a cot with Krishanchand standing by, fanning her. Upon seeing his mother, he said, 'I won't come home just yet, Amma. See how ill Aunty is. Dadi is not in her right mind and Binni is cooking. Who else can sit with her?'

Pramila replied angrily, 'It's already dark. How long are you going to stay here? I don't like being alone at home either. Come with me this minute. You can always come back here in the morning.'

The sick woman heard Pramila's voice, opened her eyes and said weakly, 'Come, Mataji, sit down. I was telling bhaiya to go home because it's late but he didn't go. Goodness knows why he takes so much pity on an unfortunate woman like me. Even a son of my own could never look after me so well.'

There was an unpleasant smell inside. The humidity was so high that Pramila felt suffocated. Not a breath of fresh air could make its way into this hole. But Krishanchand was as happy as a man who had returned home after years of suffering slings and insults in a distant land.

As Pramila looked around, her eyes fell upon a picture on one wall. When she went to look at it closely, her heart skipped a beat. She turned to her son, 'When did you have this photograph taken?'

Krishanchand smiled. 'That's not my photo, Amma, that's Gopinath.'

Pramila said in disbelief, 'Don't tell me that, you're lying.'

The sick woman spoke timidly, 'No, Mataji, that's my husband's picture. No one can fathom the playfulness of God, but your son looks so like him that it astonishes me. When I got married he was the same age as bhaiya is now, and was just like him. The same laugh, the same way of speaking, the same nature. I cannot understand this mystery. Mataji, ever since he began coming here I can't tell you how happy I feel. In this area, they are all workers like us. He behaves like a son to all of them. Everyone is happy to see him.'

Pramila gave no response. An unexpressed doubt was clouding her mind, as if she was having a nightmare. In her heart, a question arose again and again, the

mere thought of which made her hair stand on end.

Suddenly she grabbed Krishnachand's hand and pulled him physically towards the door as if someone were snatching him from her grasp.

The sick woman said only, 'Mataji, let bhaiya come to me sometimes, or I will die.'

## 6

Fifteen years after he had left, the former Seth Khubchand arrived at the railway station in his home city. The verdant tree he once had been was reduced to a stump. Lines marked his face, his hair was grey, his beard long and unkempt. He hadn't a single tooth in his mouth and his back was bent. No one could have recognized him as the same leafy green tree laden with flowers and fruits where birds cooed.

As Sethji walked out of the station, he wondered where he should go. He was ashamed to tell anyone who he was. How could he find out whether Pramila was alive or dead, if she were alive, where she lived? When she saw him, would she be joyful or dismiss him with contempt?

It didn't take very long to discover her address. His former home was still known as Khubchand's mansion as the man in the street cares little for the ups and downs in fortunes caused by the law courts. Finding himself outside his old home, he asked a paan-seller, 'Bhaiya, this is Seth Khubchand's house, isn't it?'

The paan-seller examined him with curiosity. 'It was Khubchand's once, now it belongs to Lala Deshraj.'

'Oh! It's a long time since I've been here. I used to work for Sethji. I heard he had been sentenced to Kaala Paani.'

'Yes, the poor man was finished by his own good nature. If he'd wanted to, he could have got off without a stain on his character. His whole household is in the dust.'

'His wife must be alive?'

'Yes, she certainly is. She has a son too.'

For an instant youth returned to Sethji's face. His enthusiasm and joy in living, which had been lying in a sleep as deep as the demon Kumbhakaran's for a full fifteen years, suddenly found new energy, and his feeble frame could hardly contain it.

Sethji gripped the paan-seller's hand as if he were his closest friend and said, 'Really, she has a son! Where does she live, bhai? I want to pay her my respects. I ate her salt for many years.'

The paan-seller told him the way. Pramila lived close by. Sethji set off, walking on air.

Just a little way ahead he saw a temple dedicated to Thakurji. Sethji went inside and bowed his head at the feet of the deity. Faith welled up within him and flowed through every hair of his body. In these fifteen years of severe atonement if he had found any solace it was at the feet of the Helper of the Helpless. Only by meditating on Him did Sethji find peace. After labouring the whole day at the sugar cane press or with a mattock, he would lie at night close to the earth and old memories would re-enact themselves in his mind. His life of luxury would come before his eyes as if in tears and a cry full of anguish would rise from his inner being, 'Lord! Have mercy upon me!' In his plea for forgiveness he discovered a sense of transcendent peace and security like that of an infant lying in its mother's lap.

When he had been a man of property, he had the means to enjoy luxury, youth, good health and authority but no time for introspection. The mind had craved action. Now, having lost these means, in this humble state, his mind bent towards the Almighty. As long as water is covered, how can it reflect the light of the sun?

He was just stepping out of the temple when a woman entered. Khubchand's heart leapt. Unsure of what to do, he took refuge behind a pillar. It was Pramila.

In all these fifteen years there had not been a single day that he had not thought of her. Today he beheld the difference between her image in his memory and her true appearance. Age could never touch the memory and it was beyond the power of joy and sorrow to affect it. Her true form was not so impregnable. In his memory she was always bejewelled, joyful, smiling, modest. Now he saw her as a radiant, ascetic devotee and his heart began to tremble like a voice heavy with love. He longed to fall at her feet and say, 'Goddess! Grant salvation to this sinner.' But immediately the thought came, *What if she rejects me?* He felt ashamed to confront her in his present state.

Walking some distance, Pramila turned into an alley. Sethji followed her. Before him stood a building several storeys high. Sethji watched Pramila enter this chawl but could not see where she went after that. He stood at the door for



his crawl but could not see where she went after that. He stood at the doorway wondering whom to ask.

Suddenly, a young man came out. Sethji called out to him. The youth gave him a piercing glance and immediately fell at his feet. Sethji's heart stood still. This was Gopinath, but a little younger. The same face, the same build—as if he had taken a new birth. Sethji's whole body shuddered with a strange apprehension.

Krishanchand rose a moment later and said, 'I was waiting for you today. I was on my way to get a car to go to the docks. You must have found it very difficult to get here. Please do come inside. I recognized you as soon as I saw you. I would have known you anywhere.'

Khubchand entered with him, but he was caught on the thorns of the past. Could he ever have forgotten Gopinath's face? He had seen it so many times in his dreams. That incident was the most momentous of his life and even though an age had passed since, it still stood there unmoving in his path.

Krishanchand came to an abrupt halt by the staircase and said, 'I'll go and tell Amma that my father has arrived! We have new clothes ready for you.'

Khubchand kissed his son's face as if he were a baby, picked him up and carried him up the stairs, the joy in his heart giving him a new strength.

## 7

For thirty years he had longed impatiently for a son and now he had found one, his joy knew no bounds. Life was charming Sethji with all kinds of new desires. For this gem, he would have willingly undergone endless torments like those he had suffered. Now he wanted to fill Krishanchand's mind with the essence of all that he had learned from experience. He had no wish for Krishanchand to become rich, shrewd or famous but he wanted him to be compassionate, helpful to others, gentle and devout. Sethji now had limitless faith in the mercy of a God who had found it fit to bless a wretch like himself. And Pramila was the Goddess Lakshmi incarnate.

Krishanchand was also thrilled to have his father back. It was as if he wanted to care for him so well that his father's memories of the past would be wiped away, as if he had been born solely to serve his father, as if he had come into this world only to repay the debts of a past life.

It was dusk on the seventh day after Sethji's return. Sethji was about to perform his evening prayers when Gopinath's daughter Binni came and said to Pramila, 'Amma is not at all well. She is calling for bhaiya.'

Pramila replied, 'He won't be able to come today. His father has come home, he's talking to him.'

Krishanchand overheard their conversation from the next room. He immediately came out and said, 'No, Amma, I'll take Dada's permission and go there for a little while.'

Pramila was irritated. 'Whenever you go there you forget all about your own home. God knows what potion these people have fed you.'

'I'll come back soon, Amma, I beg you let me go.'

'What kind of boy are you? Your poor father is sitting on his own and all you want to do is leave him.'

Sethji also overheard what was being said.

He joined them. 'What's the harm in his going? He says he'll be back soon.'

Krishanchand went off happily with Binni. After a moment Pramila said, 'Ever since I saw Gopinath's photograph I've begun to constantly fear what God means to do, that's all it is.'

Sethji replied gravely, 'I was also amazed when I saw him first. It seemed as if Gopinath himself were standing there!'

'Gopinath's wife says his nature is just like her husband's.'

Sethji smiled mysteriously. 'God in his playfulness has made the man I murdered my son. I am convinced Gopinath is reborn in him.'

Pramila raised her hand to her brow. 'This is precisely the thought which sometimes fills me with goodness knows what fears.'

Gazing at her devotedly, Sethji said, 'God is our greatest friend. Whatever he does, he does for the well-being of living creatures. We imagine injustice has been done to us, but that is our stupidity. The Almighty is not a foolish child enjoying breaking the toys it's made itself. Neither is He our enemy, revelling in doing us harm. He is supremely merciful, the image of auspiciousness. His was the support which saved me from destruction during my time in exile. Without Him I cannot tell you how this boat of my life would have floundered and what end it would have met.'

A few steps from the house, Binni said, 'I lied when I said my mother was ill. She's perfectly well now. You hadn't been to see us for several days and so she told me to make that excuse to send for you. She wants to ask your advice about something.'

Krishanchand looked at her with curiosity.

'My advice? What advice can I give? My father's come back and that's why I couldn't come to see you.'

'Your father's come back! He must have asked who I was!'

'No, he didn't.'

'He must have thought how shameless I was.'

'Dada isn't like that. If he had known who you were he would have spoken to you very affectionately. I sometimes used to be scared of what he'd be like. I'd heard that convicts become very hard-hearted. But Dada is like a god of forgiveness.'

They proceeded for some way in silence. Then Krishanchand asked, 'What does your mother want to ask me about?'

Binni's train of thought was broken.

'How do I know what she wants to talk to you about? If I'd known your father was there, I wouldn't have come. He must be wondering what a grown-up girl like me is doing wandering around all alone.'

Krishanchand burst out laughing. 'Yes, he must be. And I'll go and complain about you too.'

Binni lost her temper.

'What are you going to say about me? You tell me—when do I ever wander about on my own? Apart from your house, where do I go?'

'I'll say whatever I feel like unless you tell me what sort of advice I'm expected to give.'

'I told you at the start, I won't tell you. There's going to be a strike again tomorrow at our mill. The manager is so hard on us that even if we're late by just five minutes he cuts half a day's wages and if we're ten minutes late, the whole day's wages are lost. We've all met him several times but he won't listen to us. You're not much more than a child but for some reason Amma has enormous faith in you and the workers also have great confidence in you. Their opinion is

that you should go to meet the manager once and argue with him. If he sticks to his position, then we will stick to ours and go on strike.'

Krishanchand was engrossed in his thoughts. He said nothing.

Binni said rebelliously, 'He is being so tough with us because he knows that we are helpless and have nowhere else to go. So, we have to show him that if need be, we will starve but we will not tolerate injustice.'

Krishanchand replied, 'If there's unrest, there'll be firing.'

'Let them shoot. Because my father was killed does that mean we have no right to live?'

When they arrived at Binni's home a large number of workers were standing at the door and discussing the strike.

When they saw Krishanchand they shouted, 'Look, bhaiya's coming!'

## 9

This was the same mill where Seth Khubchand had fired his revolver. Now his son was the workers' leader and was facing bullets.

Krishanchand and the manager had completed their discussion. The manager had refused to relax the rules and a strike had been called. Today was the day of the strike. The workers had assembled in the mill compound and the manager had called on the army to protect the mill. The workers hadn't wanted to cause a riot. The strike was simply an expression of their dissatisfaction. But when they saw the military on guard their blood began to boil. Both sides had prepared themselves—one side with bullets and the other with pieces of brick and stone.

The young Krishanchand addressed the workers, 'Are you ready? We have to enter the mill even if the last one of us is shot.'

A huge number of voices answered, 'We're all ready!'

'All of you who have wives and children should return to their homes.'

Binni spoke up from the back. 'Wives and children are all under the protection of God.'

Some workers were considering leaving but were steadied by her words. Slogans were shouted and the thousand workers set off towards the gates of the mill. The military guard opened fire. First Krishanchand and then several other men fell. The rest began to waver.

At that moment Khubchand, bareheaded and barefoot, rushed to the compound just in time to see his son fall. When he was at home he had heard what was happening. Beside himself, he yelled, 'Victory to Krishanchand! *Krishanchand ki Jai!*', ran towards the wounded boy and held him in his embrace. An extraordinary courage and resolve spread through the workers.

'Khubchand!' This name had a magical effect. In these fifteen years Khubchand had attained the elevated position of a martyr. His own son was today the workers' leader. Praise be to the playfulness of God! Sethji lay his son's body on the earth and said composedly, 'Brothers, this boy was my son. When I returned after serving fifteen years' imprisonment, by God's grace I was privileged to see him. This is the eighth day since my return. That was His grace, this too is His grace. I was an ignorant man and a fool before and I am one now. But, yes, I am proud that God gave me such a courageous child. Now I want you to congratulate me. How many people have such a hero's death? A true hero is one who can stand openly against injustice, and so join me and say, "*Krishanchand ki Jai!*"!'

The response came in a roar from a thousand throats and, shouting, the workers forced their way into the mill office. The soldiers on guard didn't even fire once, they had been paralysed by this extraordinary turn of events.

The manager picked up his pistol and rose to his feet. Before him he beheld Seth Khubchand!

Shamefacedly, he said, 'I am deeply saddened by the unfortunate accident today, but you yourself can understand that there was nothing else I could do.'

Sethji replied calmly, 'Whatever God does, He does for our own good. If, through this sacrifice, the workers are benefited in some way, then I do not regret what has happened in any way.'

The manager said respectfully, 'But no one can really find solace in such arguments. Even the hearts of the greatest spiritual men are moved by emotion.'

To put an end to the subject, Sethji asked, 'So what decision are you going to make?'

The manager said hesitantly, 'I am not in a position to make an independent decision. I was doing as instructed by my superiors.'

Sethji said sternly, 'If you believe the workers are being treated unjustly, it is your duty to take their side. To support injustice is the same as to commit it.'

Outside the workers were arranging for Krishanchand's last rites inside the

Outside, the workers were arranging for Krishanchand's last rites, inside the office the mill's directors and manager were sitting with Seth Khubchand and working out a way to end the injustice to the workers.

At ten o'clock, Sethji came out and announced, 'Friends, thank God for granting your humble request. New rules will be made for you to register on duty and the present system of penalties will be removed.'

The workers heard what he said, but they felt none of the joy which they would have felt upon hearing the same news an hour earlier. Even the greatest reward would have been rendered meaningless by Krishanchand's death.

Before they could raise his body, Pramila came running with red eyes, beside herself with grief and clung to the child she had borne and cherished with her own blood. There was tumult. Tears flowed from everyone's eyes whether worker or manager.

Sethji came close and placed his hand on her shoulder. 'What are you doing, Pramila? You should smile and give thanks to God for his death, not weep.'

Pramila held Krishanchand's body to her heart just as before. Her treasure, the boy who had made adversity seem good fortune, who was the light which provided her hope, fortitude and support in the dismal years apart from her husband, that boy was dead, his light extinguished. The power she had to fill her body and soul with devotion to and reverence for God had been snatched from her.

Suddenly she faced her husband with an unsteady gaze and said, 'You may think that whatever God does is for our good. I do not. I don't understand at all. How can I? Oh, my darling, my lamb, my raja! My sun, my moon, my reason to live! My everything! How can I ever find peace with you gone? I laid this boy in my lap and counted myself fortunate. How can I control myself when I see him lying dead on the ground? I can never accept this. My suffering heart can never accept this!'

With these words, she began to beat hard at her breast.

The same night, the grief-stricken woman passed from this world. The bird flew from its cage in search of its young one.

Three years passed.

In the workers' locality, it was Krishnashtami, the day Krishna was born. They had all contributed to build a temple. It wasn't particularly beautiful or large, but the degree of devotion with which people worshipped here was not to be equalled in many temples which were much greater in size. People here came to make offerings of reverence and love and not to show off their wealth.

The women workers were singing, children were running here and there doing small tasks and the men were busy making and decorating a tableau of Krishna's birth.

Seth Khubchand arrived and the women and children rushed to surround him. This temple was the fruit of his constant industry. The purpose of his life was now the service of the workers and their families. His small family was now a vast one. He considered their happiness and their sorrow his own. The workers no longer spent their time drinking, gambling or in other kinds of misconduct. Sethji's support, companionship and example were turning beasts into human beings.

Sethji went and bowed his head before the Child-God and an extraordinary joy blossomed in his heart. In the God he glimpsed Krishanchand. Then in just a moment it was as if the deity had become Gopinath.

Sethji was enraptured. For the first time, he envisaged the universal presence and mercy of God. Such divine intervention for the salvation of a wayward, degenerate soul! Such continuous, God-given inspiration! His whole life played out before him on the screen of his mind. It seemed as if the mercy of God had been shading him for the past twenty years. What had Gopinath's sacrifice been? When the rebellious workers had surrounded his house, what had his own surrender been but the result of God's compassion? Who had protected his soul during his fifteen years in exile, and then in the form of Krishanchand? A cry in praise of Lord Krishna, saturated with fervent devotion, rose from the depths of his inner soul—'*Krishna Bhagwan ki Jai!*' and the entire universe seemed radiant with the light of God's grace.

*Translated from the Hindi by Gillian Wright*



## The Votary of Reminiscence

Since the death of his wife, Horilal has lost interest in worldly affairs. He now goes to the court every day—his legal practice is still not bad. He keeps up his relationships with his friends, goes to fairs and spectacles. He does all this because he is a man and a man is a social animal.

It was another matter as long as his wife was alive. Back then he invited his friends every other day on some pretext or the other. Sometimes there was a garden party, sometimes there was a musical soirée, sometimes there were festivals like Janmashtami and Holi. He loved entertaining his friends. A basket of Safeda mangoes had arrived from Lucknow. He would not find peace as long as he had not shared them with his friends. If he bought something good, he would begin to think of somebody to whom he could make a present of it. Just as other people thought of ways and means to protect their self-interests, he always thought of the ways in which he could be of service to others. If you went to his house, even if he knew you only cursorily, he wouldn't rest if he could not entertain you with tea and fruits. He had a happy disposition, and was always ready to help his friends. His hearty laughter deserved to be recorded and played on the gramophone. He had no children but no one saw him sad or melancholy. All the children of the mohalla were like his own children.

His wife too was exactly the same. You might be deeply worried but if you met her, then you'd soon forget your worry and would blossom like a flower. She had an inexhaustible repertoire of popular sayings. She interspersed her talks with proverbs and if she was bent upon teasing anyone, she would reduce that person to tears. She had no parallel in housekeeping. The husband and the wife were deeply attached to each other and their love for each other became more



and more intense with the passage of time. It was as though the passage of time was working as a blessing on their relationship. As soon as his work at the court was over he ran to his home like a lover separated from his beloved. At that moment, you wouldn't have been able to stop him even for a minute however much you tried; and if on any day he got late, then his lovelorn wife came out on to the terrace and kept staring at the way leading to their home. Their unbroken companionship for twenty-five years had united their souls so much that if any thought occurred in one's mind, it resonated in the other's mind too.

It's not as if they didn't differ in their opinions. On many subjects, they had great differences of opinion and they used their entire lung power in supporting their own opinions and refuting those of the other. If any stranger heard it, he'd think that they were fighting and it might take a violent turn soon. But their debates were all intellectual. Their hearts were tied together; both were sympathetic, of pleasant disposition, outspoken and selfless. It was as though they were denizens of heaven.

That is why when his wife died, for several months we were afraid that he might commit suicide. We always tried to cheer him up and wouldn't leave him alone. Even at night someone or the other slept with him. Everyone feels for such individuals. The wives of his friends loved him very much. He was a god in their eyes. They gave his example to their husbands and would say, 'This is what is called love. If the man is like that, any woman would like to be a slave to him. Since the wife has died, the poor man hasn't eaten a belly full, hasn't slept peacefully. You fellows always expect us to die so that you can marry again. You'll be happy in your minds saying that it's good riddance. You can bring a brand-new wife home.'

He was in his forty-fifth year, his body was well built, healthy, well rounded and handsome. If he had wanted, he could have married promptly. He had just to say 'yes' to marriage. Parents of daughters sent word to him, his friends also tried to settle him down through remarriage but this man cherished the memory of his wife and didn't want to put a stain on it. Now for weeks, he did not do his hair or change his suit of clothes. His appearance looked like that of a grass-cutter, but he didn't care. Earlier, he used to get up before daybreak and walked a distance of four miles. On the days when he felt lazy, his wife pushed him out of the house and closed the door. Now he stayed in bed till eight in the morning, turning on his sides. He didn't feel like getting up. The servants brought the

...talking on his bed. He didn't feel like getting up. The servants brought the hookah and he took a few drags. He didn't worry even if they didn't bring it. If they brought tea, he drank it. If they didn't, he didn't care. If his friends coaxed him, he would go to watch a film, but he wouldn't register what he saw or heard. Earlier, he was obsessed with good clothes. If a new design came in the market, he was certain to get a suit made. If he didn't, his wife did it for him. And now he would put on any loose baggy, crushed fabric on his body that looked like cast-offs because of his leanness. They didn't fit the description of a suit any more. For months, he wouldn't care to go to the market. When the severe winter arrived this time, then he got an overcoat made out of cotton and became almost an ascetic. Only the question of a cap remained. Had his wife been alive, she would've snatched away this cloak and given it to some beggar; but who was there now to look after such things? Who cared how he lived and what he wore? The man, who looked thirty-five at the age of forty-five, now looked seventy at the age of fifty; he even walked with a stoop. His hair had turned grey and he had also lost his teeth. Those who had seen him then, won't even recognize him today.

What is interesting is that the very subjects on which he would argue with his wife had now become a part of his worship. It wasn't known whether there had been a revolution in his thoughts or the dead spirit had dissolved itself in his soul and had erased the differences. His wife hated widow remarriage. He was a staunch supporter of it. But now even he opposes widow remarriage. Earlier, he was a follower of Western or the new civilization and made fun of his wife. Now, there is hardly anyone who can possibly criticize this civilization more intensely than him. Once when we were discussing about the punctuality of the English, I said, 'In this we should learn from the English.'

Well, he sat up and said angrily, 'Never, never till doomsday. I consider this restraint to be a pillar of selfishness, a mountain of pride and a desert of weakness. Someone comes to you afflicted by some misfortune. No one knows which of his needs have pulled him here. But you say, "I have no time." This is the behaviour of those who value wealth over humanity, and for whom life means only wealth. Someone with a sympathetic heart will never like this principle. Our civilization never gave wealth such a high premium. We always kept our doors open. Anyone could come to us if and when they wanted. We would listen to them with rapt attention and would share their happiness or

sorrow. What a culture! 'The culture whose spirit is selfishness is not worthy of being called one. It's a curse upon the world, a bane for society.'

Likewise, there would be a lot of quibbling between the two on the subject of religion. The wife was a follower of the Hindu dharma while he was an admirer of Islamic principles. But now he too was a staunch Hindu or better still, a believer of humanitarianism.

One day he said, 'For me, humanity is the touchstone. I'm only a believer of such a dharma in which humanity is given prominence. Someone may be a deity or a prophet; but if he says something against humanity, then I can only salute him from a distance. I was an admirer of Islam because it considers all human beings as one. There is no place for inequality in it. But now I realized that this equality and brotherhood is not widespread, and is limited only within the confines of Islam. In other words, like other religions, it too is divided into different factions. Its principles have only been designed to strengthen and unite that faction or group. And when I see that even here animal sacrifice is sanctioned by the sharia law and that it is the duty of every Muslim to sacrifice sheep, goat, cow or camel according to his capacity, then I begin to doubt its divine provenance. A sect amongst Hindus too, considers animal sacrifice to be its dharma. Even Jews, Christians and people from other religious persuasions have followed it as a hallowed practice. Similarly, there was a time when human sacrifices were prevalent. Such people exist till today at some places. But didn't the government declare human sacrifice to be a crime and hang the religious fanatics? I don't have any objection if you slaughter a sheep, a cow, a camel or a horse to satisfy your palate. But I fail to understand the idea of sacrifice in the name of religion. If these animals were to rule today, then tell me, won't they sacrifice us in response to these offerings? But we know that animals will never gain such power and so we slaughter them fearlessly and consider ourselves pious. We don't mind it when we follow *adharma* throughout the day to serve our greed and self-interest. But we can't rest till we've gained some merit through *qurbani*, the ritual animal sacrifice. Therefore, sir, I'm not a follower of such blood-sucking religions. I am simply a worshipper of humanity, whether it is found in Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism or Christianity; else I am better off as an apostate. I'm not antagonistic to anyone simply because he doesn't belong to the same religion as I do. At least I don't shed blood in the name of earning merit.'

The gentleman's thoughts had witnessed many other changes of a similar

kind.

And he had only one subject for conversation, of which he would never tire—that of singing the praises of his deceased beloved. If some guest arrived, he'd be in a tizzy, not knowing how to entertain him. He would look for words of apology and request: 'Bhaijaan, what can I do to entertain you? The one who could've truly entertained you is no more. By this time, she'd have produced tea, toast and halwa before you. Oranges and apples would've been served in plates. I'm a boorish person, brother, absolutely boorish. Whatever good is in me was a gift from her. I drew on her intelligence, she taught me courtesy and generosity. Now I'm a clay idol, totally inert. I was not worthy of that goddess. I don't know how I'd got her, probably because of some good deed that I'd done. Come, let me show you her photograph. It seems as though she was sitting here and has just left. Brother, let me tell you that I've never seen such a beautiful woman. Her beauty had not only pride in it, but sweetness and intoxication as well. Every limb of her body had been perfectly shaped, sahib! Had you seen her, you wouldn't have cared for poets' descriptions of feminine beauty.'

You would look eagerly at those pictures. You wouldn't notice any special beauty in it. What was on display were a bulky body, a broad face, small eyes and a pale appearance. The merits of that photograph were described with such fondness and flourish that you would actually start believing in them. The time spent in such encomiums were the only happy moments of the gentleman's life. He remains alive for these moments. The rest of his life was dull and cheerless.

For the first few days, he would go out with us for a walk. Well, it was not his choice. I goaded him to come with us, but I had to wait for him for half an hour every day. Even when he stepped out of his house, he'd walk at a snail's pace. He'd give up before half a mile and would express his desire to return. Finally, I stopped taking him out with me. Since then his walk was confined to taking forty steps out of the house. It was not a walk but a mechanical chore which he did because he was accustomed to doing it during his wife's lifetime.

One day, I was walking past his house when I saw that the upper windows of the house, closed for years, were open. Surprised, I asked his helper, who was sitting there and drinking coconut water, about his whereabouts. The helper informed me that he had gone out for a walk. My surprise knew no bounds. Why this deviation from routine? He never woke up so early. I proceeded on the way he had gone for a walk. I had been out of town for a week. What a great

He had gone for a walk. I had been out of town for a week. What a great transformation in a week! There must be some secret. How far had the gentleman had gone? No trace of him for two miles. I was disappointed. Had I lost him somewhere on the way? Where could that be? He had no friends here to drop by on. I was worried. Had he fallen in some well? I was about to turn back when I saw him returning and felt comforted. But his appearance was totally different. With his hair cut in a new style, moustache clean shaven and beard trimmed, he looked cheerful. There was a spring in his gait, his suit was old but brushed properly and probably ironed, and there was a new coat of polish on his boots. He was smiling all the way. He leapt up to shake hands with me and said, 'Seeing you after several days. Had you gone somewhere?'

I explained my absence and said, 'I'm afraid someone might cast an evil eye on you. From now on, I'll go out with you every day. You're looking like a man after a long time.'

He was somewhat embarrassed and said, 'No, brother, leave me alone. You'll run and expect me to do so. I walk at my own slow pace. When I get tired, I stop somewhere to take rest. I can't keep up with you.'

'You didn't look like this a week ago. You're looking so smart! At this rate, you'll leave me far behind.'

'Stop making fun of me.'

'From tomorrow, I'll go for a walk with you. Please wait for me.'

'No, brother. Don't bother me. Nowadays I get up at dawn. I can't sleep at night, so you go for the walk. Why should you inconvenience yourself for me?'

I was flummoxed. This gentleman had fallen at my feet earlier so that I would take him along. He was very sad when I had parted company with him, fed up with his slowness. He had also complained a couple of times. 'It's all right, brother. Why should anyone give me company now? Who has ever helped the helpless? It's nothing new. It's the way of the world—if someone limps, shove him; if someone is sick, give him poison.' The same gentleman was trying to get rid of me now. What's the mystery? Where has this sprightliness and cheerfulness come from? 'Have you got the monkey gland grafted on to your body? The new civil surgeon is an expert in grafting. It's quite possible someone has advised you and you've got it done by spending five hundred to one thousand rupees.' I couldn't find peace without solving this mystery. I returned with him.

After walking a couple of steps with him I asked, 'Tell me the truth, Bhaijaan. Have you really gone for the graft?'

He shot an inquiring glance at me. 'What graft? I have no idea what you are talking about.'

'I have a strong suspicion that you've got the monkey gland grafted on to your body.'

'Buddy, why do you have this suspicion? Do I need it? The idea never occurred to me.'

'Have you got an electric shock, then?'

'Why are you after my life today? Even widows feel like dressing up on occasions. It's life, after all! One day I felt sorry for my own disinterest and inertia. I thought, if I had to live this life, it's better I lived it in earnest. What's the use of living like a dead man? This is all to it, there's no secret or mystery at all.'

I was not satisfied with this explanation. On the following day, I arrived earlier and knocked at his door. He was already out. I followed. I decided that I was not letting him off so easily. Let me see how he could escape me. Of course, there's some mystery. All right, man, now I'd come to wake you up at midnight! I could not run but walked as fast as I could. He came into sight after a mile. He was walking fast. I called out to him again and again to stop, that I was losing my breath, but he didn't care to listen. Finally, when I told him that my head was spinning, he stopped. When we stood face to face, he looked annoyed and said, 'I had told you not to come to my house, then why did you? Why are you chasing me? Let me walk at my slow space. You go your own way.'

I pulled his hands towards myself and said, 'Look, Horilal, don't try to pull a fast one on me. You know very well how ruthless I can be! Were you walking at a slow pace? My limbs are going numb. Even the postal runner doesn't run so fast! On top of it, you don't look tired, you're still walking with full zest. Now, even if you try to shoo me away with a stick, I'm not going to leave you. Even if I accompany you for two miles it'd be good physical exercise. But tell me frankly the real story. Where has this youthfulness come from? If you're taking any elixir, then share it with me. At least give me the address where I can place the order. If this miracle is the result of some prayers or talisman, then take me to the pir who has given them.'

He smiled and said. 'You're insane. You're harassing me for no reason.'

You've grown old but haven't forgotten your boyishness. Do you want that I should keep lying on my bed like a dead man? You can't take it when I'm a bit cheerful. Only some days ago even you'd ignore me. How I implored you to take me along when you went out for a walk. But you made such a fuss. Now why are you after my life? Just keep in mind that even God helps those who help themselves. I've seen the patience and forbearance of my friends. Now onwards, I'm on my own.'

He reprimanded me as I kept on provoking him. Suddenly he put his finger on his lips as a sign for me to be silent. He stretched his body, put on the mask of good cheer on his face and started walking with a swagger. I didn't understand why he silenced me and was now exhibiting his manliness in this way. There was no one else around. There was a woman walking from the other end. But why should he pretend to her? I had never seen her. She looked pretty with her sky-coloured silk sari bordered with yellow laces. She was not beautiful but her simplicity and cheerfulness were more enchanting. I had never imagined that a woman of ordinary features can be so captivating.

She greeted Horilal as she came close. Horilal bowed without saying anything and was pushing ahead when she said in her cuckoo voice, 'Aren't you going to stop? You're crossing your limit. And yes, you'd promised to give me Deviji's photograph today. Have you forgotten? Shall I come along with you?'

The fellow was so flummoxed that he had forgotten ordinary courtesy. He was a gentleman to the core and always adhered to the norms of civility, but at that moment he felt very awkward. He took a step forward and said, 'Excuse me, I've some urgent work to take care of.'

The lady was somewhat peeved. 'It seems you're impatient to run away. Are you going to give me the photograph or not?'

He looked at me angrily and said, 'I'll look for it.'

The lady said complainingly, 'But you had told me it always stands on your table. Now you're saying you'll look for it. Are you all right? Since you've told me about her, I'm impatient to see her with my own eyes. If you don't give me on your own, I'll lift it from your table.' Then she looked at me and said, 'Please help me. Though I know that you're his friend and won't betray him. You'll be wondering who's this woman talking with your friend in such a familiar tone. The first time I met him was in the sabzi *mandi*. I had gone to buy vegetables. I

always buy my own vegetables and don't want to leave it to my helpers. Having bought the vegetables when I took out the money to pay the vendor, he clinked the coin and said—give another one. This one is counterfeit. I took the coin to see for myself. It was indeed fake. What could I do now? I didn't have another one. I had had such experiences earlier, but I do not remember to test the coins before stepping out of the house. Nor do I remember to test them when people give them to me.

'There's about twenty-five counterfeit coins in my box, if not more. And there's change worth hundreds of rupees. But at that moment I had no other option but to return the vegetables and leave. It was sheer coincidence that your friend had come to the same shop to buy his vegetables. Seeing me in distress, he promptly took out a rupee . . .'

My friend cut her right there and said, 'Why're you telling him the entire story now? We're going on an important errand, you're delaying us.' He pulled me by my hand towards him.

I didn't like this show of discourtesy on his part. But I was beginning to understand why he behaved the way he did. I said, 'You may go, if you like. I don't have any important work. I'd like to go back home.'

He gritted his teeth. Had the lady not been there, he'd have made mincemeat of me. He glared at me for a moment as though to tell me, 'you'll pay for this', and left. I planned to return with the lady. However, the lady said hesitantly, 'Please be on your way. I'll come with him. Probably he's not pleased with me. For the last one week, we spend our days together, and he tells me about his life. What a fortunate woman his wife was! Her husband still remembers her so fondly. You must've seen her. Was she really so attached to him?'

I said with pride, 'They adored each other.'

'And since her death he has turned his face away from the world?'

'Absolutely. There's nothing he cares for in the world save her memories.'

'Was she beautiful?'

'In his eyes, there was no one in the world more beautiful than her.'

She was lost in thought for a minute, and then said, 'All right. You may go. I'll talk to him. Why should I be averse to be of service to such a godlike man? I'm fascinated by the story he recounted.'

I returned, somewhat deflated. By chance, I had to go to Delhi that very day on some work. I returned from there after a month. The first thing I did after



ON SOME WORK. I RETURNED FROM THERE AFTER A MONTH. THE FIRST THING I DID AFTER returning was to go to Horilal to see how he was doing. I was impatient to know about the new developments in their relationship. I had written a letter to him from Delhi. But this fellow had the bad habit of not replying to letters. Many questions bristled in my mind—what was the nature of his relationship with the lady now, are the meetings still on or off, what reward had she given to him for his devotion to his wife, and so on.

It was eight when I reached his house. The windows were closed. Heaps of garbage had accumulated on the veranda. It was the same scene as before. I felt worried. When I went up, I saw him lying on the floor amidst a lot of litter. He was turning the pages of a magazine. His hair had probably remained undone for the past week. His face looked pale.

I asked, 'Have you returned after the walk?'

He replied dispiritedly, 'Who has the time for walks and entertainment? Even if one has time one doesn't feel up to it. Didn't you go out of town?'

'Yes, I was in Delhi. Haven't you been meeting the lady?'

'I haven't, for the last many days.'

'Has she left the place?'

'How do I know?'

'Well, you'd badly fallen for her, no?'

'I had fallen for her? Are you crazy? The one I had fallen for had left me for the other world. I can't fall for anyone else.'

I sat down, placed my hands on his shoulder and said threateningly, 'Look Horilal. Don't try to befool me. Earlier, I did take you to be an ascetic given to fulfilling his vow. But having seen the kind of infatuation that had overtaken you the past month I can't say that you've buried all your emotions. You must tell me the full details of all that has happened. Or, you can take it to be the end of our friendship.'

Horilal's eyes became moist. He said hesitantly, 'Brother, don't be so unfair to me. If you, too, begin to doubt me, where shall I go? Her name is Indira. She is the headmistress of the girls' school here. You know very well how we got to know each other. Her empathy made me her lover. At my age, what else could have drawn me to her? Every day I went to her like a forlorn lover, with longings in my heart and the desire to unburden myself. She is attractive, soft-hearted, has a pleasant disposition and understands others' woes. But you can't

compare her with your bhabhi. She was a goddess from paradise. What she was to me, no one else can be. I was enlivened by her presence. With her, life seems to have gone out of me too. I am a worshipper of the idol enshrined within me. When I find someone with a sympathetic heart, I feel obliged and begin to tell her my sad story. I know that people run away from me because of this. But what can I do, brother? I cannot rest without telling others my story. I feel suffocated. That is why when Indira took kindly to me, I took it as a divine sign and in that mental state which my friends unfortunately call insanity, opened my heart to her, and told her everything that was, is and will remain in my heart as long as I live. How can I forget those blessed days? For me, the past is more alive and potent. I still live in the past. Indira took pity on me, invited me over to her house and prepared several dishes for me with her own hands. The following day she came here and arranged all the household stuff. A day later, she brought some clothes, and stitched a suit for me. She is very skilful in this art.

‘One evening we were in Queen’s Park when she said, “Why don’t you marry again?” I smiled and said, “At this age, Indira? What’ll people say?”

“What’s your age, after all? You don’t look more than forty.”

‘I corrected her, “I’m in my fiftieth year.”

‘She egged me on, “We can’t measure age by years, sir, but by health. Your health is very good. You need someone to take care of you. Fall in love with a lady. You’ll see your dullness vanish in an instant.”

‘My heart began to beat faster. I saw a reddish tinge spread across Miss Indira’s fair face. Her eyes bent down in embarrassment. Her lips fluttered to say something but she held back. Finally, she lifted her eyes, held my hands and said, “If you think that I can be of any use to you, I’m at your service. The devotion and love I have for you will find their fulfilment.”

‘I slowly disengaged my hand and said in tremulous voice, “I am grateful for your extreme kindness. But I regret to say that I’m no longer a living human being, but simply an embodiment of memories. I can’t stain the memory of that goddess with my lust and your sympathy with my passion.”

‘After that I talked to her about many things in an effort to please her, but she didn’t utter a word. The frown on her face was still there when she left. I tried to mitigate her pain with my tears, but in vain. I haven’t seen her since then, and didn’t have the courage to make inquiries about her. Of course, she’d told me before leaving that I could call her whenever I was in distress and needed her.’

Horilal finished his tale and looked at me with eyes that seemed to suggest that I must appreciate his sacrifice. On the contrary, I gave him a reprimand. 'How unfortunate are you, Horilal! I feel angry at your stupidity, but feel pity for you too. Wretched fellow, your life would've changed! She was not an ordinary woman, but a Devi sent by God, to illuminate your dark life with her gentle light. You've allowed a golden opportunity to slip through your fingers.'

Horilal looked at his wife's portrait hanging on the wall and said in a voice filled with love, 'I'm only her lover, my brother, and will remain so forever.'

*Translated from the Hindi by M. Asaduddin*



## Kusum

### 1

It was a year ago that I happened to meet Naveen, just as I was going for my evening stroll. He is an old friend, really informal and carefree. He has a house in Agra and is a good poet. I have attended many conferences of his group of poets and have yet to see another devotee of poetry like him. He is a lawyer by profession but is perpetually submerged in contemplation about poetry. Being an intelligent man, he gets to the bottom of a case as soon as it comes to him. That is why he sometimes does get cases but any discussion about legal issues and cases outside the law courts is a forbidden activity for him. He is a lawyer for four to five hours within the precincts of the courts, and becomes a poet from head to toe as soon as he steps out of its four walls. At all hours, you may find a congregation of poets with poetic discussions going on, and he himself listening to different poetic compositions. Naveen sways under their intoxication, and gets completely engrossed while reciting his own pieces. His voice is so mellifluous that his poetry pierces the heart like an arrow. His poetry is also distinctive for its creation of sweetness in spirituality and communicating the presence of form within the formless. He usually informs me in advance about his visits to Lucknow and therefore it surprised me to see him suddenly here today. ‘How are you here? Is everything well? You did not even inform me about your arrival.’

He said, ‘Bhaijaan, I am trapped. There was no time to inform you. Moreover, I consider your house to be my own. There is no formality or need for any special arrangements for me. I have come to trouble you regarding an important matter. Postpone your walk for now and come along to listen to my tale of

distress.'

I got worried and said, 'You have really disconcerted me. You and a distress tale! I'll die of anxiety.'

'Come home. I'll tell you when you cool down.'

'Hope the kids and family are fine?'

'Yes, they are all fine. Let's go to a restaurant and have a little refreshment.'

'No, bhai, I can't think of refreshment right now.'

We began to walk towards home.

At home, I made him wash up and have some sherbet. After taking some *elaichi* paan, he started narrating his tale of distress. 'You had of course come for Kusum's wedding. You have known her before that too. I feel that she has all the qualities that one needs to attract a simple and upright man. What do you think?'

I said eagerly, 'I consider her to be even more praiseworthy than you do. I am yet to see another girl who is as modest, diligent, jovial and well groomed.'

Naveen said in a pathetic voice, 'The same Kusum is on the verge of death with weeping because of her husband's heartlessness. It's more than a year back that she first went to her married home. She's been there three times in between but her husband just doesn't speak to her. He seems to be disgusted by her sight. I tried my best to call him over and clear any misunderstanding that may have arisen between the two but he neither comes nor does he respond to my letters. Who knows what snag in his mind makes him turn away so heartlessly. Now I hear that he is getting married a second time. Kusum is in bad shape. You will not even recognize her now. She just weeps through the day and night. All this will give you some idea about the extent of my worry. All the aspirations of life are gradually withering away. God did not give us a son but we considered ourselves fortunate and blessed to get Kusum. We brought her up with such care and affection. Never touched her even with a floral stem. Gave her the best of education. She did not do her BA but her mature thinking and her range of knowledge is no less than that of any educated woman of high class. You have seen her articles. My opinion is that very few ladies can write like that! Whether it is society or religious ethics, her ideas on all subjects are quite sophisticated. Her dexterity in discussion surprises me. She is such an expert in the management of domestic affairs that she manages almost our whole house. But in her husband's eyes, she is not even as good as the dust on his feet. I asked her

many times, have you said something to him, or else what is the matter? After all, why is he so indifferent to you? In response, she weeps and says, "He has not spoken even a word to me." I think that some difference cropped up between them on the first day itself. He must have come to Kusum and asked her something. She must have been too shy to reply. It's possible that he may have said a couple of other things too. Kusum must not have lifted her head. You know of course, how shy she is. That's it! Her husband must have sulked. I cannot imagine how any man can be indifferent to a girl like Kusum but now that it has happened, how does one deal with this misfortune? The unfortunate one wrote several letters to her husband but that heartless man did not reply to even a single one! He returned all the letters. I fail to understand how that man's heart of stone can be melted. I cannot write anything to him myself. Now you have to protect Kusum's life, otherwise it will soon reach its end and along with her, the two of us will also lay down our lives. We can no longer bear her agony.'

Naveenji's eyes became moist. I too became very gloomy. Trying to console him, I said, 'You have been under this stress for so long. Why did you not tell me earlier? I will go to Moradabad today itself and give that chap such a dressing down that he will remember it all through his life. I will drag the fellow to Kusum's feet.'

Naveenji smiled at my confidence and said, 'What will you say to him?'

'Don't ask me that! I will conjure up all the magical charms of bewitchment and test them out on him.'

'Then you will never be successful. He is so admirable, so polite, so good-natured, and so soft-spoken that you will become his admirer by the time you get back. He will stand every day in front of you with folded hands. All your resentment will disappear. You just have one way out. You have some magic! You have brought so many young men to the path of righteousness. It is your duty to awaken the passion for humanity that lies submerged in people's hearts. What I want is that, on Kusum's behalf, you must write so piteous a letter, that it unsettles his heart. I will remain obliged to you all through my life.'

Naveenji was a poet after all. His suggestion smacked not of pragmatism but of his poetic disposition. He has wept while reading several articles of mine and so he is convinced that I have the powers of a clever snake charmer to make any heart dance. He is sure now that all men are motivated and withered by the

heart dance. He is unaware that all men are not poets and neither are they sensitive to the same degree. The articles that have moved Naveenji to tears have been read and thrown away with complete indifference by many others. But this was not the occasion to say all this. He would have thought that I want to wash my hands off all this. So, with great affection, I said, 'You have thought of something really far-fetched and I wholly agree with your suggestion. While it is true that you have overestimated my eligibility to engender compassion, still I will not disappoint you. I will write a letter. The letters that Kusum wrote must be with Kusum if she has not torn them. If I get to see those letters, then I can assess what scope I may have to write about the untouched aspects.'

Naveenji took out a pack of these letters from his pocket and keeping them in front of me, he said, 'I got these letters with me because I knew that you would like to have a look at them. Feel free to read these. Kusum is your daughter as much as mine. There is nothing hidden from you!'

I started reading the letters that were beautifully written out on fragrant, pink, smooth sheets:

*My lord. I have already been here for a week but my eyes have not known even a moment's rest. I pass the night restlessly turning sides on my bed. I often wonder what mistakes I have committed that you treat me like this. You may snub me, scold me, curse me, pull out my eyes if you want. I will happily tolerate all this chastisement but I can't bear your coldness. I stayed in your house for a week. God only knows the cravings of my heart. I thought many times of asking you, of seeking forgiveness for my faults; but you avoided even my shadow. I found no occasion. You may remember that when the whole household slept at noon, then I used to go to your room and stand there for hours with my head bent; but you didn't raise your eyes even once. You will probably never get to know what I felt at that time. Only unfortunate women like me can possibly get close to feeling it. After hearing the experiences of their wedding nights from my friends, I had created a heaven of pleasures in my imagination but you destroyed it with such brutality!*

*I ask you, do I have no right over you? Even the court puts some allegations on the culprit before passing its sentence, calls witnesses and hears their evidence. You just did not ask anything. If I get to know my lapses, I can become cautious for the future. I would have fallen at your feet and implored for forgiveness. I swear I have no inkling about the cause of your displeasure. It is possible that I don't possess the qualities that you may have desired in your wife. Doubtless, I have not studied English; am not familiar with the culture of English society, neither do I have any knowledge of the games that the English play. There must be many other flaws in me too. I know I am not worthy of you. You deserved a much more beautiful, talented and intelligent woman than I am; but my Lord, one must receive punishment for crimes and not errors. Also, I am ready to follow your dictates. I need just a little indulgence from you, and will then show you how quickly I can get rid of my deficiencies. A glance of love from you will make my beauty resplendent, my intellect sharp and my fortune strong. This divine gift will bring about my metamorphosis.*

*My lord! Have you ever thought whom you are getting angry with? The defenceless woman who has fallen at your feet seeking forgiveness—the one who has been your slave since eternity—can she*

*endure your anger? My heart is really frail. You will achieve nothing but regret by making me weep. A mere spark of fire of your anger is enough to burn me down to ashes. If it was your wish to see me dead, then I am ready to die. I just need a gesture from you. If your heart will be content to see me dead, then I will happily offer myself at your feet. But it is difficult for me not to at least say that I may have a hundred flaws but I also possess a quality—I have full confidence that no other woman can serve you the way I can. You are a scholar, you are generous and a specialist in psychology. Your slave, standing in front of you, is begging for pity. Will you turn her away from your door?*

*Yours to blame*

*Kusum*

The letter electrified me. I found it difficult to tolerate that any woman could be driven to such sycophancy of her husband. If a man can become indifferent to a woman, then why can the woman also not cast him off? The villain assumes that marriage has made the woman his slave. He may inflict on the woman whatever pain he wishes, and nobody can either hold his hand or even express a whisper of protest. Man can marry a second, third or fourth time. He can continue to control the woman with an iron hand even without having a relationship with her. He knows that the woman is bound by familial constraints and has no alternative besides weeping herself to death. If he had the fear that the woman could slap, then he would never have had the courage to behave in such an uncivilized manner. Poor woman! She is so helpless. If I had been in Kusum's place, then I would perhaps have responded to this ruthlessness with ten times more harshness. I would not have let him get off the hook. I would not have bothered about being derided by the world. If society can quietly watch such repression being inflicted on the defenceless woman without even a whimper, then I would not have cared a whit about its tears or laughter. You unfortunate man! You don't realize how you are killing your own future joys with your dagger of cruelty. It is the time of life when the man has to open up his storehouse of love and fulfil the expectations of love that the woman's parents, siblings and companions consider to be their due. If the man does not have the capacity to do this, then how will he be able to gratify the deprived soul of a woman? The consequences will be exactly what often happens. The woman dies of unexpressed grief. It is the memory of this time that fills the whole life with sweet delight. So strong is the woman's thirst for the nectar of love that she considers her life to be successful if she receives her husband's love, and deriving strength from it, she goes through the ups and downs of life without much ado. This is the time when the spring of love visits the heart and many new



...then that time is the time when the spring of love flows the heart and many new desires start budding. Who is heartless enough to axe the tree in this season? It is in this season that a huntsman brings the bird away from the nest and imprisons it in the cage. Can he expect to hear its sweet song after sawing its neck?

I started to read the second letter.

*The treasure of my life! After waiting for two weeks, I am once again registering the same complaint. When I had written that letter, then my heart had told me that I would definitely receive an answer. I was hoping against hope. My heart still refuses to accept that you have purposely not given any reply. Perhaps you found no time, or God forbid, I hope you have not fallen ill. Who should I ask? My heart trembles with the mere thought. My only prayer to God is for your joy and good health. It's fine if you decide not to write to me. I will at my best weep and then be quiet but for God's sake, write immediately to me if you have any problem. I will come with somebody. I feel suffocated by the shackles of social decorum and convention. If you keep me away from serving you even in such a condition, then you will be depriving me of that right which is the most precious possession of my life. I ask you for nothing. Give me a coarse cloth to wear, coarse food to eat, I will not complain. If I am with you, then I will remain happy even through the worst calamity. I have no desire for ornaments, no desire for entertainment, none for accumulating wealth. My only aim in life is to serve you. This is its only purpose. I have no God, no guru and no master in this world. You are my God; you are my emperor; don't push me away from your feet. Don't cast me off. I have come to serve you with the flowers of love and service, and carry the gifts of duty and penance in the aanchal of my sari. Allow me to keep this gift, these flowers at your feet. The devotee's job is to worship. It is not for her to worry whether God accepts or rejects her worship.*

*The crown of my forehead! You probably don't realize what my condition is these days. You would not have treated me so harshly if you had known. You are a man. You have pity, sympathy and generosity. I cannot believe that you could get angry at a worthless creature like me. I deserve your pity—so weak, crippled and mute as I am! You are the sun, I am the atom; you are the fire, I am an insignificant blade of grass; you the king, I the beggar. Anger should be expressed against an equal. How can I endure the blow of your anger? If you think I am not worthy enough to serve you, then give me the poison cup with your own hands. I will consider it as ambrosia, head, shut my eyes and drink it. When I have offered my whole life to you, then the decision to either let me live or dies lies with you. The satisfaction that my death has made you free from anxiety is enough for me. I just know that I am yours and will always remain so, not just in this life but also till infinity.*

*The unfortunate*

*Kusum*

After reading this letter I began to detest that chap but I even got irritated with Kusum. Agreed! You are a woman. According to prevailing custom the man has full authority over you but there is a limit to being submissive. Even she should not pay heed to him. We have demolished the dignity and confidence of women by continuously inculcating the notions of duty and sacrifice in them. If the man is not dependent on the woman, then is the woman completely ignorant? It is the meekness that makes man's arrogance touch the skies. Hell breaks loose for the

woman if the man is displeased. I believe that it is not Kusum who deserves our pity but her unfortunate husband, who has failed to realize the worth of a woman like her. I began to suspect of this guy being entangled in other kinds of vices and being trapped in pleasures of a predator of a different sort.

Anyway, I opened the third letter:

*My beloved! I have now discovered that my life is meaningless. Why should a flower bloom if there is nobody to look at it or pick it? Does it bloom only to become dry, fall off the ground and be trampled upon? I have returned once again after staying in your house for a month. Your father had asked me to come and he himself organized my departure. You did not visit me even once during this time. You came inside the house several times during the day, laughed and joked with your brothers and sisters, or amused yourself by watching shows with your friends but you had sworn not to come to me. I sent many messages to you; entreated with you; shamelessly went to your room many times; but you did not lift your eyes towards me even once. It is difficult for me to imagine that any man can be so heartless. Not deserving love, not deserving trust, not even deserving to serve, then do I not even deserve your pity? The other day I made rasgullas for you with such love and care but you didn't even touch them. Why should I continue to live on in the face of such indifference from you? Who knows what kind of hope it is that is keeping me alive. It is great injustice that you are punishing me without telling me my crime. What kind of policy is this? Do you realize that in the one month that I stayed in your house I must have eaten barely ten times? I have become so weak that darkness falls in front of my eyes at the slightest exertion. It seems as if I have lost the glow of my eyes! As if blood doesn't run through my heart! Anyway! Feel free to torture me all you want to. This unethical system will also end one day. Now all my hopes are centred on death. I have a feeling that you will spring up a little at the news of my death and inhale a lighter breath without even a tear in your eyes. However, this is not your fault but my misfortune. I must have committed a grave sin in my earlier birth. I try not to care about you, to become indifferent like you are, to turn away from you, turn my heart away from you, but I can't understand why I don't find the strength to do it. Can the creeper stand on its own like the tree? The tree needs no support. From where can the creeper gain this strength? It is born only to twine around the tree. Separate it from the tree and it will die. I cannot even imagine my existence without you. You are a part of every stirring, every idea and every desire in my life. My life is a circle with you at the centre. I am a garland and you have entered every flower of this garland like a thread. Without this thread, the flowers will get scattered and perish in dust.*

*I have a friend, Shanno. She got married this year. Shanno literally walks on air whenever her husband visits her parents' house. She changes her demeanour many times during the day. Her face really blossoms like the lotus. She can hardly control her rapture. She spreads it around, distributes it—for the unfortunate ones like me. I get drenched in the showers of joy and intoxication when she comes and embraces me. Both of them are drunk with love. She has neither wealth nor property but remains entranced even in her poverty. A moment of this eternal love! What in the world can be compared with that? I am aware that such pleasurable activities and freedom from anxiety is short-lived. They will be trounced by the worries and hopelessness of life but like accumulated wealth, these sweet memories will continue to provide them support. Dry roti soaked in love, rough clothes dyed in love and a small room lighted up with the light of love, have the kind of radiance and shelter in penury that is probably not fated even for the deities in heaven. When Shanno's husband goes back to his own home, then the unhappy one weeps so bitterly that it overwhelms my heart. When she gets his letters, it appears as if she has received some divine gift. It seems there is a relish, a flavour even in her weeping, her loss and her complaint. Her tears are tears of impatience and agitation,*

*mine of hopelessness and agony. There is waiting and delight in her restlessness, in mine only degradation and subservience. There is a claim and affection in her complaint, and in mine, only rupture and weeping.*

*The letter gets longer but the heart becomes no lighter. The heat is very intense. Dada is planning to take me to Mussoorie. He suspects my feebleness to be TB. Little does he realize that not just Mussoorie but even heaven is a dark dungeon for me.*

*The unfortunate*

*Kusum*

*My lord of stone! I returned yesterday from Mussoorie. People say it is a very invigorating and beautiful place. Must be. I did not go out of my room even once. The world is a desolate place for broken hearts.*

*I saw a very interesting dream last night. Should I tell you? But what's the point? I'm not sure why I am still scared of death. The weak thread of hope still ties me to life. How distressing it is to reach the gates of the garden of life only to return without even a stroll in it! What beauty lies therein! What pleasure! The door is sealed for me. It was with such high hopes that I had gone to experience the pleasures of the garden—with such anticipation—but the door was closed as soon as I reached it.*

*Okay, just tell me, will you—after my death—shed a few tears on my dead body? You had accepted my responsibility for life; had taken my hand in yours forever. Will you not even show this bit of generosity? Everybody pardons the wrongs of the dead. You too do it. Come and bathe my body with your own hands, and put the sign of marriage—vermilion—on my forehead and bangles on my wrists—with your own hands. Put Gangajal in my mouth with your hands and shoulder my corpse for just a couple of steps. That's it! My soul will be contented and will bless you. I promise you that I will sing your glory in the court of the Lord. Is this also a bad bargain? You get freed of all your responsibilities with just a little civility. Ah! If I had faith that you would show even this civility, then I would have welcomed death with such joy. But I will not be unjust to you. You may be very harsh but it is not possible that you could be so cruel. I know that you will come as soon as you receive these tidings and your eyes may perhaps even weep at my painful death. I wish I could have witnessed that auspicious occasion!*

*Okay! May I ask a question? Don't be angry. Has some fortunate woman taken my place? If it is so, then congratulations! Do please send her photograph to me. I will worship her, bow down my head at her feet. She has received the gift from God, whom I failed to please. One should wash the feet of such a fortunate woman and receive the water as divine. It is my heart's desire that you must live happily with her. If I could have served that divine creature in some manner—in covert, if not in an overt way—then I could have been of some use to you. For now, just tell me her good name and her address. I will fly to her and say to her—Devi, I am your slave because you are the beloved of my lord. Give me a little place at your feet. I will decorate your hair with pearls, put colour on your heels—this will remain the only devotion of my life! Don't think that I will grudge you your happiness or be jealous of it. I would have been jealous only if someone had taken away what had belonged to me. When I have not had the good fortune of calling something my own, then why should I be jealous about losing it?*

*I had to write a lot more but Doctor Sahib has arrived. Poor thing! He has misunderstood the smouldering heart to be TB.*

*The one tortured by agony*

*Kusum*

These two letters filled the cup of my patience to its brim! I am a man without passions. I am not even touched by sensitivity. Like most artists, even I am not moved by words. The unsolved mystery of what comes from the heart and what is meant only to tickle the vulnerable often becomes a hindrance in my pursuit of literary pleasure, but I lost control after reading these letters. My eyes really filled up at one point. The feeling that the girl who has been the apple of her parents' eyes must get so enmeshed in hardships, was deeply agonizing for me! Her marriage has become a funeral pyre, or a command of death for her. It is true that such marital accidents are rare but given the current condition of society, there remains a strong possibility of their existence. Such assaults will become an everyday affair unless men and women are given equal rights. To repress the weak is probably a basic characteristic of human beings. People keep away from dogs that bite while even kids entertain themselves by throwing stones at a peaceful dog. Your servants will never quarrel if they enjoy a similar position but if today you decide to make one of them the boss and the other his junior, then just observe how the chief sahib bosses over his subordinate. Satisfaction in married life is possible only if its foundation is laid on equal rights. I at least have serious doubts that it is possible for any form of love to coexist with such great disparity. What we today perceive as love between the man and the woman is actually the love that a master has for his animal. If the animal bends its neck and keeps working, then the master will feed it well with hay and oilcakes, will pat its body, and even adorn it with ornaments, but the moment the animal plays any trick or becomes obstinate, then the master's whip will slash across its back. This cannot be called love.

Anyway, I opened the fifth letter:

*Just as I expected, you did not respond even to my last letter. The message, that you have decided to forsake me, is quite clear. Be it as you wish! Man thinks of woman as the dust of his feet but for the woman, the man is godly—in fact more than a god. She begins dreaming about her husband as soon as the faculty of thinking is born within her. You entered the space of my heart as a doll at the time when I had just begun to play with them. I washed your feet, welcomed you with garlands of flowers and other offerings. After some time I got passionately interested in reading and listening to stories. Then you entered my home and settled in my heart as the hero of these stories. You have been a part of my life in some form or the other, since my childhood. These emotions have touched the core of my existence. Every atom of my identity is bound by this emotion. It is not simple to push it out of my heart. Even the minutest pieces of my life will get completely scattered if I do so, but if that's your wish, then so be it. I was ready to do everything to serve you. I was not merely ready to live a life of deprivation and poverty. I was even willing to destroy myself in your service. The purpose of my life*

*was to annihilate myself in your service. I abandoned modesty and hesitation, squashed my self-respect under my feet, but you still do not wish to accept me. I am helpless. You are of course not at fault. It must be an act of mine that has made you so heartless. You do not consider it proper even to voice it. I was prepared to go through all hardships besides this heartlessness. I would not have taken even a split second to drink the cup of poison from your hand, but many strange things occur in this world! To begin with, I had serious objections in accepting the fact that the woman is like the dust of man's feet. I considered her to be an equal and a companion to man but now I am no longer in the dark. A long time back I had read that in ancient times the man possessed the woman like he did cattle or land. The man had the right to keep the woman, mortgage her, or kill her. Marriage simply meant that the group arrived armed along with his strong group of kinsmen and just kidnapped the bride. Along with the girl he also carried whatever wealth, grain or cattle he could lay his hands on. He took the woman home, chained her feet and imprisoned her. In an attempt to demolish any remains of self-respect left in the woman, it was inculcated in her that man is her God and her married state is a divine blessing. The psychology of man has not undergone any change even after thousands of years. All the customs continue to exist either in their antique or distorted forms. Today I realize how truthfully that writer had represented the condition of woman.*

*Now, my humble and last request is that kindly return all my letters. The clothes and ornaments given by you are now useless for me. I have no right to keep these with me. You can get them picked up whenever you like. I have put them in a box and kept it apart. The list of ornaments lies along with it. Do get them matched. From today onwards, you will receive no complaint either from me or my pen. In no frame of mind should you at any time nurture any doubt that I will ever betray you or be faithless to you. I will stifle myself to death in this house but my heart will never bear a grudge against you. Deference for the husband is the main essence of my upbringing. Neither jealousy nor envy can thrust this emotion out of my heart. I am the guardian of your family name. I will never be disloyal to this trust. If I had any control over this, I would have returned this too but both you and I are helpless in this matter. My only prayer to God will be that may you remain happy and safe wherever you are. The bitterest experience of my life has been the realization that a woman's life is worthless—for herself, for her parents and for her husband. She has no place either in the home of her mother or her husband. My home is full of mourning. My mother is weeping and so is my father. All my family members are weeping. All of them are undergoing such mental agony because of my existence.*

*They perhaps feel that it would have been better if this girl had not been born in our family. But even if the whole world gets together, it will not be able to win against you. You are my lord. Your decision is unshakeable. One cannot appeal against it, cannot plead against it. Anyway, this story gets over today. Now I exist with my repressed and ruptured heart. My still unfulfilled desire is that I could not serve you!*

*The unfortunate*

*Kusum*

## 2

I am not sure how long I kept sitting in a state of mute agony, when Naveenji said, 'What is your decision after reading the letters?'

With a weeping heart, I said, 'If these letters have had no impact on that devil,

then what possibility is there of my letter achieving anything. Expressing any more pity and anguish is beyond my ability. There is no sacred emotion that these letters have not touched upon—pity, modesty, humiliation, justice—Kusum has alluded to all these. The last resort for me is to pester that villain and try to reach to the root of the problem by directly confronting him. If he does not give me a satisfactory answer, then I will end up spilling his blood as well as mine. Either I will be hanged or he will end up in Kaala Paani. The patience and courage with which Kusum has dealt with the whole issue is truly praiseworthy. You just comfort her. I will leave for Moradabad by train tonight and whatever the situation, I will apprise you of it by day after tomorrow! To me he appears to be a debauched and unintelligent fellow.’

I am not sure what all I kept mouthing in the grip of passion. After that we had our meal and went to the station. He went to Agra, and I took the route to Moradabad. He was still very nervous that I might become violent in a fit of anger. He became calm only after persistent convincing from me.

I reached Moradabad the next morning and started my investigation. The suspicion that I had about that young man’s character proved to be unfounded. Whether it was in the neighbourhood, in the college or amongst his good friends, he had admirers everywhere. The mystery became still more enigmatic. I reached his house in the evening. I cannot forget the genuine manner in which he hastened to bend down at my feet. I have yet to meet a young man who is so eloquent, well mannered and polite. I had never seen such a gap between appearance and reality. After a few customary and formal inquiries about his well-being, I asked him, ‘I am delighted to meet you but after all, what lapse has Kusum committed that you are inflicting such a harsh punishment on her? She wrote several letters to you but you did not respond to even a single one. She even came here two or three times but you did not even speak to her. Are you not being unfair to that innocent girl?’

The young man responded somewhat shyly: ‘It would have been good if you had not raised this issue. It is extremely difficult for me to answer this. I had left this for all of you to assess, but I will now have to clear all misconceptions and articulate my mind.’

He merely uttered this and then fell silent. Insects of different varieties collected around the electric light. Some crickets were skipping around our faces and then they flew away, seemingly after leaving an imprint of their victory over

and then they flew away, seemingly without leaving an imprint or their victory over the human race. A big grasshopper was also sitting on the table, probably weighing itself with the intention of leaping. The young man brought a small fan and kept it on the table. It proved to the insect that man is not as defenceless as it had assumed. The field was cleared in a moment and there was no one left to interrupt our talks.

The young man hesitated and said, 'It is possible that you may consider me to be extremely greedy, vile and selfish but the truth is that this marriage has not fulfilled that desire of mine which is much dearer to me than my life. I was not yet willing to get married and chained down by matrimony but Naveenji really pestered me and after listening to him, I cherished a hope that he would help me in all ways. However, he completely ignored me after the wedding. He did not write to me even once about when he may be able to arrange for my trip abroad. He chose to disappoint me even though I had expressed my wish to him right in the beginning. His negligence demolished all my ambitions to dust. What choice am I now left with except that I pass my LLB and make rounds of the local courts?'

I asked him, 'So, what do you expect from Naveenji? He gave no cause for complaint as far as customary transactions are concerned. It is probably beyond his means to send you abroad.'

The young man bent his head and said, 'Then he should have said this to me right at the beginning. Why would I have then got married at all? He may have spent whatever amount but how is that of any use to me? At least ten or twelve thousand rupees have been burnt down by the two sides, and along with that—my aspirations too. My father, in fact, has accumulated a debt of several thousand rupees. Now he cannot send me to England. Could respected Naveenji have not sent me to England, had he so desired? Five or ten thousand is no big issue for him.'

I was stunned. I spontaneously uttered, '*Chhee!* What a world! And what a wonderful Hindu society! What slaves of selfishness can be found here! They wish to achieve high status by endangering the life of a vulnerable woman and oppressing her father. There is nothing wrong in going abroad for education. Do please go, if God gives you the stamina to do so. But it is the limit of shamelessness to abandon your wife and burden your father-in-law with this. It would have been truly praiseworthy if you had gone on your own steam. What is

the point of going by putting the burden on another's shoulder and bargaining off your own self-esteem?' Kusum herself holds no value in the eyes of this wicked and foolish man. She is merely a means of achieving his selfish goals. It is meaningless to debate with a man of such low character. The situation is such that we are in his grip and we have no choice except placing our heads at his feet.

I reached Agra by the next train and narrated the whole incident to Naveenji. Little did he know that the whole responsibility has been put on him! Even though the bad times have adversely affected his legal practice and he cannot easily bear the expense of five to ten thousand rupees—if that man had merely indicated this to him, he would certainly have managed it in some or the other way. Who else, besides Kusum, did he have in the world? Poor thing! He was not at all aware of this. So when I narrated all this to him he could not help saying, 'Chhee! The good fellow gave this minor matter so much importance! You write immediately and inform him that he can happily go for his studies at any time, whenever he wants to. I accept the full responsibility for that. For a whole year he has tortured poor Kusum almost to death.'

The matter was discussed at home. Kusum also heard it from her mother. She discovered that a cheque of one thousand rupees was being sent in her husband's name, as if a religious ceremony was being performed for deliverance from hardship.

Kusum frowned and said, 'Amma, tell Dada that there is no need to send any money anywhere.'

The mother looked at her child in surprise. 'What money? Okay! That! Why? What harm is there in this? If the boy so desires, then he should go and study abroad. Why should we stop him? All this anyway is in his name and belongs to him. Can we tie all this to our chest and take it with us?'

'No. You tell Dada not to send even a single pie.'

'But what's wrong with it?'

'Because this is the same kind of looting that ruffians do. Forcibly take somebody away and then swindle a large amount from the family as the price for freeing him.'

The mother answered, reproachfully. 'What sort of talk is this, beti? It is after ages that God has finally conceded and you have begun to bother him once again.'



again.

Kusum was irritated. 'It is better that such a God continues to be angry. I cannot spend my life with a man who is so selfish, arrogant and vile. I am warning you that I will consume poison if any money is sent there. Don't consider this to be a joke. I do not want to see even the face of such a man. Just tell Dada and in case you are scared, I will tell him myself. I have decided to remain free.'

The mother saw that the daughter's face had become flushed, as if she wanted to neither hear nor say anything more about this issue.

Next day, Naveenji reported all this to me, and in a state of gay abandon, I went running to Kusum and embraced her. This is the kind of self-respect I wish to see in women. Kusum managed to do what I had in my mind but did not have the courage to express.

One year has gone by. Kusum has not written even once to her husband and neither does she ever mention him. Many a time, Naveenji has expressed the desire to cajole his son-in-law and bring him home but Kusum does not want to hear even his name. It is surprising to see how her self-reliance has brought immense assurance and strength to her. Her face is neither pale nor overshadowed with disappointment or anguish. The glow and radiance of self-respect and liberation have taken its place.

*Translated from the Hindi by Vibha S. Chauhan*



## The Widow with Sons

### 1

When Pandit Ayodhyanath passed away, everyone remarked, ‘May God give such an end to everyone!’

He was survived by four grown-up sons, all married, and a daughter, yet unmarried. He had left behind a considerable fortune; a brick-house, two orchards, jewellery worth several thousands of rupees, and twenty thousand in hard cash. For a long time, Phulmati, his widow, remained in a state of mourning, but she composed herself with the thought that she had four grown-up sons to look to. All four of them were impeccably mannered and all their wives exceedingly obedient. When she lay down at night, the four of them took turns to massage her feet. When she would take her bath it is they who picked out a sari for her. Thus the entire household danced to her tune. The eldest son, Kamatanath, worked in an office for fifty rupees a month. Umanath, the younger one, had qualified as a doctor and was hoping to open up a clinic. The third, Dayanath, having failed his BA examination, was somehow managing a living by writing for magazines. Sitanath, the fourth, was the brightest of them all, and having passed his BA in the first division, was now preparing for his MA examination. None of the sons had any vices, or had such improvident habits that would bring grief to the mother or disgrace the family honour. For all practical purposes, Phulmati was in charge of the household. However, the keys remained in the custody of the eldest bahu. The old woman did not make an ostentatious show of her authority which often makes the elderly irascible and querulous, but no one could demand and have anything without her wish.

It was evening. Twelve days had gone by since Panditji had passed away. Tomorrow would be the thirteenth day of the death rites. A big ritual feast to which all relatives and members of the fraternity were invited, had to be arranged. The preparations were in progress. Phulmati, seated in her room, could see people bringing in bagful of flour, ghee tins, baskets full of vegetables, bags of sugar and containers of curd. Several other things were brought for offering; utensils, clothes, beds, bedding, umbrellas, shoes, sticks and lanterns, but Phulmati was not shown anything. As had been the custom, all these items should have been first brought to her for approval. She would size everything up, approve of it, and would suggest proper measure, before it could be stored. But, why was she not consulted, or shown anything? And why only three bags of flour when she had asked for five. Ghee too was only in five tins when she had asked for ten. Similarly, every other item like vegetables, sugar, curds must have been cut down upon. Who dared to interfere with her orders? Once she had decided on something, who could have any right to tamper with the quantities?

For forty years, Phulmati's word prevailed in all matters. If she wished hundred rupees to be spent, hundred were spent; if she asked for one, then just one. Nobody ever did any nitpicking. Even Pandit Ayodhyanath didn't ever go against her wishes. But, today, right in front of her eyes, she was being ignored. How could she tolerate all this?

For a moment, she kept quiet; but couldn't restrain herself any longer. She was used to her rightful autonomy. Full of anger, she went to Kamatanath and said, 'Why have you brought just three bags of flour; I had asked for five? And ghee, too, is only in five tins. Don't you remember I had asked for ten? Prudence is not bad but if a person who dug the well himself remained thirsty—isn't that such a disgrace?'

Kamatanath did not care to say he was sorry, nor did he feel ashamed. For a moment he stood defiant, then said, 'We decided on three bags for which five tins of ghee would be enough. In the same way we cut down on the other quantities too.'

Phulmati reacted sharply, 'Who suggested a cut in the flour?'

'We did.'

'Does my opinion count for nothing?'

'Why not, but we too can understand our gain and loss.'

A flabbergasted Phulmati stared at him. She couldn't get what he intended by

‘gain and loss’. She very well understood the gain and the loss of this household. Others, even if born of her, had no business to interfere with what she did. This insolent fellow was talking back as if the house belonged to him alone, as if he had suffered to raise this family, and she was an outsider. Look at his audacity!

Her face flushed with anger as she retorted, ‘You are not to count my gain or loss. I have the right to do what I think proper. Go right away and bring two more bags of flour and five tins of ghee, and beware of disregarding my orders in future.’

She had given him quite a dressing-down. Perhaps she shouldn’t have been so harsh. She felt sorry for it. Well, they were boys after all. It was natural for them to think in terms of economy. Maybe they didn’t ask me because they knew I myself am thrifty. Had they known that I wouldn’t skimp on anything in this matter, they wouldn’t have dared defy me. Although Kamatanath was standing in the same manner, it was apparent that he was in no mood to comply. Phulmati, however, felt assured, and went off to her room. She couldn’t have entertained the thought of someone not following her word.

As time passed by, it became apparent to her that she no longer had the same status in this house that she had enjoyed ten or twelve days ago. From the kinsmen came various offerings of sugar, sweetmeats, curds, pickle, etc., which were stowed away by the eldest bahu as her own possessions. No one came around to take her advice. If any of the relatives had something to ask, they went straight to Kamatanath or his wife, as if he was the most responsible or resourceful person of the house. In fact, most of the time he could be found stoned with bhang. Somehow he managed to go to his office, but that too, for no more than fifteen days in a month. The sahibs had regard for Panditji or else he would have been fired long ago. His wife, an insensitive woman, could not appreciate a situation like this. She was not even capable of taking care of her personal belongings, let alone manage the household. What a shame! They were all bent upon bringing disgrace to the family. At some stage, something or the other could run out of stock. One needs to exercise a lot of prudence to see to such things. Something may be in surplus and one wouldn’t know how to dispose it of, while other items would be in such small quantities that they would hardly reach each platter. What has struck all of them? Well, why was the eldest bahu opening the safe? Who is she to do that without my permission? The keys

are in her custody, all right, but she is not supposed to open the safe unless I authorize her to do so. But look at her, today she is opening the safe as if I count for nothing. No, I can't stand it any more.

Rising peremptorily she went over to the eldest bahu and said sternly, 'Why are you opening the safe? I never asked you to!'

The elder bahu replied nonchalantly, 'Won't we pay for the things purchased?'

'I don't know anything about how things were purchased and in what quantities? How can there be payments unless there are proper accounts?'

'Well, all is settled.'

'Who did that?'

'How do I know? Go and ask the men. I was ordered to fetch money for payments, and I am merely doing that.'

Phulmati could hardly suppress her ire. But it was no time to get into a foul mood. The house was full of guests—men, women, all. If she lost her temper with the boys now, the people will gossip that the family was splitting up soon after Panditji had died. She braced herself and walked up and withdrew to her room. But she was determined to take everyone to task once the guests had left. Let her see how they face her and respond to her. She was going to smash the coterie.

She felt restless even in her room and kept an eagle-eyed watch on the entire scene. Which rules of hospitality were not observed? Where had someone overstepped the bounds of honour? The feast had begun. All the guests were asked to be seated in rows. The courtyard had room for barely two hundred people. She wondered how five hundred people could be accommodated in this space. Were they going to pile up one upon the other? Would there be two shifts? What was the harm if the people were to be seated in two shifts? At the most, the feast would be over by two at night rather than at twelve. But everybody seems to be in a hurry to get away and sleep. Let this damn thing be over so that one may sleep in peace. The diners are sitting so close to one another that one can't even move edgewise. The *pattals* are overlapping. The puris served have gone cold—there is a clamour for hot puris. When the *maida* puris become cold, they stiffen like leather. Who is going to eat such stuff! Why has the cook been sent off so early? So very irritating!

Suddenly, there was an uproar. The vegetable dishes had no salt. The elder

bahu quietly set about powdering salt. Enraged, Phulmati was biting her lips, but couldn't have spoken at such a juncture. At last salt powder was brought and sprinkled over the platters. There was another uproar: 'The water is hot—we need cold water.' But cold water had not been arranged for; no one had thought of getting any ice. Someone was rushed to the market but where could one get ice so late in the night? The fellow returned empty-handed. Guests had to make do with the warm tap water. If Phulmati had her way, she would tear the boys from limb to limb. Her house had never before witnessed such ignominy. And yet, everyone was dying to be the master of the house. It hadn't occurred to anyone to order for such an essential item as ice. How would it strike anyone when they were busy gossiping? How must the guests be wondering there wasn't any ice in the house and the entire community had been invited to a feast?

There was more commotion. The diners were getting up from their places. What must the matter be?

Phulmati could not remain unconcerned. Emerging from her room she came into the courtyard and asked Kamatanath, 'What is the matter, son? Why are the people getting up?'

Kamatanath did not answer her, and quietly slipped away from there. That irritated Phulmati. Suddenly she met the maid and asked her the same question. She was told that a dead mouse was found in someone's curry. Phulmati stood transfixed. She was in a terrible rage, fuming from within, as if she would dash out her brains against the wall. These accursed fellows were in charge of the feast. It was the height of grossness. How many people have had their dharma abused. Why won't they get up after witnessing all this? Everything has come to nought. Hundreds of rupees have gone to waste; not to talk of this utter ignominy.

The guests have dispersed. And the food was still lying on the pattals. All four sons standing in the courtyard were a picture of disgrace. They were now blaming each other. The eldest bahu was getting angry at the younger ones, who in turn put all the blame on Kumud, which made her cry. Just then, Phulmati appeared and burst out: 'Are you satisfied with the disgrace you have brought on or is there something still left? Go and drown yourself, all of you. We cannot show our faces in the town.'

None of the sons responded.

Phulmati became more vehement: 'It doesn't affect you since none of you has

Kamata became more vehement. 'It doesn't affect you, since none of you has any sense of honour. Only he who has spent his life bringing dignity to this house can grieve. Why have you brought disrepute to his noble soul? The entire community has contempt for us. No one will ever come to even urinate at your door.'

Kamatanath listened to her silently for a while, then got irritated and said, 'Now keep quiet, Amma. We admit our mistake, indeed, this was a blunder. But are you going to hang us for this? Everyone commits mistakes only to repent later. But you do not cry for their blood.'

The eldest bahu tried to clear it up. 'How would we know Kumud couldn't do even this much of the job? She should have checked the vegetables before pouring them into the cauldron. She just emptied the whole basket into it. How can we be blamed for this?'

Kamatanath admonished his wife, 'No single person, not even Kumud, not you, nor I is to blame for this. It was just a matter of chance. We were destined for this disgrace. When there is such a big feast, you do not put fistfuls of vegetables into the *karhai*. Entire baskets have to be emptied. Such mishaps do take place occasionally.'

'How can this be an object of mockery or disgrace? You are unnecessarily adding insult to injury.'

Phulmati gnashed her teeth in disgust and said, 'Instead of feeling ashamed, you speak so insolently.'

Kamatanath was not one to be subdued. 'Why should I be ashamed? Have I committed some theft? Ants in sugar and pests in wheat are easily overlooked. We didn't watch out and that was a slip—that was it. Or else we would have quietly thrown out the mouse and none would be any the wiser.'

Phulmati was aghast at hearing this. 'What did you say? The dead mouse would have defiled everyone's dharma.'

Kamata said smilingly, 'Amma, which age are you living in? Such trifles do not corrupt anyone's dharma. Tell me who among the so-called virtuous people who walked off from there don't eat meat? They won't spare even tortoises and snails. How would a little mouse defile them?'

Phulmati felt as if doomsday was very near. 'God save dharma! Even educated people harbour such unrighteous notions.' Cut up, she withdrew.

Two months went by. Night had fallen. The four brothers, having done with the day's job, were sitting in the room and chatting. The eldest bahu was in league with them, the topic being discussed was Kumud's wedding.

Kamatanath reclined against the bolster and said, 'Father's words are gone with him. Pandit Murari is a learned man and should be a gentleman. But a person who barter his learning and status for money is rather mean and we couldn't marry Kumud off to such a person's son, not for an amount, let alone a dowry of five thousand rupees. Send him a refusal and look out for another groom. We only have twenty thousand rupees with us, which means five thousand as each one's share. If we set aside five thousand for dowry and five thousand for other things, such as band, etc., we will be stripped of all the money we have.'

Umanath quipped, 'I need at least five thousand rupees to start my clinic. I cannot spare anything out of my share. In the beginning, there will be hardly any earnings and I shall have to fall back on whatever resources I have.'

Dayanath was looking at a newspaper. Taking off his glasses, he said, 'I too, am thinking of publishing a newspaper. I need a capital of at least ten thousand rupees for the printing press and the newspaper. If I can invest five thousand rupees, somebody can chip in as a partner with another five thousand rupees. I can't get by on writing articles for others' newspapers.'

Kamatanath nodded in agreement. 'No one publishes articles even for free, let alone pay for them.'

Dayanath contradicted him and said, 'Well, not so really. I don't write for anyone unless I get some advance.'

Kamatanath took his words back. 'I am not speaking of you, you may be getting paid, but not everyone can manage that.'

The elder bahu said, 'If a girl is born under lucky stars she will be happy even in an impoverished home. But if she is unlucky, she will feel miserable even in a king's home. It is all a matter of destiny.'

Kamatanath looked at his wife with admiration. 'We have to marry Sita off this very year.'

Sitanath was the youngest of the brothers. Even while keeping his head down, he was getting impatient to criticize the selfish motives of his brothers. So as



soon as he heard his name, he said, 'Do not bother about my marriage. I will not even talk of it unless I start earning. Truly speaking, I don't really want to marry. What our country needs is people who work, rather than adding to the population. You can spend my share of the money on Kumud's wedding. Having once fixed with Pandit Murarilal, it would be unbecoming to snap the relations.'

Uma protested loudly. 'How do we manage ten thousand rupees?'

Sita said with some diffidence, 'I am willing to contribute my share of the money.'

'What about the remaining amount?'

'Murarilal can be asked to lower the dowry demand. He cannot be so selfish as not to be accommodating. If he is satisfied with three thousand rupees, the marriage can be arranged within five thousand rupees.'

Uma said to Kamatanath, 'Do you hear what he is saying?'

Dayanath spoke up, 'What is the harm? He is giving up his share, why not spend it? We have no grudge against Murari Pandit. On the other hand, I am happy to know that there is someone among us who is willing to make a sacrifice. He has no immediate need for money. He gets a stipend from the government. As soon as he passes his examination he will find some job. We are not that lucky.'

Kamatanath spoke with circumspection, 'What would he know about loss? If one of us suffers should others do something about it? He hasn't yet grown up and doesn't realize that a single rupee is worth a lakh of rupees in difficult circumstances. Who knows he might get a scholarship to study in a foreign country, or get selected for the civil services. At that time he will require at least four to five thousand rupees to equip himself with. Where will he then go begging for money? I don't want him to ruin his life for the sake of a dowry for Kumud.'

Sitanath couldn't refute his argument. With some hesitation he conceded, 'In that case, I shall need the money.'

'Is that not likely to happen?'

'It is not unlikely, but perhaps difficult. Those who can manage recommendations get scholarships. Who is going to bother about me?'

'At times recommendations count for nothing and those without them romp home.'

‘Well, do as you wish. As far as I am concerned I can forgo an overseas trip, but want Kumud married off into a good family.’

‘You don’t get a family only with a dowry. As your bhabhi said, it is all in one’s stars. What I want is that Murarilal should be sent a refusal and we should look for a groom who would agree to a small dowry. I cannot afford to spend more than a thousand rupees on this marriage. How about Pandit Deendayal?’

Uma was delighted to hear that and said, ‘He is excellent. Doesn’t matter if he is not an MA and BA, but he earns a good living from his *jajmani*.’

Dayanath objected, ‘We should seek Amma’s opinion.’

But Kamatanath saw no need for this, and said, ‘She has lost her reason, and has the same orthodox views. She is all out for Murarilal. Doesn’t realize that the times have changed. All she wants is to send Kumud to Murari’s house, even if we are ruined in the bargain.’

Uma expressed some doubt. ‘You just watch out, Amma is going to give away all her jewellery to Kumud.’

Kamatanath couldn’t be so selfish. ‘Well, the jewellery is her sole possession. It is her dower. She can give it to anyone she likes.’

Uma interjected, ‘It is her dower, but does that mean she should squander it away? After all, that too was Dada’s earning?’

‘Whosoever might have earned it, but she has full rights on it.’

‘These are labyrinths of law. Twenty thousand will have four claimants and jewellery worth ten thousand will be only Amma’s. You just wait and watch; she will marry Kumud off to Murari Pandit on the strength of this jewellery.’

Umanath was in no mind to let go of such a huge amount. He was adept at trickery. He would cook up some story and wangle the jewels out of the mother. Till then it would be rather indiscreet to provoke Phulmati by bringing up the subject of Kumud’s marriage. Umanath nodded his head and said, ‘The jewellery will be of no less value than ten thousand rupees.’

Kamatanath was not moved and said, ‘Whatever their worth, I cannot be party to something that is unethical.’

‘All right then, you be off. Don’t jump in later to upset things.’

‘I’ll stay away from all this.’

‘And you, Sita?’

‘I too will stay away.’

But when Dayanath was told about it, he promptly agreed to conspire with

him.

He will at least get two and a half out of ten. If one has to resort to some trickery for such a large sum, it's all in the game.

### 3

Phulmati had retired after her dinner when Uma and Daya came over to her. They looked so pathetic in appearance as if some great calamity had befallen them. Phulmati asked apprehensively, 'Both of you look perturbed.'

Uma scratched his head and said, 'Writing for newspapers is a risky business, Amma. However cautious you may be, you get caught sometime or the other. Dayanath wrote an article for which a surety of five thousand rupees has been demanded from him. If the amount is not deposited by tomorrow, he will be arrested and sent to jail for ten years.'

Phulmati beat her head in desperation. 'Why do you write such things, son, you should know we are already passing through tough times? Can't the surety be avoided?'

Dayanath replied sheepishly, 'Amma, I had not written any such thing, but what to do about misfortune? The district magistrate is so strict that he will show no mercy. I have left no stone unturned.'

'In that case didn't you ask Kamata to arrange the money?'

Uma said with a grimace, 'You know his nature, Amma, money is dearer to him than life. He may be condemned to solitary confinement, but he will not part with a single pie.'

Dayanath supported him. 'I didn't think it proper to even take this issue to him.'

Phulmati, rising from her bed, said, 'Come with me, I will tell him, how can he refuse to give? Money is meant for such emergencies and not to be kept hidden underground.'

Umanath stopped his mother and said, 'Amma, don't tell him anything. Instead of giving money he will raise hell. He is more concerned with saving his own job, and he won't even allow Dayanath to live in the house. I wouldn't be surprised if he even reports it to the officers.'

Phulmati felt helpless. 'So how are you going to arrange for the surety? I have

got nothing with me. Yes, I do have my jewellery. Take these and pawn them with someone to deposit the surety amount. And swear that you will never write such things for any newspaper.'

Dayanath put his hands on his ears. 'Amma, it is just not possible for me to take away your jewellery to save my skin. No matter if I am sentenced to ten or five years' imprisonment. I shall go through this ordeal. What purpose do I serve here?'

Phulmati, beating her breast, said, 'What are you saying, my son—who has the guts to arrest you as long as I am alive? Won't I torch his face? Isn't the jewellery meant for such a rainy day? What shall I do with it if you are not around? Throw it into the fire?'

She brought out the jewellery box and put it in front of him.

Daya looked at Uma beseechingly, and said, 'What is your opinion, Bhai Sahib? That is the reason I was telling you there was no need to tell Amma about it. The worst that can happen is that I will end up in jail.'

Uma as if coming to his defence said, 'How is it that such a calamity would have passed Amma by? It wasn't possible for me to keep quiet about it. I just can't see what is to be done now. I don't want you to go to jail nor is it right to pawn Amma's jewellery.'

Phulmati said in a plaintive voice, 'Do you think the jewellery is dearer to me than you are? I can even sacrifice my life for your sake, the jewellery is not even worth mentioning.'

Daya said resolutely, 'Amma, I won't have your jewellery whatever misfortune may befall me. I have been of no use to you so far, how can I now take away your jewellery? A wicked son like me should not have been born to you. I have always given you pain.'

Phulmati spoke up as firmly, 'If you do not accept these jewels I will myself go and pawn these and shall deposit the amount with the district magistrate. You can test me if you like. God alone knows what will happen when I am no more, but as long as I am alive, nobody can ever touch you.'

Umanath, as if obliging his mother, said, 'There is no other way left for us now. There is no harm, then, accept these, but remember to redeem and return the jewellery as soon as you have the money. It is true that motherhood is a long process of sacrifice. Who else but a mother can shower so much love? We are so unfortunate that we do not show even a fraction of the respect which is due to

her.'

Both of them, as if getting over a big dilemma, took charge of the jewellery box and took off. Their mother looked at them lovingly as if all her being's blessings were eager to embrace them. Today, after so many months her heart, shadowed with grief, got some solace after making this sacrifice of all she had. Her whole being was indeed looking for ways and means to surrender her possessions. Her attitude never smacked of greed or self-interest. She knew that her enjoyment and her authority lay in sacrifice. She felt overwhelmed as if her rights had-been restored to her.

#### 4

Three more months passed. After making away with their mother's jewellery all four brothers began fawning upon her. They also instructed their wives not to give her any offence. If being a little polite could placate her heart, what was the harm in it? They did what pleased them but took care to take her token advice. They manipulated things in such a manner that she would be easily taken in by them to give her ready consent. She was most unwilling to sell the orchard but they cooked up such stories that she felt compelled to consent to the sale. However, no consensus could be reached regarding Kumud's marriage. The mother was intent on Pandit Murarilal whereas the sons were bent upon Deendayal. Then they quarrelled over the matter one day.

Phulmati declared that a daughter, too, had all the claims on her parents' money. She told the sons, 'You got the orchards worth sixteen thousand rupees and a house worth twenty-five thousand rupees. Can't she claim even five thousand out of the cash of twenty thousand?'

Kamata said politely, 'Amma, Kumud is not only your daughter, she is our sister, too. You will pass away in two to four years but our relation with her will last long years. We will never do anything that goes against her well-being, but as far as a share for her is concerned she is entitled to nothing whatsoever. It was different when Dada was alive. He could have spent as much as he liked on her marriage. No one would have restrained him, but things are different now. We have to manage everything with utmost care and look after every paisa. There is no wisdom in blowing five thousand if something can be managed within one thousand.'

thousand.

Umanath corrected him, 'Not five thousand, but ten thousand.'

Kamata shrugged it off and said, 'No, I will say five thousand. It is not within our means to spend five thousand rupees.'

Phulmati put her foot down. 'Come what may, she will be married off only to Murarilal's son, no matter five thousand or ten thousand. After all, it is all my husband's earning. I have put it together with great difficulty. And I will spend it as I like. You alone are not born of me. Kumud too has taken birth from the same womb. All of you are equal in my eyes. I am not begging anything of anyone. You just sit and watch the show, I will manage everything. Out of twenty thousand rupees, five thousand belong to Kumud.'

Kamatanath was left with no choice but to speak out the bitter truth, and said, 'Amma, you are unnecessarily aggravating the situation. The money that you think is yours doesn't really belong to you but to us. You can't spend anything out of it without our permission.'

Phulmati felt as if she had been bitten by a snake. 'What did you say? Come on, repeat it. I can't spend my own money?'

'The money is not yours, it belongs to us.'

'Yours only after my death.'

'Not so, it became ours as soon as Dada died.'

Umanath said shamelessly, 'Amma doesn't understand the law and quarrels with us unnecessarily.'

Phulmati spoke in anger and indignation, 'To hell with your law. I don't respect such law. Your father was not a millionaire. I scrimped and saved and held the family together or you would have no shelter for yourself. You can't touch my money as long as I am alive. I spent ten thousand rupees on each of your brothers' weddings, and I am going to spend the same amount on Kumud's marriage.'

Kamatanath grew wild. 'You have no right to spend anything.'

Umanath admonished his elder brother, 'Bhai sahib, you are unnecessarily arguing with Amma. Simply write a letter to Murarilal telling him that Kumud can't be married into their family. That's the end of it. She doesn't understand any law and gets into useless arguments.'

Phulmati composed herself and said, 'Well, let me hear what the law says.'

Uma said with exasperation, 'The law says that the ancestral property goes to

the sons after their father's death. The mother is merely entitled to food and clothes.'

Phulmati reacted sharply. 'Who made this law?'

Uma said quietly, 'Our rishis, the maharaja Manu, who else?'

For a moment Phulmati was dumbstruck and then let out painfully, 'So, I am living in this house at your mercy.'

Umanath said impassively, 'Well, you may take it as you like.'

Phulmati cried out at this thunderbolt. The words emitted as sparks as she said, 'I made the house; I managed the property, I gave you birth and brought you up. And today I am a stranger in my own house? Is that Manu's edict, and do you want to follow it? All right, have your house to yourself. I can't go on living here as your dependant. I would rather die. What a shock! I planted the tree but can't stand in its shade. If that is the law, to hell with it!'

The four youngsters were not in the least intimidated by this show of anger of their mother. As they thought they had the protective shield of law, how could such pinpricks harm them?

After a short while, Phulmati left. For the first time, she felt that her disheartened motherhood was cursing her. The motherhood, her sole treasure, which she had cherished above all her aspirations, was now a burning furnace, into the flames of which her life was consigned.

It was evening. The neem tree in the courtyard stood with drooping branches as if depressed with the ways of the world. On the western horizon the lord of light and life was burning it its own pyre; so was Phulmati's motherhood.

## 5

When Phulmati retired to her room and lay on the bed, she felt as if her back was broken. Even in her dreams it had never occurred to her that her own sons would turn into her enemies as soon as her husband died. The sons whom she had nurtured and suckled were inflicting terrible wounds on her heart. This house was now a bed of thorns for her.

To live here and feed herself in a place where she had lost all respect and counted for nothing was something that was unbearable to her proud nature.

But what was the way out for her? If she lived apart from the sons who was going to suffer the disgrace? Whether the world cursed her or cursed her sons, it

going to suffer the disgrace: whether the world cursed her or cursed her sons, it was all the same, she was the one who would be held responsible for the indignity. The people would gossip that with four young sons around, the old woman lived separately and had to labour for her meals. Those whom she always considered below her status will laugh at her. No, such humiliation would be more heart-rending than this disregard. It was wiser to keep her own and her family honour under wraps. She would now have to adapt herself to new circumstances. Times had changed. So far she had been in command, but now she was compelled to live like a servant. This was the will of God. It would be better to suffer the jibes and blows of her own sons rather than those of outsiders.

She covered her face and wept over her wretched plight. The long night passed in this suffering. The winter dawn emerged from the darkness, full of trepidation, as if coming out of jail. Much against her habit, Phulmati got up very early that morning. It appeared as if she had undergone a mental metamorphosis during the course of the night. While the entire household slept, she began to sweep the courtyard. The ground hardened by the midnight frost stung her bare feet like thorns. Panditji would have never allowed her to wake up so early. The cold was very harmful for her. But those days were gone. She was trying to adjust herself to the times. Having done the sweeping, she lit some fire and began to pick pebbles off the rice and lentils. After some time, the sons woke up, but no one said to her, ‘Amma, why are you bothering yourself with all this work?’ They were probably happy that the proud spirit of the old woman was crushed.

From then onwards, Phulmati was determined to work with all her might, but with complete indifference. In place of the proud, self-confident expression on her face, there was deep anguish. In place of the bright electric light, there was a timorous lamp, which would be snuffed out with the slightest whiff of a gentle wind.

Finally, it was decided that a letter of refusal would be sent to Murarilal. The very next day, the letter was written. Kumud’s wedding was settled with Deendayal who, over forty years old, didn’t have much of a social standing, and barely earned his livelihood. He expressed no reservations and readily agreed to marry Kumud. The wedding day was fixed, the *baraat* came, the wedding ceremony took place and Kumud was sent off. Nobody knew how Phulmati felt.



But all four brothers were happy as if a thorn had been removed from their flesh. As for Kumud, how could a high-born daughter open her mouth? She would either enjoy her life or live in sorrow, depending on what luck had in store for her. One is always helpless and has to submit to God's will. If the family elders selected her life partner, he had to be looked up to with devotion, no matter what his failings may be. He was her lord. There was no question of resisting what had been allotted to her.

Phulmati did not intervene in anything, whether it concerned gifts for Kumud, or entertaining the guests, or the money or gifts received from the invitees—she was not concerned with anything. Even if someone came to take her advice, her response was, 'Whatever you do is fair enough, my sons, why ask me?'

When the *doli* for Kumud arrived at the gate, she embraced her mother and started crying. Phulmati took her daughter to her room and whatever was left in her possession, hundred or fifty odd rupees and some jewels, she put all into her lap and said, 'Beti, all my desires are smothered within me; or else you wouldn't be married and be sent off in this way.'

Phulmati had never talked about her jewellery to anyone so far. She may not have realized how her sons had duped her but she knew she wouldn't get her jewellery back. Speaking of it now would be of no avail, and would only breed rancour. However, she wanted to make things clear on this occasion. The thought that Kumud would go away with the impression that Amma had saved her jewellery for her bahu instead of giving it to her, would be unbearable to her. That was the reason she had taken Kumud to her room, but Kumud had already sensed the treachery played on her mother. She returned all the money and jewellery and put them at the feet of her mother and said, 'Amma, your blessings are worth more than lakhs of rupees. Keep these trinkets with you. God knows how much adversity you may have to face yet.'

Phulmati was about to say something when Umanath came into the room and said, 'What are you doing, Kumud? Come on, hurry up. It is getting late. The people are in a desperate hurry. Well, you will be back here in two or four months, then you can take whatever you may.'

Phulmati felt as if Umanath had rubbed salt on her injuries. Stung, she shot back, 'What is there left with me that I will give her? Go, beti, may your husband have a long life.'

Kumud went away. Phulmati, struck with grief, collapsed on the ground. The

Kamata went away. Kamata, struck with grief, collapsed on the ground. The last hope she had nurtured had extinguished.

## 6

One year passed.

Of all the rooms in the house, Phulmati's room was the largest and well ventilated. She had vacated it for her eldest bahu for several months and was herself occupying a small room, living like a beggar. She was now without any attachment for her sons and their wives. Her position was that of a maid in the house. Nothing that passed in the house, neither any person nor any object was of any concern to her. She was living only because she had not yet died. She was unaffected by any joy or pain. Umanath opened his clinic. His friends had a grand party, with revelries and celebration. Dayanath opened his printing press. There was another party. Sitanath got a scholarship and went off to a foreign land. There were celebrations yet again. At the *yagyopavita* ceremony of Kamatanath's eldest son, there was a big bash, but not a glimmer of happiness could be seen on Phulmati's face. Kamatanath was bedridden with typhoid for a month and hardly survived. In order to garner more publicity for his newspaper, Dayanath wrote an objectionable article for which he was sentenced to six months' imprisonment. Umanath took a bribe, filed a false report in a criminal case and his legal licence was seized, but there was not the slightest regret on Phulmati's face. It was as if there was no hope, no interest, and no worries left in her life. Her life was limited to doing just two things: she worked mechanically like a beast, and took her food. An animal may be goaded to work, but it eats of its own accord. Phulmati worked without any stimulus but ate food as if she was nibbling at some poisonous crumbs. For months she did not bother to oil her hair, or wash her clothes, and just didn't care. She was bereft of all sensations.

The Sawan rains came intermittently, spreading malaria. There were dark clouds in the sky and the earth flooded with muddy water. The humid air spread around, giving people cold, fever and asthma. The maid of the house fell sick. Phulmati, soaked to the skin in the rain, did all the work and cleaned all the pots and pans. Then she made a fire and put the pans on it. The boys must have their meals on time. Suddenly, she remembered that Kamatanath was not used to drinking tap water. She set out to fetch Gangajal though it was raining.

Kamatanath reclining on his bed saw her and said, 'Forget it, Amma, I shall go and get the water. The maid and the Kahar are both absent today.'

Phulmati looked at the sky darkening with clouds and said, 'Beta, you will get drenched and catch cold.'

'But you, too, are wet. You may fall sick.'

Phulmati said nonchalantly, 'I will not fall sick. God has made me immortal.'

Umanath was sitting close by. He was not earning much from his clinic, which constantly worried him. He looked towards his brother and the sister-in-law and remarked, 'Let her go, bhaiya. She has lorded it over her bahu for a long time, let her do some atonement.'

The Ganga was swollen like an ocean. The horizon met the farthest shore. The riverside trees had only their tops trailing on the water and the ghats were completely submerged. Phulmati came down the steps carrying her pitcher. She filled water in it and as she was climbing the steps she slipped, couldn't balance herself and fell into the water. For some time, she desperately thrashed her limbs and then she was sucked into the waves. A couple of pandas saw her and shouted, 'Look, run, the old woman is drowning. Some ran to save her but Phulmati was drowned in the whirling, threatening waves that would make anyone's heart quiver.'

Someone asked, 'Who was this old woman?'

'Arré, she is Pandit Ayodhyanath's widow.'

'But Ayodhyanath was a big man.'

'Yes, indeed he was, but she was doomed to be buffeted by misfortune.'

'He has many sons who are quite well-off and have huge incomes.'

'Yes, that is true, but after all, there is something known as destiny.'

*Translated from the Hindi by Satish C. Aikant*



## The Coward

### 1

The young man's name was Keshav and the girl was called Prema.

Both were students of the same college and they were classmates. A young man with a modern outlook, Keshav was opposed to class and caste barriers. Prema was steeped in traditional values, and put her complete faith in conventions and customs. Yet they were deeply in love. And this was known to everyone in the college. Keshav, despite being a Brahmin, wanted to make his life meaningful by marrying Prema, a girl from the Vaishya community. He was not bothered about the views of his parents. The notion of the family honour was no more than a sham to him. If there was any truth, it was love. But to Prema, even one move against the wishes of her parents and the community was unthinkable. It was evening. In a secluded corner of Victoria Park, they were sitting face to face on a patch of grass. All those out for an evening walk were leaving one by one. But those two continued to sit and talk; their discussion showing no sign of coming to an end.

Irritated, Keshav said, 'Does this mean that you don't care for me?'

Trying to pacify him, Prema replied, 'You are being unfair to me, Keshav! But how do I broach this subject to my parents? They are staunch followers of age-old customs. Can you imagine the kind of apprehensions such a hint from me will raise in their minds?'

Keshav was enraged. 'So you too are a slave of those archaic customs?'

Prema looked at Keshav with intense fondness and replied, 'No, I am no slave to them, but my parents' wishes matter more to me than anything else in the

world.'

'You have no identity of your own?'

'You may think so.'

'I always thought that those shams were for foolish people; now I know that the enlightened ones like you also worship them. See! I am willing to give up the world for you and I expect the same from you in return.'

Prema thought to herself: *Do I have the right to my own body? My parents created me with their own flesh and blood and brought me up with their love and affection. I have no right to go against their wishes.*

She humbly told Keshav, 'Is love impossible except in a man–woman relationship? Why can't it exist in friendship? I consider it to be the union of souls.'

Keshav replied harshly, 'Your philosophical views will drive me mad, Prema! I cannot survive in such hopelessness. I am a practical person and your dream world holds no pleasure for me.' Saying this, he held Prema's hand and tried to pull her towards himself. Prema shrugged him off sternly and said, 'No, Keshav. I have already told you that I am not independent. Don't ask for something to which I don't have any right.'

Even if Prema had used harsher words, it would not have hurt Keshav as much as this gesture did. Dejected, he sat there for a moment and then told her, 'As you wish!' Dragging his feet slowly, he went away. Prema continued to sit there, shedding tears.

## 2

At night, after dinner, when Prema went to bed and lay beside her mother, sleep evaded her completely. Like a shadow darkening the sprightly waters of a stream, Keshav's words had cast a gloom over her. His words evoked ever-changing visions—none of them lasting more than a moment. How could she share her thoughts with her mother? Shame would make her speechless. She wondered, 'What will my duty be if I am unable to marry Keshav? If Keshav behaves in an uncouth manner what will be left for me in the world? But what control do I have over it?' among the myriad thoughts that crossed her mind, she was decisive about one—she would not marry anyone other than Keshav.

Her mother asked her 'Haven't you slept? How many times have I told you to

Her mother asked her, 'Haven't you slept? How many times have I told you to spend some time on household chores? But you are glued to books all the time. Soon you will be married—and who knows what kind of people you will have to adjust to. How will you get along if you are not used to doing any household work at all?'

Prema answered innocently, 'But why on earth would I go into a family of strangers?'

Her mother smiled. 'This is the fate of a girl. After parents lovingly bring her up, she leaves them to become part of another family. If she is lucky to get a good family, life is smooth, otherwise it ends up being a tale of woe. It all depends on destiny. I can't think of a suitable family for you in our community. There is no respect for girls among us, but ultimately we will have to marry you within our own caste. Who knows when these caste barriers will break down.'

Prema answered timidly, 'But nowadays they do marry outside the caste!'

She had said it, but she was trembling with fear lest her mother should find out the truth.

Intrigued, her mother asked, 'Has this happened even among Hindus?'

And then she answered it herself, 'So what even if it has. A couple of exceptions do not change anything.'

Prema remained silent, afraid that her mother might guess her intent. Her future gaped at her like a dark abyss, ready to swallow her.

She didn't know when she fell asleep.

### 3

Next morning, when Prema woke up, she felt a strange courage within her. We all take our important decisions in an instant; as though some divine spirit draws us to them. Prema was in a similar state. Until the previous day she had faith in her parents' decisions, but now faced with a crisis, she was filled with courage like the wind that comes face to face with a mountain. Prema ruminated, *Agreed, my parents may have a claim over my physical being, but the spirit is still mine. And whatever my soul is fated to suffer, will have to be experienced through this body. Any inhibition in this regard, therefore, was not only improper but also fatal*, she thought. *Why should she sacrifice her life for false pride?* She thought a marriage without love was like trading her body. *Is submission possible even in*

*the absence of love?* At the very thought that she would be married to a stranger, her heart rebelled.

After breakfast, she was going back to her books when her father's loving voice stopped her. 'I met your principal yesterday. He was all praises for you.'

Prema replied modestly, 'You always say such things.'

'No. It's true.'

He then opened a drawer and pushed a photograph in a velvet frame towards her, and exclaimed, 'This boy has topped the IAS exam. You must have heard his name?' Her old father had calculated such a scenario that the mother had missed it completely; but Prema guessed it. Her mind hit the target like an arrow. Without looking at the photograph, she said, 'No, I have not heard his name.'

Feigning surprise, her father said, 'What? You haven't heard his name? Today's *News Daily* carries his picture and biographical details.'

Prema replied disinterestedly, 'Maybe, but I don't consider that exam so important. In fact, I believe that the people who take this exam are downright selfish. What else is their aim, after all, except to rule over their own poor, downtrodden fellow beings and hoard money? This is not a commendable aim in life.'

Her objection betrayed jealousy, injustice and vindictiveness. Her father had presumed that Prema would fall for the proposal after listening to his descriptions. But hearing Prema's response, he said sharply, 'You are talking as though money and power mean nothing to you.'

Prema was stubborn. 'Yes, I do not value them. I rather value the spirit of sacrifice in men. I know of young men who would not accept this offer even if it was thrust upon them.'

Her father answered mockingly, 'This is news to me. My experience tells me that people run from pillar to post for petty jobs. I want to see the face of the boy who is so selfless. I would rather worship him.'

On any other occasion, hearing such words Prema would have bowed her head in embarrassment. But today her state was like that of a soldier who, caught at the edge of an abyss, has no option but to go ahead. Controlling her anger and filled with the spirit of revolt, Prema rushed to her room and picking up one of the least impressive of Keshav's photographs, placed it before her father. Her father intended to glance at the picture with scorn but it impressed him. The tall and frail figure in the photograph exuded patience and restraint. Though lacking

and that figure in the photograph exuded patience and restraint. Though lacking in brilliance, the face reflected a kind of thoughtfulness which was very reassuring.

Looking at the picture, he asked, 'Whose photograph is this?'

Prema lowered her head in deference. 'He is a classmate of mine.'

'Does he belong to our community?'

Prema's face turned pale. The answer to this very question would decide her fate. She regretted having unnecessarily brought the photograph. The determination which she had experienced for a moment disappeared in the face of this pointed question. In a low voice she said, 'No. He is a Brahmin.' And with this, she left the room in despair, as though the very air in the room suffocated her and hiding behind the wall, she burst into tears.

Lalaji was so annoyed at first that he felt like telling Prema directly that it was impossible. He stepped towards the door in rage, but the sight of Prema's tears softened him. Prema's feelings for this man were no more a secret to him. He had always supported women's education, but at the same time he also wanted to safeguard the reputation of his family. He was ready to offer all he had to find a suitable match for Prema in his own community. But even the thought of a match outside the community, however high caste or worthy, was inconceivable to him. He could not imagine a humiliation worse than that.

He said harshly, 'Stop attending college from today. An education that brings disgrace to the family values is not worth its salt.'

Prema pleaded helplessly, 'But my examination is round the corner.'

Lalaji answered stiffly, 'Let it be.'

And wrapped in deep thoughts, he retired to his room.

#### 4

Six months passed.

On reaching home, Lalaji called his wife to a quiet place and said, 'As far as I have been able to find out, Keshav is a decent and talented young man. I have a feeling that Prema will not be able to survive in this sorrow. You have reasoned with her, I tried it too, as did others; but nothing seems to have any effect on her. We don't have much of a choice in such a situation.'

Deeply perplexed, his wife answered, 'You permit it, but where would we be?'



How will you face the community? I wish I had not given birth to such a child.'

Lalaji retorted with contempt, 'How long can we go on lamenting over the family honour? It is foolish to set a bird free and then expect it to remain confined to your veranda. I have already thought over the issue and I have arrived at the conclusion that we should accept her marriage outside our caste. I cannot sacrifice Prema for the family honour. Let the world laugh at us; soon the time will come when all these barriers will break down. Hundreds of people are marrying outside the caste these days. If the purpose of marriage is to enable a man and a woman to lead a happy life together, how can we deprive Prema of this?'

The old lady passively answered, 'If this is what you wish, why are you asking me? But let me make it clear that I will have nothing to do with this wedding, nor will I ever see the face of this girl. I will take it that like my other children, she too is dead.'

'What do you want us to do then?'

'Why don't you marry her off to that boy? What's wrong with him? He will pass his civil services examination in a couple of years. What has Keshav got? At the most he will become a clerk in an office.'

'What if Prema commits suicide?'

'Then let her. You needn't give her ideas. If she doesn't care for us, why should we let her tarnish our reputation? Suicide is no joke. It's a mere threat. The imagination is like a horse—you have to rein it in if you wish to tame it. If she is so fickle, who knows if she will spend her whole life just with Keshav. Just as she loves him today, she might fall in love with somebody else tomorrow. You want to serve your own flesh on a leaf plate?'

Lalaji looked at his wife inquisitively. 'And what if she elopes with Keshav and marries him! What will you do then? What reputation will you have then? She may not say anything out of shyness or regard for us; but if she chooses to be obstinate, then you and I can do nothing.'

It had never occurred to the old lady that this problem could have such a grotesque outcome. It exploded in her mind into pieces. Then, overwhelmed, she said, 'You do have weird ideas. I have never heard of a girl from a good family marrying at her will.'

'Maybe you haven't, but I have seen it. And it is quite possible.'

'The day this happens will be the last day of my life.'

The day this happens will be the last day of my life.

‘I am not saying this will happen, I am only saying this is probable.’

‘If such a thing has to happen, we had better make way for it ourselves. The knife that chops off our nose had better be a sharp one. Let’s call Keshav tomorrow and see what he has to say.’

## 5

Keshav’s father, an irritable and miserly man by nature, was a government pensioner. He lacked imagination and derived supreme satisfaction from following superficial religious rituals. It was beyond him to respect others’ sentiments. He still lived in the same world in which he had spent his childhood and youth. The changing style of the new generation was to him a sign of degradation from which he shielded his own family with all his might. When Prema’s father called upon him with a proposal for Prema’s marriage with Keshav, the old Brahmin could not control himself—his pale eyes nearly popped out of his head and he said, ‘Are you doped? An alliance of this kind can be called anything but marriage. It seems you too are under the spell of new ideas.’

The old man replied politely, ‘I myself do not approve much of this alliance. I share your views on the subject; but circumstances have forced me to come to you with this proposal. You know how self-willed girls and boys nowadays have become. It has become difficult for old people like us to protect our principles. My only fear is that in desperation, these two might risk their lives.’

Thumping his feet, Panditji roared, ‘What are you saying, sahib? Aren’t you ashamed? We are Brahmin and *kulins* at that. However downfallen we may have become, we still haven’t reached the point where we would let our son marry the daughter of a bania. This contingency may arise only when the families of kulins run out of suitable girls. How dare you say such a thing to me?’

The more Prema’s father humbled himself, the more Panditji fumed, so much so that Lalaji could not bear this humiliation any more and cursing his fate, he went away.

At about the same time, Keshav returned from college. Panditji instantly summoned him and said in a strong voice, ‘I have heard that you have married the daughter of a bania. Is this true?’

Keshav feigned ignorance. ‘Who told you?’

‘Someone did. I merely ask you if this is true or not! If it is true, and you have decided to ruin your honour, there is no place for you in our house. You do not get a paisa from my property. Whatever I possess is my own earning and I have a right to give it to anybody I like. You cannot step into my house after committing such an immoral act.’

Keshav knew his father’s nature. But he loved Prema and wanted to marry her secretly! His father would not live forever, after all, and his mother’s love was there for him. Swayed by passion, he had been ready to face all hardships in life, but now his state was like that of a gutless soldier who gets cold feet in front of the gun and retreats. Like other young men of his generation, he too could argue for his principles; he could verbally affirm his faith in them; but he lacked the courage to suffer the consequences of his convictions. If he stuck to his ground and his father also refused to relent, where would he be? His whole life would be ruined.

He said haltingly, ‘Whosoever has told you this has misinformed you.’

Panditji looked at him sharply and said, ‘So the news is false?’

‘Yes. Absolutely false.’

‘Then write a letter to this bania right away and remember, if this topic surfaces again, I will be your worst enemy. Now go.’

Keshav could not utter a word. When he began to walk, his feet would barely move.

## 6

Next day, Prema wrote a letter to Keshav:

*Dear Keshav,*

*The uncivil and humiliating attitude of your revered father towards my father has created apprehensions in my mind. He might have severely scolded you too. Under these circumstances, I am really eager to know your decision. I am willing to face all hardships with you. I have no greed for your father’s property. Your love is all I desire and it is enough to make me happy. Join us for dinner today, at our place. Mother and Father wish to meet you. I am already dreaming of the days when the two of us will be united in a bond that is eternal and remains intact even in the worst of crises.*

*Yours ever*

*Prema*

The day passed and no reply came from Keshav. Her mother asked many times

The day passed and no reply came from Keshav. Her mother asked many times why Keshav had not come. Old Lalaji also waited with his eyes fixed on the door. The clock showed nine, but neither Keshav arrived, nor his letter.

Prema was filled with speculations of all kinds—maybe he did not get time to answer my letter, or perhaps he was not free to come today. He will surely come tomorrow. She reread all the love letters Keshav had written to her. Each word in those letters exuded so much love and passion, such fervour, intense desire and ecstasy. Then she recalled those statements of Keshav which he had made hundreds of times. How many times he had broken down before her! Where was the room for doubt after such abundance of proof? And yet she felt as if her heart was hooked to a nail all through the night.

Keshav's letter arrived early next morning. Prema's hands trembled as she opened the envelope and read the letter. The letter dropped from her hands. It seemed as though the blood in her veins had frozen. Keshav had written:

*I am in a precarious situation as to how I should answer you. Of late I have pondered seriously over this problem. And I have reached the conclusion that under the present circumstances, it is impossible for me to ignore my father's wishes. Don't think I am a coward. I am not selfish either. But I haven't got the strength to overcome the hurdles in my way. Forget all that passed between us. I did not have even an inkling of these obstacles at that time!*

*Keshav*

Prema took a long, deep and scorching breath, tore the letter and threw it away. Tears rolled incessantly from her eyes. She could not believe that Keshav, whom she had accepted as her own deep down inside her, would turn out to be more cruel than she had ever imagined. It was a golden dream that vanished when she opened her eyes. When hope departs from life, nothing but darkness remains! The boat which she had loaded with her heart's desire had sunk today. How was it possible to have another boat? She would rather go down with the sunken ferry. Her mother asked, 'Is that Keshav's letter?' Prema answered, her eyes fixed to the ground, 'Yes, he is not well.' What else could she say? She did not have the courage to bear the humiliation of revealing Keshav's heartlessness and his betrayal.

The whole day she remained absorbed in household chores, as though she didn't have a care. She served food to everyone at night and ate herself. And then she played the harmonium for a long time.

But when the morning broke, it cast its light on her dead body lying in her

room. The first rays of the rising sun lent a glow of life to her pale face.

*Translated from the Hindi by Nishat Zaidi*



## The Man Who Defied Fate

### 1

I have known Babu Raseek Lal since his college days. He became a lawyer right before my eyes and shone very quickly. In no time at all, a bungalow was built, land was purchased, a car was kept in readiness and he came to be counted as one among the aristocrats of the city.

I don't know why, but I never found his lifestyle appropriate. I could not understand why a gentleman like him would wear his cap at a rakish angle or apply *surma*, have his hair parted, with mouth swollen by betel leaf, with a pearl or flower garland hung around his neck, dressed in shining *tanzeb* kurta with a semi-transparent dhoti, and ogle at brothels, cracking jokes. It annoyed me. Not to speak of befriending him, I would not even cast my vote in his favour for his municipal membership. I would like a gentleman to be more serious and sober. If I have to engage a lawyer, I wouldn't go for a fellow like him even if he is as knowledgeable as Raas Bihari Ghosh. Raseek Lal is one such colourful man. I admit the fact that his argumentative skills are pretty high. No doubt he is good in arguing, I also admit that. But will it make a difference to his profession if he walked straight or wore his cap at the right angle? I believe that if he behaves like a gentleman and leaves his flamboyant style? his practice may get doubled. But why should I meddle in anyone's affairs? Whenever I happen to run into him, I turn my face or enter a narrow bylane.

I don't find it appropriate to talk to him in public. So what if he is a reputed lawyer and I am a mere schoolteacher! I harbour no malice against him. He has done me no harm, why should I be jealous of him. Instead he holds me in high

regard. I went to borrow rugs and other things from him for my daughter's marriage. He sent me two bags full of rugs, carpets, stools and large cushions. No, I don't hold him any grudge. Since I have known him for a long time, I have become fond of him, but I dislike his jauntiness, his immaturity. He walks as if he is challenging the world. *Look, who can do me any harm? I don't care about anyone.* Once I met him at the station. He put his hand swiftly on my shoulder. 'You are hardly seen these days. At least show your face once or twice in a year.' Extracting my shoulder from his grip, I said, 'What to do, sahib, I don't get leisure time.' Immediately he spouted a cheap couplet:

*Tumhey ghairon se kab fursat  
Humein apney gham se kab fursat  
Chalo, bas ho chuka milna  
Na tum khali na hum khali*

*You are busy entertaining strangers  
Lost in grief am I;  
So, this much is for our union  
Neither you're free, nor am I*

I laughed. How can you be rude to a person who treats you with such courtesy? And of course I didn't want to rub a rich person like him the wrong way. Who knew when I would need his help. But I didn't like his informal behaviour. Although I am no ascetic or devotee. A dull person is worse than someone who shows too much exuberance. A dull life, in which there is no possibility of entertainment, is not worth living at all. The beauty of a forest is made up of green trees with rich foliage, not dry ones with dry stumps. What I want is that people can do some activities in private.

If you want to drink wine, do it in solitude. Why would you roam around town in an inebriated state? There is no harm in worshipping beauty, but why should one beat the drum of one's lasciviousness by sitting amidst whores in the car? After all, a flirtatious nature suits one till a particular age. When one's boys mature and girls are married and the hair ripens, it is my opinion that one should become more serious. It is good if you are still young at heart; in fact, I congratulate you for this. Lust never ages; in fact, I believe that it gets younger with age. But I find it obscene to gambol at this age. I don't approve of behaving like a dandy at a mature age. People can do nothing, but why indulge in behaviour that might prompt them to point their fingers at you?

It's all right if God has made you rich, but it is not proper for a gentleman to show off your wealth to the hungry and the needy.

It was Raseek Lal's elder daughter's wedding. The groom's wedding party had come from Mathura. There had hardly been any groom's marriage procession that marched so pompously. The reception hall was in a big dharmashala. The groom's father was a minister of some state. I was also busy being hospitable to the guests. There were no less than one thousand men. It was no joke to serve so many guests. People may find it difficult to manage a mere hundred guests. Then, of course, was the added hassle of dealing with the temperament of the guests. Everyone behaved like a king. Someone asked for jasmine oil, while someone would demand myrobalans. Some asked for *kesh ranjana*, some for wine and some for opium! Soap was needed. Perfume too. How difficult it was to manage the food for one thousand men! I think the expenditure must have been at least twenty to twenty-five thousand! Yet, Raseek Lal was least bothered and carried on in his carefree manner. He was neither annoyed nor upset. The guests would come with such shameless demands that we began to get angry. A handful of bhang was enough, what was the need for a basketful? Were they going to burn it like incense? When they demanded one hundred first class cinema tickets, I could not bear it and reprimanded Raseek Lal harshly. Then I marched towards the guests, shouting, 'Have they come to marry their son or put a gentleman to disgrace? Can't they even live for one day without watching cinema? If you are so passionate then why don't you spend money from your own pockets?' Raseek Lal just stood there and laughed. 'Brother, why are you creating a fuss about it? They are your guests and you should not feel bad even if they hurl shoes at you. This is the spectacle of life. We go to spectacles for entertainment, there is joy there even if one has to cry. Just go and quickly get hundred tickets from the cinema. Don't care about one or two hundred.' I soliloquized, 'You have amassed free wealth, so squander freely and earn a name. It is not a religious occasion that we should be slaves to the guests. Guests should behave like guests. When they start bullying and insulting, they don't remain guests but become devils.'

After three months, I came to know that Raseek Lal's son-in-law had died. He had gone to take his civil services exam in England and caught pneumonia there. This news thrilled me. His face flashed before my eyes. He was such a gentle



and talented boy. He had died in England and his family was not even able to see him. What would be the plight of his wife whose life was destroyed? The henna on her hands had not faded yet. Her *chunri* was yet to gather dust. What a merciful God and how strange are his ways of justice. You draw pleasure in the suffering of people. At the same moment, I hurriedly went to Raseek Lal and when I saw his face, I felt so bad that I wept at the top of my voice. Raseek Lal was lying on a resting chair. He stood up and hugged me. Then he spoke in the same steady, unshaken voice, ‘Master Sahib, you are crying louder than a child whose sweetmeat has been snatched away. The children weep in order to get new sweets. You are weeping for such a thing which one can hardly get back. Arré, sahib, one should live shamelessly here. Get beaten and live proudly. The excitement lies in maintaining the same arrogance even when you are trampled under the feet of the hangman. If there is a God, though I don’t know for sure, but I hear that he is generous, then how can such a merciful God be pitiless? We should not think why a few are killed or kept alive. We are his toys. It is his wish to play with or to destroy them.

‘Why should we interfere in all this? He is neither our enemy nor a cruel king, who draws pleasure from our suffering. If my son sets the house on fire, I would still not become his enemy. I have nurtured him. How can I turn hostile towards him? Then how can God, whose love is manifested through this world, be cruel? If there is no God, then I don’t know if there is some other power that feels happy at our tragedies. So, I am not going to weep. Had I been powerful enough to do something and see the enemy, I would have shown my manliness. Now what is the other way to show your bravery but to keep smiling even if you are beaten? Be arrogant. If we weep, we accept defeat. No matter how much he bangs us, we will keep smiling. He is cunning as well as a magician. He attacks stealthily. I will show him my valour when he comes before me. I like the ways of poor poets who remain engrossed in the music produced by the tinkling sounds of their beloved’s anklets even in their graves.’

After this, Raseek Lal started reeling off Urdu couplets one after another continuously and drew pleasure from it, as if nothing had happened. Then he said, ‘The girl is weeping. I asked her not to weep for such an unfaithful person who had abandoned her. If you love him then there is no need to weep. Love is meant to give joy. If your heart is not ready to accept, try to convince it. But don’t be sad. Being sad is like insulting God and staining humanity.’

don't be sad. Being sad is like insulting God and staining humanity.

I stared at Raseek Lal's face. He said all this in such an emotional manner that even I was mesmerized for a moment. After some time, I left and found my heart quite relieved. I felt courage surge in my heart which scoffed at any kind of trouble and misery.

## 2

After a few days, he was transferred and then, there was no news about Raseek Lal. After several years, one day I received an invitation card in a pink envelope, inscribed with golden letters. Raseek Lal's elder son was getting married. Right below the invitation, in his own handwriting, he requested everybody to come; otherwise he would feel bad about it and the joy of the occasion would be halved. An Urdu couplet was written as well.

*The passion, oh Lord, no limit knows  
We wait eagerly, wishing he comes.*

A week was left for the wedding. I had a new silk achkan stitched, bought new shoes and left for the wedding, appropriately dressed. I took a beautiful Kashmiri sari for the bride. Working and living at the same place for months had made me dull. 'The merriment will last for three to four days. I would listen to good music and enjoy feasts. My mind would be refreshed. Alighting from the train, I went to the waiting room and wore my new suit. I had found the occasion to wear a new suit after a long time. Yet, even today I get excited about it as I would in my youth after wearing new clothes. No matter how unhappy one is, dressing up in a new suit brings an unusual happiness. In fact, I suggest that if one falls sick, instead of taking a lot of medicines, one should get a new suit made. It will benefit you as much as the medicine does. Does it mean nothing that you rise in your own estimation even if for only a moment? My experience says that a new attire infuses new life into us like the snakes shed their skins or like trees blossom with new leaves in the monsoon.

After exiting the station, I hailed a tonga, and reached Raseek Lal's door. It must have been three in the afternoon by then. The hot *loo* was blowing and searing the face. The pennants were tied to strings. The shehnai was being played at the door. I reached the inner courtyard. A large number of men had

gathered there. I thought maybe the wedding dress and jewellery was exhibited there. Somehow, I managed to push myself through the crowd. No, don't ask me what I saw. May God spare even the worst enemy from such a sight.

It was a dead body covered with a beautifully embroidered shawl with flowers strewn on it. I felt as if I was going to faint. My eyes suddenly fell on Raseek Lal. He had come with a bundle of coloured clothes from inside. He had no tears in his eyes nor did he look sad, not even a wrinkle on his forehead. He was dressed as usual with the same tilted cap, the same silk kurta and in his fine dhoti. Everybody was crying. Some were crying openly, some were trying to hide their tears while some were numb with shock. They were all outsiders. Some were friends, some close acquaintances while the father of the deceased was standing upright, like a lighthouse amidst many tottering boats and ships. I ran and hugged him and started crying. The tears he was holding back suddenly gushed as I hugged him just like the dew on leaves starts dripping when the wind blows.

Raseek Lal hugged me and asked, 'When did you come? Have you reached just now? I had no idea. I was so busy with the wedding preparations that I couldn't even attend to the guests. Come, change your clothes and freshen up. You have to accompany the wedding party. We will go with all pomp, beating drums and trumpets. I have called for horses and elephants and I have also arranged rides for the wedding party. There will be fireworks and flowers all around. And we will go with all pomp and show. It is my elder son's wedding, we will enjoy wholeheartedly. The reception will be on the banks of the Ganga.'

There was deep pain in those words. There was a disturbance in the environment.

Placing a wreath on the corpse, Raseek Lal said, 'Brothers, why are you weeping? There is nothing new about it. This is like an everyday show, sometimes seen in our own houses, sometimes in those of others. You weep every now and then, sometimes at your own misery or at times over other people's. Who cares if you weep? Who wipes your tears? Who pays attention to your wailing? No matter how much you weep, fate will keep on executing its plans. Then why do you show your cowardice by weeping? Bear the pain He inflicts on you bravely and smile to show Him that you don't care about such suffering. Tell Him to give you the severest punishment. Does He prick you with needles? He is heedless of our wishes. Let Him be, we too won't leave our

needs. He is heedless of our wishes. Let him be, we too won't leave our stubbornness. We will take the wedding procession with the same pomp and show and enjoy to the fullest.'

Raseek Lal wept while people kept on consoling him. People were stunned by his defiant tone. Who could pacify him? To me, his defiant rambling seemed more heart-rending than tears. One gets blisters if embers touch the skin. But if one jumps into the blazing fire, one gets roasted, not simply end up with blisters. Raseek Lal's pain was like a blazing fire.

The body was kept in the same car which had been decorated with flowers for the wedding. Someone yelled, '*Ram naam satya hai.*'

Raseek Lal looked at him with appealing eyes. 'Why do you forget, Lala, this is a wedding. The only truth for us is life. Rest is all myth.'

The wedding procession left the house with trumpets blaring, accompanied with loud music. I have never seen such a huge procession even in cities. Usually, a wedding party comprises two to four hundred people. But the people in this procession were close to a hundred thousand. Thanks to Raseek Lal. He mounted the horse and followed the car with the same aplomb. When the body was placed on the pyre, Raseek Lal thumped his chest once with great force—the storm rising in his breast seemed to shake up all humanity. But the next moment a cruel smile played on his lips. It was difficult to decide which was a more human act—the former or the latter.

Two days after this, I returned to my job.

I now come to meet Raseek Lal during holidays. His rebellious attitude has infected me. And I simply smile when someone finds fault with his behaviour.

*Translated from the Urdu by Shaipta Ayoub*



## Neur

### 1

In the sky, silver ‘mountains’ were fleeing, colliding, embracing. It was as though a battle of the sun and the clouds had begun. Sometimes, shadow won, sometimes the sun came out brilliantly. It was the rainy season, it was humid. The breeze had died down.

Outside the village, several workers were constructing a low ridge around a field. Bare-bodied, dripping with sweat, loincloths tightened, they were all digging up earth with spades and heaping it on the ridge. Water had turned the earth into soft mud.

Gobar rolled his one eye and said, ‘Brother, I can’t work any more! The signal shot must have been fired, let’s have a bite.’

Neur laughed and said, ‘Let’s finish this job, then we can eat. I’ve been working since before you got here.’

The other two lifted their baskets to their heads and said, ‘Grandpa Neur, in your youth you must have drunk more ghee than we get water now.’

Neur was a small-statured, muscular, dark-skinned, agile man. He was over fifty, but the best youths couldn’t compete with him in hard work. He had been a wrestler until just a couple of years before. He’d stopped wrestling when his cow died.

Gobar asked, ‘How do you live without tobacco, Grandpa Neur? We can survive without bread, but not without tobacco.’

Dina said, ‘Grandpa, will you go and make us some bread? Doesn’t your old woman do anything? We couldn’t put up with such a woman for a single day.’

The line of Neur's smile flashed on a face hidden behind a squashed, greying moustache, lending beauty to his ugliness. He said, 'I spent my best years with her, son, so now what can I do if she can't do any work?'

Gobar said, 'You've spoilt her, otherwise why won't she work? She sits on the bed enjoying her hookah, and fights continually with everyone in the village. You've become an old man, but she still pretends to be young.'

Dina added, 'Even a young woman couldn't compete with her. She's obsessed with sindoor, kohl, henna. I've never seen her without a fancy bordered, colourful dhoti. She's not even satisfied with all her jewellery. You're as simple as a cow for putting up with her, otherwise by now she would be out on the streets.'

Gobar continued, 'I get mad just seeing her made-up face. She won't do a lick of work, but she wants only the best food and clothes.'

Neur said, 'What do you know, son. When I married her I had a seven-plough field. She lived like a queen. Now times have changed, but her heart is the same as before. If she sits in front of the stove for a moment, her eyes become red and she lies down holding her head. I can't bear to see it. People get married for old age, otherwise why bother? I'll go from here, make bread, fetch water, then she'll eat a few mouthfuls, otherwise what do I care? Like you I'd toss a handful of tobacco in my mouth and drink a jug of water. Since our daughter died, she's become even more listless. It was a huge blow. What do we men know of motherhood, son? Before, I used to scold her sometimes. Now how can I scold?'

Dina asked, 'Yesterday why were you up in that tree? The wild figs aren't ripe yet.'

Neur replied, 'I was cutting some leaves for our goat. We bought the goat so we could give milk to our daughter. She's an old goat now, but she still gives a little milk. It's this milk and bread that sustains the old woman.'

Upon reaching home, Neur picked up the jug and rope and was on his way to bathe at the well, when his wife, lying on the bed, said, 'Why do you always take so long? People don't kill themselves for work. When everyone gets the same wages, why are you killing yourself?'

Neur's mind became infused with sweetness. In his surrender-saturated love, there wasn't even a whiff of ego. What affection! Who else would be concerned about his welfare and his life and death? Then why shouldn't he die for his old woman? He said, 'You were surely a goddess in your past life, Budhiva.'

‘Okay, stop the flattery. It’s not as though we have any children for whom you should struggle so much.’

Neur’s chest was a yard wide as he went off to bathe. When he returned, he made some thick rotis. He put potatoes on the embers. He mashed them, then they both sat down to eat.

Budhiya said, ‘I haven’t given you any happiness in life. I lie around eating, and pester you. It would have been better if God had taken me away.’

‘If God comes, then I’ll say, take me first. Then who will stick around in this lonely hut!’

‘If you aren’t here then what will become of me? I can’t bear to even think about it. I must have done something in my life to deserve you. How could I ever put up with anyone else?’

What all wouldn’t Neur want to do for such sweet satisfaction? Lazy, greedy, selfish Budhiya had only to bring a little sweetness on her tongue to make Neur dance to her tune, like a fisherman baiting a hook.

Today wasn’t the first time they had conversed on the topic of who would die first. How many times before had this question been raised, and left thus; but who knows why Neur had given the strong impression that he had made the decision to go first. After his demise, as long as Budhiya lived, he hoped she would live comfortably, not having to ask for handouts from anyone. This goal kept him struggling to scrape together a few rupees in savings. Neur would take on the most difficult of jobs, those that no one else could do. After digging and shovelling all day long, he would spend the night pressing somebody’s sugar cane during sugar cane season, or guarding someone’s fields; but the days came and went, and whatever he earned, that also came and went. Life without Budhiya . . . no, he couldn’t even imagine it.

But today’s conversation had made Neur apprehensive. Just as a drop of dye spreads in water, this fear entered his heart and started to grow.

## 2

There had been no lack of work for Neur in the village; but the wages were the same as they had always been; and in these lean times those wages weren’t enough. Unexpectedly from somewhere, a wandering Hindu holy man, a sadhu,

turned up in the village and lit his holy fire right in front of Neur's house in the shade of a peepul tree. The villagers considered it a stroke of good fortune. Everyone gathered to serve and pay their respects to Babaji. Firewood appeared from somewhere, from somewhere a blanket to spread, from somewhere else flour and lentils. What did Neur have? He took on the task of cooking food for Babaji. Hashish appeared, and smoking began.

In a few days, Babaji's reputation began to spread. 'He can see into your soul, he can tell the past and future.' 'He is untouched by greed. He doesn't even touch money with his own hands.' 'And what he does eat! In twenty-four hours he only had a couple of chunks of bread, but his face glows like a lamp.' 'And what sweet speech!' Simple-hearted Neur was Babaji's biggest devotee. If Babaji would somehow bless him with his favour, then Neur would be the most fortunate man on earth. All his pain and poverty would vanish.

One by one, the devotees departed. It was bitterly cold. Only Neur was sitting under the tree with Babaji, massaging his feet.

Babaji said, 'Child! The world is a web of illusion, why are you caught in it?'

Neur lowered his head and said, 'I am ignorant, master, what can I do? I have a wife, who will support her?'

'Do you think that you take care of your wife?'

'What other support does she have, Babaji?'

'Are you everything? Is God nothing?'

It was as if wisdom dawned in Neur's mind! You have become so conceited! You are so proud! You spend your life slaving away and you think, you are everything to Budhiya. You claim to interfere in the work of the Lord who takes care of the whole world. In his simple, rustic heart, it was as if a note of faith rose to reproach him. He said, 'I am ignorant, master!'

He could not say more than this. Tears of miserable sorrow began to fall from his eyes.

Babaji said with lordliness, 'You want to see a divine miracle! If He wishes, He can make you a millionaire in a moment. He can remove all of your worries in a moment. I am just a lowly devotee, of no importance; but even I have the strength to make you the richest man on earth. You have a clean heart, you're an honest man. I feel pity for you. I've watched everyone in this town carefully. No one has strength or faith. In you beats the heart of a devotee. Do you have any silver?'



Neur was feeling as though the door of heaven was opening before him.

‘I might have five or ten rupees, Master.’

‘You don’t have any broken silver jewellery?’

‘My wife has some jewellery.’

‘Tomorrow night, bring me as much silver as you can get and witness God’s power. Before your eyes I’ll put the silver in a pot and put it on my holy fire. In the morning, take out the pot, but remember that if you spend the gold coins on liquor, gambling, or any other bad pursuit, you’ll turn into a leper. Now go, sleep. Oh, one more thing, don’t mention this to anyone, not even to your family.’

Neur went home, and was as happy as if God’s blessing was on him. He couldn’t sleep a wink that night. In the morning, he borrowed a few rupees from several people and scraped together fifty rupees. People trusted him. He never borrowed money without repaying it. His word was good, his conscience clean. He had no problem getting the money. He had fifty rupees. But how to get Budhiya’s jewellery? He had a strategy. ‘Your jewellery has gotten very dirty. I’ll clean it with lemon juice. Soaking all night in lemon juice will make it like new.’ Budhiya fell for it. They put the jewellery in a pot and soaked it in lemon juice. When she went to sleep that night, Neur put the rupees in the pot as well and went to Babaji. Babaji recited a mantra. He put the pot in the ashes of the fire, blessed him, and bid him farewell.

After tossing and turning all night Neur went to see Babaji at the crack of dawn; but Babaji wasn’t there. He began to grope impatiently in the burning embers of the fire. The pot was missing. His heart began to pound. In a frenzy, he began to search for Babaji. He went towards the village market, towards the pond, ten minutes, twenty minutes, half an hour! No sign of Babaji. Devotees began to show up. Where had Babaji gone? No blanket, no cooking dishes!

A devotee said, ‘Wandering sadhus never stay in one place! Here today, gone tomorrow. If he had stayed, he wouldn’t be a sadhu. To develop ties with people is to be tied down.’

‘He was a true holy man.’

‘He was untouched by greed.’

‘Where’s Neur? Babaji was especially kind to him. He must have told him he was leaving.’

The search for Neur started, but with no luck. Just then Budhiya emerged

The search for Neur started, but with no luck. Just then Budhiya emerged from the house calling for Neur. An uproar ensued. Budhiya was crying and cursing Neur.

Neur was running wildly through the fields, as if trying to escape from this sinful world.

One man said, 'Neur borrowed five rupees from me yesterday. He promised to pay me back this evening.'

Another said, 'He took two rupees from me also and promised them back today.'

Budhiya wept. 'The scoundrel took all my jewellery. I had twenty-five rupees and he took those also.'

People figured it out: Babaji was a con-artist. Neur had been swindled. There are such bandits in the world! Nobody had any such doubt about Neur. The poor, gullible man, caught in a trap. He must be hiding somewhere, dying of shame.

### 3

Three months passed.

In Jhansi district, on the bank of the Dhasan River, there is a little village, Kashipur. On the riverbank is a small hill. On this hill, for the past several days, a sadhu had set up his camp. He was a short man, black as a skillet, with a muscular body. This was Neur, who was fooling the world in the guise of a sadhu, the same simple, guileless Neur, who had never looked enviously at anyone else's wealth, who had been happy eating the bread earned with his own sweat. He didn't forget his home, his village, and Budhiya for a moment; a day would come in this life when he would again reach home and live happily in that world of petty concerns and dreams! How pleasant was that life! Everyone he knew was familiar, everyone respected him, everyone was a comrade. After a hard day's work, he would bring home a little grain, or a little money, then Budhiya would welcome him with such sweet affection. All the hard work, all the exhaustion would become all the more sweet as soon as it was touched by Budhiya's sweetness. Alas, when would those days return? Who knew how Budhiya was living? Who would be taking care of her?<sup>1</sup> Who would be cooking for her and feeding her? He hadn't left her any money, and he'd also lost her

jewellery. Then his wrath would rise and he couldn't wait to catch that Babaji and eat him alive. Alas, greed! Greed!

Among his countless devotees was one lovely lady whose husband had rejected her. Her father was a military pensioner. He had married her off to an educated fellow; but the boy was tied to his mother's apron-strings and the girl didn't get along with her mother-in-law. She had wanted to live separately from her mother-in-law with her husband but her husband didn't consent to move out. She became upset and came back to her parents' house. Three years had passed since then and not once had her in-laws asked her to return, nor had her husband come to get her. The lady wanted somehow to get control over her husband. And it's not a difficult matter for holy men to work a change of heart in somebody! But yes, all you need is their mercy.

One day in seclusion she told Babaji about her calamity. It seemed as though today Neur was close to catching his prey. He spoke gravely, 'Daughter, I am not a saint, nor a great soul, nor do I meddle in the welter of the world, but seeing your reverence and love, I feel mercy for you. God willing, your heart's desire will be fulfilled.'

'You are capable, and I have faith in you.'

'God's will shall be done.'

'Only you can help this unfortunate woman's boat reach the shore.'

'Have faith in God.'

'You are my God.'

As if caught in a moral dilemma, Neur said, 'But daughter, for this task we will have to plan carefully, and the plan will cost hundreds, maybe thousands. And even then I can't say whether your goal will be achieved. Yes, whatever I can do, I will do, but everything is in God's hands. I never touch wealth, but I can't bear to see your suffering.'

That very evening the lady brought her gold jewellery in a bundle and placed it at Babaji's feet. Babaji opened the bundle with trembling hands and in the radiant moonlight he looked at the ornaments. His eyes were dazzled. All this wealth was his. With folded hands she stood before him, saying, 'Please accept me.' All he had to do was take the bundle, keep it under his pillow, and bid the woman goodbye. She would come in the morning! By that time he'd be as far away as his legs could carry him. What unbelievable good luck! When he would return to the village with sacks full of money and place them before Rudhiva!

return to the village with sacks full of money and place them before Daanya.  
Oh! A greater bliss than this he couldn't imagine.

But for some reason he couldn't do even such a little thing. He couldn't pick up the bundle and put it under the blanket at the head of his bed. It was not a complicated task, but for him it was difficult, unthinkable. He couldn't stretch out his hand towards the bundle. He had no control over his hands. He could say with his tongue, 'Let my hands go.' But even to say this much was earth-shattering. His tongue wouldn't be cut out if he were to say, 'Daughter, pick this up and put it under my blanket.' But now he found that he had no control over his tongue either. He could have also indicated to her what to do with his eyes alone, but now even his eyes were in rebellion. King Mind, despite being the head of so many ministers and vassals, is still powerless, aloof. With a sack of a million rupees to gain, a naked sword in hand, and a cow tethered before him on a strong rope, would he raise his hands to smite the cow's neck? Never! He'd sooner let his own throat be cut! He could never kill a cow. The hapless young woman seemed to Neur like that cow. He had finally attained the moment for which he had been searching for three months, and yet today his soul was trembling. Avarice, like a wild creature, is predatory by nature, but from being bound long in chains, its claws fall out, its teeth become weak.

He said, weeping, 'Daughter, take away your bundle. I was testing you. Your heart's desire will be fulfilled.'

The moon had gone to rest in the lap of the trees on the other side of the river. Neur got up quietly and having bathed in the Dhasan, set off in one direction. He was starting to hate the *bhabhoot* and the tilak. He was wondering why he had ever left home. For fear of a little ridicule! He was experiencing a strange glee within himself, as if he had been freed of his shackles, or had won a great victory.

#### 4

Neur reached his village on the eighth day. Boys came running, jumping to take the wood from his hands and welcome him.

One boy said, 'Grandma has died, Grandfather!'

Neur's feet stopped dead. Both corners of his mouth fell. Sorrow dulled his eyes. He asked nothing, said nothing. He stood for a moment as if in a trance,

then ran rapidly towards his hut. The village children ran after him but their naughtiness and frolicsomeness was gone. The hut was standing open. Budhiya's bed was right where it had always been. Her hookah was exactly where it had always been. A few clay and brass vessels were lying in a corner. The boys remained standing outside. How could they go inside: Budhiya was sitting there!

A commotion started in the village. Grandfather Neur had returned! A crowd gathered at the door of the hut, a flurry of questions ensued: 'Where were you for so many days, Grandfather?' 'Grandmother passed away the third day after you left.' 'She cursed you night and day.' 'She cursed you with her dying breath.' 'When we came on the third day, she was lying dead.' 'Where were you for so many days?'

Neur gave no answer. He only kept looking at the people with empty, frustrated, pitiful, wounded eyes, as though his power of speech had been taken away. From that day forth, no one ever heard him speak, or laugh, or cry.

There is a paved road about half a mile from the village. It's pretty well travelled. Neur would go there at the crack of dawn, and sit under a tree beside the road. He didn't beg, but the passers-by gave him a little something: food, grain, money. In the evening, he would go back to his hut, light a lamp, cook food, eat, and lie down on that same cot. The lone power that motivated his life had vanished. Now he was just an organism. What deep anguish! The plague came to the village. People started leaving their homes and fleeing. Neur no longer had anyone to worry about. He neither feared nor loved anyone. The whole village had fled, but Neur didn't leave his hut.

Then Holi came. Everyone celebrated, but Neur didn't leave his hut, and even today he can be seen sitting silently under that same tree by the roadside, motionless.

*Translated from the Hindi by Afroz Taj*



## Gilli-Danda

### 1

Whether our Anglophile friends agree or not, I must say that gilli-danda is the king of sports.

Even now, whenever I see boys playing gilli-danda, I get so excited that I want to start playing with them. You don't need a field, or a court, or a net, or a tamper. You happily cut a branch from some tree, and make the gilli; two more men arrive and the game begins. The biggest problem with foreign sports is that their equipment is so expensive. Until you have spent at least a hundred rupees, you can't be included as a player.

It's gilli-danda that offers sharp colours without fancy chemicals; but we are getting so obsessed with English goods that all of our own things have become flavourless. In our schools, an annual sports fee of three or four rupees is taken from every student. No one thinks to have them play Indian sports instead that can be played without spending a single penny. English sports are for the wealthy. Why do you fill poor boys' heads with this addiction? Yes, there is always the fear that an eye will be poked out by the gilli. But while playing cricket isn't there also the fear of a head being cracked, a spleen being burst, a leg being broken? So what if my forehead bears the mark of the gilli even today; don't I also have friends who have long since exchanged the tamper for a crutch?

Well, to each his own. I still consider gilli-danda the best of all sports, and the memory of gilli-danda is the sweetest of all my sweet childhood memories. Leaving the house early in the morning, climbing a tree to cut the twigs for the gilli and the danda, the excitement, the passion, the players' camaraderie, the

fielding and striking, the fights and skirmishes, the simple character in which there was no sense at all of caste or class, in which there was no room for throwing one's weight around, for pretension, for ego; one can forget that time only when the folks at home are getting upset, Father is sitting at the table furiously taking out his anger on his bread, and Mother, whose domain reaches only to the door, is thinking of how my obscure future is shuddering like a leaky dinghy; as for me, I'm ecstatic with striking, not a thought of bathing or eating entering my mind. The gilli is just a little thing, but it is filled with all the sweetness of candy and all the pleasure of a circus.

Among my companions was a boy named Gaya. He must have been two or three years older than I. Slim, tall, with monkey-like long thin fingers and monkey-like agility, he also had a monkey-like petulance. No matter how the gilli flew, he would catch it like a gecko catches a bug. I don't know if his parents were alive or not, where he lived, what he ate, but he was our gilli-danda club champion. Whichever side he was on, victory was assured. When we would see him coming from afar, we would run to greet him, we would make him our teammate.

One day, only Gaya and I were playing. He was striking and I was fielding; but the odd thing was that we could while away the whole day happily in striking, but we couldn't stand fielding for even one minute. I tried getting rid of him using every strategy even if not strictly in the rulebook, but Gaya wouldn't get off my back without completing his turn.

Persuasion and civility were futile. I ran off towards home.

Gaya ran after me and caught me; he raised the danda and said, 'You can't go until you give me my full turn. You make really brave at striking, but when it's time to field, why do you run away?'

'You'll strike all day, and I'll keep on fielding all day.'

'Yes, you'll have to field all day.'

'Without eating or drinking.'

'Yes; you can't go anywhere without giving me my full turn.'

'I'm your slave?'

'Yes, you're my slave.'

'I'm going home. Let's see if you can do anything about it.'

'How can you go home? Are you kidding? It's my turn, and I'll finish it.'

'So, yesterday I gave you a guava to eat. Give it back.'

‘It’s already in my stomach.’

‘Take it out of your stomach. Why did you eat my guava?’

‘You gave it to me so I ate it. I didn’t ask you for it.’

‘I won’t let you finish your turn until you give me my guava back.’

I thought that I had justice on my side. Clearly, I had given him the guava out of self-interest. Who treats others completely unselfishly? People even give charity for their own benefit. When Gaya had eaten my guava, what right had he to demand his own turn? People give bribes and cover up even murder. Would Gaya be able to digest my guava so easily? They were five-rupee guavas that even Gaya’s father couldn’t dream of eating. Gaya was clearly in the wrong.

Gaya pulled me towards him and said, ‘Don’t leave without finishing my turn. I don’t know anything about any guava.’

I possessed the force of truth. He was rooted in injustice. I wanted to slip out of his clutches and run. He wasn’t letting me escape. I swore; he swore right back, and gave me a couple of slaps as well. I bit him. He whacked me on the back with the danda. I began to cry. Gaya couldn’t counter this strategy. He fled. I quickly wiped my tears, forgot about the smart of the stick, and arrived at home laughing! I, a police chief’s son, had been beaten at the hands of a lower-caste boy, and even at that time I realized it was insulting but I didn’t complain to anyone at home.

## 2

Around that time, Father was transferred. I was so ecstatic about discovering a new world that I didn’t feel the slightest pain at leaving my friends behind. Father was sad. This had been a very lucrative post. Mother was very unhappy; everything here was inexpensive, and she had become very attached to the neighbourhood women, but I couldn’t contain my joy. The boys were spreading the rumour that where we were going there were no houses like our old one. The houses there were so tall that they talked to the sky. In the English schools there, if a master beat a pupil, he went to jail. My friends’ wide eyes and amazed gestures revealed how much I had risen in their estimation. Children have so much power to turn myth into reality; those of us who turn reality into myth can hardly comprehend it. Those poor fellows were becoming jealous of me. It was



as if they were saying, 'You're so lucky, brother. Go; we are destined to live and die in this dead-end village.'

Twenty years passed. I got my engineering degree, and on a tour of that same district, I arrived at that same little town and lodged at the Post Bungalow. Just the sight of that place awoke such sweet childhood memories in my heart that I picked up my walking stick and set out to tour the town. Like some thirsty wayfarer, my eyes yearned to see those childhood haunts and playgrounds; but aside from the familiar name, nothing there was familiar. Where there had been ruins, smart new buildings were standing. Where the old banyan tree once stood, there was now a beautiful garden. The place was completely transformed. If I hadn't known its name and location, I never would have recognized it. My hoarded, undying memories longed to embrace old friends with open arms; but that world had changed. I wanted to cling to that earth and cry, and say, 'You've forgotten me, but I still want to see you in your old guise.'

All of a sudden, I caught sight of a few boys playing gilli-danda in an open lot. For a moment, I completely forgot myself. I forgot that I was a highly placed official, a dignified personality, invested with influence and privilege.

I went and asked one of the boys, 'Tell me, son, does a fellow named Gaya live here?'

One boy picked up the gilli-danda and asked in a timid voice, 'Gaya who? Gaya the tanner?'

'Yes, that's the one,' I said offhandedly. 'If he's named Gaya, he's probably the one.'

'Yes, he is.'

'Can you go and get him?'

The boy ran off and in a moment, I saw him coming back with a tall, black devil of a man. I recognized him from afar. I wanted to leap towards him and hug him; but I thought better of it. I said, 'Well, Gaya, do you recognize me?'

Gaya bowed and saluted me. 'Yes boss, why on earth wouldn't I recognize you? Are you doing all right?'

'I'm doing just fine. What about yourself?'

'I'm the deputy's groom.'

'Matai, Mohan, Durga, where are they all? Do you know?'

'Matai is dead, Durga and Mohan became postmen. And you?'

'I'm the district engineer.'

‘Boss, you were always the smart one.’

‘Do you still play gilli-danda?’

Gaya looked at me questioningly. ‘How can I play gilli-danda now, boss, now that I don’t get a break from earning my living?’

‘Come, let’s play, you and I. You strike, and I’ll field. I owe you a turn. Today you can take it.’

With great difficulty, Gaya agreed. He had remained a petty labourer, while I was a big official. What did we have in common? The poor fellow was embarrassed; but no more than I was. Not because I was going to play with Gaya, but rather because people would think our game was a spectacle and a sizeable crowd would gather to watch the show. With a crowd, the enjoyment would be lost; but there was nothing for it but to play. Finally, we decided that the two of us would go far outside the town and play in some deserted area where there would be no one sitting around to watch us. We would play with pleasure, savouring every drop of that childhood joy. I took Gaya to the Post Bungalow where we got in the car and set off for the playing field. We took an axe along. I was experiencing intense emotion, but Gaya was still thinking of it as a joke. Even so, there was no trace of curiosity or pleasure on his face. Perhaps he was caught up in thinking about the disparity that now divided us.

I asked, ‘Did you ever miss me, Gaya? Tell me the truth.’

Gaya said humbly, ‘Who am I to miss *you*, sir? It was my destiny to be able to play with you for a few days. But you’re out of my league.’

I said somewhat sadly, ‘But I missed you all the time. The way you used to swing the danda and hit, remember?’

Gaya said with regret, ‘That was when we were young, boss. Don’t remind me.’

‘Hey, that’s my sweetest childhood memory. The way you wielded the stick: I don’t get that thrill from all my prestige, honour and wealth. There was something about your playing that has kept my heart young until today.’

Meanwhile we had travelled about three miles outside of the town. It was uninhabited in all directions. To the west, the Bhimtal Lake extended for leagues, where at one time we used to pick lotus flowers and make them into earrings. The lake had turned orange in the summer twilight. I quickly climbed a tree and cut a branch. The gilli-danda was made in no time.

The game began. I put the gilli in a little pit and struck it to send it flying. The

The game began. I put the gilli in a little pit and struck it to send it flying. The gilli flew by in front of Gaya. He threw out a hand like he was catching a fish. The gilli fell on the earth behind him. This was the same Gaya who used to catch like the gilli itself wanted to fly to his hands. Whether passing to his left or right, the gilli ended up in his palm, as if he had enchanted it. The gillis could be new, old, small, large, crooked, straight—he caught every one of them. It was as if he had a magnet in his hands that attracted the gilli, but today it seemed the gilli didn't love him any more. Anyway, I started striking. I was using all sorts of deceptions, breaking all the rules. I was making up for my lack of practice with trickery. I kept striking even when I struck out, although according to the rulebook it should have been Gaya's turn to strike. When I hit the gilli a glancing blow and it fell nearby, then I rushed over and picked it up myself and whacked it again. Gaya was watching all of this unorthodoxy, but he didn't say anything, as if he had forgotten all the rules. His aim had once been so accurate. As soon as it left his hand, the gilli would instantly connect with the danda. It was like the gilli's only goal was to zoom from his hand to the danda, but today that gilli refused to find the danda at all. Sometimes, it went to the right, sometimes to the left, sometimes ahead, sometimes behind.

After half an hour of striking, Gaya's gilli finally connected with the danda. I tried to bluff: 'The gilli didn't touch the danda, it missed by a hair, but didn't touch.'

Gaya didn't reveal any sort of dissatisfaction.

'You're right, I'm sure it didn't touch it.'

'If it had touched would I try to cheat?'

'No, brother, why in the world would you cheat!'

As a child, I would never have dared to save a victory with such a low trick. This very same Gaya would be after my neck, but today I was getting away so easily with my deception. What a jackass! He's forgotten everything.

Suddenly his gilli hit the stick again, and with such force that it sounded like a gunshot. With this proof before me now, I didn't have the courage to try another deception. But why not try to turn truth into a lie once more? What did I have to lose? If he agreed, then fantastic; otherwise I would only have to field for a few rounds. I'd use the excuse of nightfall to get rid of him quickly. And whoever comes back to complete a turn?

Gaya said in the excitement of victory, 'It touched, it touched! I heard the

crack!’

I tried to appear indifferent. ‘Did you see it hit? I didn’t see it.’

‘Hey boss, I heard the crack!’

‘And what if it hit a rock, then?’

I myself was shocked at that time to hear that sentence come out of my mouth. To call that truth a lie was just like calling day night. We had both seen the gilli collide forcefully with the danda, but Gaya accepted my statement.

‘Yes, it must have hit a rock. If it had hit the danda, it wouldn’t have made such a loud sound.’

I started to strike again, but after using such an obvious deception, I started to have pity on Gaya’s simplicity. That’s why, when the gilli hit the danda for the third time, I generously decided to cede Gaya his turn.

Gaya said, ‘It’s getting dark now, brother, let’s come back tomorrow.’

I thought about how much time I would have tomorrow, and who knows how long he would strike. For this reason, I thought it better to settle the matter clearly now.

‘No, no. There’s still a lot of light. You take your turn.’

‘We won’t be able to see the gilli.’

‘It doesn’t matter.’

Gaya started to strike, but he was totally out of practice. Twice he tried to strike a solid blow, but both times he missed. In less than a minute, he had struck out. The poor guy had fielded for an hour, but he lost his turn in a minute. I proffered my big-heartedness.

‘Take another turn. You struck out on the first try.’

‘No, brother, it’s too dark.’

‘You’re out of practice. Don’t you every play any more?’

‘When do I have time to play, brother!’

We both went and got into the car and reached my lodging with the lighting of the lamps. As he was leaving, Gaya said, ‘Tomorrow we’re playing gilli-danda here. All the old players will come. Will you come too? I’ll call all the players according to your schedule.’

I suggested the evening and the next day I came to watch the match. There was a team of about ten men. A few turned out to be my childhood friends, but mostly they were youngsters that I didn’t recognize. The match began. I sat on the car and watched the show. Seeing Gaya’s skill and adroitness today I was

the car and watched the show. Seeing Gaya's skill and aggressiveness today, I was shocked. When he struck it, the gilli would kiss the sky. There was none of yesterday's hesitation and timidity, none of the half-heartedness. Today, he had achieved the perfection of the skill of his youth. If, God forbid, he had played like this yesterday, I would have definitely begun to cry. Whenever he hit the gilli, it would soar up two hundred yards in the air.

One of the young fielders tried a trick! He opined that he had caught the gilli in the air. Gaya said that the gilli had bounced after hitting the ground. The situation almost turned into a physical altercation. The youth gave in.

Upon seeing Gaya's flushed face, I was frightened. If that youth hadn't given in, there would have been violence. I wasn't in the game, but in this match played by others, I was vicariously enjoying the same youthful pleasure that we used to feel when totally absorbed in the sport. Now I realized that yesterday Gaya hadn't played with me, he'd just pretended to play. He considered me an object of mercy. I had tricked him, cheated him, but he hadn't shown the slightest trace of anger. That's why the game hadn't been a game; he was just letting me play, letting me keep my self-respect. When striking, he could have made mincemeat out of me, but he didn't want to. I could win his kindness, his respect, but not his fellowship. In our youth, I had been his equal. There was no disparity between us. Having played against him now, I was worthy only of his pity. He didn't consider me a partner.

He had become the bigger man, and I the smaller.

*Translated from the Hindi by Afroz Taj and John Caldwell*



## The Prostitute

### 1

The first thing that Dayakrishna did after returning from Calcutta, having lived there for six months, was to join his dear friend Singaar Singh in mourning. Singaar's father had died nearly three months ago. Back then, Dayakrishna could not come because he was busy with work. Though he had tried to do his bit of mourning by sending a condolence letter, not a single day passed when he did not remember Singaar.

He wanted to live in Calcutta for a few more months because his presence was required to consolidate the business that he had started and even his temporary absence could cause losses. But he finally could not restrain himself when he received a letter from Singaar's wife, Leela. She had not written anything very clearly, but had just asked him to come urgently. Dayakrishna surmised from the letter that the situation at home was worrisome and it was necessary for him to be there.

Despite being the son of a wealthy father, Singaar was an extremely reckless, stubborn and indulgent man, entirely untouched by virtues like tenacity and industry. His mother had died when he was a child and his father's parenting was more affectionate and loving than disciplinary, and he had thus been protected from the vagaries of the world. He never knew what was involved in making any effort at all. A mere gesture was enough to have any of his wishes fulfilled. He was an adult child without any thoughts or principles of his own. Anybody could easily make him a target of his viciousness. Understanding the stratagems of managers and accountants was nothing short of a Herculean task

for him. He needed a wise and well-wisher friend who could save him from the tricks of the selfish people around him. The Singh family had extended a lot of favours to Dayakrishna in the past. It was incumbent on him to extend his services in such crises to repay that debt.

Having refreshed himself, Dayakrishna left for Singaar Singh's house thinking of having his meal there itself. It was past nine. The day had advanced and it was warming up.

Singaar Singh came out to receive him as soon as the news of Dayakrishna's arrival reached him. Dayakrishna was startled at Singaar's appearance. His hair was curly, not long (Singaar was a Sikh), and parted on the side. Although a bit pale, yet carrying a smile indicating debauchery, he neither had tears in his eyes, nor any other sign of mourning. He was wearing a shirt of fine silk and velvet shoes, as if returning from a party. Dayakrishna could not utter any words of condolence. He felt the occasion rather demanded words of congratulations.

Singaar Singh embraced him promptly and said, 'What timing, yaar! I have been remembering you lately. But first tell me, have you shut down your business there or not? If you have only abandoned that burden, then first go and bury it completely because now you can't leave from here. I have changed my ways, dear. Tell me, how long could I go on? Now we have parties every other day. I thought, dear, now that we are in this world, why not travel around and enjoy it, otherwise one fine day we will be wringing our hands and leave this world empty handed.'

Dayakrishna stared at his face in wonder! *Is it the same Singaar or someone else? So much change right after the father's demise!*

The friends entered the drawing room and sat on a sofa. During his father's time, the drawing room had an almirah and floor seating with bolsters. That had now been replaced with dozens of plush sofas and chairs; the floor had been carpeted and huge mirrors had been put up. The father had a desire for accumulating, the son had it for spending.

Lighting up a cigar, Singaar said, 'I swear—on your life—that I missed and remembered you a lot.'

Dayakrishna complained, 'You are lying. Months would pass without you finding time to write a letter and now you claim you missed me!'

Singaar replied in a juvenile manner, 'That's it. Now drink to my health. Come on, vaar, what is this life all about? The time that you can spend in

laughter and pleasure is the only consolation that life has. I have given up all work. Now there are parties every other day. Sometimes the friends are invited or we take the boat on the river; at others, its either music or liquor. I have decided to indulge in these pleasures for a few days. Why should the heart's desires be not satisfied? Man comes into this world only to enjoy pleasure. These are the joys of life. The one who has not tasted these, has only wasted his life. All I want is a gathering of friends, the beloved in my arms and a peg in my hands. Nothing else!'

He took a bottle from the almirah and pouring out two drinks, said, 'This, for my health. Don't refuse. I drink to your health.'

Dayakrishna had never had the occasion to drink. He was not such a sage as to think of drinking alcohol as a sin, but he did consider it a vice. His heart recoiled at the mere smell of liquor. He feared that even if he took a sip, he would not be able to gulp it down. He picked up the glass just out of courtesy but then put it back on the table and said, 'You know it, I have never had a drink. Forgive me this time. I will learn this art in a few days, but first tell me, do you even take care of your work or are you busy with indulgence only?'

Singaar made a disinterested face and said, 'Oh, what sort of talk is this, yaar? I can't ruin this short life just for business. One comes into this world with nothing and one will go without anything. Papa accumulated wealth very painstakingly, but what did he get in return? He died by the time he was barely fifty. Even his soul must be craving for worldly pleasures. It's better to live poor and happy than to die wealthy and miserable. I am not worried about wealth nor am I worried about what happens when I am gone. You have kept the glass away. Drink some. Your eyes will open and the heart will rejoice. Many mix their drinks with soda or ice. I take it neat. If you want, shall I call for ice?'

Dayakrishna once again excused himself but Singaar kept downing peg after peg. His eyes turned bloodshot. He started speaking nonsense, bragged about himself and then started singing some vulgar song in his out-of-tune voice. Finally, he passed out on his chair itself.

The curtain behind Dayakrishna parted abruptly and Leela called him in. Blood



was coursing rapidly through his veins. Although he was inwardly drawn towards beauty, his hesitant and diffident temperament made him reserved outwardly. He would go dumbfounded before beautiful women, blush heavily with bashfulness, and lower his eyes. But his heart would pine to surrender and grovel himself before them. His friends taunted him and called him an old saint. Women too would turn away from him thinking him to be disinterested. Even if he was to travel alone with a woman on a train going as far as Lanka, he would not dare to speak a word to her, though he would not hesitate in giving up his life if the woman flirted with him first. In this life blighted by diffidence and hesitation, Leela was the only woman who had understood him and had treated him kindly. Dayakrishna had turned an ardent fan of hers. His virgin heart considered Leela to be the perfect embodiment of womanhood. It was as if his parched soul did not yearn for fancy drinks but for plain cool water. Leela had beauty, glamour and daintiness but these did not attract Dayakrishna. He had seen more beautiful and glamorous women at parks. Leela was humane, thoughtful and compassionate. It was these elements that attracted him. His gallantry had no other sentiment but surrender. It was his greatest wish to follow some command from Leela. That would have been enough to satiate his soul.

With trembling hands, he lifted the curtain and went in, and looked at her with awestruck eyes. If he had not seen Leela here, he would not have even recognized her. That icon of beauty, youth and health had wilted so much as if somebody had sucked the lifeblood out of her. In a sympathetic voice, he asked, 'What is this, Leela? Are you ill? Why didn't you inform me?'

Leela smiled and said, 'What's that to you? Why are you concerned if I am well or unwell! Why don't you concentrate on your tours? You have remembered us after six months, and you ask me if I am ill? I am suffering from a fatal illness. Have you seen the condition of that man outside? Do I have to explicitly say it for you to understand how I suffer seeing him in this condition? It is shameless of me to continue living in this house. Nobody wants me or cares for me. Ever since Papa died, I have been like a widow. I am called a fool if I try to reason. He stays out for whole nights, no one knows where. Always inebriated. Doesn't come home for weeks. How do I speak to him? If he continues in his ways, we will become paupers in a year or two.'

Daya asked, 'How did he turn this way? He didn't have these addictions.'

Leela replied in a voice full of agony, 'Bestowed by wealth. How else? Is this

why the elders earn so that the boys can spend! They might think they are providing for their children. I say they only ensure their children's ruin by this. They only poison their children's lives. If Papa had not left behind such riches, this man would have been toiling somewhere, and would care for his home. Now he simply withdraws money from the bank and blows it up! I would not worry if I knew that he would mend his ways after exhausting the wealth. But I am afraid such men turn out good for nothing. They either rot in the jailhouse or in the orphanage. He is also having an affair with a prostitute. Her name is Madhuri. She leads him by the nose and is pauperizing him, as is her wont. He believes she loves him! He has even proposed marriage! Don't know what her response was. Many times I thought of going back to my home since there are no more relationships here, but I fear that this will make him even more reckless. If I trust anyone at all, it's you, which is why I called you thinking maybe he will listen to you. If you also fail, I won't stay here a minute. Come, eat. The food is ready.'

Dayakrishna pointed towards Singaar Singh and said, 'And what about him?'

'He won't wake up before two or three o'clock.'

'Won't he mind?'

'I don't care for these things any more. I have resolved that if he ever acts smart with me, I will teach him a lesson. My father is a subedar major in the army. I have his blood in my veins.'

Leela's posture turned aggressive. The fire of revolt, which had been smouldering for months, now burst forth into flames.

She said in the same tone, 'Only in this house have I been suffocated and humiliated so much and continue to be insulted that I won't feel an iota of guilt in anyhow avenging it. I have not told my father of my condition. If I write to him, this man will lose all his audacity. I am suffering only because it's a woman's destiny to suffer, but even a woman's patience has limits.'

Dayakrishna looked at the flushed face, fiery eyes, and the trembling lips of that dainty maiden and a shiver overran him. His state now was that of a man who runs to call a doctor upon seeing a man writhing in pain. With a lump in his throat, he said, 'Excuse me for now, Leela. I will honour your invitation some other time. I can only assure you that you must think of me as your servant. I didn't know that you were in such pain, otherwise I would have thought of some way out by now. What greater fortune can be there for me than using my life for some good to you?'

some good to you.

Dayakrishna left with a heart so elated as if he was flying on a plane to paradise. He had finally discovered a calling in life for which he could live or die. He was now the confidant of a woman. He resolved to never let go of this gem, even if it cost him his life.

### 3

A month went by, during which neither Dayakrishna visited Singaar Singh, nor Singaar bothered to ask after Daya. In that one meeting, Singaar had understood that Daya was not one to follow his ways. He had no use for such saintly men. At his house, only the flamboyant, the epicurean, the pleasure loving and the loose-hearted were welcome. Leela, though, always remembered him.

But Dayakrishna's temperament also did not seem to have the former restraint any more. It seemed he too had been captivated by the draw of debauchery. He too had started visiting Madhuri's house. He was no longer Singaar Singh's friend, but a rival. Both were supplicating to the same idol, but there was a difference between the devotion of the two. In Singaar's eyes, Madhuri was only an object of indulgence, a pleasure-giving machine. Dayakrishna, on the other hand, was an icon of docility who was happy in merely serving her. Singaar believed that Madhuri's banter was his rightfully bought pleasure. What made Dayakrishna happy was that Madhuri accepted his services. Any hint of disinterest from Madhuri was likely to infuriate Singaar, the way a horse owner does when his mare throws tantrums. Dayakrishna thought himself too inferior to receive any favour from her. Whatever Singaar presented to Madhuri, he did it like a proud exhibit, as if doing her a great favour. Dayakrishna had nothing to offer, but whatever he did, he did it with such devotion as if offering flowers to a deity. Singaar's obsession desired to lock Madhuri in a cage where none could see her. Dayakrishna only wished to enjoy her dalliance with a stoic detachment. All the men that Madhuri had dallied with were like Singaar Singh—lusty, jealous, proud, and devoid of any tender emotion, who thought of her as an object to be consumed. Dayakrishna was different from all those—humane, decent and servile, as if he desired to surrender his soul to her. Madhuri had now found such a thing in her life which she wanted to carefully preserve. She now valued the talisman from this humble fakir more than any precious ornament.

Ornaments can be acquired again, if they are lost. Not so with the talisman. Ornaments served to only aggravate her debauched instincts, but the talisman seemed to have some divine power which somehow awakened in her the feelings of affection and reformation. Dayakrishna never made an exhibition of his love, nor did he regale her with tales of love and loss, but still Madhuri fully trusted him. Singaar Singh's ramblings appeared affected and showy to her, and she wanted him to leave quickly. But the measured discourse of Dayakrishna felt deep, serious and grave. For others, she was merely their mistress, but a beloved for Dayakrishna, the very sound of whose footsteps raised up a storm within her. This was a novel experience in her life. For long, she was merely an object of pleasure for others. Now she was an icon of respect and love in the eyes of at least one man.

Ever since Singaar Singh had heard of the amorous acts of Dayakrishna, he had turned into a bloodthirsty foe, and was getting consumed by jealousy. He set many spies after Dayakrishna, with orders to kill him wherever possible. He himself carried a pistol in his waist. Dayakrishna understood and recognized this hazard, but still visited Madhuri at the allotted hour without fail. It seemed he had no care for his own life, but why the assassins edged away and did not attack him even at an opportune moment was beyond his understanding.

One day Madhuri told him, 'Krishnaji, you should not come here. You don't know but you have scores of enemies here. I fear that some day something bad will happen.'

It was a mist-laden winter evening. Madhuri was sitting near the fireplace with a cashmere shawl draped around her. The silver light from an electric bulb was spread across the room. Dayakrishna noticed that Madhuri's eyes had moistened and she was trying to hide it from him by turning her face away. The heart of that idiot could not fathom why a maiden given to exhibition and indulgence was being coy. Yet, it was true that he had never seen such a glow of bashful charm on the fair, happy and exuberant face of Madhuri. He saw the diffident longing and unwavering affection of a newly-wed in her face. His love now had the piety of Truth.

He replied calmly, 'I do not speak ill of anyone. Why would anyone have enmity for me? I am not an obstruction or a rival to anyone. Everybody seeks something from a charitable donor. What one gets, though, is one's own fortune. Why be jealous? If you are especially favourable to anyone in particular, I will

why be jealous? If you are especially favourable to anyone in particular, I will think him to be fortunate and respect him. Why should I be jealous?’

Madhuri replied in an affectionate voice, ‘No, sir, do not come here from tomorrow.’

With a smile, Dayakrishna countered, ‘You can’t stop me from coming here. You can rebuke and turn a beggar away. You can’t stop him from beseeching you.’

Madhuri looked at him compassionately and said, ‘Are all men guileless like you?’

‘So what can I do?’

‘You should not come here.’

‘I can’t do that.’

Madhuri reflected for a moment and then said, ‘Will you agree if I propose something? Come, let’s go to some other city.’

‘Just because some people here are our enemies?’

‘Not mere enemies. They are after your life.’

Unperturbed, Dayakrishna replied, ‘The day I receive that prize for my love would be a new day in my life, Madhuri! What better death than this! Then I will not be alive in separation from you. I will then live in your heart, in your memory.’

Madhuri’s soft hands gently patted his cheek. Her eyes welled up. The love infused in these words penetrated her heart like a jet from a water pistol. Such agonizing anguish! Such intoxication! What could she call it?

In a tender voice, she said, ‘Don’t talk like this, Krishna, or I swear some day I will consume poison and die at your feet. I don’t know what magic your words had that I was inflamed. For God’s sake, don’t come here or one day I will give up my life. You don’t know how viciously that cut-throat Singaar is after your life. I have given up pleading with his henchmen. I tell them I have nothing to do with Dayakrishna. I insult you before them. I berate you. But that brute does not believe me. It is better I don’t tell you how much I have pleaded with those goons, how much humiliation I have had to bear. I lie at the feet of those, even looking at whose faces I think to be an insult to my dignity, but these dogs become fiercer when they get these scraps. I am sick of them. I pray to you with folded hands that let us go to a place where no one knows us. There we will live peacefully. With you, I am ready to face any hardship. I will not let you go today

before I have your word on this. I know you still do not trust me. You suspect I will betray you.'

Dayakrishna interrupted her, 'No, Madhuri, you are being unfair to me. I have never had any such suspicion about you. From the first day, I somehow felt, I don't know why, that you are different from other women like you. You have the dignity and bashfulness of the ladies of great households.'

Madhuri looked into his eyes and said, 'You are not so skilled at lying, Krishna, that you can fool a prostitute. I am neither dignified nor bashful, nor am I different from other women. I am a prostitute. As blemished, as debauched, as much a trickster, as other prostitutes. In fact, even more. Nor is it that you, like other men, came to me for banter or to satisfy your lust. If that was the case, you would not be so detached even after visiting me for months. You never bragged about yourself. You never enticed me with wealth. I never expected any riches from you. You were clear about your situation to me. Even then, I gave you not one but many opportunities. Opportunities that any other man would not let go, but I still could not dominate you. Whatever your intention might have been in coming to me, it was not for fun. If I thought of you as so fallen, so cruel, so debauched, I would not tolerate your tantrums. Over time, I too turned friendly towards you. I understood I was being tested. Unless I pass this test, you cannot be mine. You are as tough as you are gentle.'

Madhuri held Dayakrishna's hand, and with an expression of affection and surrender in her beautiful eyes, said, 'Krishna, tell me truthfully, what in me attracted you? Look, don't make excuses. You are not one to be captivated by beauty. I can swear about that.'

Feeling trapped, Dayakrishna said, 'Appearance isn't such a lowly thing, Madhuri! It mirrors the heart.'

'There is no dearth around here of women more beautiful than me.'

'It's also about how one sees. Maybe I had my own beliefs.'

Madhuri frowned again and said, 'You are lying again. Your face says it all.'

Defeated, Dayakrishna said, 'Why do you want to know, Madhuri? I fear that if you know you will start hating me. Is it not possible that I may not be what I appear to you?'

Madhuri was saddened. With an air of disinterest, she said, 'This clearly means you don't trust me. That's all right. One should not trust prostitutes. You will obviously follow the learned and the holy!'

...and suddenly, from the roomed and the way.

The womanly heart was now deploying its own arsenal to tide over this hurdle.

This very first salvo made Dayakrishna lose courage. He said, 'You are getting upset, Madhuri. I said it thinking only that you will consider me a cheat. You probably don't know of the favours that Singaar Singh has done me. There is not an iota of untruth in that I was brought up on his scraps. When I went there and saw his ways and found his saintly wife, Leela, to be unhappy, then after much thought, the only solution that occurred to me was that I must anyhow free Singaar Singh from your clutches. This only is the secret of my pride. But instead of freeing him, I myself got trapped. Punish me as you wish for my deceit. I stand here with my head bowed.'

Madhuri's pride was shattered. As if singeing from the insult, she said, 'Then say that you are lady Leela's lover. I would not have let you enter this house if only I had known that. You are such a dark horse!'

She walked to her parrot's cage and made a show of petting him, but how could the flames rising in her heart be calmed?

Dayakrishna said insultingly, 'I am not Leela's lover, Madhuri. Don't disgrace that goddess! I swear to you today that I have never looked at her in that manner. My feelings for her were exactly the same that any man feels for a dear one who is in trouble.'

'It's not a sin to love anybody. You are needlessly explaining yourself and Leela.'

'I don't want Leela to be accused in any way.'

'All right, sir, fine. I won't speak of Leela. I accept she is pure, saintly, and only by her orders . . .'

Dayakrishna cut her short, 'She issued no orders!'

'Oho, now you cut people short, Krishna! Forgive me! Not by her order, you came here on your own! Fine? Now tell me, what are your intentions now? I can give you my word but I can't change my ways. I am not so strong. My purity has been destroyed long ago. Like other precious things, beauty and youth too can be protected only by the strength of the arms. I ask you. Can you give refuge to me? If I have your protection, I am sure I can battle all the temptations of life only by the power of love. I will kick this golden palace away, but in turn I should also get the shade of some great tree. Can you provide me that shade? If you can't,

leave me. I am happy as I am. I promise you I won't have anything to do with Singaar Singh. He will entreat me. He will cry. He will probably also have his goons threaten or humiliate me. But I will face everything. Only for you . . .'

She did not speak any more. She looked at Dayakrishna with entreating, yet indifferent eyes, like a shopkeeper who solicits a customer but also wants to demonstrate that he could not care less. What could Dayakrishna reply? In this competitive world, he had but merely staked enough space to plant a foot. But now he was denied even that. Maybe he could regain his space to stand if he struggled, but that space was not enough to sit down alone or stand together with another being. Even if one accepted that a Herculean effort would carve out enough space for two, what would happen to his self-respect? What would people say? Would Leela ever want to see him again? Would she ever be able to look Singaar in the eye? Forget it! If Leela thought of him as her husband, so be it. If Singaar was jealous of him, he could not be bothered. But how would he reason with his heart, which refused to trust anybody? His heart lost trust like a snare loses its bird of prey. The lady came with a boon of trust. There was no doubt about her chastity. To suspect her required prima facie evidence. The prostitute came with a sacrament of mistrust. To trust her would require clear—absolutely clear—evidence. He asked humbly, 'Do you know my condition?'

'Very well.'

'And will you be happy in that condition?'

'Why do ask such a question, Krishna? It pains me. I know and I understand the doubt you have in your heart. I had the illusion that you know me, you understand me. Now I know I was deluded.'

She rose to leave. Dayakrishna grabbed her hand and said beseechingly, 'You are being unjust to me, Madhuri! I am saying the truth. There is nothing like this . . .'

Still standing, and with a disenchanted heart, Madhuri said, 'You are lying, absolutely lying. In your heart, you still don't accept that no woman enters this profession voluntarily. In your understanding, selling one's modesty for money is such a pleasant business that a prostitute does it fondly. You don't think it possible that a prostitute has any womanhood. You cannot even imagine why a prostitute is not constant in her affections. You don't know how hungry she is for love and if her good fortune does find her love, how she treasures it like her own lifeblood. One who keeps kicking pots of fresh water cannot know how



dear a mere glass of fresh water is when out on the ocean.'

Dayakrishna was in such quandary that he could not utter a word. What a fierce blaze it would be if the spark of suspicion in his heart burst out! The drama of deceit that he had put up, the farce of love that he had enacted, its guilt was distressing him all the more.

Abruptly, Madhuri questioned him cruelly, 'Why are you sitting here?'

Dayakrishna swallowed the insult and replied, 'Will you allow me some time to think, Madhuri?'

'To think what?'

'My duty?'

'I didn't ask you for any time to think of my duty! If you are thinking of rescuing me, perish the thought. I am corrupt and you are an icon of saintliness. Till the time you think this way, I'll speak to you the way I speak to others. If I am fallen, then the men who come here for sex are no less fallen. If you, who are eyeing a friend's wife, you, who are enacting a farce of false love with a simple powerless woman, gain me entry into the paradise at your hands, I will kick it.'

Dayakrishna retorted with bloodshot eyes, 'The same taunt, again?'

Madhuri felt wounded. The rising tide of jealousy drowned whatever was left of her softness. She said inwardly, 'Even a taunt is unacceptable for Leela because she is the lady of a respectable house. Even my love given away in charity is unacceptable because I am a prostitute!'

Undaunted, she said, 'I am not taunting. I am merely stating the truth. I fear you. Whether you admit it or not, you love Leela to death. May you be happy with your Leela. I am happy with my Singaar Singh and do not hanker for any cleansing any more. Go, clean yourself first. I warn you. Do not come here ever again, even forgetfully. The fallen like you cannot uplift the other fallen. Only those who never allow an act of rescue to be a matter of pride can rescue others. There cannot be any discrimination where there is love.'

She immediately went to the adjoining room and shut the door. As if crestfallen, Dayakrishna stayed there for some time. Then he walked down the stairs. Slowly. As if life had drained out of him.

Dayakrishna could not step out of the house for two days. He had not expected Madhuri to behave with him that way. That Madhuri loved him, he did not doubt. But the love that is so intolerant; that is so unmindful of other's feelings; that does not hesitate from making false charges; that love is not love. It is lunacy. He told himself that it was smart of him to escape the trap of Madhuri's stratagems, or one wonders of the fate that would have befallen him.

But then, the very next moment, he would think exactly the opposite and his heart would be filled with affection for Madhuri. Then he would regret his pettiness and narrow-mindedness! He had no reason to suspect Madhuri. In situations like these, it is natural to be jealous and jealousy without sting and venom is no jealousy at all. So what if the world would have condemned him or that Madhuri was impure or unwifely, at least Singaar Singh would have been rescued from her clutches. At least, Dayakrishna's debt would lessen a bit, if not much. At least Leela's life would be happy.

There was a sudden knock on the door. When he opened the door, he found Singaar Singh standing there. Singaar's hair was undone and unkempt.

Dayakrishna shook hands with him and asked, 'Did you walk all the distance? Why didn't you call me?'

Singaar looked at him penetratingly and said, 'I have come here to ask you where is Madhuri? Surely she is here.'

'Why? How would I know? Must be at her house. Why would she come here?'

'These excuses won't do! I say I will kill you unless you tell me clearly where she has gone.'

'Believe me, I don't know anything. I haven't even stepped out of the house these past two days.'

'Last night, I was with her. In the morning, I received this letter. Immediately, I rushed to her house. But there too nobody knew anything. The only thing the servants could inform was that she had left on a tonga, but where, nobody could say. I suspected she might have come here. I won't be satisfied until I search your house thoroughly.'

He searched—under the bed, behind the almirah—every corner of the house. Crestfallen, he said, 'What an unfaithful and a cheat woman! Just read this letter.'

Both sat down on the floor. Dayakrishna took the letter and started reading:

Sardar Sahib! I am going away for a few days. I don't know when I will return. I also don't know where I am going. I am going away because I am disgusted with this life of terrible shamelessness, and I am disgusted with those whore-seekers for whom I was a mere plaything for their perverse enjoyment, and among whom you are the chief. You have been showering riches upon me for months, but what I ask you is will you let your sister or wife trade in this market, even at ten times the profit? Never! There is something about those women of quality which you think to be more precious than all the wealth in the world. Did it ever occur to you that you were cruelly trampling upon that very precious thing, when you used to come to me heavily drunk, your whole body reeking of lustful abandon? Did it ever occur to you that how pained you would be to see your own women in the same condition? Never! This is the mentality of those jackals and vultures who gather around a corpse to feast on it. You must understand that a woman never offers herself up for money of her own volition. If she does it at all, then you must know that she does it because she has no shelter or support. Man is so shameless that he satisfies his lust with a woman in that horrible condition, and he is also so cruel that he wants to see her suffer in that very condition by branding her a whore! Is she a woman at all? Does she get no place in the temple of womanhood? But men like you do not let her enter that temple. Even her touch is deemed corrupting for the deity of that temple! Anyway, let men inflict as much brutality as they can. We are helpless. We have lost our self-esteem but . . .'

Suddenly, Singaar Singh snatched away the letter from his hand and putting it away in his pocket, said, 'What are you reading with such concentration? There is nothing new. It's all that you have taught her. You visited her for this only. Why are you so jealous of me? I have not harmed you in any manner. This year itself I must have wasted not less than ten thousand rupees on Madhuri. Whatever of any value was there in my house, I offered all of it at her feet, and today she has the audacity to feel equal to our women! This is all because of you. The sinner is preaching virtue! Their whole kind is so ungrateful. Such people should be shot dead! The one for whom I squandered everything, the one for whom I earned disrepute, is now the one preaching to me! There is surely some riddle to it. She must have snared someone new! But she can't run away from me, I will dig her out. So lovely was the conversation of that scoundrel that I felt terribly intoxicated! I am sure she has trapped some new beast! I'll shave off my moustache if it's proven otherwise.'

Dayakrishna smiled, looking at Singaar's clean-shaven face and said, 'You have already shaved off your moustache!'

This trivial jest felt like a soothing ointment to Singaar Singh's wounds, who now noticed the emptiness, the cracked floor, and the broken things of Dayakrishna's house and felt pity for him. Writhing under the assault, he was trying to think of a fitting response in his mind, but the blow had subsided by now and the pain was now lessening. Camaraderie too was rising up along with

pain. Where will the smoke rise from if the fire cools down?

Singaar Singh inquired, 'Tell me the truth, did she ever talk of romance with you?'

Dayakrishna said with a smile, 'With me? I only used to go to look at her face.'

'It's difficult to control one's heart while looking at her face.'

'That depends on individual interest.'

'An enchantress! The mere sight of her face pierces one's heart.'

'Not that my heart was pierced. My only desire was to surrender myself at her feet.'

'Surely it is this poetry that is the cause of this disaster. Idiots like you should get married only to village bumpkins. And you wanted to romance a prostitute!'

A moment later, Singaar continued, 'But she is unfaithful. And a cheat!'

'My regret is that you desired fidelity from her.'

'You don't have the heart of a lover. How can I explain it to you?'

A minute later, he said affectionately, 'Whether one agrees or not, what she has written in her letter is true. It is not really a great thing to think of beauty as a marketable commodity.'

Dayakrishna tried to console him. 'When a woman is out to sell her beauty, customers too gather around. Not to mention there are many castes around here who follow this vocation.'

'How did this business begin?'

'It is about the womanly frailty.'

'No, in my understanding, it was the men who must have started it.'

Following this exchange, Singaar abruptly took out his pocket watch and exclaimed, 'Oho, it's already two and I am still sitting here. Have dinner at my home today. We will talk more about this. For the moment, I have to search for her. She is in this city itself. Never said anything to her housemates. The old madam was crying her brains away. Her mentor was cursing his fortune. I wonder where she is hiding.'

He rose, shook hands with Dayakrishna and walked away.

Dayakrishna asked, 'At least your conscience is clear about me?'

Singaar turned around to reply, 'Yes, and, no,' and walked out.

For a week or so, Singaar Singh tried all means at his disposal to search for Madhuri. He combed the entire city, filed a police report, put out notices in newspapers and even deployed his henchmen, but Madhuri was nowhere to be found, so that the entertainments could be resumed. Friends would duly appear on time and then leave disappointed. Singaar did not have any more time to indulge them in idle chatter.

It was now summer. The decorated drawing room was hot like an oven. There were screens of *khus-khus* and a fan too but the heat refused to abate. It seemed as if it had a mind of its own.

Singaar Singh was sitting in an inside room and drinking one peg after another, but the fire inside him refused to die down. This inner fire had consumed all the outward trappings and like a volcano was melting him from inside, blowing out the lava of innermost disaffection and hurt feelings. Madhuri's betrayal had so hurt his cheerful heart that he now felt his life to be meaningless. Madhuri was the only true possession of his life; true and beautiful too. Madhuri was the sole focal point of all the paths in his life. That point was now abruptly wiped out like a bubble and all his feelings, all her sweet memories were now buzzing around like those frustrated honeybees whose beehives had been set on fire. He was questioning himself that after Madhuri's betrayal, could he ever expect anything from anybody else? What was left in his life? What was the point in living? When a mango had been sapped of all its nectar, of what use could the kernel be?

The prolonged silence in the drawing room was baffling Leela. For months, she had given up having a say in household matters. The routine of her life comprised simply carrying out the orders received from outside. She had become like an ascetic, without any concern for her likings, or even Singaar.

But this prolonged lull was causing anxiety in her already pensive mind. She wished to inquire about one thing, but how could she ask? Her pride would be wounded! But what pride? Any measure of pride could be felt only when someone asked after her and sought her out. Why did she have to be a woman?

She quietly lifted the curtain to peep into the room. She observed Singaar Singh lying on the sofa, just like a bird who buries its face in its own feathers in the silence of the twilight.

Coming close, she said, 'I have been silenced, but what to do, I can't stay quiet. Why has your highness's drawing room been so calm for so many days? Are you ill?'

Eyes brimming over with pain, Singaar Singh turned to look towards her, and said, 'Why don't you go to your parents' house?'

'As you command, but that is not the answer to my question.'

'No, it's not that. I am perfectly fine. Even death shies away from such shameless folk. I am done with this life now. I want to go away for a few days. If you go to your parents' house, I can go away without any worries.'

'Good that you at least think this much of me.'

'You can take whatever you want with you.'

'I don't consider things in this house mine any more.'

'I am not saying this because I am angry, but because I don't know when I will come back. How will you live here alone?'

It was after months that today Leela could sense affection in the eyes of her husband. She continued, 'I was not married to the riches in this house. I was married to you. I will live wherever you live.'

'With me, you have only had to suffer and cry all along.'

Leela noticed a drop of tear at the corner of Singaar's eyes, about to drop like the full moon floating in the purple night sky. Her heart was touched too. How could she refuse a morsel after being hungry for ages? Obviously, this one morsel would not satiate her, but would it be possible for her to refuse it?

She moved closer to him. Very close, such that the fringe of her sari touched him, and said, 'I am yours. If you make me laugh, I will laugh; if you make me cry, I will cry; if you keep me, I will stay; if you banish me, even then I will stay; you are my home, my dharma; good or evil, I am yours.'

The next moment she found her head resting on Singaar's chest, and his hands found their way to her waist. Their faces flushed with joy, their eyes brimmed over, and a storm in their hearts was carrying them away.

A moment later, Singaar said, 'Did you hear this? Madhuri has run away and that idiot Dayakrishna has gone away to look for her.'

Leela could not believe this, 'Dayakrishna!'

'Yes, he went away the day after she ran away.'

'He was not like that, and why did Madhuri run away?'

'They had fallen in love. Madhuri wanted to live with him but he would not

agree.'

Leela sighed. She remembered Dayakrishna's words from months ago. Dayakrishna's pleading eyes were wrenching her heart out.

Suddenly, someone thrust open the door and rushed to the inner room. Taken aback, Singaar Singh said, 'Arré! What mess is this, Krishna? Where are you coming from?'

Dayakrishna's eyes were bloodshot; grime caked his face and beard, and anxiety contorted his expression like that of a madman.

He screamed to say, 'Have you heard? Madhuri is no longer in this world!'

Both Dayakrishna and Singaar howled in agony. They cried and cried, as if pouring out their hearts and lives through their eyes.

*Translated from the Hindi by Vikas Jain*



## The Romantic Editor

### 1

Since the death of his wife, Pandit Chokhelal Sharma, the editor of *Navras*, developed a special affection for women. His romantic inclinations, too, exhibited an upward swing. Some of the best works of male writers were dumped, but as for the ladies' they were easily accepted, and with gratitude. Not only were they accepted but greeted with appreciation such as, 'My heart was in my mouth after reading your work, my past crystallized before my eyes.' Or he would write, 'Your expressions are ever-sparkling jewels in the ocean of literature.' And their poems were the tumultuous waves of the heart, the immortal waves of the Vishva Veena, pathos of the universe and the silent song of the night! All this praise was accompanied with a deep desire to see these women in person. 'I'll consider myself fortunate if a great poet like you visits me. So please do not hesitate to grace this place with your benign presence.'

The women writers were greatly overwhelmed by such praise. The works that had returned like unfortunate beggars without any alms from the doors of many a journal, received such a grand welcome. This was the first time that an editor such as this one was born, one who knew the real worth of art. The rest of the editors thought they had all the authority in the world. Lord forbid, if these editors ever got a position in the government, they'd end up creating chaos. Thankfully, the government did not pay any heed to them. Good that an ordinance had been passed. Be envious of women and this would be the outcome. After all, Sharmaji too was an editor, not a petty idler, the editor of an internationally renowned journal *Navras*, which reigned supreme.



The subscription to Chokhelal's journal began to increase by leaps and bounds. With every mail, there was a deluge of thanks. The women writers had by now begun to worship him. News about weddings, births, deaths and naming ceremonies started pouring in. Some sought blessings, others wished to get a word of reassurance from him, and there were others who even sought advice on domestic conflicts. At least five to ten women actually presented themselves before him every month. The moment Sharmaji heard of their arrival, he'd rush to the station to welcome them, persuade them to stay on for a day or two and shower them with hospitality. Complimentary cinema passes were handy and he made the best use of them.

Suitably impressed by his generosity, the ladies would bid him farewell. It was rumoured that Sharmaji had developed intimate relations with many women writers, but on this matter, we cannot say anything for sure. All we can say is that the ladies who visited him once became his ardent devotees. 'Poor fellow, he is just an ascetic in the house of literature. He has locked the sorrows of his desolate life deep in his heart, and is savouring the nectar of love in silent grief.' The ladies took it upon themselves to fill the void that had come into the esteemed editor's life. If a morsel of sweet is given to a starving man from a wholesome feast, it would only add to the glory of the feast. Someone would send him a jar of pickles, while another, of laddus; one of them even sent him a hand-woven woollen prayer mat.

A lady would come to mend his clothes once every month; another would visit him at least twice or thrice every month just to cook and serve him various delicacies. Now he did not belong to one but to everyone. There was hardly a greater upholder of women's rights than him. As for the men, all Sharmaji got was sharp criticism. Only in women did he find the bliss of devotion.

One day, Sharmaji received a poem in which the poet had projected a particularly aggressive form of her love. The other editors would have called this poem obscene but Chokhelal had turned quite generous now. The poem was composed in beautiful words and the poet had such an attractive name that an imaginary picture appeared before him—passionate nature, soft body, pleading eyes, luscious lips, and golden complexion, all filled with vivacity, dry and tough like gum crystals at first but soft and supple when soaked. He read the poem a few times and a thrill of anticipation ran through him.

Do you think you'll run away from me?  
 Well, can you?  
 I'll put my arms around you;  
 I'll hold you tight by your waist;  
 I'll clutch your feet and won't leave you;  
 And then my head will rest on it.  
 You think you'll run away from me?  
 Well, can you?  
 I'll press my cheeks on your lips;  
 And you'll suck the nectar of my love;  
 Enthrilled, you'll place your head  
 On my feet.  
 You think you'll run away from me?  
 Well, can you?

Kamakshi

With each reading of this poem, Sharmaji enjoyed a fresh fervour. He dispatched a letter to Kamakshi Devi instantly:

*I cannot say how your poem has affected my heart. The desire aroused in my heart is burning me. I know not how to cool it. The mind wants to break away from the chains like an elephant. The heart from which such passion has emanated is a treasure of love, love that finds pleasure in submission. To tell you the truth, I have never read such a poem. The storm it has raised in me has shattered the tranquillity of my desolate life. You have set a pauper's straw-hut ablaze. But my mind refuses to accept it as a mere game for entertainment. In these words, I discover a heart that has suffered in love and burnt in desire. I will consider myself fortunate if you condescend to meet me. This hutment with its offering of love is eagerly waiting to welcome you.*

With love

The reply arrived on the third day itself. Kamakshi had expressed her gratitude in passionate words and confirmed her date of arrival.

## 2

Today was the day of Kamakshi's auspicious arrival.

Sharmaji shaved in the morning, took an elaborate bath with soap and *besan*, dressed himself up in dhoti made of fine khadi and a sparkling crinkled kurta to match with a cream silk shawl. This was his day. He made his entry with such an air that the entire office seemed transformed. The place was scrupulously cleaned. Pots of plants were arranged in the veranda and the tables were decorated with bouquets.

The train reached at nine. Sixty-eight children were there. They all had their hands

The train reached at nine. 'It's eight-thirty now. She will be here by nine-thirty.' He was too restive to work. Again and again, he looked at his watch, then checked himself in the mirror and continued pacing across the room. At this point, he noticed a few grey hairs in his moustache, but there was no implement to pick them out now. No problem. 'It'll make me appear even more impressive,' he thought.

Love, when it comes along with devotion, is like a guest who comes with a gift. Youthful love is extravagant while the love of sages—or those who are close to being sages—gets them something more in return. Where youths use expensive gifts to impress, sages manage it through mere blessings.

Exactly at nine-thirty, the peon brought in a card with 'Kamakshi' printed on it. Sharmaji permitted him to bring madam in, looked at himself in the mirror once again, picked up a thick book and started pretending to be totally absorbed in it. Sharmaji did not even realize that she had already stepped into the room.

The lady came close to him and stood there nervously; Sharmaji looked up startled as if from a trance. He got up to welcome her but she was not at all the picture of his imagination.

A dark, fat, middle-aged woman, stood there staring at Sharmaji as if ready to devour him. Poor Sharmaji! All his enthusiasm and fervour evaporated. The sweet dreams he had been nurturing for months started pricking him like a spear. He was out of his wits. All he could say was, 'The life of an editor is actually the life of an animal. Where's the time to lift one's head from papers? On top of it, the pressure of work is even taking a toll on my health. I have been down with a headache since last night. How can I serve you?'

Kamakshi held a big bundle in her hands. Dumping it on the table and wiping her face with a handkerchief, she said in a honeyed tone, 'This is really bad news. I was actually on the way to meeting a friend of mine and had thought of just dropping by. But now that you are not well, I will have to stay here for a few days and take care of you. I will also help you with your editorial work. Your health is precious for womankind. I cannot leave you in such a condition.'

Sharmaji felt as if the flow of his blood had ceased and his pulse was dropping. Living with this devil would be hell. She claims to write poetry! And what kind of poetry! Dripping with vulgarity. Not only is it obscene but cheap and filthy. Flowing from the pen of a beautiful young woman, the poem would have been cupid's arrow, but from her pen, it's sheer filth! I ask, what right does

she have to write such poetry? Why the hell does she write such a poem? Why can't she just sit in a corner and chant Ram bhajan? And then, she has the audacity to ask, 'Do you think you can run away from me?' Let me ask you, why should anyone come to you? One will run away at the very sight of you. What kind of poetry! With no head or tail, doesn't even know the spellings correctly! She writes poetry!

If poetry can reside in this form then even a donkey can sing and a camel too can dance. This slut does not know that to write poetry, one requires beauty, youth, delicacy and refinement. What a horrid face! It'll give anyone a scare at night. And she writes provocative verses! Even starvation cannot force a man to eat shit. Hag, she's brought such a big bundle—must be filled with similar filth.

Looking at the thick bundle in her hands, he said, 'No, no, I don't want to trouble you. It's nothing of that sort. A few days of rest is all that I need. Your friend must be waiting for you.'

'Mahashayji, you need not be embarrassed. There would be no harm in my staying for a few days.'

'Deviji, this is not required.'

'It may seem to be flattery, but really your goodness is unmatched. You are the first one to appreciate my poetry. All this while I had remained totally disheartened. The result of your encouragement led to all these poems by me. You can use any of these. In fact, I've even started working on a play. I shall send it for your kind review. If you want, I shall recite a few poems for you. When else will I get this golden opportunity? I know not how I write but I'm sure you'll be pleased to hear them. They are of the same flavour.'

She did not wait for his consent. She opened her bundle and began reciting a poem. Sharmaji felt as if he was being thrashed with shoes. He felt sick to his stomach. It sounded like thousands of donkeys were braying in unison.

Kamakshi's voice was melodious but it sounded like cacophony to Sharmaji. He actually started having a headache. 'Will this stupid woman ever stop or will she continue forever? She can't even read my expressions and hopes to write poetry! The poetry of Mahadevi Verma or Subhadra Kumari too would sound disgusting from such a mouth. He could bear it no longer and said, 'What poetry! Leave your poems behind. At the moment, I'm a little busy. I'll read them in my free time.'

Kamakshi responded sympathetically 'You keep so busy even in poor health

Kamakshi responded sympathetically, 'You keep so busy even in poor health. I feel so sorry for you.'

'You are very kind.'

'Do you have some time tomorrow? I would like to read my play to you.'

'Sorry, I have to go to Prayag tomorrow.'

'Shall I come along? I'll read it out to you on the way.'

'I am not sure of the conveyance yet.'

'When will you return?'

'I'm not sure.'

He picked up his telephone and said, 'Hello! No 77.'

Kamakshi kept waiting for over half an hour but Sharmaji was too engrossed in an important conversation with someone to pay any heed to her.

She had to leave totally disheartened but she promised to visit again. Sharmaji heaved a sigh of relief and dumped the parcel into the dustbin. Broken-hearted, he said to himself, 'God forbid that I see you again. The shameless, wanton woman has spoilt my entire day!'

He called the manager and said, 'Kamakshi's poem will not go for publication.'

Shocked, the manager reacted, 'But the form is already in the printing machine.'

'No problem, withdraw it.'

'It'll cause a long delay.'

'Never mind. That poem will not go.'

*Translated from the Hindi by M. Asaduddin*



## The Boy

People think that Gangu is a Brahmin and he also considers himself one. While my syce and other servants courteously greet me, Gangu never does. He perhaps thinks that I should show him due respect. Maybe he expects me to genuflect before him. He never touches a glass I have used and I dare not ask him to fan me. When I'm sweating and no other servant is around, he himself picks up a hand fan. But he gives the impression that he is doing me a great favour and I don't know why I quickly snatch the fan from his hands. He is short-tempered and can't tolerate any impudence. He has few friends and considers it below his dignity to be seen in the company of other servants. I have never seen him hanging around with other servants. What is more surprising is that he is not even fond of the intoxicating bhang *booti* which is rather unusual among people of his class. I've never seen him praying or bathing in the river. He is illiterate, but nevertheless a Brahmin. He desires that the entire world should respect him and bow before him. And why shouldn't he nurture such desires when even today people blindly claim their right over ancestral inheritance as if everything has been acquired by them. So why shouldn't he claim the high regard and honour earned on account of his ancestry. This is his inheritance.

My nature is such that I rarely converse with my servants. I feel that they shouldn't bother me until they are called. I don't like to call them for odd jobs. I find it more convenient to pour water from the jug or light the lamp, put on my shoes or pick out a book from the shelf rather than shouting for Maiku or Hengan every now and then. It makes me feel more independent and self-reliant. My servants know my nature and they rarely approach me without a good reason. They usually come to borrow some money as a salary advance or to

complain about others. I hate such habits. I pay all of them on the first of every month and lose my temper if they come asking for more money in the middle of the month. Who wants to bother about keeping the account of small sums. Moreover, if one has already been given salary for the full month, he has no right to splurge it in a fortnight and borrow money or depend on an advance. I hate bad-mouthing, I consider it a sign of weakness or a mean attempt to flatter somebody.

That's why I didn't like it when Gangu visited me early one morning. I frowned. 'What's the matter? I didn't call you. Why have you come?' Gangu's usually arrogant face had such softness, humility, and reluctance that I was amazed. It appeared as if he wanted to say something but was groping for words. I said politely, 'What's the matter? Why don't you speak up? You know I'm getting late for my morning walk.'

He said disappointedly, 'Please go ahead. I will come later.' This was all the more worrying. I was in a hurry and so he could have finished the whole story in a minute. He knew I didn't have time to spare. On other occasions, the wretched fellow would waste my time for hours. Perhaps he thinks that my indulgence in reading or writing is of some importance but for me, the most difficult task is to silently reflect upon issues. While I'm doing the latter, Gangu thinks that I'm free. This is the time when he would come to bother me. I said ruthlessly, 'Have you come for an advance? You know I don't give it.'

'No, Sarkar, I have never asked for an advance.'

'Any complaints then? I hate complaints.'

'Not at all, sir! I have never come with complaints.'

Gangu mustered up his courage. It looked as if he was gathering all his strength to take a plunge. He faltered, 'Please relieve me. I won't be able to serve you any more.'

It was for the first time that someone had approached me with such a request. My self-esteem took a beating. Why shouldn't I have felt offended at such a request when I considered myself an epitome of kindness? I never abused my servants, and always tried to keep a check on my authority as the master of the house. I said harshly, 'Well, what's your problem?'

'*Huzoor*, who can be more kind-hearted than you? But the circumstances are such that I can't continue my present job lest something happens that might

bring disrepute to your good name. I don't want to tarnish your image.'

I was mystified. I became curious. Surrendering myself, I sat on a chair in the veranda and said, 'You puzzle me. Why don't you clearly say what's the matter?'

Gangu said respectfully, 'The problem is . . . that woman, Gomti Devi, who has just been kicked out of the *vidhva* ashram . . .'

He paused. I said impatiently, 'Yes I know that she has been thrown out but how's that related to your job?'

'Babuji, I want to marry her,' Gangu blurted out as if he wanted to unburden himself.

I was at a complete loss. This conventional Brahmin, who had no exposure to modern civilization, was going to marry a loose woman whom no gentleman would ever allow to enter his house. Gomti's presence had upset the peaceful atmosphere of the locality. She had come to live in the *vidhva* ashram a couple of years ago. She had been married off three times by the employees of the ashram but each time she returned within a month or so. Things had gone so far that she had now been kicked out by the administrator of the ashram too. Since then, she had rented a room in the locality and had become an object of interest for all the rogues there.

Gangu's simplicity annoyed me but I also felt sorry for him. When she had already walked out on three husbands, how long could she be expected to live with Gangu? Had his pockets been full, it would have been a different matter. She could have stayed with him for six months or a year. He is a blind fool. I don't think they would be together even for a week.

'Do you really know the story of her life?' I warned him.

'They're just rumours. People have slandered her for nothing,' Gangu said as if he had been an eyewitness to everything.

'What do you mean? Has she not left her husbands?'

'Not really, in fact, they deserted her. What else could she have done?'

'How silly! Why does a man travel such a long distance to marry a woman and spend so much money on her? Is it just because he intends to abandon her later?'

'Sir, a woman can't live without love. She doesn't merely need the basic necessities. She also longs for love. Those people might have thought that they have done a great favour by marrying a widow. They wanted her to completely



have done a great favour by marrying a widow. They wanted her to completely surrender herself. Huzoor, the truth is, you have to give love to get love. Moreover, she is afflicted with a strange disease. She is under a spell. Occasionally she talks nonsense and faints thereafter.'

'And you intend to marry this sick woman?' I shook my head sceptically. 'Mind you, your life will be full of bitterness.'

'I feel my life will change for the better. The rest is the will of God,' he said with the frenzy of a martyr.

'So that's your final decision?' I asked to confirm.

'Yes, huzoor!'

'Then, I accept your resignation.'

I'm not a slave to hollow customs and meaningless conventions. But I thought it was unsafe to employ a man who was going to marry a debauched woman. People would spread all sorts of rumours. New problems may crop up. The police might also come for an inquiry. There might be legal complications too. It's possible that there might be incidents of petty theft. Better to keep away from these problems.

He chased her as a hungry man would jump at a slice of bread. He didn't really bother whether the bread was stale or tasteless. It was difficult to advise him to act in a more sensible manner. I felt it was safe if he left the job.

Five months passed by. Gangu had married Gomti and was living in a shack in the same mohalla. He earned his living by selling chaat. Whenever I happened to meet him in the market, I would ask him how he was doing. I had a peculiar interest in knowing about his personal life. I also wanted to examine an important social issue—an issue which was not only social but also psychological. I wanted to see what would ultimately happen. But I always found him contented. The grace and self-respect which results from a peaceful and prosperous life was evident on his face. He usually earned a rupee to twenty annas. After meeting his costs, he was able to save eight to ten annas. This was the only income that he had. But even this meagre income had some divine blessing because he seemed free from the disgrace and bankruptcy which one commonly finds among the people of his class. His face reflected the self-confidence and happiness which is possible only when your heart is contented.

Then one day I heard that Gomti had left Gangu. I don't know why this news gave me a peculiar pleasure. I had always felt envious of his peaceful and

problem-free life. I had always expected that something disastrous and utterly disgraceful would happen to him. So, this tragic news made me happy. I had been sure that this would happen. At last this man had to pay a price for being rash and impulsive. Now let's see how he would face the social stigma. Now his eyes would open and he would realize that all those who were dissuading him from marrying Gomti were his true well-wishers. At that moment, he felt as if he was getting a rare opportunity. He felt as if the gateway to freedom had opened up for him. So many people insisted that he should never trust that woman as she had already betrayed other men. She would betray him too. But such words fell on deaf ears. Now I will see what he has to say in his defence. I will ask him, 'Tell me, maharaja, are you really happy with this new blessing of Deviji? You used to say she has so many qualities and people accused her out of sheer malice. Now answer me, who has been proved wrong?'

By chance I met Gangu the same day in the market. He looked anxious, desperate and completely lost. Upon seeing me, tears came into his eyes, not out of shame but out of grief. I was actually delighted but pretended that I felt sorry for him. 'I had already warned you but you did not listen to me. Now you have to bear it. There's no other alternative for you. Has she run away with all your money or spared something for you?' Gangu placed his hand on his chest. It appeared as if my question had pierced his heart.

'Oh, Babuji, please don't say that. She didn't touch a thing. She has even left behind her own belongings. I don't know what wickedness she saw in me. Perhaps I was not worthy of her, what else I can say? She was educated while I am illiterate. It's enough that she lived with me for such a long time. If I could have spent a little more time with her, I would have been transformed into a noble man. How do I describe all her qualities to you? Huzoor, I don't bother about what others have to say about her; for me, she was a divine blessing. I don't know what mistake I have committed. But I swear that her face never had a trace of anger. Babuji, what is my status? I merely earn ten to twelve annas a day, but she would spend them so judiciously that we never fell short of money.'

These words disappointed me greatly. I had thought that he would narrate the story of her betrayal and I would sympathize with him for his blind love, but the fool's eyes were still closed. He was still singing praises of her. It was certain that he was emotionally disturbed.

'So, you mean to say that she hasn't taken anything with her?' I mocked him.

‘Nothing, Sarkar, nothing worth a penny.’

‘And she loved you too?’

‘How do I tell you that, Babuji? I will always remember her love.’

‘Still she left you?’

‘This is what is really shocking for me, Babuji.’

‘Have you ever heard that women are not trustworthy?’

‘Babuji, please don’t say that. I will admire her even if my own life is in danger.’

‘Then why don’t you go in search of her?’

‘Yes, malik, I won’t rest until I bring her back. Once I come to know where she is, I will certainly bring her back. I have a gut feeling that she will come back. Watch my words. Although she wasn’t angry with me, my heart is restless. For the next couple of months, I’ll visit far-off places in search of her. I’ll see you again if I’m still alive.’ Then he walked away in a frenzy. After this incident, I had to go to Nainital, not on an excursion but for some official work. I returned after a month and I had barely changed my clothes when I saw Gangu was standing before me with a newborn baby in his arms. Even Nanda could not have felt so much joy after the birth of Lord Krishna. He looked ecstatic. His face was full of gratitude and conviction. He had the expression on his face which appears on the face of a starving beggar after he has been fed to his heart’s content.

‘So, maharaja, any news of Gomti Devi?’ I asked. ‘I believe, you had gone in search of her.’

‘Yes, Babuji,’ he replied delightedly. ‘I found her with your blessings. She was in a maternity hospital in Lucknow. She had requested one of her friends to reveal it to me only if I got too worried about her. As soon as I got to know, I rushed to Lucknow and brought her back. Along with her, I have also been blessed with this child.’

He lifted the child closer to me and looked like a player who proudly displays a medal won by him.

‘Oh, I see, you’ve got a child too.’ I taunted. ‘Maybe that’s why she ran away from here. I hope this is your own child.’

‘Why mine alone? This is also your child. This is the child of God.’

‘So, he was born in Lucknow?’

‘Yes, Babuji, he’s just a month old.’

Yes, Babuji, he's just a month old.

'How long have you been married?'

'It must be the seventh month.'

'So, you mean to say that he was born after six months of your marriage?'

'Of course, Babuji.'

'Still you claim that he's your child?'

'Yes, sir!'

'What nonsense!'

I'm not sure whether he understood what I meant or was feigning ignorance. Anyway, he continued speaking with the same honesty. 'She narrowly escaped death, Babuji, and she has got a new life. For three days and three nights she suffered birth pangs.'

I said sarcastically, 'This is for the first time that I've heard about a child being born after six months.' This time, I was able to hit the mark.

He smiled and said, 'Oh, I understand what you mean but this thought never came to my mind. It was this fear that had made Gomti run away. I had assured her that she was free to leave me. I would go away and never meet her again. I told her that she could inform me whenever she needed anything and I would try my best to help her. I'm not angry—in my eyes she is as respectable as ever, and I still love her as much as before. In fact, I love her even more now and have told her that if she still loves me, she can come with me. Gangu will never betray her. I did not marry her because she was a goddess but because I loved her and believed that she loved me too. This is my child, my very own. I chose to possess a field that had already been sown. Should I leave the crop just because it was cultivated by someone else?' He burst into laughter.

I forgot to change my clothes. I can't say why my eyes brimmed with tears. I don't know what strange power crushed the deep hatred in my heart, and I stretched out my hands towards that innocent child, kissed him with love that was much more intense than what I'd ever bestowed on my own children.

Gangu said, 'Babuji, you're such a thorough gentleman! I often tell Gomti how good you are. I've been asking her to come and pay you a visit but she is ever so shy.'

Me, a gentleman! Today I realized that my niceness was a facade. I said, 'Not at all, why should she visit a mean fellow like me? I'll rather go to meet her. Do you really think I am a gentleman? I may look like one but I'm really very mean.'

You're a true gentleman and this child is the proof of your greatness.'  
I hugged the child close to my heart and walked away with Gangu.

*Translated from the Hindi by Asmat Jahan*



## Renunciation

In Gorakhpur Railways, there was no one as righteous and God-fearing as Pandit Bajrang Nath. He was a man of great learning, enlightened thoughts and a simple temperament. All his seniors and juniors in the office were happy with him.

On the first day of May, in the month of Baisakh, Panditji received his salary of eighty rupees. When he returned home, he placed it in the hands of his wife, Vindhyeshwari. Like her husband, she too was an icon of compassion and love. After giving him a glass of water, she said, ‘Ten rupees will go towards rent and we have to send thirty rupees home.’

Bajrang added, ‘Yes, and ten rupees for the two children at the *gurukul*.’

Two children from his neighbourhood were studying at the gurukul ashram, for which Panditji had promised to make a monthly contribution of ten rupees.

‘Yes. What else?’ Vindhyeshwari tried to remember other expenses. ‘We should also give at least five rupees to the Brahmin who had requested help for his daughter’s wedding.’

Bajrang agreed and said, ‘Right, right! I had completely forgotten about him. Two rupees for contribution to the *gaushala* too.’

Vindhyeshwari continued, ‘And there will be two rupees for the girls’ school too.’

Bajrang said, ‘That accounts for all the money. How will we manage the pilgrimage to Badrinath?’

Vindhyeshwari suggested, ‘Set aside ten rupees from this only. If we save the same amount every month, we’ll have a hundred rupees in a year. Will that not be enough for the pilgrimage to Badrinath?’

Making some calculations, Bajrang said, 'If I credit ten rupees to this head, what will be left for the monthly expenses? Only eleven rupees.'

'That is enough for food.'

'I can see your sari. It's starting to tatter.'

Vindhyeshwari dismissed the concern and said, 'Will do for this month. If possible, I'll buy one next month.'

'We should send only twenty rupees home and hire a maid here.'

Once again, Vindhyeshwari was dismissive. 'No, no, what's the need for a maid? How many plates do two people use anyway!'

Every month, this is how Panditji's salary was spent. Only after deliberating for months was it possible to get a new sari, but still both were happy with their circumstances and money held no allure for them. However, the couple were bereft of a child and were restless for a son. They had always nurtured the desire for a son. One would be enough. This was the only lack in their realm of peace and happiness.

Ten years passed by. Pandit Bajrang Nath's salary grew from eighty to hundred and fifty. The monthly expenses grew accordingly but did not exceed twenty-five rupees even now. And that too only because times had changed and the material necessities of life had become expensive. Vindhyeshwari had not yet hired help for washing the dishes, but everything else had been accomplished. Yet, their desire for a child was still unfulfilled. They were still alone. Earlier, this desire was somehow veiled by their faith in religion and they were reminded of it only occasionally, but nowadays, Vindhyeshwari especially, keenly felt the sadness and misfortune of her empty womb. Their religious devotion, which was earlier only temperamental and without any avarice, was now turning greedy. Now they desired their good deeds to bear fruits. They would often discuss, 'How can God be just when he fulfils all the desires of selfish and decadent people but does not answer even a small prayer from us? This only is the destiny of a devotee. No reward even after a lifetime of devotion. Even the decadents are better than us, but maybe this is God's will, otherwise would we not have even a little of His grace? All that a man must achieve in his life is readily available to devotees, though we have got nothing. And what to speak of our salvation? If such a trivial wish has not been granted, how can we speak of salvation?'

Pandit Bairang Nath would explain to his wife 'Who can know God's will?

... Panditji would explain to his wife, 'Who can know God's will? What if our deliverance lies in not having a child? Whenever His beneficence comes, we will get all of it—faith, child, wealth, salvation. The only duty of a devotee is to offer all that he has at the Lord's feet. Without intelligence, can we ever know what is good for us and what not?' Though Vindhyeshwari would fall silent upon hearing this sermon, her heart was not satisfied and even Panditji could not say these things with a clear conscience. Even his heart would become restless for want of a son but he did not want to express his pain openly.

A trader of the bania caste lived in Panditji's neighbourhood. The houses even shared a wall, in which the bania had carved out a window. Sometimes the two women would chat through the window. The bania's wife, the *baniayin*, had many children. The bania was a moneylender and also ran a cloth shop. Both extracted excessive and exacting interest rates. The baniayin herself had loaned some money and charged an interest of one anna per rupee. Only a rare fortunate beggar could ever get alms from them, otherwise their standard retort was something like that they were busy and the beggar should come some other time. The beggars would curse and leave. Because of the shared wall, the conversations in the bania's house could sometimes be heard on the other side too, particularly because the bania's wife spoke very loudly.

One night, when Vindhyeshwari was lying in the courtyard after they had had dinner and Panditji was reading the newspaper, the bania returned home after having shut his shop for the day. His wife asked, 'How were the sales today?'

The bania replied, 'Kept swatting flies all day. There was not even a single sale.'

The baniayin lamented, 'I wonder whose cursed face did I see the first thing in the morning that here too mistakenly I overturned a pot of oil. All the oil was spoilt.'

The husband inquired, 'Did you see the face of the pandit's wife?'

'*Haan*, now I remember. I peeped through the window right after waking up and caught sight of her taking a bath.'

'I too saw the pandit's face. When I was leaving for my bath, I saw him brushing his teeth.'

The baniayin came up with a solution. 'From now on, I won't open the window until the day is well advanced.'

The nocturnal silence is usually deeper than when it is quiet otherwise.



Whether this was the cause or the two deliberately talked loudly to allow the Brahmins to hear them, it cannot be said with certainty. Yet, what was clear was that the conversation could be heard clearly and they heard it. Vindhreshwari looked at her husband with sorrowful eyes and then lowered her head. Panditji let out a cold sigh and putting the newspaper aside, began staring at the sky. His devotion and faith had never been tested so grimly.

After some time, Vindhreshwari said, 'We should look for another house.'

Bajrang Nath said, 'Haan, tomorrow.'

They moved to another house the very next day. But the hurt caused by the Bania's words could not be assuaged. The fire in the heart that had been smouldering under the surface so far, now burst out vigorously, and its flames were now scalding the high traditional values on which they had founded their lives. They were losing faith in religion, devotion and righteousness. A religious life now appeared only a sham to them.

It was evening. Placing the hundred and fifty rupees of his monthly salary in the hands of his wife, Pandit Bajrang Nath said, 'It's not late yet. Let me go for a stroll and on the way I will pay the five rupees to the gaushala, and the donation to the school too.'

Putting away the money in a box, Vindhreshwari replied, 'I won't give any money to anybody now. What's the point? Are we strangers to the indulgence of dress and dine that other people are used to? Just send thirty rupees home, the rest will be for our household expenses. Tomorrow, you must look for and hire a Kahar, a palanquin-bearer. We have spent half our lifetime in these austerities and yet we haven't had any reward. We would have been happier if we had filled our bellies and dressed our bodies. Why should we stake our lives for others? The world belongs to God and He anyway takes care of it. Why should we suppress our desires?'

Laughing, Bajrang replied, 'Come on. Let me go and make the donations. People will talk if I don't.'

Vindhreshwari refused to budge. 'If the world isn't scared of what others say, why should we be? Some get all the pleasures while we get none!'

The same thought had sprouted in Bajrang's mind too. Nevertheless, he tried once more to pacify her, failing which he went out with two rupees to purchase hybrid mangoes.

That day onwards, the two served only themselves. Their food turned grand

and the clothing beautiful. A hundred rupees are anyway not too much. All of it was spent on luxuries like dining and dressing. Earlier, their charity was fed by their frugality. Once they became indulgent, even the entire month's salary was not enough.

Strange are the ways of God. Merely one year after the change in their lifestyle, Vindhyeshwari gave birth to a boy. There was music and joyous celebration and preparations for a grand feast.

After twelve days, came the occasion of the boy's *barahi*. The *domni* women were singing inside and Panditji's friends were assembled in the courtyard. Relatives and acquaintances were invited and a tent was erected, where a high-pitched *malhar* was being sung. On another side, a feast was being prepared. Seeing this joyous celebration, Vindhyeshwari was beside herself with happiness. She would repeatedly look at the newborn's face and kiss him and beam with joy and tell him, 'My son! You have made me proud. Now who can have the audacity to taunt me?' The Bania, who had used painful and abusive words for Vindhyeshwari, had also been invited. The baniayin sat disinterestedly, and Vindhyeshwari's mother-in-law who had come prepared for the celebrations was repeatedly taunting her. Vindhyeshwari was waiting impatiently for the celebrations to conclude—so that the father could see the child for the first time—thinking that the father's eyes would light up and he would swell with pride when he would pick up the baby in his arms.

It was eleven at night. The gathering had dispersed and the guests had left. The servants and helpers now got their turn at savouring the food after finishing all the chores. Bajrang was getting impatient to see the boy. He came inside the house after bidding farewell to the guests. Vindhyeshwari was ready after having had a bath and her face beamed like a freshly blooming lotus. The moment Bajrang entered the house, she said smilingly, 'Congratulations for the child!' and put the baby into the father's lap. All the riches of the world would not have made him this happy. What a captivating picture! So enchanting as if it was painted by the gods themselves! His eyes brightened as he looked at the pleasing countenance of the child. His breast swelled with pride and emotion as he embraced him.

Vindhyeshwari demanded, 'I will surely take a big gift from you.'

'May God bless the child with a long life. Let this be my dearest gift to you.'

Talking this way, both fell asleep. The day had been tiring and but after a

Talking this way, Dhanu fell asleep. The day had been tiring and but after a short while Bajrang Nath was startled out of sleep by a dream in which some holy man stood by the boy and was saying, 'So finally your wish has been fulfilled, but this is the fruit of your greed and you are so happy about it! The fruit of devotion to God is much sweeter than this. You have exchanged gold for iron.' After saying this, the holy man vanished.

The quietness of the night was spread all around. The lamp was still lit and the boy was sleeping as if he himself was the glowing flame of someone's heart, though the words from the dream were still echoing in Bajrang Nath's ears. Looking at the boy's face, he said to himself, 'Is it possible that there is something greater than this? Now I know. If the fruit of greed is this pleasant, surely the reward for devotion to God must be greater.'

He immediately walked out of the house. He looked at the child with extreme anguish and then strode towards the forest. Nobody ever heard from him again.

*Translated from the Urdu by Vikas Jain*



## The Flame of Love

### 1

Buti had turned quite caustic in her temperament ever since the death of her husband. At times of excessive heartburn, she cursed her dead husband, ‘You yourself left for the other world but left behind these worries for me! Why did you marry if you had to go away so early? No money in the house but you wanted to marry!’ She could have remarried if she had wanted to. *Ahirs*, the cow herders, do have this tradition, and not that she was ugly to look at. Two men were ready to marry her but she could not overcome the desire of being known as a devoted wife. And all this frustration was vented out on Mohan, her elder son, who was now sixteen. Sohan was still a child and Maina a girl. These two were not good for anything as yet. If only the three children were not there, she would not have to bear this agony. She could have worked for and lived with anybody, and could have gone away with anyone at will. But if she did that now, people would talk. They would taunt her and question the sanity of this mother of three. Mohan, for sure, tried his best to help her. He did all the work, tending to and feeding the cows and buffaloes, and milking them, but none of this made Buti happy. She sought out some or the other issue every day to fight over, and by and by, even Mohan stopped paying much attention to her tantrums. Her recurring complaint was why the husband had to die, burdening her with the responsibilities of the family. His death felt utterly devastating to her! She could not enjoy the pleasures of good food and good clothes, nor of anything else. It was as if she had been thrown into a pit of fire! There was a constant struggle between her desire for the glory of widowhood and the insatiable thirst for

worldly pleasures. This fire within her had incinerated all the kinder feelings of her heart. If nothing, the husband had left behind jewellery worth some four or five hundred rupees, but now even that had been exhausted. In her own neighbourhood and in her own community, there were many women, women even older than her, who wore jewellery, kohl and a thick line of vermilion in the parting of their hair, as if taunting her deprivation, which is why whenever any of them became a widow, Buti would rejoice, and all her frustrations and jealousies were vented on her children, especially Mohan. She probably wanted to see all the women in the world in her own image. She derived a special pleasure out of hate. In the absence of water, even a drop of dew would have satiated her frustrated thirst. How, then, could it be possible for her to hear any gossip about Mohan and not make a scene out of it? In the evening, the moment Mohan returned after having sold the milk, Buti lashed out, 'I see, you are intent on becoming a lover boy.'

Mohan looked at her questioningly. 'What lover boy? What's the matter?'

She vented, 'Don't you dally with Rupiya on the sly? And then you say what lover boy? Aren't you ashamed? Here we are strained for every paisa but you still lavish her with betel leaves and get her clothes dyed!'

Mohan assumed a rebellious posture. 'What could I do if she asked me for betel leaves worth a few paise? Ask her to pay? Could I charge her if she gave me her sari for dyeing?'

She continued to argue, 'Are you the only rich man in this village? Why could she not ask anyone else?'

'That she would know. How can I tell?'

'You want to play the *chhaila*, the Casanova! Have you ever got home a betel leaf worth even a paisa?'

'Who would I get the betel leaves here for?'

'Why? Has everybody died in your own family?'

'I wasn't aware you wanted to chew betel leaves.'

'Why? Is Rupiya the only one in the whole wide world to eat a betel leaf?'

Now Mohan turned cruel. 'Such hobbies look decent only at a particular age.'

This remark singed Buti. Calling her an old woman was tantamount to disregarding her whole penance. What is the merit of such penance in old age? What a jolt to the imagined sacrifices which made her walk around other women with her head held high! She ruined her youth only for these children! It had

with her head held high. She raised her youth only for these children. It had been five years since her husband had died. She was in the prime of her youth then. God had burdened her with three children. After all, she was not really advanced in her years. If she had wanted to, she could have also strutted around with glossed lips, heels dyed with Rose Bengal and toes decorated with jewellery. She sacrificed all of it only for the children and today Mohan had the audacity to call her an old woman! Compared to her, that Rupiya would surely look like a shrivelled mouse. Even so, Mohan thought her young and Buti old.

Buti continued, 'Right! What else! Surely now I must only wear tatters. When your father died, I was just a few years older than Rupiya. If I had remarried then, you people would have been ruined. You would have been begging then. Anyway, let me make it clear that if you speak to her again, then only one of us will live here any more. Either you or I!'

Mohan now spoke diffidently, 'I have given her my word, Amma.'

'What word?

'Of engagement.'

Buti could not stand this. She warned, 'I will chase her out with a broom if she even steps into this house. It's all her mother's evil magic. That bitch wants to snatch away my boy from me. That whore can't stand it that I have some things to me. She wants to plant another woman in my house!'

Mohan replied in a pained voice, 'Amma, for God's sake, keep quiet. Why should you yourself throw away your dignity? I only thought that Maina will soon get married and go away. This will leave you alone. Which is why I thought of Rupiya. But if you don't like it, then let it be.'

'Today onwards, you must sleep here itself in the courtyard.'

'And leave the cattle outside?'

'Let them be. They won't get stolen.'

'You suspect me so much?'

'Yes!'

'Then I won't sleep here.'

'Then get out of my house.'

'All right, I will leave if that is what you want,' declared Mohan.

That night Maina cooked dinner, but Mohan declined to eat saying he was not hungry. Buti did not bother to placate him. Mohan's adolescent heart could in no way tolerate her draconian ways. He was thinking that she could have her house

to herself and he would find other means for himself. Rupiya had infused his mundane and insipid life with a certain joy. When he was getting giddy with an unexpressed desire and felt his life to be gloomy and forlorn, Rupiya had walked into his life like the first breeze of spring and infused new life into him. Mohan experienced a new sweetness in life. Even while tending to a chore, he would only think of Rupiya, and try to think of gifts that would please her. But how could he face her now? Could he tell her that his mother had forbidden him from meeting her? It was only yesterday that they had exchanged sweet nothings under the banyan tree. Mohan had told her, 'How beautiful you are, Rupa! There must be hundreds of men after you. What can I provide for you in my house?' Rupiya's reply to this question still echoes through the depth of his soul, like notes of music. She had said, 'I love you, Mohan, only you. Even if you become the district headman, you will be the same for me. If a labourer, then too you will be the same.' To the same Rupiya, could he today say this, 'Now I have nothing to give you'?

No, this could be done. He did not care for the family. He could stay with Rupiya, away from his mother. If not in this locality, then somewhere else. He was thinking, *Even at this moment, Rupiya must be waiting for me. How nicely she prepares the betel leaf! If Amma gets to know that I have been to Rupiya's house at night, she might even kill herself. Let her kill herself! She should rather thank her stars for getting such a nice daughter-in-law. Wonder why she is so piqued with Rupiya. Just because she chews some betel nut, and wears her sari dyed?*

The clank of bangles was heard from somewhere nearby. It must be Rupiya.

She approached his bedside to check on him. 'Have you slept, Mohan? I have been waiting for you. Why didn't you come?'

Mohan kept pretending he was asleep.

She petted his head and called again, 'Have you slept, Mohan?'

Who could know what magic was there in those gentle fingers. It made Mohan delirious, down to his very soul. It wanted to fly out of his body and surrender itself at Rupiya's feet. A goddess had appeared to grant boons. The universe seemed to be dancing. He felt a sensation as if his entire body had etherized and he was dancing with the universe clinging to his lap like some sweet musical note.

Rupiya repeated, 'Slept already? Have you?'

Mohan said, '*Haan*, I had dozed off for a bit. What have you come for at this hour? Amma will kill me if she sees you.'

'Why didn't you come today?'

'I fought with Amma today.'

'What did she say?'

'She said that she will kill herself if I meet you.'

'Didn't you ask her why she is so piqued with me?'

'What can I say about her, Rupa. She can't stand anybody's enjoyment of food and dress. You should now stay away from me.'

'My heart won't allow that.'

'If you speak like this, I will run away with you.'

'All I want from you is to meet me at least once every day. Nothing more.'

'And what if Amma reprimands me for it?'

'I get it. You don't love me.'

'If I had my way, I would have you for all my life.'

Just then somebody came at the door. Rupiya ran away.

Next day when Mohan woke up, he felt within himself an ocean of pleasure and peace. Earlier, he would only scold Sohan, who was a lazy person and did not take interest in any work at home. Today as well, he was looking for an opportunity to slip away with a bar of soap hidden in his dhoti.

Today, Mohan smiled and said to him, 'Has your dhoti become too dirty, Sohan? Why don't you give it to the washerman?'

Sohan smelt the fragrance of love in these words.

'The washerman's wife demands money.'

'Then why don't you ask Amma for the money?'

'When has Amma given any money?'

'Then take it from me!'

Saying this, he tossed a one-paisa coin towards Sohan, which made Sohan very happy. He was always reproached by his mother and brother. Today, after a long time he tasted the sweetness of love. He picked up the coin and leaving the dhoti behind, he untethered the cow and made to go out with her.

Mohan said, 'Let her be. I will take her out today.'

Handing over the tether to his brother, Sohan asked, 'Should I fill up your pipe?'

For the first time in his life, Sohan expressed such amity for his brother



For the first time in his life, Sonam expressed such amity for his brother. Mohan could not decipher the secret behind this, but said, 'If there is fire available, then do.'

Maina, her hair untied, was building a doll's house in the courtyard. When she saw Mohan, she at once broke the house, covered her hair with the fringe of her scarf and started cleaning the utensils in the kitchen.

Mohan asked her, 'What game were you playing, Maina?'

Scared, Maina replied, 'Why? Nothing at all.'

'You make very good houses. Make one so that I can see.'

All of a sudden, Maina's sad face brightened up. How magical are the words of love! They spread a fragrance the moment they escape from the lips. They lighten up the heart of anyone who hears them. It drives away fear, and ushers in trust. It clears away bitterness to replace it with amity. It makes everything lively. No sloth, no glumness. Today, Mohan's heart was full of love and it was spreading its fragrance all around.

Maina went back to building her dollhouse.

Mohan, trying to untangle her hair, said, 'When are you getting your doll married? Invite me, so I can eat some sweets!'

Maina's happiness knew no bounds. She decided that from then on, whenever Mohan would ask for water, she would rub the tumbler with a lot of ash and clean it thoroughly.

'Amma refuses to give me any money. I have decided on a groom-doll but how do I send the proposal?'

Mohan inquired, 'How much will you need?'

'One paisa for the sweets and another for the colour. That should be enough to dye the couple's dress!'

'So two paise will be enough for you?'

'Then give me two paise, bhaiya. I will organize a grand wedding for my doll.'

Mohan took out the money in his hand and showed it to Maina. She lunged for it but Mohan raised his hand playfully. Maina caught hold of his hand and tried to pull it down. This was too much for Mohan to stand, who now picked up his sister in his arms. Maina took the money and danced around in joy. Then she ran out to invite her friends for the doll's wedding.

Just then Buti showed up with a pile of cow dung. Seeing Mohan idling

around, she said sternly, ‘You are still having fun. When will you milk the buffalo?’

Today, Mohan did not respond to her rebelliously, as if a spring of sweetness had sprung up in his heart. Seeing the mother burdened by the pile of cow dung, he took it off her head.

Buti said, ‘Let it be, let it be. Go milk the buffalo. I will take away the cow dung.’

But Mohan said, ‘Why should you carry so much weight? Why don’t you call me for these chores?’

This made the mother’s heart jump with affection and tenderness.

She chided him, ‘You go and tend to your own work. Why are you always after me?’

‘Picking up the cow dung is my job, not yours.’

‘And who will do the milking?’

‘I will do that too.’

‘Are you such a strong man to take on all the work?’

‘I will do whatever I take on.’

‘Then what will I do?’

‘You make your sons work. That is your only duty.’

‘Like anyone listens to me!’

## 2

Today, on his way back home from the market after delivering milk, Mohan bought some betel leaf, betel nuts, some catechu, a small case for the betel leaves and some sweetmeats. Buti scolded him, ‘Did you find money just lying around somewhere? How long can we make do if you waste money like this?’

‘I didn’t waste any money, Amma. Only that earlier I thought that you didn’t chew betel leaf.’

‘So now I will chew betel leaves?’

Mohan said endearingly, ‘Sure. Why not? One who has two grown-up sons, can she not indulge even in this much of a hobby?’

Some greenery sprouted somewhere in the dry hard landscape that Buti’s heart had become. It was just a tender sapling but it contained within itself a sea of life giving nourishment. She gave a sweetmeat each to Maine and Sehan, and

of life-giving nourishment. She gave a sweetmeat each to Maina and Sohan, and proceeded to give another to Mohan.

He tried declining the sweet, saying, 'The sweets were meant for the children, Amma.'

But she objected, 'And you think you have grown old, right?'

'Compared to these children, I am surely old.'

'But you are still a child for me.'

Mohan now accepted the sweet. Maina had instantly gobbled up her share. That piece had barely sweetened her tongue before going down the throat. She was now greedily eyeing Mohan's share. He broke the laddu into two and gave one half to her. Between Mohan and his mother, there was still one more left. Buti offered it to Sohan, saying, 'You got so little of the sweetmeats. Now take this.'

Mohan ate half the laddu and said, 'This is your share, Amma.'

She replied, 'The pleasure I get when I see you eat is sweeter than the sweetness of this sweetmeat.'

She gave away half the sweet to Mohan and half to Sohan. She then opened the betel leaf case. She was experiencing this good fortune for the first time in her life. What great fortune to have something when the son was the man of the house, when it could not be had when her husband ruled it! There were several compartments in the case, along with two small spoons, with a handle on the cover to carry it around anywhere. The plate on the upside will be used to keep the betel leaves. The moment Mohan left the house, she washed and cleaned the case thoroughly and then filled it up with ingredients like lime, catechu, betel nuts and leaves. Then she prepared one betel leaf with all the required ingredients for herself. The juices from the leaf flowing into her throat washed away the bitterness of widowhood. Just as a jolly heart shows itself through compassionate behaviour, she could not restrain herself from going out. Her heart was not deep enough to hide a great pleasure like this. In an old mirror, she looked at herself. She noticed her lips were not red, but then reminded herself that she was not chewing the betel leaf to gloss her lips.

Dhaniya, a neighbour, came in to ask for a rope., 'Kaki, just lend me the rope. Mine has snapped.'

Had it been just yesterday, Buti would have refused, saying her rope was not meant for use by the entire village and Dhaniya should have her broken rope

mended. Today, she happily and smilingly gave away the rope to Dhaniya and asked endearingly, 'Have your son's loose motions stopped or not, Dhaniya?'

Dhaniya replied with a heavy heart, 'No, Kaki, the motions have been loose the entire day. He is probably teething.'

'Be done with water drawing and then I will go along to see if he is teething or is it some other problem. Has someone cast an evil eye on him?'

Dhaniya expressed helplessness. 'How can I tell, Kaki? Who knows who has the cursed eye!'

'Restless and playful boys are always at such risk.'

'He goes to whoever calls him lovingly, and then how he laughs!'

'Sometimes even the mother's eye is not good for the child.'

'What are you saying, Kaki, why will anyone cast an evil eye on her own son?'

'You don't understand this. Sometimes, the eye is cast on its own.'

After Dhaniya had drawn water from the well, Buti went along with her to see the baby.

'You are alone! You must be terribly troubled by all the chores?'

'No, Kaki. Rupiya comes over and does some chores. I would have died doing all of it all by myself.'

Buti was surprised. She had only thought of Rupiya as a flippant girl.

'Rupiya!'

'Haan, Kaki. She is a very simple girl. She sweeps the house, cooks and washes, and even looks after the baby. Otherwise, Kaki, who asks after anybody during strained times?'

'But does she find any time. what with all her decking up?'

Dhaniya tried to explain, 'That is an individual's interest, Kaki. Not even any devotee of God gave me as much help as this decked-up girl has helped me. She stayed up all night. Not that I rewarded her with anything. But, yes, I will sing her praises as long as I live.'

Buti was not convinced. 'You don't know her, Dhaniya. Where do you think the money for the betel leaves comes from? How does she have saris with bright borders?'

Dhaniya was not having any of it. She said, 'That is not for me to get into, Kaki. And who doesn't like to wear good clothes and do some make-up? This is the age for her to enjoy these things.'

Thus talking, they reached Dhaniya's house. In the courtyard, Rupiya was tending to the baby, patting him gently. The baby had fallen asleep.

Dhaniya laid down the baby on the bed. Buti touched the baby's forehead, and then gently pressed his belly with her finger. She instructed Dhaniya to apply a paste of asafoetida on the navel. Rupiya took up the fan and started fanning the child.

Buti said, 'Come, give the fan to me.'

'It will not hurt me to fan the baby.'

'You work here and do the chores all day. You must be tired.'

Rupiya now praised her, saying, 'You are such a nice person, the opposite of what people say—that you can only talk in abuses. I was so scared, I never came to see you.'

Buti smiled and said, 'They are not lying.'

But Rupiya refused to believe her. 'Should I believe in what people say or what I have seen with my own eyes?'

Today as well, Rupiya had kohl in her eyes, had chewed a betel leaf, and was wearing a colourful sari. Today, Buti realized that this bloom was not just colourful but was fragrant too. The hatred that she had borne in her heart for Rupiya was now washed away as if by a divine pronouncement. She was thinking, 'What a gentle girl she is, how modest! How sweetly she speaks! Girls these days do not care for their own children, let alone tending to others' children, and here she stayed awake the entire night caring for Dhaniya's son! Mohan must have surely told her about the altercation. Had it been any other girl, she would have turned away from me, taunted me or thrown a tantrum! And this girl acts as if she knows nothing. It is also possible Mohan might not have told her anything. Yes, that's how it is.'

Today, Buti found Rupiya very beautiful. There was nothing wrong in her wanting to be beautiful. If not at this age, then when? Decking and make-up generally felt bad because such people were only busy in indulging themselves, and would not bother to help even if somebody's house was on fire. Their only job was to seduce others, as if they had set up a beauty shop, and call out to passers-by to inspect their wares. But such ornamentation was not objectionable in charitable people like Rupiya. In fact, it suited them. It showed that they were as beautiful inside as they were on the outside, and anyway, who does not want

to be praised for their beauty? Who does not have the desire to appear handsome to others' eyes? Even Buti, who was long past her prime, nursed this desire. How her heart beamed with joy when somebody looked at her even with a remotely amorous eye! She then found it difficult to keep herself grounded. Compared to all this, Rupa's youth qualified her for all this.

That day onwards, Rupa started visiting Buti's house at least once or twice every day. Buti requested Mohan and got her a nice sari. Now if Rupa ever showed up without kohl in her eyes or wearing a plain sari, Buti admonished her, saying, 'This plain nun-like attire is not fit for young women. It is meant for old hags like me.'

One day, Rupa replied, 'How are you old, Amma? Only a mere gesture from you will have men flocking to you like bumblebees. My father is capable of planting himself at your door. He won't even budge.'

With mock opprobrium, Buti said, 'Right! As if I can be a co-wife to your mother.'

'My mother is anyway old now.'

'And you think your father is young!'

'Of course, he is made of sterner stuff.'

Buti looked at her with beseeching eyes and said, 'Okay, tell me, should I get you married to Mohan?'

Rupa blushed, her face glowing red like a rose.

Later, when Mohan returned home after selling milk, Buti told him, 'Save some money. I am thinking about you and Rupa.'

*Translated from the Hindi by Vikas Jain*



## The Prisoner

### 1

Ivan Okhotsk came out of prison after enduring constant physical and mental suffering for fourteen years. He was not like the bird that emerges wingless from the hunter's cage, but rather a lion made more furious and bloodthirsty after being kept confined within a narrow enclosure. A flame was burning in his heart that had scalded his strong physique, his shapely limbs and his aching desires. Every pore of his body was like an ember—hungry, restless and rebellious.

The jailor weighed him. When he had entered the jail he was 110 kilograms, now he weighed only 45.

The jailor said with sympathy, 'You've become weak, Ivan. Avoid any irregularities which might be fatal for you.' Ivan looked at his ribcage triumphantly, felt something like lightning coursing through his veins, and said, 'Who says I've grown weak?'

'You can see for yourself.'

'Jailor, as long as the flame burns inside, Ivan won't die. Not in a hundred years. Mark my words.'

Ivan was known to say such outlandish things, so the jailor didn't pay much attention to his bravado. Everybody considered him half-mad. After some formalities were conducted, his clothes and books were brought to him. All his suits had become outsized. There were several banknotes in the pockets of his jacket—many roubles in cash. He gave them away to the warders and attendants. It was as though he had suddenly become the head of a state.

The jailor said, 'You can't do this, Ivan! You can't bribe government

officials.'

Ivan laughed like a sage. 'This isn't a bribe, Mr Jailor. Why should I offer them bribes now? What can they give me now even if they're pleased with me, and what harm can they do if they're displeased? This is to express my gratitude for all the little acts of kindness they showed me without which I couldn't have spent even fourteen hours in this jail, let alone fourteen years!'

When he emerged from the jail's gate, the jailor and other officials accompanied him up to his motorcar.

## 2

Fifteen years earlier, Ivan was the bright star of a rich and aristocratic family. He had acquired higher education, and was a sportsman and a fearless youth. He was generous and good-hearted. His heart was pure like transparent glass and he was truly courteous. He would lay down his life for the poor. Faced with challenges, his courage turned into a naked sword. There was a girl by the name of Helen who studied with him. All the boys of the school were in love with her and were ready to die for her. She was stunningly beautiful and intelligent, but of an imaginative temperament. She liked to keep her secrets close to her heart. It was difficult to say why she was drawn to Ivan. There were no apparent similarities between them. Ivan liked to travel and drink while Helen was fond of poetry, music and dance. Ivan spent money with both hands while Helen was miserly. The lecture hall seemed a prison to Ivan but for Helen it was a natural habitat. However, their contrasting temperaments drew them close to each other, and they fell deeply in love.

Ivan proposed to her and she accepted. Both were married at an auspicious moment and were planning to go to the mountains for their honeymoon when they became embroiled in the political turmoil raging in Russia. Helen had already been a nationalist; Ivan became one as well. He was from the nobility, hence to take the side of the serfs was a deep commitment for him. Thus, whenever he felt dispirited in this struggle, Helen stood by him and encouraged him. Her love and courage helped him overcome his despair and made him ashamed of his weaknesses.

At that time, a new governor was appointed for Ukraine whose name was Romanov. He was an autocrat, a mortal enemy of the nationalists. He wouldn't



ROMANOV. HE was an autocrat, a mortal enemy of the nationalists. HE wouldn't rest till he had sent a couple of nationalists to jail every day. Soon, he brought down the charge of sedition against several editors and got them deported to Siberia, and disbanded peasant assemblies and the municipal council. When the common people assembled in protest, he got the police to shoot at the crowd, which led to the death of several innocent protesters. The entire city was in mourning. People were afraid to come out of their houses because the police were frisking and beating whoever they got hold of.

Helen was agitated. 'This injustice can't go on, Ivan. There must be some way out.'

Ivan looked at her questioningly. 'Way out! What can we do?'

Helen was incensed by his lack of enthusiasm. 'You're asking what we can do? Let me tell you, we can do anything. I'll put an end to his life with my own hands.'

Ivan looked at her with open-eyed wonder. 'You think it is so easy to kill him? He never comes out in an open car. There's a convoy of armed guards that travels with him. He travels in a reserved coach by train. The task seems quite impossible to me. Absolutely impossible.'

For the next few minutes Helen was silent, absorbed in the preparation of tea. Then she placed two cups of tea on the table and began to sip from one of them, lost in thought. Suddenly, she put the cup back on the table, opened her big eyes wide, and said zestfully, 'Despite all this I can kill him. Once you're ready to risk your life, you can achieve any goal. Do you know what I'll do? I'll establish a rapport with him and give him the impression that I'm in love with him. However heartless a person is, in some corner of his mind there's bound to be a desire for love. Well, I think Romanov's oppressive policies might be a result of his frustration in love. Having failed to win the heart of some lady his own heart may have turned into stone. The flame of love must be ignited in his heart and a sweet word or smile from a lady will work wonders. She will make him fall at her feet in no time. It's far more difficult to entice seasoned customers like you. If you accept the fact that I'm not without beauty, I assure you I'll be successful in my task. Now tell me if I'm a beautiful woman or not.'

She looked at Ivan from the corner of her eye. Ivan was bewitched by her sidelong glance.

'You're asking me this question, Helen? For me you're the world's—'

Helen cut him off mid-sentence. 'You're a fool, Ivan, if you think so. There are girls in the city, even in this school, who are far more beautiful than me. Of course, you can say that I'm not ugly. Do you think I consider you the most handsome youth in the world? Not by any means. I can name not one but a hundred young men who are more handsome than you. But there's something special in you that I don't see in anyone else. Now listen to my plan. It'll take a month for me to get close to him. After that he'll start going out with me. Then one evening he and I will go to the park and sit on the bench near the pool. At that moment you'll arrive there with a revolver and make short work of him.'

Now, being the son of an aristocrat, Ivan's heart didn't lie in revolutionary politics. Of course, he had developed some sympathy for it because of Helen. But it was not very deep. He didn't raise any objection to her plan but he seemed to have his reservations. 'Just think, Helen, is it a humane act to kill somebody just like that?'

Helen replied tersely, 'Should we behave humanely with a person who doesn't treat others as human beings? Isn't it as clear as daylight that hundreds of families have been destroyed because of him? Who knows how many innocents have died at his hands so far? It's against reason to show any compassion for such a person. I don't know why you appear to be so disinterested. My blood begins to boil when I observe his evil deeds. To tell you the truth, when his carriage passes by, every pore in my body cries out for revenge. If someone were to skin him alive, I won't feel the slightest sympathy for him. Well, if you don't have the courage then forget about it. I'll manage everything myself. Just watch how I send that cur to hell!'

Helen's face turned red with the strength of emotion. Embarrassed, Ivan said, 'Oh no, Helen. Don't misunderstand me. I didn't mean that I won't help you in this task. Today I realize how much your heart bleeds for your country. But I must warn you that the task is not as easy as you're making it out to be. We must proceed with utmost caution.'

Helen placed her hand on his shoulder and said, 'Don't worry about that, Ivan. I'm about to risk the most precious object of my life. I *will* exercise utmost caution. But I've one request: if in the process I do anything that offends you, please forgive me.'

Ivan stared at Helen's face. He didn't quite understand what she meant.

Helen was scared lest Ivan raise some new objections. To reassure him she brought her face close to his lips and said, 'While pretending to be in love with him I'll have to offer him *certain* privileges to which only you have the right. I'm afraid you might begin to harbour suspicions about me.'

Ivan locked her in an embrace and said, 'That is impossible, Helen. Trust is the first step towards love.' But even as he said this his eyes were downcast. He was wondering whether he could stand by the ideal expressed in those generous words.

Three days later the drama began. She met Romanov with the complaint that the police chief was treating her as a suspect merely because she had refused his ugly overtures. It was true that she met some radical youths in the school, but she didn't keep any relationship with them outside the school. Romanov took himself to be cleverer than he really was. In his tenure of service for ten years he had never met such a lady who trusted him so much as to surrender herself to his mercy. For a moment he lost his sense of judgement. He was congratulating himself on ferreting out such facts about the radical youths, which the police chief could not manage to do despite his best efforts. However, he didn't stop to think that some of these facts could be untrue. In the span of half an hour, a young woman had been successful in making an experienced officer intoxicated by her beauty.

When Helen got up to leave, Romanov said, 'I hope this won't be our last meeting.'

Helen held out her hand and said, 'I'm grateful to your lordship for listening to me with such courtesy.'

'Please take your afternoon tea here with me tomorrow.'

They began to meet often. Helen discussed with Ivan whatever transpired in those meetings. She felt that Romanov was not as bad as he was made out to be. He was courteous and humble, a connoisseur of music and the arts. Helen became close to him in a couple of days, and through some unseen measures, the police atrocities in the city began to lessen.

Finally, the decisive moment arrived. Ivan and Helen pondered over this question throughout the day. Ivan felt restless. Sometimes he laughed without reason, sometimes he broke into tears. Fear, the waiting and some unknown anxiety had totally upset his mental balance. His mind was in turmoil. Helen too was thoughtful and anxious. She had got an especially luxurious dress made for

was thoughtful and anxious. She had got an especially luxurious dress made for herself for this day. She intended to use all possible resources to enhance her beauty. But she lacked the enthusiasm of a warrior; instead she felt tremulous like a coward.

Suddenly, Ivan said in a tearful voice, 'Today you're looking so bewitching that I don't know why I feel scared of you.'

Helen smiled. But the smile was suffused with pity. 'Sometimes human beings have to perform undesirable tasks, Ivan. Today I'm going to use nectar for poison. Can there be a more inappropriate use of such a valuable object?'

Ivan replied absent-mindedly, 'This is our national life!'

'National life? It's a veritable hell.'

'But the world will need it for some more time.'

'The sooner this system changes, the better.'

Ivan seemed convinced by this argument. He said hotly, 'If the oppressors are allowed to thrive, they'll fill the world with so many thorns that you won't be able to put your feet anywhere.'

Helen didn't reply. But the exhaustion that had overwhelmed her was visible on her face. For her, the nation was above everything; the individual was of no consequence. If her heart was getting weak for some reason, she had no courage to open it up.

The two embraced each other and parted. Who knew whether they were meeting for the last time. Their hearts were heavy and their eyes moist.

Ivan said with enthusiasm, 'I'll be there at the exact moment.'

Helen did not respond.

Ivan requested her, 'Please pray to God for me, Helen.'

Helen said tearfully, 'I don't trust God.'

'But I do.'

'Since when?'

'Since death has stood right before me.'

He left in a huff. It was dusk. His time of reckoning would come two hours later, and he was terribly nervous. He wanted to sit somewhere alone and mull over it. He realized today that he was not free. Strong fetters had chained each part of his body. How was he going to break them?

It was ten in the night. Helen and Romanov were sitting on a bench in the park. A strong, icy wind was blowing. Hidden in the clouds, the moon seemed

like a faint ray of hope.

Helen looked around her fearfully and said, 'It's quite late. We should make a move.'

Romanov stretched out his legs on the bench and said, 'It's not too late, Helen. I can't say whether these moments are a dream or a reality. Even if it's reality, it feels sweeter than a dream; and if it's a dream, it's brighter than the truth.'

Helen stood up restlessly, held Romanov's hand, and said, 'My mind is in turmoil today. I've got a headache too. Come, drop me to my house.'

Romanov grabbed her hand, made her sit beside him, and said, 'But I've instructed the car to be here at eleven.'

Helen screamed out, 'Eleven!'

'Yes. It'll be eleven soon. Come, let's chat for a while longer. The night is like the black devil for me. It feels good as long as I can keep it away. Helen, I feel that you had come to me as a good angel on that day. Otherwise I could have committed many other atrocities. I'm myself surprised at the changes brought about by the liberal policies that I adopted. What I could not achieve for months through tyranny has been achieved by trust and reassurance. For this, Helen, I'm deeply indebted to you. What is regrettable is that our government knows only how to kill and not how to cure. The tsar's ministers have now grown suspicious of me and plans are afoot to shift me from here.'

Suddenly, there was a blinding ray of lightning accompanied by a gunshot. Romanov leaped forward and grabbed Ivan. He raised an alarm, 'Catch him! Murder! Run, Helen, run!'

There were several sentries in the park. They ran from all directions. Ivan fell to the ground. Out of the blue there arrived several troupes of the town police, armed guards, secret police and horse-borne police. Ivan was arrested.

Romanov shook hands with Helen and said suspiciously, 'He's the same youth who studied with you in school, isn't he?'

Helen said in an offended tone, 'That's right. But I didn't know he had become a revolutionary.'

'The bullet whizzed over my head.'

'Oh God!'

'I didn't give him the chance to fire a second time. I pity this youth, Helen. These wretched fellows think that they'll save the country by such

assassinations. Even if I had died, someone far more tyrannical could have taken my place. I'm not angry, sad or afraid, Helen. Don't worry at all. Come, let me drop you home.'

Throughout the journey, Romanov thanked himself and expressed his gratitude to God for being alive. Meanwhile, Helen was lost in thought.

The following day the case was presented to the court of the magistrate. Helen was the witness on behalf of the government. Ivan realized that his world had grown dark and he was being swallowed by a bottomless pit.

### 3

#### *Fourteen years later*

Ivan got down from the train to go and meet Helen. He had no thoughts for his own family. His parents had been on the verge of death due to his incarceration. But he didn't care. He had harboured an obsessive desire for revenge in his mind for fourteen years. He was not thirsty for Helen's blood, but a deep despair consumed him. He wanted to distil the agony that he had undergone in a couple of sentences, inject that poison into her veins and see her writhe in pain. That would appease his eyes.

What were these sentences? 'Helen, your betrayal of me is without parallel in the history of women's frailties. I had surrendered everything to your feet. I was a slave to your desires. It's you who incited me to kill Romanov and then you bore witness against me, just because you wanted to fulfil your own sexual appetite. There was no other evidence against me. Romanov and his policemen could not have implicated me with their false witnesses. But you betrayed me, solely to satiate your desire, to enjoy the illicit embrace of Romanov. Open your eyes and see that the same Ivan whom you had trodden under your feet is standing before you and is going to expose your duplicity. You had taken a vow to serve your country. You wanted to sacrifice your life for it. But you surrendered to your ugly propensities, and, forgetting your lofty ideals, became a slave to your sensual urges. You fell to the temptation of authority and affluence. Shame on your sensuality and your ugly and repulsive existence!'

It was dusk. The sun, after burning like a pyre through the day, had become cool and was gliding towards the western horizon. In Romanov's sprawling mansion people were making preparations to carry Helen's hearse to the graveyard. The city nobles were all present and Romanov was decorating the hearse with wreaths, drenching the flowers with his tears. Right at that moment Ivan appeared like a madman—dishevelled and rickety, looking like a skeleton. No one paid him any heed. People assumed he must be one of those beggars who appear from nowhere on such occasions.

When the city bishop finished the funeral rites, and hymns for a new life were sung, Ivan moved closer to the hearse and said in a voice choked with emotion, 'She's an evil woman. The prayers of all the pure souls of the world cannot save her from the fires of hell. She deserves to have her corpse—'

Several mourners ran and grabbed him. They held him by the scruff of his neck and were going to throw him out of the gate when Romanov came over and placed an arm on his shoulder. He took him aside and asked, 'Friend, are you Claudius Ivanov? Yes, you look the same. I remember your face. I know everything about you—every little detail. Helen didn't hide anything from me. Now that she's no longer in this world I can't do her any service by telling lies. You might strike her with weapons or words, but she will remain calm. Let me tell you that she remembered you till her last breath. Your memories always made her cry. Her most earnest desire was to be able to seek your forgiveness. Even at her moment of death she left the message to be conveyed to you that she had done you a grievous wrong and sought your forgiveness. Do you think that if she had stood before you in flesh and blood with tears of remorse streaming down her face your heart wouldn't have softened? Aren't you seeing in your imagination that she's standing before you as a suppliant even at this moment? Just go and see her smiling face, Mr Ivan. You'll feel a strong urge to kiss her. I won't feel jealous at all. Sleeping among the flowers, she's looking like a flower queen. If she had one desire left unfulfilled in her life, it's your forgiveness. A lover's heart is always generous, Ivan. It's like an ocean of kindness and forgiveness. You cannot overlook the wishes of the person you had once loved.'

He grabbed Ivan's hand and, ignoring the curious onlookers, brought him close to Helen's hearse. He lifted the lid of the coffin to reveal Helen's tranquil

face—calm, silent and still. Death had invested her image with a hallowed aura. It was as though the angels were welcoming her. Ivan's revengeful eyes were lit up with a heavenly glow. He remembered the day he had held her in an embrace for the first time and given away his heart to her. He felt that what he was witnessing before him was simply a dream. The reality was that he was holding her in a tight embrace. Wasn't he ready once again to go to jail for fourteen years for that joy! Weren't the best moments of his life those that he had spent with her, the memories of which he couldn't forget in fourteen years?

He sat down by the coffin and prayed to God in a voice quivering with reverence, 'Dear God, please grant your forgiveness to Helen, who is dearer to me than life.'

As he carried the coffin on his shoulders, he felt ashamed by the thought of his meanness and baser feelings, and when the coffin was lowered into the grave he kept sitting there, shedding tears. The following day when Romanov visited the grave to say his prayers, he saw Ivan's lifeless body, lying prostrate, as though offering prayers to God.

*Translated from the Hindi by M. Asaduddin*





## Idgah

### 1

Today, after a full thirty days of Ramadan, is Eid. How beautiful and bright is the morning of Eid, like a baby with his face bathed in smiles! The trees look lush green, the fields appear festive. Look at the sun! It looks more beautiful than usual, as if eager to wish Eid Mubarak to the people of the world on the occasion. The village is astir and everyone is making a beeline for the *idgah*. Someone finds a button missing from his shirt and is hurrying to his neighbour's house for thread and needle. Another person finds that the leather in his shoes has become hard and tries to soften it with water and oil. People are placing fodder before the bulls because by the time they return from the idgah, it would be noon. They would have to trudge on foot to reach the idgah, which is a good five miles from the village, and there will be hundreds of acquaintances to meet and exchange greetings with. It will be impossible for them to return before afternoon.

The boys are more excited than anyone else. Some keep their fast for only one day, and that too, for just half a day. Some do not even do that. But the pleasure of walking to the idgah is special to them. The fasting is for the elderly, while children just love the Eid celebrations. They have been waiting eagerly for it, and now it has finally come. They are impatient with their family members in a bid to make haste. They are least concerned about other worries. They have no idea why a distraught Abba is rushing to the house of Choudhury Qasim Ali, the village moneylender. Their pockets contain all the wealth of the world. They take out the coins frequently from their pockets, count them, show them off to

friends, and then put them back with a great sense of satisfaction. They will buy all the goodies of the world—toys, sweets, bugles and many other things—with these few coins. The happiest of them all is Hamid. He is an impoverished boy of four. His father died of the plague a year ago. Then his mother gradually became pale, with no one knowing what the ailment was, and finally died. She didn't have anyone to share her miseries with. She had to endure the suffering that befell her, and when she couldn't endure it any more, she just left the world.

Now Hamid sleeps in Granny Amina's lap and is very happy. He thinks his father has gone to a far-off place to earn money. He'll return with pots of money. And his mother has gone to Allah's house to get sweets for him. Hamid doesn't have any shoes on his feet, the cap on his head is an old and soiled one, its golden thread has turned black. But that does not dent his happiness in any way. He knows that when his Abbajaan returns with bagful of coins and Ammijaan returns from Allah with goodies, he will be able to fulfil his heart's desires. Then he will see how Mahmood and Mohsin, Noori and Sami can bring as many coins. The world might like to strike him with innumerable miseries, but his innocent gaze is enough to vanquish them all.

Hamid goes inside the shack and tells Amina, 'Don't worry about me, Amma. I'll stay with the people of the village. Have no fear.' But Amina isn't reassured. The children of the village are going to the idgah with their fathers. Will Hamid go all by himself? What if he gets lost in the crowd? No, she won't allow him to go alone. He's a child. If he walks three to five miles, won't he get blisters on his feet?

But if she accompanies him then who will prepare *sewaiyaan* at home? He'll return hungry and thirsty and won't be able to wait for her to cook. Amina feels sad that she doesn't have any money on her. She has saved up eight annas for Eid by sewing clothes for Fahiman, but she has to pay the milkmaid. She buys two paise worth of milk every day for Hamid. Now she is left with two annas only, out of which she has given three paise to Hamid. That brings her balance to five paise which are in her possession. Only Allah can see her through the day. The washerwoman . . . the cleaning woman . . . the barber woman . . . All will come. Everyone will expect *sewaiyaan*, and she can't avoid them. The festival comes once a year. May Allah keep everyone happy! Their fortunes are connected with hers. May Allah keep the child safe! This day, too, will pass.

The people from the village start out for the idgah. Hamid accompanies other

children. In their enthusiasm, the children run ahead of the others, then they stand under some tree for the others to catch up. Why do the oldies walk so slowly!

They reach the outskirts of the town. The orchards of the rich people are on both sides of the road, enclosed by walls on four sides. Mangoes are hanging from trees. Hamid picks up a stone and aims at a mango. The gardener comes out hurling curses. The children slink away from the spot, laughing to their heart's content. How they have made a fool of the gardener!

Then the big buildings appear—the court, the school, the club. Such a huge school! 'How many boys must be studying there! Not simply boys, but men with big moustaches. They have grown so big, yet no one knows how much longer they'll go on studying! Today's a holiday. But once when I came here I saw many boys with moustaches and beards playing in the field. There are two or three big boys in the village school too—absolutely worthless. They're shirkers. These boys, too, will be like that. Otherwise, why should they still study at school? Over there is the clubhouse where magic shows are held. People say that a man's head is separated from the torso and can be seen flying around. Then he's made senseless but gives out all secret facts that are asked of him. There's always a big spectacle being held there, and memsahibs play games. To tell you frankly, if you hand over what they call the 'bat' to my mother she won't be able to handle it and fall down on the ground herself.'

Mohsin says, 'My mother won't even be able to hold it. Her hands will begin to shake, I swear.'

Hamid counters him, 'What're you saying? She grinds bushels of grains with her hand, and can't hold a bat? She carries so many jars of water every day. Ask any memsahib to carry just one jar and she'll see the world darken before her eyes.'

Mohsin is not ready to give in so easily. 'But she's not accustomed to running, and can't jump about.'

'She can run if needed,' replies Hamid. 'Just the other day when your cow had snapped the tether and strayed into Choudhury's field it was your mother who ran to bring it back. How fast she had run! She had left both of us much behind.'

They move on. The shops of the sweet vendors are right before them, all so gaily decorated. Who eats all these sweets? Just see, every shop will have tons of

sweets. People say that a jinn visits every shop at night, buys all the sweets that are left and pays with real silver coins.

Mahmood is incredulous. 'Where will they find such real coins?'

'Jinns are never short of money.' Mohsin displays his knowledge. 'They can enter into any treasury they want. No one can see them. Even iron bars cannot stop them, you know. They also have diamonds and rubies; if they are pleased with you they can give you basketfuls of those. If they're here this moment, they can reach Kabul in five minutes.'

'Jinns must be huge in size,' Hamid speculates.

'Of course,' Mohsin agrees. 'Each one is as huge as the sky. If his feet are on the ground his head touches the sky. But if he so wants, he can squeeze himself into a pot.'

'I've heard that there are many jinns working under Choudhury Sahib,' Sami butts in. 'If anything is stolen, Choudhury Sahib will be able to tell where it is and who stole it. Jumrati's calf was stolen. He wandered everywhere looking for it for three days, but couldn't find it. Finally, he went to Choudhury Sahib who said it was in the cattle pound and there he found it. The jinns give him news of everything that is going on in the world.'

Now everyone begins to understand how Choudhury Qasim Ali came to possess all that wealth, and how he became the moneylender for a huge area around the town. The jinns give him money.

'Here is the police line. The police do their drills here—left, right, halt!—and guard us.'

Noori objects, 'The police guard us? It seems you know a lot about them! It is they who are behind all the theft. All the thieves and dacoits of the town are in cahoots with the police. The police instruct them to commit thievery in one mohalla, when they themselves go to another mohalla and ask people to be on their guard. My uncle is a constable in a police station. His salary is twenty rupees a month. But he sends home bags full of money. Bagful—I swear by God. Once I had asked him, "Uncle, where do you get the money from?" to which he replied smilingly, "Son, God provides." Later, he said himself, "If we want, we can earn lakhs of rupees in a day. But we take only as much as is safe for our job and does not give us a bad name.'"

Hamid is surprised and asks, 'If these people help thieves in stealing, why doesn't someone arrest them?'

Noori pities his lack of understanding and replies, ‘Silly ass, who will catch them? They’re the ones who are supposed to catch others. But Allah does punish them for their misdeeds. Not too long ago my uncle’s house caught fire and all the goods were reduced to ashes. There was not even a plate left. For days together, they had to sleep under the trees. Finally, someone lent them some money with which they bought some utensils and other things.’

Now the settlements are becoming dense, and the crowds walking towards the idgah can be seen clearly. They are wearing colourful clothes, one dressed brighter than the other. Someone is riding a car, someone is on a tonga. The smell of *itr* perfume wafts in the air.

The villagers, oblivious to their ordinary status, walk forward, fully content. Everything they encounter seems wondrous to them. They keep staring and do not listen to horns hooting behind them. Mohsin narrowly escapes being run over by a car.

At long last, the idgah comes into view. The congregation has started. Huge tamarind trees cast their shade on the cemented floor on which carpets have been spread. Row upon row of worshippers are standing in line all the way to the far end. There are no carpets for several rows towards the end. As people arrive they join the row closest to them. There is no space left in the front rows. There is no distinction of status here. Everyone is equal in Islam. The villagers perform ablutions and join the congregation. How orderly the congregation is! Thousands of devotees genuflect at the same time, then rise to sit on their knees; and these movements are repeated. It seems as though thousands of electric bulbs light up at one moment and then go out the next. What a solemn and lofty spectacle! It leaves a deep impression of harmony and breadth of vision. It is as though a bond of brotherhood connects all these souls genuflecting before Allah.

## 2

The congregational prayer comes to an end. People are giving away alms to beggars who have gathered there in thousands. The villagers make rounds of the shops selling sweets and toys. Even the elderly are not immune to the childlike amusements. Just look at the giant wheel which lifts one to the sky at one paisa, and then brings passengers down to the earth. There is a merry-go-round—  
wooden horses, camels and elephants are suspended from iron rods. One can

wooden horses, camels and elephants are suspended from iron rods. One can enjoy twenty-five rounds for one paisa.

Mahmood and Mohsin sit on the giant wheel, Noori and Sami on horses. Their parents, too, climb on to the merry-go-round with the same enthusiasm. Hamid is standing at some distance. He has just three paise in his pocket. He cannot spend one-third of his treasure for the mere fun of getting on a swing. Mohsin's father asks him again and again to get on the swing but he doesn't. The elderly say that Hamid is too mature for his age. Hamid doesn't like to accept favours from anyone. Poverty has made him wise beyond his years.

All get down from the swing. They start buying toys. There are toys of different shapes and sizes: soldier and milkmaid, king, queen and lawyer, washerwoman and water-carrier, all huddled together. The washerwoman is sitting close to the king and the queen while the water carrier nestles close to the lawyer. How lovely they are! It seems they'll start speaking any moment. Mahmood is going crazy over the soldier dressed in khaki and a red turban, wielding his gun, looking as though he's just returning from a parade. Mohsin falls for the water-carrier, with his back bent down and holding the water skin with one hand. He's holding the rope in the other hand, looking very happy. Probably he's singing a song while pouring the water. Noori chooses the lawyer who has an expression of wisdom on his face and who is wearing a black gown with a white achkan under it. He has a pocket watch tied to a gold chain and carries a law book in one hand. It seems as though he's just returning from the court after arguing a case. Hamid has just three paise in all. If he buys a toy for two paise then he'll be left with almost nothing. Well, what good are the toys? Once they slip from one's hand they break into pieces. If a few drops of water fall on them, they become discoloured. What's the use of buying such toys?

Mohsin says, 'My water-carrier will bring water every morning and evening.'

Mahmood asserts, 'My soldier will keep guard over the house. If a thief comes he'll shoot him instantly.'

Noori ventures, 'And my lawyer will fight cases in the court and bring money every day.'

Hamid decries the toys. They are, after all, made of clay and will shatter to pieces once they fall. All the same, he looks at them longingly and wishes to hold them in his hands for a minute.

Then they all go to a shop where household goods are spread out in full view of the customers: balls, whistles, bugles, rubber toys and a thousand other things. Someone buys a whistle, Mahmood purchases a ball, Noori a plastic figurine which makes a creaking sound and Sami a flute on which he'll play many melodies. Hamid is standing there, looking wistfully at everyone. When one of his friends buys something, he leaps to take it in his hand and see it closely. But boys are not normally so indulgent, particularly when their attachment to the objects is so fresh. Hamid's heart fills with despair.

After the toys, they turn to the sweets. If one is buying *reodi*, another is buying gulab jamun, and still someone else, *sohan* halwa. They gorge on them with great relish. Hamid stays on the periphery. The wretched fellow has at least three paise in his hand. Why doesn't he buy something to eat? He's only looking at others with greedy eyes.

Mohsin says, 'Come and take this reodi. It's simply delicious!'

Hamid can guess that Mohsin is up to some mischief. He is not at all generous by temperament. Still he goes up to him. Mohsin takes out two to three pieces of reodi from the leaf plate and advances towards Hamid. But just as Hamid stretches out his hand to grab them Mohsin pulls back his hand and pops the reodis into his own mouth. Mahmood, Noori and Sami clap their hands and laugh heartily. Hamid is sorely embarrassed.

Mohsin tempts him again. 'All right. This time I'll certainly give you some . . . By God, Hamid! Come and take it.'

'Keep it to yourself. Don't I have money of my own?' says Hamid.

'You've just three paise in all. What can you buy with that?' Sami asks.

Mahmood says, 'Don't pay attention to him. Come to me, Hamid. Take this gulab jamun.'

Hamid replies, 'Sweets are no good. A lot of things are written against them in books.'

Mohsin comments, 'In your heart you must be wanting to eat! Why don't you take out your money?'

'I understand his trick,' says Mahmood. 'When we've spent all our money, then he'll buy sweets and tempt us.'

Beyond the sweet-sellers are the ironsmiths who have spread their wares in their shops. And beyond them are shops selling gilded and artificial jewellery. There's nothing there to excite the boys. Hamid stops for a moment before the

There's nothing there to excite the boys. Hamid stops for a moment before the iron ware. There are many tongs on display that draw him. He remembers that his grandmother doesn't have tongs. When she pulls rotis from the oven her hands often get scalded. How happy will she be if he buys a pair of tongs for her! Her fingers won't burn again. It'll be something really helpful. The toys are of no use, just a waste of money. Their pleasure is short-lived. No one looks at them after some time. They will break by the time they reach home, or the children who weren't able to come to the idgah will grab them and break them after a while. Tongs have many uses: you can hold rotis in the oven, you can grab embers from the oven to offer to someone. Grandmother doesn't have the time to go to the market or even the money to buy them. She burns her hands every day. His friends have moved ahead. They are drinking squash.

*How greedy they are! They've bought so many sweets and didn't offer me any. On top of it, they ask me to play with them and clean their slates. Now, if Mister Mohsin asks me to do something, I'll put him in his place. Let them eat sweets. They'll have blisters and boils all over their mouths. They'll also get addicted to sweets, and then steal money from others and will get beaten.*

He imagines how Grandmother will run to take the tongs from his hands, exclaiming, 'My darling has brought tongs for me.' She'll give him a thousand blessings. She'll show them to the neighbours, and the entire village will talk about it. Who will bless these fellows for buying toys? When elderly people bless someone, God listens and their prayers are immediately granted. I don't have enough money. That is why Mohsin and Mahmood show themselves off. I'll also show myself off. Let them play with toys, let them eat sweets. Granted, I'm poor, but I don't beg from anyone. Abba will return some day. Then I'll ask them how many toys they want from me. I'll offer a job to everyone and show them how one treats one's friends. To all the poor boys I'll give one shirt each, and books. Just imagine—they bought one paisa worth of reodi and kept taunting me. They'll laugh when they see the tongs. Let them. They are all halfwits!

He asks the shopkeeper, 'These tongs are for sale?'

The shopkeeper looks at him and finding no elderly person accompanying him, says, 'This is of no use to you.'

'Are they for sale or not?'

'Of course, they are. Why should I put them out if they weren't.'



‘Then why don’t you tell me the price?’

‘One pair will cost you six paise.’

Hamid’s heart sinks. He gathers courage and says, ‘Will you give it for three paise?’ He leaves the spot immediately thinking that the shopkeeper will berate him. But the shopkeeper doesn’t do anything of the kind. Instead, he hands over the tongs and accepts the money.

Hamid holds the tongs on his shoulder, as though they were a gun, and struts up to his friends.

Mohsin sniggers at him. ‘Look, he’s bought a pair of tongs! Fool, what on earth are they for?’

Hamid throws down his tongs and says, ‘Just throw your water carrier on the ground and see! All his ribs will be smashed.’

‘What kind of toy is it?’ asks Mahmood incredulously.

‘And why not? Hang it from your shoulder and it looks like a gun, hold it in your hand and it becomes the tongs of the mendicants. If I want I can catch you by the nose with them. If I strike with them, I can destroy all your toys. Your toys cannot be a match for his strength. This is a courageous lion, this pair of mine,’ says Hamid.

Sami is greatly impressed by this and asks, ‘Would you like to exchange them with my toy drum? I’ve bought it for two annas.’

Hamid looks sneeringly at the toy drum and says, ‘My tongs can burst the belly of your drum. It’s just a layer of skin that makes the sound. A drop of water falls on it and it’s all over. My pair of tongs will remain steadfast in the face of fire, water, thunder or storm.’

The fairground has been left much behind. It is close to ten o’clock now. They are in a hurry to reach home. No one can buy tongs now. In any case, they have spent all their money. Hamid has proved to be the cleverest of all!

Now the boys split into two groups. Mahmood, Mohsin and Noori are on one side, and Hamid is alone on the other. Sami is a fence sitter. He’ll side with the winning party. A heated debate ensues. Hamid’s tongue is cutting through the arguments of his opponents. The triumvirate on the other side is pushed into a corner. If the trio has the strength of numbers with them, Hamid has truth and morality on his side. On one side are clay, plastic and wooden objects, on the other iron, alone and unyielding.

‘If a lion roars, the water-carrier will run for cover, the soldier will drop his

gun and take to his heels, and the lawyer will forget about his legal knowledge, hide his face in his cloak and lie on the ground. But my strong pair of tongs, this Rustum-i-Hind, will leap up and ride on the shoulder of the lion and gouge out its eyes.'

'But it cannot fetch water,' says Mohsin, offering the strongest counter-argument he can think of.

Hamid straightens the tongs and says, 'Just one command from the tongs and your water carrier will run to draw water and sprinkle it on the door. Then you can fill your pots and jars as much as you want.'

Mohsin is rendered speechless, but Noori comes to his rescue, saying, 'But if they are caught creating mischief, then they'll be presented in court, bound in chains. Then you'll seek the help of our lawyer, won't you? Tell us.'

Hamid has no ready argument against this. To buy time, he asks a counter question. 'Who can dare arrest him?'

'This soldier, with his gun,' says Mahmood.

Hamid sneers in contempt. 'This fellow will arrest the Rustum-i Hind? What a joke! Come on, let them have a bout. He'll freeze to death at the mere sight of the tongs. How can he arrest him?'

Mohsin takes a breath and attempts a different tack. 'Your pair of tongs will have its mouth burnt in fire every day.'

'Only the brave jump into the fire,' Hamid retorts instantly. 'Your lawyer, soldier and water carrier are all cowards. They'll run to their homes for shelter. Only Rustum has the courage to jump into the fire.'

Noori attacks with renewed energy. 'The lawyer will sit smartly on a chair with a table in front, while the tongs will lie on the ground in the kitchen.' This argument enlivens others too. Sami pipes in, 'Sure enough. The tongs will lie there in the kitchen.' Hamid, shorn of a ready rejoinder, takes recourse to bluster. 'My tongs won't stay in the kitchen. If the lawyer sits on a chair, they'll throw him down and stuff all his laws down his throat.'

Hamid's reply lacks conviction. However, though the remark he made is a senseless one, it captures everyone's imagination, so that the trio on the opposite side keep staring at each other's faces. Hamid wins the battle hands down. The three of them still have their ball, whistle and drum, but what's the worth of crackers before a machine gun? The tongs are indeed Rustum-i Hind. No one can dispute that any more.

can dispute that any more.

The victor receives compliments and honour from the vanquished. Hamid is no exception. The others have spent three annas each and bought things that are of no use. Hamid has spent just three paise and yet he has become the centre of attention. The toys will break and disappear in a matter of days, but Hamid's tongs will endure. Discussions begin on the terms of the truce.

Mohsin says, 'Let me take a look at your tongs. You can see my lawyer in the meantime.' Hamid has no objections to this. He's a generous victor. The tongs are handed to Mohsin, Mahmood, Noori and Sami. Hamid also runs his hands over all the toys. What beautiful toys they are! It seems as though they'll start speaking in a moment. But who will bless them for the toys they've bought? Who'll be happy seeing them? Who'll be as happy as his grandma when she sees the tongs? He does not regret his decision. Moreover, his tongs are now the Rustum-i Hind, the king of all toys. On the way, Mahmood buys cucumbers for one paisa which he shares with Hamid, though Hamid keeps saying 'no'. Mohsin and Sami buy blackberries worth one paisa each which they share with Hamid. All this is due to the blessing of the tongs!

### 3

The village gets animated at eleven. People have returned from the fairground. Mohsin's younger sister leaps to grab the water carrier from her brother's hands. As she jumps in excitement, the water carrier falls, crashing to the ground. The brother and sister come to blows over this and bawl to their hearts' content. Their mother hears the ruckus, appears on the scene and serves them two tight slaps each. Mr Noori's lawyer meets a fate worse than this. The lawyer cannot sit on the ground or a niche on the wall. It doesn't befit his status. So, two pegs are hammered into the wall. An old wooden plank, covered by a red rag like a carpet, is placed over them. The lawyer takes his seat on the throne in style, to conduct his legal arguments. Noori begins fanning him with a hand fan. One doesn't know whether it is the draught from the fan or a knock from it that sends the lawyer from his elevated position down to the mortal earth, turning him to tiny pieces. Loud lamentations arise. The last rites of the lawyer are performed according to Parsi ritual. His body is abandoned in the burial ground to be fed on by the crows.

That leaves Mahmood's soldier, who is a venerable figure of awe. He cannot suffer the ignominy of walking on his own feet. Mahmood grabs his goat's young one and makes the soldier sit on it. Mahmood's sister holds the soldier with one hand while he grabs the goat by the ear and takes her around the doorstep. His two younger brothers follow him with their lisping chorus, 'Keep awake, O sleeping folks!' No one knows exactly what happens next, but Mr Soldier soon falls down from his perch with his gun right there on the ground. The accident takes away one of his legs, but never mind. Mahmood is a clever doctor, and Dr Nigam and Dr Bhatia can very well act as his apprentices. He can join the leg in an instant, for which he just needs the milky fluid from the *gular* tree. The fluid is brought and the leg is repaired. But the moment the soldier stands, the foot gives way. The surgical operation proves futile. Then Mahmood breaks the soldier's other foot. Now he can sit comfortably. With a single foot, he could neither sit nor walk. Now he will sit at one place and prey on his victims from behind a screen.

As for Hamid, Amina runs when she hears his voice. She takes him in her lap and begins to cuddle him. She's startled by the sight of the tongs in his hand.

'Son, where did you get these tongs from?'

'I've bought them for three paise.'

Amina beats her breast. 'What a stupid boy! It's noon, and he hasn't eaten or drunk anything. And what does he bring back—a pair of tongs! Didn't you find any other object in the entire fairground?'

Hamid replies like a guilty person, 'You burn your fingers at the griddle every day, don't you?'

Amina's anger turns to love instantly, a love that can't be expressed in words. This love is mute, steeped in pain and longing. Such self-sacrifice, such total self-effacement in a boy of his age! What self-control the poor thing must have exercised to stifle his childlike desires! How tempted he must have felt seeing other boys buying toys and sweets! How could he possess such judgement? He remembered his old grandmother in those moments! How deeply my darling feels for me! She is overwhelmed by a strange feeling that makes her think that through some divine intervention she is made the empress of a realm and she endows this realm on Hamid!

Then a strange thing happens. The old woman Amina begins to weep uncontrollably like a young girl. She lifts both her hands and sends up prayers

unconditionally like a young girl. She hits down her hands and sends up prayers and blessings for Hamid while large drops of tears stream down her face. Hamid cannot comprehend the secrets of these blessings. I wonder if my readers can.

*Translated from the Urdu by M. Asaduddin*



## The Queen of Hearts

### 1

The blood of the fearless Turks whose majesty and grandeur gave the Christian world shivers is flowing through the streets of Constantinople. The same Constantinople which was once brutalized by the violence of the Turks now cools its heart in their warm blood. Seventy thousand corpses of soldiers are floating on the waves of Baazfurs, and the Turkish commander with his army of one lakh stands before the aura of Timor, waiting for his verdict.

Timor raised his victory-drunk eyes and looking towards Yezdani, the commander, roared like a lion, ‘What do you want: life or death?’

Holding his head high with pride, Yezdani said, ‘A life of respect, otherwise death.’

Timor’s fury intensified. He had forced the greatest of the self-respecting men to bow down their heads before him. He could not tolerate this reply on such an occasion. These one lakh men were in his grip. He could smash them within seconds. Even then, such pride! A life of respect! This means that the poor should sacrifice their lives for the rich to live a life of luxury and indulgence. The same wine parties, the same beauties from Armenia and Qaaf . . . no, no, Timor did not crush the pride of Caliph Bayazid that the Turks be left free to tarnish the name of Islam, drunk with the notion of liberty. Then he needed to shed blood. But human blood does not flow as a musical note or a rhythm—rather it is a dreadful sight which makes the eye turn itself away and the heart bow itself in shame. Timor is not an inhuman beast to risk his life to enjoy such a sight. He said with disgust, ‘What you call a life of respect is a sinful and

hellish life.'

Yezdani did not expect mercy or forgiveness from Timor. He knew he would not be able to save himself or his warriors. Then why should he feel subdued and not speak up the thoughts that arose in his heart. With his restless eyes, he cast a look at the handsome man who stood behind him trying to rein in his vibrant youth. Just like copper put to a whetstone for sharpening, every pore of his body effused uncontrolled wrath. Having looked at his face and as if sheathing his drawn sword and gulping down an unsavoury draught of blood, Yezdani said to Timor, 'My lord, you are the victor now but if you forgive my offence, let me say that the Turks never sought advice from the Tars regarding how to live. Set off from the world, in the dry and uncultivated land of Tatars, one can live a life of abstinence from things which are never available. But it would be ungrateful not to enjoy the blessings of God where they rain down. If sword could testify to a country being civilized, the Galls would have been a far better civilization than the Romans.'

Timor laughed out loudly and his soldiers' hands moved to their swords. The boisterous laughter of Timor—was it the laughter of death or one of lightning?

'Then the Tatars are beasts, aren't they?'

'No, I did not say that.'

'You say you are born into this world to enjoy yourself. I call it disobedience and breach of faith. God created man for His worship. One who goes against His will is a disbeliever, cursed to be thrown into Hell. The Prophet came into this world to purify our lives, to make us good human beings. He did not come to give us lessons for indulging in morally illegal activities. Timor has taken it upon himself to cleanse the world of the unfaithful. By the feet of the pious Prophet, I am not cruel or ferocious or bereft of mercy. But the punishment for infidelity in my eyes is nothing less than death.'

He cast a murderous look at the Tartarian commander and instantly a big man came over the head of Yezdani with his sword drawn. The Tartarian army with their raised swords charged at the army of Turks, and corpses could be seen lying on the ground in a matter of seconds.

Suddenly the same graceful young man who had been standing behind Yezdani came forward and as if smashing death with his fists, said, 'O! Emperor who likes to call himself a Muslim! Is this what you think is the Islam that you have you to propagate? Is this the teaching of Islam that you ruthlessly spill the blood of those brave men whose only offence is that they stood by their country and their caliph?'

A silence descended all around. For a young man who has not yet grown his moustache to curse a domineering and authoritative emperor like Timor! Can one not imagine his tongue being pulled out from its root? Everyone was stunned and Timor looked at the man mesmerized.

Looking at the faces of the Tatars which reflected a mix of curiosity and eagerness, he said, 'You call these Muslims infidels and think that by killing them you are doing a great service to Islam? I ask you—if they are not Muslims who do not bow down before anybody except God and consider the pious Prophet their leader, who would you call a Muslim? Okay, let us say we are infidels but are not we your prisoners? Does Islam allow the killing of chained captive soldiers? Has God given you power and authority to spill the blood of his creatures? Will you make the sinners go to the right path by killing them? Do you have any idea how cruel you were to blow up seventy thousand brave Turkish soldiers cunningly and make their innocent children and harmless women orphans? Are these your significant feats as a Muslim that you are proud of? Will the black ink of your cruelty and your killings in which you write your name cause it to glow? You have not wet the hooves of your steed in the flowing blood of the Turks, rather you have uprooted Islam. It is the selfless sacrifice of the Turks which caused the message of Islam to spread throughout Europe. Today you can hear the call "Allah-o-Akbar" (God Is the Greatest) from the church of Sofia. The whole of Europe is ready to welcome Islam. Is this your "reward" to them? Just forget that through this bloodshed you serve Islam. A day will come when you will have to account for your deeds before the Almighty and then no excuse will work. If you have not totally lost the power to discern between right and wrong, put your hand on your heart and ask yourself whether you have waged this war for the sake of God or some greed that has led you on. And I am sure the true reply that you get from your heart will make you lower your head in shame.'

The caliph had not still raised his head when Yezdani said in a wavering tone,



‘My lord! He is the son of a serf. He is not in his senses. I plead that you forgive his impudence. I am ready to undergo punishment in his place.’

Timor looked at the face of the boy with curious eyes. It was for the first time in his life that he had heard somebody speak so boldly before him. The greatest of commanders, ministers and kings would mumble when it came to talking to him. Whatever he said or did was accepted as the law. No one could dare heave a breath of disapproval against it. His flatterers had made his haughtiness touch the sky. He was convinced God had sent him to the world to spread Islam and to mend the whole world. He never claimed to be a prophet but in his heart, he believed he was one. Now that this young man, bravely risking his life, dared to uncover his false glory, Timor woke up to true awareness. He experienced devotion taking birth in his heart instead of violence and fury. Just a wink of his eye could put out this boy’s lamp of life. Before his world-winning power, this milk-suckling boy looked like he was trying to hold back the motion of an ocean with his tiny hands. How ridiculous his courage! But at the same time it was filled with unbounded self-confidence. Timor realized how feeble he was before this unarmed boy. The only source of such courage was the unwavering belief in truth. His soul was eager to run to the boy and embrace him. He was not a philosopher to have doubts about truth. He was just a warrior whose confidence could turn even untruth into truth.

Yezdani continued pleading in the same tone, ‘My lord! Don’t mind his offending words . . .’

Timor got down from his throne, embraced Yezdani and said, ‘I wish I had got an opportunity to hear such language and offending tone some time before, then I would not have been carrying the sin of murdering these innocent men on my shoulder. I can perceive the soul of an angel in this young man who has been sent to show the righteous path to sinners like me. My friend, you are lucky that you are the father of such an angel-like boy. May I know his name?’

Previously, Yezdani had been a worshipper of fire, but had embraced Islam later on. Sometimes, doubts would arise in his heart regarding this decision. He was like a prisoner who was to be hanged. The rope might have tightened around his neck any moment and his dead body would have swung from the pole and suddenly he found himself in the soothing lap of an angel. Overjoyed, he said, ‘He is called Habeeb.’

Timor walked towards the boy, held his hands and drawing them to touch his eyes, said, 'My young friend, undoubtedly you are the Habeeb (the beloved) of God. I am a sinner to have considered my evil deeds as my virtues as I lacked knowledge. They used to tell me I was free from faults. Today I have come to know how much damage I have caused to Islam. From today onward I seek guidance from you. You are my torch-bearer; you are my *Khizr*, the most knowledgeable prophet. I believe that only through you I can reach the court of the Almighty.'

He looked at the face of the young man and noticed it reddened with shyness. The hardness was replaced by a sweet hesitation.

The boy said with bowed head, 'This is your appreciation and blessing, my lord, otherwise I am nobody.'

Timor pulled him up and made him sit by his side on the throne. He ordered his commander that the Turk captives be set free, their weapons be given back to them and the booty be divided equally among the soldiers.

While the commander carried out the order, Timor held Habeeb's hand and took him to his camp. He arranged a feast for his two guests. When they were done with the food, he narrated the story of his life which was a life filled with acts of cruelty and barbarism from the beginning to the end and he did all this under the impression that he was following the commandments of God. How would he face God? He sobbed uncontrollably.

Finally, he said to Habeeb, 'My young friend, now only you can row my boat across the river. You have shown me the way, and it is you who will take me to the destination. You can safeguard my kingship. I was about to ruin it. I request you to be the minister of my kingdom and please, for God's sake, you will not say no to it otherwise I will have nowhere to go.'

Yezdani said, 'My lord, you bless us so much but just look at the age of the boy. Will he be able to do justice to the responsibilities of a minister? He is still learning things.'

At one side they kept saying no and at the other side Timor was persistent. Although Yezdani said no, his chest swelled with pride. He was like Moses who went in search of fire and was bestowed with prophethood. There was the verdict of death a moment before and see now an offer to be a minister! But he also doubted the unstable nature of this man. In a mood of happiness, today he was there with an offer of a ministry and tomorrow if he got angry he may prove the

were with an offer of a ministry and tomorrow if he got angry he may prove the biggest threat to their lives. He trusted the capabilities of Habeeb but was afraid in his heart of hearts what turn events may take in a foreign land. The court is a place known for conspiracy. Habeeb is sensible and honest and he can assess the circumstances but what about the maturity and experience that only age can bring. He asked for a day to think over it and took leave.

### 3

Habeeb was the daughter of Yezdani, not his son. In fact, her name was Umm-ul-Habeeb. When Yezdani and his wife converted to Islam, she was just twelve years old. But she was wise, talented and candid in expressing her thoughts. Unless she ascertained the truth behind a thing, she would not accept it. She felt unsettled with the conversion of her parents to Islam but she would not receive the teachings of Islam in order to please them until she had she studied the religion properly. Her parents did not want to exert any pressure on her. They felt that she had the same right to stick to her faith as they had the right to change their religion. The girl felt relieved but she made a comparative study of Islam and Zionism and after two years of analysis and examination she took allegiance with Islam. The parents were overjoyed that the girl did not accept Islam by force but through her own study, will and belief in it. The worry that had gripped their hearts for two years came to an end.

Yezdani had no son. In an age when the sword itself was the court of law, it was the greatest of bad luck to not have a son. Yezdani started seeing a son in his daughter. She received an education that normally was reserved for boys, dressed like them, rode horses, trained to fight and would accompany her father to the court of Caliph Bayazid to go hunting with the princes. At the same time she would learn philosophy, poetry and science, and would practise meditation. By the time she was sixteen, she entered the army school. She was adept at fighting and at the management of an army and the caliph was so pleased with her character that she was awarded a position for thousand rupees. Could there be a dearth of lovers? There were many officers and many young men from the royal family who pined for her but she liked none of them. She was averse to conjugal life. Her free spirit would not like to be tied down to such a relationship. Moreover, she witnessed daily how women were enthusiastically

brought to the court in marriage and then end up as captives there, humiliated and forsaken. They were fated to be at the mercy of their men. She would often get an opportunity to meet women from the noble families. The sad stories that she had heard from them made her all the more averse to conjugal slavery and Yezdani would never disturb her. She was free to marry or to remain a virgin. He left this to her will. When he received proposals, he made it clear he had no role to play regarding this and it was up to the girl to decide. Although for a girl to dress like men and mix with them freely invited criticism, Yezdani and his wife both had full faith in their daughter. They did not notice anything in the behaviour and demeanour of their daughter which might trouble them with doubts about her character. The twenty-four-year-old brave girl stood unwavering and invincible amidst the storms of youthful desires and hankerings as if she considered all men to be her true brothers.

#### 4

There is no need to write about the welcome and respect that Habeeb received, the celebrations that took place in Constantinople and the festivities that the kingdom witnessed. The city was on the verge of being ruined. The marketplaces and the royal palaces would have been in flames. One simply cannot imagine the degree of devotion, love and honour a person would deserve who saved the city from the impending catastrophe. The variety of flowers and jewels that were showered on her could be described by a poet alone. The womenfolk poured out prayers from the treasure house of their hearts for her. With chests puffed up with pride, they looked at her face and felt blessed. She had made them feel elevated.

In the night, the family discussed Timor's offer. Serious, calm, large and dignified, Yezdani sat on the cushioned chair in the front. To his right sat his wife in Iranian dress, her eyes lighted up with compassion and trust. To the left was Umm-ul-Habeeb who looked pretty in her red dress illumined with the glow of celibacy.

Yezdani said, 'I will not say a word but if I have a right to tender a piece of advice, I should make it clear that you should refuse the offer. Your identity cannot remain hidden for long. Timor will get to know who you are. Then you can imagine what the situation would be. You can understand how people will

can imagine what the situation would be. You can understand how people will take it all and what words will run from mouth to mouth. In my presence, I never allowed mean people to wag their tongues but you will be on your own and the rumour-mongers will have ample freedom to invent stories and tarnish your character.'

His wife said, 'I have heard that Timor is a lustful man. I will not let you go at any cost. If something unusual takes place, the world will laugh at us. Already those who are ready to laugh at us are not few in number.'

The husband and wife thus kept evaluating the pros and cons, the merits and flaws of a decision and had their various doubts but Habeeb remained silent. Yezdani thought that Habeeb agreed with them and was about to say that was reluctant in accepting the offer when she asked, 'So, what have you decided to say to Timor?'

'The same that we all have agreed upon.'

'But I have not made my point yet.'

'I thought you agreed with us.'

'No, you go and tell him that I accept his offer.'

The mother put her hands on her breast and said, 'What an implausible thing to do, daughter! Have you any idea what people will say?'

Yezdani also sat with his head covered with his hands as if a bullet had pierced his heart. He did not utter a word.

Habeeb raised her eyebrows and said, 'I do not wish to be dishonest even a bit. You have every right to allow or disallow me to go but I may rarely get an opportunity again in my life to serve my country. I will rue forever to have missed such a chance. I strongly feel that with my honesty, loyalty and selfless service, I will turn Timor into a gentleman and the reckless bloodshed of people may perhaps be stopped. He is brave but not merciless. No courageous man could be devoid of mercy. Whatever he has done so far is the result of his religious fanaticism. Today I have been given a God-sent opportunity to teach him that the spirit of religion lies in serving others, not in plundering and killing. I do not doubt myself in the least. I can safeguard myself well. It is my belief that by discharging my duty honestly, I can put an end to the criticism and condemnation that come from the side of the foes, and supposing that I fail in my purpose, is it not the best of victories to lay down your life fighting for truth and honesty? The principles that I have abided by so far have never failed me

and it is because of them that today I enjoy such respect and position that remains a dream for the high and mighty. These are my trusted friends and will never disappoint me. Even if Timor comes to know of my real identity, what fear do I have? I have my sword with me to protect me. Regarding marriage, you know my views. The day I find a man my soul is ready to accept and in whose being I could drown and immerse myself to elevate and ennoble my soul, I will fall at his feet and surrender myself to him.'

## 5

Many months have passed. The young man, Habeeb, is apparently the minister of Timor but in reality, he is the king himself. Timor sees through his eyes, hears through his ears and thinks through his mind. He likes Habeeb to be with him all the time. His company gives him the bliss from heaven. There is not a single soul in Samarkand that bears ill will against the young man. His behaviour has cast a sweet spell on everybody because he would not flinch from justice, come what may. Those who come under the grinder of his justice are also favourably disposed towards him as he does not allow justice to become bitter beyond endurance for the offender.

Evening had set in. Government officers had finished their jobs and gone. Candles burnt in candle stands. The aroma of fragrance sticks filled the entire sitting room. Habeeb was about to get up when the usher reported, '*Huzoor*, the emperor is visiting.'

Habeeb was not happy to hear this. He was not eager to enjoy the company of Timor, like the other officers. He always tried to maintain a distance from him. It was rare to find him present at the royal feast. He never participated in Timor's parties. Whenever he had free time, he would sit with his mother and narrate the events of the day while she would approve of everything he said.

He walked to the door to welcome Timor. Reclining on the bolster, Timor said, 'I wonder how you spend the life of an ascetic even though you are young and youthful. Habeeb, your persona is blessed with such grace and beauty that the most beautiful girl in the world will consider herself lucky to be your beloved. Whether you know this or not, but the truth is when you mount your black horse and gallop, thousands of eyes from windows in the streets of Samarkand wait to catch a glance from you but none of them witness your eyes

Samaikanda wait to catch a glance from you but none of them witness your eyes looking upward. This I say, by my God, that much as I wish to walk in your footsteps, this world won't let me. Why don't you cast the magical spell of your pious life on me? I like to be in this world unattached to the world in the same manner as you. But I lack that heart, that mind. I keep expressing my fury on myself, on the world, as if I have an eternal thirst for blood which you will not let me quench knowing full well there is hardly anybody else who can do it better than you. I cannot control my anger. Wherever you go, you spread light and love. The one, who I think is your foe, turns out to be a friend. As I walk along, I create hatred and doubt. The one I expect to be my friend is my enemy. Your company is the only thing which gives me comfort. If you think that the crown and the throne are obstacles in my way, by my God, I am ready to kick them out today itself. Today, I have come to you with the request that you show me the path following which I can attain real bliss. I wish you to stay in my palace so that I can take the true lesson of life from you.'

Habeeb's heart skipped a beat. Had Timor come to know the secret of him being a woman? He did not know what to say to Timor. His delicate heart melted at Timor's regret. The one who terrorized the world ended up being a poor pleader before him, begging for light. The usual dry, disfigured and violent posture of Timor reflected a hidden beautiful flame as if his awakened wisdom peeped from inside. Compared to the acceptance of failures that Timor so humbly expressed, his own unstable position in life which had lost every aspiration to rise high seemed trivial and meaningless.

He said in a joyful tone, 'Huzoor, you give so much importance to me. It is really my good luck. But it is not suitable for me to live in the royal palace.'

Timor said, 'Why?'

'Robberies take place where there is money in plenty and your foes abound when you win appreciation galore.'

'None can be your enemy. Can there be one?'

'I will become my own enemy. The greatest enemy of man is his pride.'

It was as if Timor had got a precious jewel. He recognized the feeling of his heart. Repeating the sentence—'The greatest enemy of man is his pride'—in his heart of hearts he said, 'I cannot get hold of you, Habeeb! You are a bird for the open sky. If one tries to keep a bird in a golden cage it will flap its wings restlessly. Anyway, Allah Hafiz.'

He walked instantly towards his palace as if he was in haste to keep this jewel of a thought in a secure place. This was not the first time he had heard this sentence but the revelation, knowledge and inspiration that he got from it that day was something new and not experienced before.

## 6

A rebellion had been reported in the region called Istekhar. Habeeb was gripped with the concern that Timor might go there and start a massacre. He wanted to resolve the crisis peacefully so that he may show to Timor the power that lay in fellow feeling. Timor did not want to send him on this mission but felt helpless at the entreaties of Habeeb. Failing to come up with further excuses, Habeeb said, 'This is impossible that huzoor should endanger his life as long as he has this servant at his service.'

Timor smiled and said, 'My life has got no value when compared to yours, Habeeb! I never cared for anybody's life. What legacy except plundering and killing have I left to the world? When I die, people will not weep for me. Believe me! Plunderers like me will be always born. But God forbid, even if an enemy of yours is hurt, the kingdom will see its doom and I will be left with no option other than killing myself with this dagger. Habeeb! I cannot tell you how much I owe you. I wish I could have met you some five or ten years ago and then history would not have recorded an evil Timor with a blackened face. Today, if the occasion demands, I am ready to sacrifice hundreds of Timors like me for you. It is like you take my soul away from me as you go. Today let me say Habeeb that I am in love with you—the love that I never had for a beautiful lady. Today I have known what real love is! What is the harm in it if I accompany you?'

Habeeb said with a restlessly pulsating heart, 'In case I need you, I will inform you.'

Thoughtfully touching his beard, Timor said, 'As you wish, but make sure you send the messenger every day otherwise I will get restless and come to you myself.'

Timor made arrangements for his journey with great care and interest. He collected various items of luxury and comfort for him. There was no way one could procure these things in the hilly region. He was as busy with this work as



could procure these things in the army region. He was as busy with this work as if he was marrying off his daughter.

When Habeeb moved with the army, the whole of Samarkand followed him and Timor sat on his throne, his head bowed down and his handkerchief on his eyes as if he was a bird who had been wounded.

## 7

The region of Istekhar belonged to Armenian Christians. The Muslims had captured it by defeating them and had brought such rules into effect that the Christians were forced to feel their subjugation at every step. The first law was that of jizya, a tax that all had to pay excluding Muslims. The second law did not allow the sounding of church bells. The third law banned wine which Muslims considered forbidden by religion. The Christians actively opposed these laws and when the Muslim officers tried to use force and arms, they rebelled. The Muslim governor was captured and the Christian flag was hoisted on the fort.

It was the second day that Habeeb had been here. He didn't know how to resolve the crisis. His compassionate heart felt that the restrictions imposed on Christians were baseless. Every religion should be given equal respect. But Muslims would not like these laws to be repealed and even if they softened up, why on earth would Timor relent? His religious views had become somewhat less rigid but he would never do away with these rules. Should he punish the Christians because they were fighting for their religious freedom? How could he terminate what he believed to be the truth? No, come what may, he would follow the truth. Let his master think that he was crossing the prescribed limits, but all that mattered little now.

The next day, Habeeb made a public announcement early in the morning. Jizya was abolished. The restrictions on wine and ringing of bells in churches had been lifted.

There was commotion among the Muslims. This was infidelity; this was the promotion of what religion forbid doing. The roots of Islam that the lord Timor strengthened were being dug up by his own minister, Habeeb Pasha. But the tables turned. The royal army joined hands with Muslims. Habeeb took refuge in the fort of Istekhar. The Muslims gained power with the royal army coming to them. They besieged the fort. They thought that Habeeb had turned a rebel and

sent a messenger to Timor in order to inform him about the latest development.

## 8

It was past midnight. Timor had not heard anything from Istekhar for the last two days. His mind was gripped with numerous worries. He regretted sending Habeeb there alone. Granted that Habeeb was extremely skilled but if the rebellion were to get bigger, a handful of men would be of no help and it was certain that the rebellion would gather momentum. The Christians of that region were highly belligerent. When they came to know that the sword of Timor had rusted and that he preferred a life inside the palace, they would become doubly courageous and fearless. It would be the worst of things if Habeeb were to get surrounded by Timor's enemies.

He brought his hand down on his thighs with force. Turning to the opposite side, he was vexed with himself. How could he be so effete? Had his valour, his majesty taken leave of him? The mere mention of his name would make his opponents quiver with fear and now he was sitting in his palace like a coward. The only interpretation of this that the world would make is that Timor was no longer the brave lion in the open space; he was a timid lion walking on a soft mattress. Habeeb was an angel. He was ignorant of the evil deeds of human beings. One who has got a pure heart, has good intention, believes in selfless service and is compassionate, and can never know how wicked a devil man can prove. These virtues lead the nation to progress and prosperity in the days of peace but during war when Satan instigates the fury and madness in men, there is no place for these. At such a time, victory goes to him who is ready to take on a bloodbath, burn a *holika* of harvest in the field, make desolate the cities and turn them into forests. The laws of peace and the laws of war differ drastically.

Suddenly, the doorkeeper reported that a messenger had arrived from Istekhar. The messenger kissed the ground and stood aside in respect. He was too awed by Timor to speak.

Timor raised his eyebrows and asked, 'What is the news? After three days you have turned up, and that too at this hour of the night?'

The messenger kissed the ground again and said, 'My lord, the minister has revoked jizya.'

Timor roared, 'What do you say? Jizya revoked?'

Timor roared, 'What do you say? Jizya revoked?'

'Yes, my lord!'

'Who did this?'

'Your minister.'

'By whose order?'

'By his own will.'

'Hmm.'

'And, huzoor, he has allowed wine.'

'Hmm.'

'And, he has passed the order that bells could be rung in churches.'

'Hmm.'

'And, he has attacked the Muslims by joining hands with Christians.'

'What do you expect me to do?'

'Huzoor, you are our caretaker and protector. If you do not help, not a single Muslim will be saved.'

'Where is Habeeb Pasha now?'

'He is in the castle of Istekhar.'

'And what have the Muslims done?'

'We have laid siege to the fort.'

'With Habeeb inside it?'

'Yes, huzoor, he has turned a traitor.'

'So, my loyal servants of Islam have held him captive. It is also possible that by the time I reach there, they may kill him. Get out of my sight, you scoundrel! Muslims think that Habeeb is my servant and I am his master. This is not true. Habeeb is the real ruler of the kingdom and Timor is his petty footman. Timor cannot interfere with his decision. Of course, jizya should be revoked. I have no right to collect ransom from people belonging to other religions. There is no reason why azan should be allowed in mosques and ringing of bells in churches banned. The sound of bells is not the symbol of infidelity. Do you hear me? O! Mean fellow! You cannot identify infidelity with that sound. An infidel is one who takes away by force what belongs to others, who makes the poor suffer, who is a cheat, a swindler, who is mean and selfish. An infidel is not one who seeks the light of God in a slab of stone or earth or one who can witness His presence in rivers, hills, trees and shrubs. Such a man is a better devotee than all of us who have confined God to a mosque. You think I am saying blasphemous

things? To consider someone an infidel is in fact an act of infidelity. All of us are creatures of God. Go and tell those rebel Muslim soldiers that if they do not lift the siege of the fort, Timor will fall on them like doomsday.'

The messenger stood there like one whose wisdom had been taken away from him when the trumpet of danger blew and the army readied itself to march.

On the third day, when Timor reached Istekhar, the siege of the fort was lifted. The cannons from the fort were opened to welcome him. Habeeb thought Timor had come to punish the Christians. They were terrified but Habeeb was ready to face the challenge. It would not be a regret even if he died fighting for the rights of the Christians. He would not settle for a compromise on this issue. If Timor used a sword, he would be paid back likewise.

But look: what was happening? The royal army carried a white flag. Timor had not come to fight but sought peace. He would be welcomed in a different manner. Habeeb came out of the fort along with Christian knights. Timor rode towards them alone. Habeeb got down from his horse and paid his respects. After dismounting from his horse, Timor kissed Habeeb's forehead and said, 'I have heard about everything, Habeeb! You did an excellent job. You did what only you could have done. I had no right to collect jizya or to capture the religious freedom of Christians. Today, I will hold court and make an honest declaration of my views. Finally, I will offer a proposal that my mind has been entertaining for these many days and I am hopeful you will accept it.'

One could see Habeeb's face drained of all its colour. Had the truth come out? What proposal was he talking about? His heart was curiously restless.

Timor said, smiling, 'You were ready to fight with me?'

Habeeb said shyly, 'Even Lord Timor is a nonentity before the truth.'

'So is this undoubtedly. If you have got the heart of an angel, you are also brave like a lion. I feel sorry that you should have such little faith that I would not approve of your decision. It is you, my dear, who has made it clear to me that the kingdom is not the property of an individual but it is like a tree whose every branch and every leaf draws nutrition from the same source.'

Both of them entered the fort. The sun had set. In no time at all, the court was in order and Timor formally announced the approval of the rights of Christians.

Voices of appreciation rose from every side. 'May our king live long.'

Timor continued, 'My friends, I do not deserve this prayer. I return what I had taken from you by force. My action is not worthy of receiving your prayers for

taken from you by force. My action is not worthy of receiving your prayers for me but rather your curse, for I deprived you of your rights for such a long period.'

The court echoed, '*Marhaba! Marhaba!*'

'Friends, with these rights I also hand over your kingdom to you, for in the eyes of God all human beings are equal and no individual or community has a right to rule over the other. From today onward you are your own king. I am sure you will also not deprive the Muslim population of the rights it deserves. If any such occasion comes when an oppressive ruler tries to assault you and capture your freedom, Timor is always there to help.'

The celebrations in the fort had come to an end. The officers and lords had gone. In the drawing room, there were only two people left: Timor and Habeeb. A playful jolliness was visible over Habeeb's face, which so far had always remained hidden behind his seriousness. The redness that coloured his cheeks, the intoxication in his eyes and the agility that made his limbs restless today—these had never been seen before. He had teased Timor in a frolicsome mood and had taken the liberty to jest with him a number of times. His feminine consciousness chuckled jubilantly, unmindful of the authority and the dignified position he enjoyed in the court.

Suddenly Timor said, 'Habeeb, till date I have said yes to everything you asked for. Now I offer you the proposal that I have been talking about and you will have to accept it.'

With a violently pulsating heart Habeeb said, 'Please, say it.'

'First promise you will accept it.'

'I am your servant.'

'No, you are my master, my life, my light. You do not know how much I have benefited from you. Until now I considered my kingdom to be the most precious thing in my life. I even did things for it I should not have done. I have smeared my hands with the blood of my own people as well as that of others. Now I am done. I have laid the foundation, now it is your responsibility to raise a palace on it. My earnest request to you is that you be the trustee of my kingship, in my life as well as after me.'

Feeling as if he was flying in the sky, Habeeb said, 'The weight of such a responsibility—no! My shoulders are not sturdy enough to carry it.'

Timor said beseechingly, 'No, my dear friend, you cannot but accept it.'

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Habeeb's eyes sparkled with laughter while hesitation rested on his lips. He said in a slow voice, 'I agree to it.'

Overjoyed, Timor said, 'May you stay blessed and safe.'

'But what then if you come to know that Habeeb is an immature virgin girl?'

'Then you will be the queen of the kingdom as well as the queen of my heart.'

'Are you not surprised a bit?'

'I already knew it.'

'How long have you known this?'

'The first time that you looked at me with your killer eyes.'

'But you managed well to conceal everything.'

'I learnt the art from you. Perhaps, no one here except me knows this.'

'How come you recognized the truth?'

Timor looked at her with love-enamoured eyes and said, 'This I will not tell.'

She is the same Habeeb who is famous as Begum Hamida, the wife of Timor.

*Translated from the Urdu by Sarfaraz Nawaz*



## The Murderer

It was a winter night. The roads were deserted as early as ten and the streets were wrapped in silence. Putting the meal plate before her young son, the old widowed mother said, 'Where do you keep wandering the whole night, son? The meal kept out for long, gets cold. The whole world has gone to bed. There is not enough fire in the house that I should sit before it and keep myself warm.'

Dharamvir was a good-looking, sturdy youth. Dragging the plate closer, he said, 'It is not even ten, Mother! Who can help if the lifeless people here drown themselves into sleep so early! In Europe, they keep moving about till twelve or one. One should learn from them how to enjoy life. None of them would think of getting to the bed before one.'

The mother asked, 'Then they would be waking up as late as eight or ten in the day.'

Being defensive, Dharamvir said, 'No, they get up at six. We are used to sleeping for long hours. From ten to six it is eight hours. If one sleeps for eight hours out of the twenty four, then there is not much work you can expect from one. The lesser one sleeps the better it is. Our group has included this point in its manifesto that the members will sleep just for a little more than three hours.'

The mother was fed up with the talk relating to the group. Do not eat this, do not eat that, do not wear this, do not wear that, do not marry or have a family, do not take a job to be servants to others. What is this group up to? Will it make people end up as monks? And where are the ones who have discarded the world and the ones who are the real seers? Most of them are slaves to their desires and saints in name alone. This new restriction even on sleeping! He just finished the tour of three months. God knows where he keeps wandering. Now, to eat at

twelve! And who knows if dinner is skipped. She said with a tone of protest, 'It is because of all this that one can count every single bone in your body. What business does this group of yours has after all? Do they do anything meaningful or simply impose restrictions on others?'

Dharamvir said, 'The group does the same work as you. Your purpose is to serve the community, so is ours.'

The old woman was a keen and devoted participant in the freedom struggle. Ten years ago, her husband had been sentenced to jail for giving a revolutionary speech. His health had deteriorated and he passed away while behind bars. Since then, the woman had devoted herself selflessly and earnestly to social work. Initially, her son was also one of the volunteers but over the last five months, he had joined this new group and was considered one of its active members.

The mother asked suspiciously, 'So, does your group have an office?'

'Yes, we have one.'

'How many members are there in all?'

'So far we have only twenty-five members. But our twenty-five members are capable of doing what even your twenty-five thousand men can't do. Look Mother, you don't share this with anybody, otherwise I will be in trouble. I don't think picketing and demonstrations will get us freedom. That is an open declaration of one's weakness and helplessness. The way to freedom is not through hoisting flags and singing songs. People here don't use their minds. A man says that this is how we get Swaraj and we follow him with our eyes closed. The man is misguided and also leading others astray. People can be happy in their heart of hearts believing that they are getting closer and closer to freedom. But I find all this childish. When children cry, they are given sweetmeats and toys. This is what these people will get. The real gain is what we are ready to pay for.'

The mother said, 'Are we not paying for this? Have not lakhs of our men been jailed? Have we not been beaten up with staff? Have our properties not been confiscated?'

Dharamvir said, 'How are the English affected by this? They will leave India only when they are convinced that henceforth they cannot afford to stay in this country. If today, thousands of them are killed, today itself we will get Swaraj. Russia won its freedom this way, Ireland is another such example and India too will win its freedom. There is no other way out. We have to finish them. One



...with him no freedom. There is no other way out. We have to finish them. One thousand demonstrations cannot strike fear in their hearts in the same degree that the murder of a white officer can.'

The mother's whole body shivered. She had been a widow these ten years and this boy was her only support. She eked out her livelihood by labouring and working for others. She was happy with the thought that the boy would earn some money and bring a daughter-in-law to the house. She wished to have a meagre meal without care, and simply live a peaceful life. With these tiny straws of wishes, she had built a boat. She sat on it and was sailing through the river of life. Now this boat was swaying and being tossed around by waves of change. She felt as if the boat was drowning. She clutched her chest and said, 'Son, what are you talking about? Do you think by killing the English we will get freedom? We don't have enmity with the Englishmen; we are against the policy of their government. Even if our countrymen rule with such a policy, we would raise our voice in protest. Russia was under no foreign rule, yet its citizens uprooted the government. The reason behind this was that the czar would not take care of his subjects. The noblemen lived in luxury. The poor were at the receiving end. You know these things better than me. The same applies in our context. Every single officer here gobbles up the share of a thousand poor men. Under one pretext or the other, the money is spent but we are getting poorer and poorer, day by day. We want to bring a change to this unconstitutional government. I fall at your feet, leave this group. Don't jump into the fire for no reason at all. I cannot imagine seeing you brought to court accused of murder.'

Dharamvir was least affected by her pleadings. He said, 'I have no fear of this. We are very cautious. To offer oneself up for arrest is foolishness. We wish to adopt such strategies that no one gets arrested.'

The fear reflected on the face of the mother was now replaced with shame. She said, 'This is even worse. The innocent will be punished and the murderers roam scot-free. This is shameful! I consider it meanness. To murder someone secretly is an act of betrayal. To make your harmless brethren suffer for your crimes is like putting your community up for sale. You will be held responsible for the death of every innocent man.'

A little amused, Dharamvir dismissed his mother's distress. 'Mother! You don't understand these things. You organize your demonstrations and take out public protestations. Leave us to our work. Sin and reward, virtue and vice, right

and wrong—these words have got no meaning. What you consider a sin is to me very much a rightful deed. How should I tell you that these are relative terms! You have read the Bhagavadgita, haven't you? Krishna says it very clearly—I am the one who kills, I am the one who gives life. Man cannot kill anybody or give life to anybody. Then what sin are you talking about? Why should I feel ashamed for the one who is accused in my place? This is not an individual fight we are engaged in. We are fighting against the authority of England. Whether I die or someone else in my place, it hardly makes a difference. The one who serves the community better has a greater right to live.'

The mother looked at the boy, astonishment writ large on her face. There was no use debating with him. She could not convince him through arguments. Having finished his meal, he got up but she sat there listless. A thought crossed her mind. Is it likely that he has murdered somebody or was planning to do so? The very thought made a tremor run through her body. Like all common men, she too considered killing and murdering highly disgusting, and hated it from the very core of her heart. Her own son a murderer! What could be more shameful, mean and deplorable? She was ready to lay down her life for the cause of the people who upheld the ideals of selfless service, sacrifice, purity of intentions and noble deeds. In her eye, the true servant of the community was one who would not hurt the lowest of the low from among the creatures in this world. Rather, one should be ready to shed one's life gladly for the country. In the making of her moral being, non-violence constituted the greatest part. If Dharamvir had been shot dead defending a poor soul, she would have wept but with her head held high. She would have suffered spiritual sorrow. Maybe she would never have come out of such a grief. But a sense of pride would have been attached to it. Now, to imagine him having killed someone! That would be a curse, a divine punishment. How could she stop the boy? The question vexed her. She would never let a situation arise where her son would be arrested on a murder charge, nor would she tolerate that the innocent be punished for his crime. How had this insanity gripped the boy? She sat down to eat but it was hard for her to swallow even a morsel. There was a cruel hand somewhere which was hell-bent on snatching away her son from her. She wanted to remove that hand. She would not separate the boy from herself for a second. She would follow the boy like a shadow. Who could dare pull the boy away from her lap?

Dharamvir used to sleep in the outer room. She had a feeling he might have

gone somewhere. She rushed into his room. The taper was burning on the stand before him. He seemed to have fallen asleep while reading a book which was still open and lay on his chest. She sat there and with utter helplessness earnestly prayed to God to bring a change of heart in him. His face showed the same innocence and childlike harmlessness that one could witness twenty years ago. There was no trace of harshness or arrogance there. For a moment, her motherly affections overshadowed the principles that she was so particular about. She tried to assess the deeply felt emotions of her son with an open heart. How much this young man was driven with the zeal to serve his countrymen! What compassion he had for them! Such sympathy for the oppressed! If he is far-sighted, patient and measured like experienced old men, what makes him so? Is there a way one could imagine the restlessness and agony of a man who is ready to sacrifice his dear life for a cause? I wish this zeal and enthusiasm could unshackle itself from violence, then the pace of his awareness would be swifter.

Dharamvir was startled by the footsteps of his mother, and grabbing the book, he said, 'When did you come, Mother? I did not know when sleep overtook me.'

Drawing the taper stand aside, she said, 'Don't sleep with the taper so close to your cot. Sometimes it may cause an accident. Will you keep reading the whole night? It is already midnight. Just sleep comfortably. I will also lie down here. I don't know why, but it frightens me to sleep inside.'

Dharamvir replied, 'Then, let me bring a cot for you to lie down.'

'No, let me lie on the floor itself.'

'Oh, no! I lie on a cot and you on the ground! Come on to the cot.'

'Oh, boy, shut up. I take the cot and throw you to the floor. Impossible!'

'I will bring the cot or I will sleep inside. But tell me, what are you afraid of?'

'Your words frightened me. Why don't you include me in your group?'

Dharamvir did not reply. He took his cot and bed sheet and moved to the inner room. The mother took the taper and showed him the way. He put the cot in the room and lying down on it, said, 'If you join my group, what more can I ask for. The poor fellow members keep falling sick after eating half-cooked meals. They will get good food, at least. And there are a lot many things an old woman can easily do which the young find impossible for themselves. For example, to spy on something or to disseminate our views among women. But I know you are kidding.'

The mother said in a serious tone, 'No, son, I am not kidding. I mean it. You

THE MOTHER SAID IN A SERIOUS TONE, 'NO, SON. I AM NOT KIDDING. I MEAN IT. YOU can't realize how delicate a mother's heart is! I can't leave my son surrounded by danger, and sit comfortably at home. As long as I did not know things, it was not an issue. But now that I am familiar with the circumstances, I can't bear to be away from you. I will always be by your side. And, if ever a chance comes, I will prefer to sacrifice myself before you. My greatest joy in life would be to see you before my eyes as I die. Don't assume that I will prove myself a coward during challenging occasions. I will not cry, I will not complain. Even the deadliest of dangers will not make me let out a shriek of pain. In order to protect her young one, even a cow turns into a lioness.'

With great devotion, Dharamvir kissed the feet of his mother. He never found her so venerable and worthy to be loved.

The very next day, an occasion came to test her spirits. She spent two days practising firing with a revolver. The woman who was a worshipper of non-violence and truth and who would shut off her ears at the sound of crackers was now seen opening fire with such fearlessness. She had such perfect and faultless aim that even the youth were full of wonder.

The highest officer of the police was their target, and Dharamvir was assigned the job.

When they reached home, she asked, 'Son, I don't think the officer has committed any mistake. Then why has the group singled him out?'

Smiling at the simplicity of his mother, Dharamvir said, 'You think that our constables, subinspectors and the superintendents do things by their own will? That officer is responsible for the atrocities that they perpetrate. And for us it suffices that he is an important tool of the machinery which is ruthlessly crushing our community. In this fight, racism is not a fact to reckon with. Your greatest sin here is that you belong to the opponent's group.'

The mother was silent. She paused for a moment and said timidly, 'Son, I never demanded anything from you. Now I ask you for one thing. Will you grant it?'

Dharamvir said, 'You need not ask me. Mother, you know, I cannot refuse you anything.'

She replied, 'Yes, I do know my son. This is why I have mustered up courage to ask you. Separate yourself from the group. See, your old mother is pleading with her folded hands.' And she stood before her son with hands folded together

in the manner of a beggar.

Dharamvir laughed and said, 'You are asking for a very irrelevant thing. You know what this will lead to? I will not return alive. If I run away from here, the members of the group will be after me, thirsty for my blood, and their bullets will find me. You have given me this life. I can shed it at your feet. But the motherland has given life to both of us and her right is greater. If the occasion demands that I may have to kill you for the sake of the country, I will not shirk from this unpleasant duty. My eyes will be streaming with tears but my sword will fall at your neck. Our religion teaches us to place the country above everything. There is no way I can ever leave the group. Yes! If you have any fear, don't come with me. I will devise a pretext and take some other comrade along. If you feel weak in your heart, just tell me right now.'

Strengthening herself, the mother said, 'It is for you that I was worried. Otherwise what fear should I have?'

The mission was to be accomplished in the dark of the night. It was decided that the moment the target returned from the club in the night, he should be seized and finished off. Dharamvir had already inspected the surroundings. He had chosen the spot where he would sit and aim at the prey. Close to the bungalow of the officer were bitter gourd and cranberry shrubs. This was the place of his hiding. To the left of the bushes, the ground was low. There were guava and plum orchards down there.

The officer would go to the club between seven and eight in the evening. He came back around eleven or twelve. The timings were confirmed. Dharamvir decided to go near the bushes around nine and sit there in hiding. Just at the spot was a turn. The vehicle would naturally slow down at the turn and right then he would open fire.

As the days passed, the heart of the old woman turned white with fear. But Dharamvir was least affected and did things as per his usual routine. He would get up at his fixed time, take his breakfast, spend his evening as usual, read for some time, play two or three rounds of chess with friends who would turn up by that time, eat his dinner in peace and then would lie down to sleep comfortably, and a little longer than the allocated time as if he had no worries. His mother's heart lost interest in things. Eating was far from her mind; she could not sit peacefully at any place. Women from the neighbourhood came to see her but she was in no mood to talk. She paced restlessly to and fro like a mouse running

away from a cat to find a hole. She felt the weight of a mountain falling upon her head. She had no respite. There was no escape. The philosophies of fate, rebirth and the will and scheme of the Creator seemed hollow and useless before this dreadful condition she was in. The shield and helmet could protect her against the arrows and spears of the enemy but this mountain would crush her with her armour of defence on her. Her mind and heart became numb and were failing her. The only feeling that overpowered her was that of terror. But by evening, gradually, a feeling of calm descended on her. She felt a power rising within her. One could call it the power of helplessness. The bird flutters its wings as long as it's hopeful of escape by flying away. And then she prepared herself for the clutches of the hunter and the dagger of the killer. Extreme fear leads to fearlessness.

She called out, 'Son, come and eat something.'

Dharamvir came inside. The whole day had passed and they had not exchanged a word. She found his face somewhat dull. The restraint that kept his inner restlessness veiled till now reflected itself on his countenance as the moment of fear drew closer.

He got dressed, placed his revolver in his pocket, and said, 'Now the time has come, Mother!'

She did not say anything. There was no need to take care of the house. Things lay scattered. Even the taper was left burning. Both of them came walked out of the house silently. One took a manly stride and the other was weighed down with helplessness and worry. They did not exchange words even on the way. Both of them were silent, determined and active like the book of fate with its prose portion majestic, vigorous, and advocating the best of performances, and the poetry portion vibrating with agony, feeling and prayer.

They reached the bushes and sat there silently. Half an hour later, the vehicle of the officer came to view. Dharamvir looked at the direction attentively. The vehicle was moving slowly. The officer and his wife sat together. Dharamvir took out his revolver. The mother caught his hand and the vehicle passed by.

Dharamvir said, 'What did you do, Mother? We would not get this golden opportunity again.'

'Madam was also in the vehicle. What if she were shot?'

'It would have made no difference. Our religion teaches us not to distinguish

between the male serpent and the female and their child.'

The mother said reproachfully, 'Then your religion is the religion of beasts and barbarians which does not care for the basic principles of war. A woman is considered innocent in every religion. So much so, that even savages respect women.'

'I will not let go the chance as he returns.'

'As long as I am alive, you cannot harm the lady.'

'I am not bound to follow your restrictions in this regard.'

The mother did not say anything. The intent of such an unmanly assault had smashed her motherly affection to smithereens. Hardly twenty minutes had passed when the same vehicle rose to the view coming from the opposite direction. Dharamvir looked at it intently and said, jumping up, 'Look, Mother, this time he is alone. You also take aim with me.'

The mother seized Dharamvir's hand and tried to frantically snatch his revolver. Dharamvir knocked her down, and taking a step back, positioned his revolver. In a second, the mother got up. Just then he opened fire and the vehicle went past. But the mother lay there, writhing about on the ground.

Throwing away his revolver, Dharamvir rushed towards his mother, and said anxiously, 'Mother, what happened to you?'

Then, suddenly the reality of the accident dawned on him. He was the murderer of his dear mother. The crudeness, alacrity and the fire in him extinguished. He bent down, feeling the onrush of tears that trembled in his eyes. He looked at the face of his mother with tearful eyes and said regretfully, 'O! What did I do? Alas! Why don't you utter a word? How did it happen? The darkness captures the vision to see anything. Where did the bullet hit you? Say something! You were destined to die at the hand of this wretched man! He is your murderer whom you raised and offered your lap on which to play. Who do I call? There is no one in sight.'

The mother spoke in a dwindling voice, 'I am blessed in my birth. You will carry my dead body. I am dying in your lap. My chest is wounded. As you fired the gun, I stood in its path. My voice fails me. God bless you! I pray for you. Tell me what else I should have done, son! Now I put my honour in your hands and leave.'

After a moment, Dharamvir was seen walking towards his home with his half-dead mother in his arms. As he rubbed his tearful eyes on her cold soles, he felt

an agony filled with a divine happiness.

*Translated from the Urdu by Sarfaraz Nawaz*





## The Wedding

### 1

After having abandoned his wife of fifteen years, Babu Devakinath is today going to marry again. His relatives and friend have gathered but no one dares ask him the reason for his umbrage at the helpless wife. Why earn his displeasure? There are drums being beaten at the gates and women are singing auspicious songs inside the house. Servants are out and about in colourful livery. His companions for the *baraat*, his wedding procession, are busy with their own celebrations. But nobody is bothered that a precious life is being blighted by this marriage.

Babu Devakinath was married to Phoolwati this day, fifteen years ago. Phoolwati was beautiful, cultured, affable and educated. Devakinath was also a decent man, of affable temperament and enlightened thoughts. But such discord erupted between the couple from the first day itself that they found themselves separated by a wide rift, which only widened with the passage of time. So much so that today, Devakinath is bent on marrying again.

And the reason behind this discord? Their difference of opinion on social issues. Devakinath was a follower of the old culture, while Phoolwati was enamoured of modern ways. The old culture demands the purdah, endurance and patience. The light of modernity demands freedom, respect and power. Devakinath desired that Phoolwati serve his mother, and not step out of the house without his permission or a veil, while she would not agree to any of it. There were arguments, bitter words were exchanged, and they blamed each other of being ungrateful. The husband blamed the wife's folks for her ways. The wife

retorted word for word. The husband scolded her. The wife left him for her people. Her house was not too far and she covered the distance in ten minutes. They stayed apart for months after which she was placated enough to return. But the arguments and fights resumed within a few days. Both were not ready to change their ways. This time around, the separation lasted for years. In the end, on the insistence of his folks and friends, Devakinath got her to return again. But this time things went so wrong that the separation turned permanent. Neither did he try for rapprochement, nor did she return and now Mr Husband is trying to calm his heart by marrying again. Is Phoolwati allowed the same freedom? If she was indeed allowed the same freedom, would Devakinath have the courage enough to remarry?

Devakinath's mother is busy arranging the jewellery box. She is almost intoxicated with joy over the prospect of a new daughter-in-law. On top of this, she has been told that the new girl is wise, submissive and shy. What else could she want? The house will surely bask in a new light when she arrives. Women of the neighbourhood tease her, saying, 'Surely, your new daughter-in-law must be highly educated?'

The mother-in-law contorts her face and replies, 'I don't need a lady. I have had enough of these educated ones. Now I want a simpleton as my daughter-in-law.'

The Munshiji called from the door, 'Hurry up, or we'll miss the train. There is no other transport after that.'

She replied, 'You mind your own business. I am not late. Just call the tailor to dress up the groom.'

The tailor helped the groom wear his wedding dress. The gardener helped with the turban. The cobbler came for the shoes. An uncle touched up the turban, and another tied the waistband, while an aunt applied kohl to his eyes. Thus, they all did their share in turning a man into an ape. He is forty-five, with a few greys in the hair, and has also just a few teeth left. His face is wrinkled but the decoration is such as if he is in the full bloom of youth.

Phoolwati's father, who somehow got word of the wedding, was deeply saddened at this turn of events. He could have tried to prevent it if only he had known about it before, but what could be done now that the *baraat* is about to depart? He was thinking, *The lower castes are better than us. They at least fear community censure, unlike us who are hell-bent on doing shameful things. Hai! How will Phoolwati cope when she hears of it! It's been fifteen years for her without any peace or comfort. She lives her life as if she is a widow. And now this new trauma! How will she bear this?*

Phoolwati was one of those brave women who preferred to give up their lives for their word instead of beating a retreat. If she was capable of being dominated even a bit, her life would have been smooth and comfortable. Even the indifference of fifteen years could not defeat her self-respect. The moment she heard the news, she decided, 'I won't allow this while I am alive. Not at any cost! He must not enjoy the pleasures of life with a new wife. If I am condemned to lifelong misery, he too must burn in this fire. He can't be allowed to trample over me like this.' Without saying anything to anybody in the house and even without informing her father, she stepped out quietly, hired a tonga and left for her in-laws' home. On the way, she kept thinking, *Today I shall make the ultimate decision of my life. I will show him that even today India abounds with women who can happily sacrifice their lives to keep their word. I will show that they do not live for pleasure but to uphold their dharma.* Her condition was like that of a lunatic now. She would smile and then cry, muttering things to herself that were incomprehensible to others. In this state of delirium, she even passed by her husband's house without noticing it. When she came to, she questioned the driver, 'What place is this?'

He replied, 'This is Katra.'

She admonished him, 'Great! Where have you come! I had to go to the sabzi mandi.'

Annoyed, the tonga driver replied, 'Then why didn't you say that earlier? We came that way only. Don't you know the house you have to go to?'

'I was absent-minded.'

'Did you doze off? I had to drive so much needlessly.'

'Don't talk rubbish. Reverse the cart.'

In half an hour, the tonga arrived at Devakinath's house.

The baraat was all set to depart. The groom was already sitting in a car decked up for the occasion. The band was playing. All this spectacle made Phoolwati greatly jealous of him. The thought of jumping into the well to kill herself occurred to her. She told herself that death is better than a life where no one asks after her. She then thought of exacting revenge by trampling upon his honour by remarrying like him. What could he then do to harm her? But she expelled these thoughts from her mind, resolving that she would not bring shame to all womankind, or humiliate her own family. Finally, she resolved, *Come whatever, I will not allow the grandee to go for his wedding. Even if it costs me my life!*

The motorcar honked and was about to leave when Phoolwati descended from the tonga and planted herself in front of the car.

The mere sight of her made Devakinath seethe with rage. He thundered, 'Why have you come here? Who invited you here?'

Turning her face away, Phoolwati retorted, 'I need no invitation!'

Devakinath roared again, 'Get away from my sight. I don't want to see your face.'

'You can't go to your wedding.'

'Can you prevent me?'

Phoolwati declared her intention, 'Either I will prevent you or give up my life.'

Completely unconcerned, Devakinath taunted her, 'If you want to kill yourself, go jump into a well. Or you can take poison. If that isn't enough for you, then go marry again. Or elope with someone. I don't care. I swear I won't even say a word. Why are you after me? I have wasted half my life for you. I don't have the will to waste any more of it. Listen to me and get out of my way or I will run you over with the car.'

Phoolwati was resolute. 'That's exactly what I want. You can go once you have crushed me under your feet.'

'What is it that you want? That I should pine for you all my life? It's a sin to even look at a woman who has made an enemy of her husband.'

'I haven't come here for you to look at me.'

'Then why display this low-woman character? Why not go and fuck with someone? I perfectly understand the character of women like you.'

Phoolwati replied with bloodshot eyes, 'Control your tongue or my curses will fly around. I can tolerate everything but not such humiliation.'

Devakinath shook his head and insulted her again, 'As if you are a woman of honour!'

'One who is unfaithful should not expect loyalty from others.'

Now Devakinath got off the car and demanded, 'Will you clear the way or not?'

Determined, Phoolwati refused, 'No.'

Devakinath clenched his teeth and said, 'Move away or I will steamroll you. All your bravery will be of no use.'

Phoolwati was unmoved. 'Do whatever you think is your right. I have already declared that I can tolerate anything but I can't tolerate humiliation.'

Devakinath warned again, 'I am telling you once more to get out of the way or I will run you over. What an ass!'

Phoolwati challenged him to go ahead, 'Why waste words? Have it your way and fulfil your wish! I have resolved in my heart that you won't live in peace as long as I am alive.'

Devakinath tried to offer a way out. 'I have already said it. Go, get married to somebody. I can sign away my marriage rights over to you if you want. I don't want you to cry after me.'

Phoolwati, however, was not one to budge. 'Only in the next world will I get married now. But I cannot tolerate this atrocity while I live.'

Devakinath could not stand it any more. He ordered the driver, 'Start the car. We will see what happens. How she orders me!'

The driver refused to start the car. He did not want to endanger his own life by deliberately running over a woman. Such a job was unacceptable to him. He got off the car and walked away.

Phoolwati now went for the kill. 'You can't scare me with the threat of death! Only those who hanker for pleasure will be scared of death. I have come prepared to die, and what will I do with my life anyway? I have had enough of crying, and have no desire for it any more.'

Devakinath's rage knew no bounds. When a man loses his intellect and thinking, he can see no reason. He did not want to be shamed by a woman in front of so many men. With violent determination, he blew the horn.

For once, Phoolwati was startled. And out of natural reflex, she moved aside for a moment. But almost immediately, she collected herself and went to lie down on the road right in front of the car. This was the last shot in her quiver.

Once again, Devakinath blew the horn.

Phoolwati did not budge. Her eyes were shut. And it felt as if the heart would sink.

The car sounded the horn for the third time. And then it raced ahead with the haughtiness of a Pharaoh king. A painful scream was heard. And the motor went ahead.

Phoolwati's delicate body now lay on the road and was wobbling like the broken strings of a sitar. For one who had never tolerated a single harsh word from her husband, how could she stand such humiliation?

#### 4

So painful, so disgusting, so brutal was the sight that thousands of spectators were now baying for blood. Mob mentality is always directed towards extremes. A mob can accomplish everything that an individual finds impossible to even think about. It is like a flood that while devastating entire populations also replenishes the earth. A river that keeps to its banks has no power of creation.

This mob was now experiencing a flood of raging resentment over this unjustified cruelty. It wanted bloody justice. Taking law into its own hands is a speciality of such mobs.

Blinded by passion, hundreds of men rushed towards the car. They pulled him out of the car by grabbing his hand and fell upon him from all sides like ferocious animals. Just a moment later, the groom, with all his desires in his heart, lay on the ground, with a bloodied turban on his head and his heels beating the ground, looking no more than a bag of bones.

The two corpses lay next to each other. Their desires brought them this fate. Who was the murderer? Who the victim?

In the second quarter of the night, the two biers started on their last journey. Instead of songs of celebration, only cries of mourning could be heard.

This was a new wedding, a new baraat.

*Translated from the Urdu by Vikas Jain*



## If You Have No Woes, Buy a Goat!

There were days when procurement of pure milk was well-nigh impossible. I tried many a dairy farm, tested milkmen, but all to no avail. They would give good milk for a few days and then the diluting process would begin. Sometimes there was the complaint of the milk turning sour, at other times it would produce an offensive smell and yet another time butter particles would involuntarily come out of it. Finally, one day I said to one of my friends, 'Brother, let us own a cow in partnership. Both of us will be saved the hassle involved in obtaining milk. Both will bear the price by half and share the milk by half.' The friend agreed.

There was not enough space in my house. Moreover, I had an aversion to dung. His house was spacious, so it was finalized that he would keep the cow in his house. For this, he was entitled to the full possession of dung without me sharing it. He would enjoy complete freedom to mould it into shape, to paste the wall of his house with it, to sell it to the neighbours, or to put it to medicinal use. The covenanter does not object to, oppose or squabble over this and further he declares in his proper health and sane mind that he will never encroach upon the partner's right over the dung, nor will he instigate anyone else to do the same.

Thus, I started getting milk without worrying about it every day. For a week, there was no complaint. I would drink suitably hot milk and gladly croon:

*Brother, say thanks to God now  
He provided us with a cow  
The fresh milk that we have got  
The real taste of life has brought  
Dipped in milk a piece of bread,  
Think how much we are blessed*

*How sweet, how lovely a thing  
My cow, my God, Your blessing.*

But gradually, the old complaints started making their presence felt. Things reached to such heights that the milk remained merely in name. Howsoever much you boiled it, you could not trace the creamy layer or the sweet characteristic of it. Earlier, I would grumble about it to the milkman and relieve my heart from agitation. If this did not help things much, I would stop getting the milk. Now there was not even a little space left to air my grievance, let alone stop the milk. The saying goes that the wrath of a wanderer endangers none but the wanderer! Now it was up to me whether I drink the milk or flush it down the drain. It was destined to be a prescription for us throughout the week. The child would not touch it, forget about gulping it down. When he was made to drink it with sugar mixed in a fifty-fifty ratio for some days, the child developed numerous abscesses and my house could be distinguished through sounds of wailing and whining. The wife would say to the servant, 'Go and plunk down the milk over his head.' But I would not let the servant take this privilege and I would stop him. She would say, 'What a nice friend you have got! Shameless fellow! Can he be so foolishly innocent not to know what others would conclude after looking at such milk? Make arrangements so that we can bring the cow to our house. We can afford to be with bad smell and mosquitoes. At least, we'll get good milk. If we have spent money, let's squeeze the taste out of it.'

Chaddha Sahib has been my benefactor for a long time and is very frank with me. My belief does not rely on my assumption that he can take recourse to such a disgraceful action if he knows fully well what it is. His wife or his servant could be behind this mischief. But how can I mention it? I have met his wife. She has also visited my house many times. My wife has also enjoyed being a guest at her place not infrequently. Could Chaddha Sahib's wife turn a fool all of a sudden to hoodwink us in broad daylight? Whosoever was behind this, it was impossible for me to go to her and talk about this in straight terms. Thankfully, by the time we could complete the third month of this milk service, Chaddha was transferred. I could not afford to keep a cow on my own. With his departure the partnership came to an end. The cow was sold at half its price. I heaved a sigh of relief on that day.

Finally, it was decided that we keep a goat. She could easily stay in a corner



or the yard. No milkman is required for her upkeep, nor is there any need to hire a milk-woman to collect her dung, wash her pot or bring straw for her. Even my servant can easily milk her. Just serve a small amount of fodder and the job is done. And add to this her milk is relatively more useful. It is healthy and easily digestible, especially for children. It was sheer good luck that the panditji who came to me to take dictation was highly experienced in this matter. When I talked to him about this, he so generously eulogized about one that he knew that I could not but become the lover of the yet unseen goat—‘A goat of the western breed, with an admirable height and big udders that touch the ground as she walks, can survive on a little fodder but gives milk profusely. At a time, you can extract as much as two and a half litres of milk. She has reproduced just once and will cost twenty-five rupees.’ To me, it seemed a bit expensive but I trusted the panditji. The wish of the family was communicated to him and the goat was brought home the third day. I jumped up to see her. She outdid her description. A small earthen pot was fetched for her. Bran was also arranged. In the evening when my servant milked her, it was really two and a half litres in quantity. My small vessel overflowed with it. Now we would celebrate and beat drums to announce our joy. The issue of getting pure milk without trouble had finally been resolved. Had we hit upon the idea earlier we would not have suffered this much. I thanked the panditji from the bottom of my heart. The one duty that I had to discharge was to hold her horns every morning and evening while the servant milked her. But the trouble I took was nothing for the pure milk that I got in exchange. She was a cow of a goat! My wife was worried lest the goat catch an evil eye, so a cover was made for her udders. She was made to wear a necklace of blue china pearls. My wife would go and personally feed her the leftovers.

But not even a week had passed when the quantity of milk decreased. We were certain she had caught the evil eye.

When I told the panditji about this, he said, ‘Sahib, the goat is from a village and belonged to a zamindar. She was accustomed to munch grains unrestrained and would roam the fields and graze the whole day. Here, tied to a knot, it is no wonder her milk is reduced. Just take a little trouble to walk her.’

But who was to walk a goat in the city and where? So it was decided that we take a house in the outskirts of the city. Away from the residential area, one could locate open fields and orchards. My water-bearer would walk her for an

hour or two. We changed our house instantly and although I had to cover three miles to my office, I was ready to travel double the distance if it ensured the availability of pure milk. The house here was a spacious one. We had a compound to its front and at a little distance were orchards of mango and mahua. As you moved out of them, you entered the farms of Kaachh with potato and cabbage harvest. I got a Kaachhi appointed to provide green fodder for the goat, but all my efforts failed to raise the quantity of the milk to the desired level. In place of two and a half litres, she hardly gave a litre of milk. Still, the consolation was that we had access to pure milk. This was no less an achievement.

I will never come to the opinion that compared to other jobs, grazing a goat is something disgraceful. Among our most respected gods and prophets were many who did this. Krishna would graze cows. Who would ascertain that his cattle did not include goats? Prophet Isa and Hazrat Muhammad both grazed sheep. But people are slaves of tradition. How could they bring themselves to do what their forefathers did not think appropriate to do? The determination and courage required to follow a new path is not found in every one. The washerman will clean your dirty clothes but will consider it below his dignity to sweep at your door. The individuals belonging to the community of criminals take it as an act of humiliation to buy a thing from the market. My servant would feel bad having to walk the goat. He would take her from the house, but having reached the orchard, would leave her unattended and sleep under a tree. The goat would graze on leaves. But one day she thought of strolling in the fields. Normally she is a very composed, dignified and sophisticated animal, and her face reflects patience and seriousness, but she could not understand that the limits to her freedom differ in the orchard and the fields. One day, she entered a field and cleared many a row of cabbages. When a Kaachhi saw her, he took her by her ears and brought her to me. He said, 'Babuji! If you let your goat graze upon our fields like this, we will be ruined. If you love to keep a goat, keep her tied. Today we leave her out of respect for you but the next time she enters our fields, we will either break her legs or send her to the cattle house.' He had not yet finished when his wife came and reiterated his speech vehemently, 'I kept on shooing her away but the whore broke into the field and spoilt the harvest. May the devil occupy her stomach! You have no authority to exercise over here. If you are an officer, you would be one at your place. Keep the goat if you like, but

you are an owner, you would be one at your place. Keep the goat if you like, but keep her chained, otherwise I will twist her neck.

I stood there like a wet cat. I had never received such a heavy dose of scolding in my whole life and if I had shown this same level of patience on other occasions in life, I would have been a successful man. I could not think of anything to say to her. Only I felt like strangling the goat and giving the servant a hundred and fifty lashes. My silence enhanced the spirit of the woman to be more and more of a lioness. That day I realized that on certain occasions, silence could really prove harmful. At the uproar, my wife came to the door and said threateningly, 'What else can you do other than sending the goat to the cattle house? Unnecessarily grumbling for an hour! After all, she is an animal. If she is let loose any day, will you kill her? I warn you if you dared utter one more word. Why don't you put barbed wire round your farm or surround it with spikes? Not ready to admit your fault and on top of that you've come to fight with us. If I inform the police right now, you will wander handcuffed.'

Her authoritative tone subdued them. After they had gone I took my wife to task. 'You cause the poor to suffer a loss and at the same time throw your weight around. Can one call it justice?' My wife said with a sense of pride, 'Will you not be grateful to me that I turned the devil away so easily? Instead, you admonish me for that? Being strict to the uneducated people is the best way to set them right. You cannot be sophisticated or generous to them. They consider it your weakness and who will not suppress one who is proved weak?'

When the servant was asked to give an explanation, he said, 'Sahib, it is not part of my duty to graze the goat.'

I said, 'Who is imposing it on you? Just a little care to ensure she does not enter anybody's field. Can't you even do this much for us?'

'I said I cannot graze a goat. You please hire someone else.'

Finally, I decided to graze the goat myself in the orchard in the evenings. For such a small piece of work, I could not afford to employ a new help and at the same time I did not want to dismiss my old servant who had served me faithfully for many years and was an honest fellow. The next day I left my office a little earlier and took the goat along to the orchard. It was winter. The wind was cold. Dry leaves were scattered under the trees. The goat took to the leaves as if she had not touched food for months. She quickly moved from one tree to another while I could not but run after her. I would take some time out for rest when I

returned from office, but today this assignment awaited me! I got utterly tired but the result was worth my labour. The goat gave more milk compared to her performance on other days.

It struck me if dry leaves could contribute to an increased production of milk, certainly the green leaves would give a better result. But where does one get green leaves from? If I pluck them from a tree, the owner will definitely object to it and these are not something one can buy at a price. I thought of using a long bamboo stick for the purpose. If the owner grumbled, I would offer my entreaties to him. If he calmed down it is good, if not, even then I would see to it. What harm would it do to the tree if some leaves are plucked? Therefore, I borrowed a thin and long bamboo stick from my neighbour and tied a scythe to the top end. In the evening as I came with my goat to the orchard, I embarked on my leave-plucking mission, but I would cast a furtive glance here and there to ascertain that the owner had not turned up. Suddenly the same Kaachhi I had met the other day appeared and said, 'What are you doing, Babuji? This bamboo stick looks awkward in your hands. To keep a goat is the business of poor people like us, not that of a gentleman like you.'

I was caught unawares and did not know what to say to him. Excuses like 'What is the harm in it?' or 'One should not feel ashamed of doing one's work' seemed lame, hollow and insubstantial. My white-collared self-respect made me stay mum. The Kaachhi came up to me, took the stick from my hand in a split second and piled up a heap of leaves. He asked, 'Tell me where do I carry these leaves?'

Sheepishly I said, 'You don't worry, I will do it myself.'

He clutched a small bunch to his side and said, 'Why would you take the trouble, sir? Allow me to do it for you.'

I got the leaves heaped up in the corridor. Still lying under the trees were leaves four times the quantity that had been brought home. The Kaachhi gathered them up in a bundle, placed it on his head and left. Then I realized how clever these peasants were! Every action has its hidden implication and end.

The next day proved difficult for me to take the goat for grazing in the orchard. The Kaachhi would be there to observe me and God knows what comments he might pass. To lose my dignity in his eyes was akin to one's face being blackened. One should learn to respect the norms society has set for an individual to be civilized and dignified. Does it suit one to be reduced to a

laughing stock?

But the goat was not ready to forgo so easily her right to roam freely, which she now thought was part of her routine. As the evening fell she raised an incessant voice of resistance, making it difficult for me to sit at peace in my house. Her undulating bleating dented wounds on my eardrums. Where should I run away? My wife started cursing her. I also gave the goat a good beating with my stick. But she was in no mood to end her satyagraha. It was such a vexation.

Finally I gave in. There is no cure for the malady one has chosen to have. At eight on a wintery night! One could hardly imagine stepping out of the house and here I was walking this goat and cursing my fate. I have the terror of my life if I come out into darkness. Once, a snake crawled past me. Supposing I had stepped on it, definitely it would have bitten me. Since then, I had never gone out in the darkness. But because of this goat, I had to face the fear. Even when the wind blew softly and the leaves rattled, my guts would shrink and my calves would shake out of fear. Perhaps I was a goat in my previous birth and this goat was my master that now I compensate for it like this. May the pandit go to hell who thrust this goat upon us. The life of a householder is in a mess. It is for the child about whom I care that I am running after this hazardous animal, and the same child after it has grown up, will not listen to me. He will say, 'What have you done for me, after all? Have you even a property that you can pass on to me after you die?' However, I returned at nine in the night having discharged my duty sincerely! Had the goat died in the night, I would not have felt sad at all.

The next day, early in the morning, I was gripped with a worry to get rid of this unrewarding task that I had to perform every night. My office was closed. I got a long rope and as the evening set in, put it round the neck of the goat with one of its ends tied to a tree. Now she was free to graze as much as she liked! By the time people lit lamps in their house, I planned to go and bring her back. Since it was a holiday it was decided that the family go to a movie. A good one was running. I took my servant along, otherwise who else would have taken care of the child. I returned home at nine in the night and took a lantern to bring the goat back. A nice job she had done by entangling herself in the rope beyond any hope of the knots coming undone as it encircled the three trees that stood there. She could not move even a step as the whole length of the rope had already been used. What a mess! I felt like leaving her right there to die. Who could possibly sit there at such an hour in the night undoing the knots of a rope! But my heart

sit there at such an hour in the night undoing the knots of a rope! But my heart dictated otherwise. First, I untied the rope from her neck and then sat down to loosen the knots one by one. The exercise took almost an hour. My hands were numb because of the cold, and as for my heart, it felt really irritated. The whole idea of the rope proved a big flop and all the more painstaking.

What to do now? My wisdom failed me. If it was not for the milk, I would have handed the goat over to somebody. As soon as evening falls, the witch will start producing her discordant notes. What an ominous and unpleasant voice! The sacred texts proclaim that wherever the voice reaches, it repels gods from going there. Little wonder that these inhabitants of paradise, who are used to listening to the songs of the fairies, hate the disgusting voice. I had developed such a fear for her eardrum-piercing voice that no sooner had I come back from the office the next day, I ran away from the house. But even after I had covered a mile, I felt her voice still chasing me. I felt ashamed of myself that such a one like me who could not afford to keep a cow should boast of such a delicate temperament. I reminded myself, *Well, do you think you will stay outside the whole night? When you reach at eight in the night, will you not be welcomed by the same goat-song?*

Suddenly, seeing a tree with low branches, on an impulse, I felt like climbing it. Trees with smooth stems are hard to climb but here I had one with branches sprouting out at a height of six or seven feet. The tree was dense with green leaves. Moreover, it was a sycamore whose leaves have great fascination for goats. I had not climbed a tree in the last thirty years and was obviously out of practice. The evidence manifested itself in the fact that despite it being an easy climb, my feet were shaking; but I did not lose courage and started plucking the leaves. *While I am all alone here, no one is supposed to notice me doing so. It will not be long for darkness to descend. I will gather a pile of leaves and reach home in no time. And with all this trouble that I take, if the goat still grumbles, she will face the music.*

As yet I was atop the tree, a herd of sheep and goats emerged out of the blue and gorged on the heap of leaves. I cried myself hoarse from above but who cared to pay heed. The shepherd was nowhere to be seen. He would be sneaking somewhere for the fear of being cursed if found. Irritated, I started climbing down. Every second a big chunk of leaves vanished. I felt like breaking the legs of each one of them.

Suddenly, I slipped and fell down straight from a height of ten feet. My waist was so badly hurt that everything plunged into darkness before my eyes for some five minutes. It was good that I did not fall from the top, otherwise I would have kicked the bucket. The only fruitful thing was the sound of my fall which scared the goats away and some leaves were left out. I gathered the leaves into a pile and hiding it from people walked home ashamed like a helpless man. Nothing undesirable occurred on the way. When it was four furlongs to my house, I hastened my steps so that no one could notice me, but then my eyes caught sight of a Kaachhi coming towards me. You can just imagine my embarrassment. The road ran along the elevated muddy ground on either side and on the mound grew cactus. *If I choose to go straight, I will have to cross him and God knows what sarcasm he might put me to.* There was no room to turn and escape while the rascal approached like a problem with zero possibility of a solution. I hitched my dhoti up, manoeuvred to walk with a different gait and wished to slip away like this, giving an impression that I was some labourer. My breath paused as if the Kaachhi were a ferocious lion and I feverishly prayed to God: ‘O! Protector of the helpless! Just lock up the tongue of the rascal. Take away his power to see things for the time being.’ Ah! That fatal moment when I moved past him with a space of one foot keeping us apart! I walked on the edge of a sword as I took a step forward, and lo the beastly voice hit my ears, ‘Who is there walking with leaves plucked from somebody’s tree?’ I felt as if the ground beneath my feet had disappeared and I had entered his entrails. Every hair on my body stood up like a spear, my mind underwent a commotion and my limbs were listless. I was not in my senses to furnish a reply. Hastily, I moved two or three strides forward. But it was not something which I had thought out, rather it was a reflex action that I took recourse to in my self-defence. An unfeeling hand fell on my pile of leaves. My mind failed to record what happened thereafter. When I regained my senses I was standing at my door, sweating badly as if I had had a fit of unconsciousness a moment before. That was the spell when my mind was governed by my subconsciousness and there lingered the obnoxious, heart-rending, the foulest and the most frustrating voice of the goat—a voice which echoed the ill omens of the world, its curses and banes—piercing my eardrums.

My wife asked, ‘Where had you been? You did not take the witch out for a stroll in the orchard. She has made life a real hell. I just don’t know where to go to avoid all this ’

to avoid an end.

I consoled her, 'Let her bleat today. Tomorrow the first thing I will do is to turn this goat out. I don't care even if I have to send her to a slaughterhouse.'

'I wonder how people manage to keep goats.'

'One needs the mind of a dog to keep goats.'

Early in the morning as I pondered over the riddance of this black devil of a goat from the house, I spotted a shepherd passing by my door with his herd. I called him out and requested him to take my goat for grazing. He agreed. This was his job, after all.

I asked him, 'How much will you take?'

'I take eight annas per goat, huzoor!'

'I will give you one rupee. But ensure that she is out of my sight.'

He was wonderstruck, 'Is she untamed, Babuji?'

'No, not at all. In fact, she is very harmless. Has any goat harmed anyone? The only thing is I do not want to see her face.'

'Does she give milk yet?'

'Yes, a litre or a litre and a quarter.'

'I will arrange to send the milk to your house.'

'That will be so kind of you to do so.'

The moment she stepped out of my house, I felt as if bad luck had left me. The goat also felt glad as if she was being released from custody. The shepherd milked her right there, left the milk for us and took the goat along. It was perhaps for the first time in his life that he had come across an owner who was so indifferent to his property.

For a week we continually got milk at home, but then there was a decrease in its quantity so much so that by the end of the month the milk supply stopped. We came to know that the goat was in the family way. I did not complain. The Kaachhi had a cow. I asked him to provide the milk. My servant would go to milk the cow himself.

Many months went by. The shepherd would come once in a month to collect his wages. I did not ever mention about the goat to him. The very memory of her gave me the creeps. If he could read my thoughts, he would have exploited my situation to get his wages doubled.

One day as I sat on my doorstep I saw the shepherd coming to me with his herd. To my surprise, I found my goat also coming along with its two kids. She



went straight to the spot where she would be tied, and then she walked into the yard and looked into the eyes of my wife as if introducing herself. My wife ran to clasp one of the kids to her breast, took it in her lap and brought enough fodder from the room to last a month. She fed the goat with such love and affection as if she were a friend whom she was meeting after many days. There was no way one could trace that old animosity and bitterness. Now she would fondle the goat and now pat the kids. The goat ate up the fodder with the speed of a postal van.

My wife addressed me, 'How lovely these kids are!'

'So they are, really.'

'I feel like keeping one of them.'

'Still your appetite has not gone?'

'You are so cold and unfeeling.'

The fodder was finished. The goat stood up contented and walked away. Hopping, the two kids followed her. My wife saw all this with tear-filled eyes.

The shepherd filled up his tobacco pot and came inside to ask for fire. As he set out to leave, he said, 'From tomorrow onwards, I will be sending you milk, my master.'

My wife said, 'But what about the kids? What will they drink?'

'How much could they possibly drink? She gives two litres of milk. These many days the milk was not that fresh, so I had stopped sending it to you.'

The unnerving incidents of that night flashed before my eyes.

I said to him, 'Whether you bring milk or not, make sure you do not bring the goat this way again.'

That was the day I had seen the shepherd and the goat for the last time. Nor did I try to find out anything about them but my wife still sometimes sheds a tear or two thinking about the kids.

*Translated from the Urdu by Sarfaraz Nawaz*



## The Goddess of Faithfulness

### 1

It was a morning in the winter month of Maagh in Haridwar. Devotees had thronged to take a dip in the holy Ganga. The mountains flanking the river seemed bathed in the golden light of the morning. The teeming crowds jostled with each other. At places, groups of mendicants and saints and bhajan singers were sitting. The king of Sangli and his queen had also come to take a holy dip in the Ganga. They had their six-year-old daughter with them. The king was attired in regalia—Jaipuri turban, full-length achkan and Amritsari shoes. He had a well-proportioned physique and impressive moustaches. The delicate queen had a wheatish complexion and her body was laden with jewellery. Their daughter too had worn ornaments. They had an entourage of armed soldiers and liveried servants who accompanied them everywhere.

They found their way through the crowd, reached the bank of the river and took a bath. Four men made a private enclosure for the queen by drawing curtains so that she could take her bath. Raja Sahib was distributing alms. The girl was playing with the water. She was setting her paper boat afloat when a strong wave came and washed away the boat. She leapt to grab the boat. Right then, a crowd of people happened to land there and the girl was separated from her parents. She ran this way and that, every person from a distance looked like her father or mother, but when she came close, she realized it was mere deception. Then she began to cry. She was so scared that she couldn't talk to anyone, or ask her way around. She cried spasmodically and called out for her mother frequently. Suddenly, she saw a lane that looked like the one leading to

their guest house and began to walk on it, but it took her further away from the guest house.

The king and the queen began to look for her everywhere. Panic-stricken, they began to vent their ire on the servants who started searching for the girl. The queen suddenly ran towards a girl, but when she came close she realized her mistake and broke into tears. The king was furious, but he didn't go out in search of the girl. His turban was not yet tied properly, he couldn't do up his hair—all because the servants were not around. He vented his anger on the pandits. Eventually, he somehow managed to dress up on his own, hung his sword from the belt and went out in search of his daughter. In the meantime, the queen had reached the riverside and took a vow. It was difficult to step ahead because of the thick crowd. If the unfortunate parents moved one step forward, they were pushed two steps backward by the crowd.

In her effort to find out the guest house the little princess moved further away from it. Suddenly, it occurred to the king that she might have reached the guest house, and the servants probably had found her. He promptly moved towards the guest house with the queen. But the princess was not there. Both went out again in search of her. The irony was—the princess was running ahead, crying, while her parents followed her behind. Only a distance of twenty yards separated them. Several hours passed. The sky became overcast with clouds. The queen was totally exhausted, she couldn't move even a step further. She sat by the road, crying. The king's eyes were bloodshot. He was angry with the world.

Disappointed, the princess turned back and walked towards the Haridwar Ghat. She walked past her parents who were looking in some other direction. Their eyes didn't meet.

Just then a sadhu appeared there, with a deer skin hanging down his shoulder and a tanpura in hand. Just a look at the princess's frightened face and he realized that she had been separated from her parents. He picked her up in his lap and asked her where she lived. She went on crying. She was so distraught that she couldn't utter a word.

The sadhu felt the stirring of a desire in his mind. Taking the girl in his arms, he was thinking what he should do. *What can I do if her parents cannot be traced?* His inner voice urged him to hide the girl. He walked towards his cottage with the princess in tow. His wife and daughter were both dead. That

was why he had renounced the world. Coming by this loveable girl, filial love revived in his heart. He felt that God, in his kindness, had taken pity on him and had sent this girl to be the guiding light in his old age.

## 2

There was a neat and clean cottage in an isolated spot covered with creepers and flowers. Far below, on the rear side, the river was flowing. There was a small courtyard in front of the hut. Two deer and two peacocks were roaming there. The sadhu was sitting on a rock in front of the cottage and singing to the tune of the tanpura. The princess was singing along with him. She was now ten. After singing the bhajan she started plucking flowers and wove a garland. Then she went inside the cottage and bathed the idol of the deity.

The sadhu also came in and both began to sing hymns. Then he went into a trance and began to dance. After some time, the girl also joined in. Once the kirtan was over, both drank the *charan* amrit. Then the sadhu began to teach her (the sadhu had given her the name Indira). He derived a kind of spiritual pleasure in teaching her singing, dancing, music and reading. He cherished the desire that Indira should devote her life to the worship of God and service to humanity. He dreamt of an auspicious day when Indira would sing like Meera before the deity and dance in spiritual ecstasy. Indira was beautiful, soft-spoken and a skilled dancer. Devotees thronged the place when she did kirtan at night.

The sadhu had spent the past five years in that cottage. Now that Indira could bear the harshness of travel, they decided to go on a pilgrimage. The devotees came to see him off. The sadhu entrusted one devotee with the responsibility of looking after the cottage, and proceeded on the pilgrimage.

They travelled to pilgrimage sites for several years. Badrinath, Kedarnath, Dwaraka, Rameshwar, Mathura, Kashi, Puri. Wherever they went, they did kirtan, and people went crazy with spiritual ecstasy. Now, the sadhu began to teach Indira the shastras and the Vedas. Often when the sadhu got lost in meditation, Indira pored over the Vedas.

## 3

One day, Mahatmaji and Indira reached a village inhabited by Muslims. In that place, plague had broken out. People had taken refuge in makeshift shacks outside the village. Mahatmaji settled down under a tree and began to treat people. Indira too began to treat the women. The daily routine for both consisted of looking for herbs and roots, preparing medicine, looking after the patients and their children. Eventually, Mahatmaji himself was afflicted with plague. The people of the village and those of neighbouring areas tended to his health. When his last moments drew near, he called Indira to his side, advised her to spend her life in the service of God and humanity, and breathed his last. The entire village was in commotion. Mahatmaji's funeral procession was taken out with great gusto, accompanied by music. There was a band of bhajan singers who walked with the corpse. The procession was taken around the village and finally he was put to rest under the tree where he had stayed.

Indira was now about twenty years old. She had a divine glow on her face that made people lower their gaze at her sight. Her strong physique was equipped to bear any kind of physical discomfort. The people of the village wanted her to stay on. But it was difficult for her to bear the separation from Mahatmaji. She couldn't stay in the village that robbed her of the person she loved the most. She tried to console her heart, saying that it was all God's will, but her heart refused to be consoled. Finally, one day she took leave from everyone and left the village. She had a tanpura and a *kundal* in her hands, and a deer skin hung from her shoulder.

She wandered in villages and towns singing bhajans that awakened religious devotion in people's hearts. Thousands of people gathered wherever she went. Different kinds of carriages were presented to her for her travels. But she didn't care for worldly comforts and spent her days under some tree near a temple. There was such a magical power in her eyes that people waited eagerly to hear her speak. Even people given to a sensual and wayward life lowered their heads in devotion when they came before her. Indira loved Sufi poetry. She loved the *dohas* of Kabir and Meera, and sang them. She also loved the padas written by Surdas and Kabirdas. Among the contemporary poets she particularly loved the verses of a poet named Harihar. She lost herself in his poems. She had a special place for him in her heart. She dreamt of meeting him one day when she could kiss his feet.

It was a special town of Jarwal state—mountainous, clean roads, neatly turned out people, gorgeous buildings. The town square was very beautiful. Shops were all lit up brightly on all four sides. There was a park in the centre with a fountain. Indira was standing near the fountain and singing bhajans on her tanpura. Thousands of people were standing there with rapt attention. The speeding cars often stopped and the nobles got down from them to listen to her songs. Vendors with carts stopped and began listening to her bhajans. Indira was singing a pada from her favourite poet, Harihar, which was steeped in spiritual devotion. Its fascinating rhythm held everyone in thrall.

A couple of years ago, Harihar had been a rich noble. He was interested in poetry and was steeped in philosophy and mysticism. He had left his gorgeous mansion and had made an ordinary cottage his abode where he wrote poetry and songs that expressed his mystical and philosophical thoughts. Oblivious to physical needs like food and clothing, he spent entire nights in philosophical speculations. The world appeared to him to be an illusion; no worldly object was worthy enough to engage his mind. He didn't care about his possessions and properties, didn't show any interest in business transactions. People from the world of business came to meet him, but he didn't go out of his cottage to meet them. However, if a destitute arrived, he promptly took him in and provided him shelter. All his wealth was dedicated to the service of the poor. He often distributed grains and blankets among the poor. No hungry person left his door disappointed. The upshot of this was that he was immersed in debt. The lenders filed suits and decrees were passed against him. Harihar didn't leave his cottage to defend himself in the court. His properties were auctioned when he was singing a pada on his sitar. All furnishings from his palace were taken out and auctioned. He seemed not to care one bit. Then the palace itself was auctioned, but it had no impact on him. A big nobleman took possession of the palace. Even after all this, Harihar still had vast tracts of land in his possession. He could have built a great palace if he so liked. But he was no longer in love with worldly possessions. He went about the villages and gave away land rights to his

possessions. He went about the villages and gave away land rights to his subjects. Thus, he set free all one hundred and one villages. Wherever he went people ran to welcome him and touched the dust of his feet to their forehead. All kinds of goodies were presented before him. But he took shelter under some tree outside the village, ate some wild fruits and slept peacefully. Finally, getting rid of all worldly possessions, which made him truly happy, he returned to his cottage and started living there. But he found that his cottage still had some objects that spoke of his refined taste, and which were redundant. He gathered these objects of art and painting in one place and made a bonfire of them. His sitar, tanpura, trumpet, statues, deerskin, books on philosophy and mysticism—all turned to ashes. He just stood there smiling, witnessing this scene.

## 6

It was evening. In the city square, Indira was singing a pada on her tanpura. Thousands of people had gathered there. Many nobles and aristocrats were standing there too. Harihar was mesmerized when he heard her mellifluous voice. He listened more intently and then leapt to join the crowd. Every rhythm struck a chord in his heart. That day, Harihar realized the depth of his verses, their deep pathos and their impact on the people on that day. He stood there like a picture of amazement. So much so that when the song got over and everyone, including Indira left the place, he still stood there like a statue. Then suddenly he became aware of the silence around him and wanted to ask people about Indira's address but couldn't bring himself to do so. Helpless, he returned to his own cottage and wrote his first poem of love. He spent the night in a state of restlessness. The following day, he reached the same spot to see Indira singing there. The crowd was even bigger than the earlier day, but there was no movement. Harihar too listened to her in rapturous silence. After half an hour when Indira left for home, he followed her. A big crowd followed her to her cottage. When she reached near her cottage she bade goodbye to everyone, but Harihar still followed her at some distance. Indira drew water from the river, gave offerings to the deity and then took her meal. Then she lay down on the floor.

The moonshine scattered everywhere. Harihar was sitting on the earth right in front of the cottage and was writing a fresh poem of love on a rock with a piece

of coal. He kept on writing through the night. When the crimson light appeared towards the east in the morning, he arranged all the rocks on the threshold of the cottage, and then lay down under the shade of a tree at some distance. The rocks were so arranged that Indira had no trouble reading his message of love.

Early next morning, when Indira came out of the cottage after prayer and kirtan, she found the rocks arranged in a circular fashion. Surprised, she picked up one and found that it looked like a love poem. She picked up another which also contained a verse that seemed to be the second couplet of a poem. Then she picked all of them, arranged them in order and read the full poem. There was such pathos in the poem that her heart began pounding. The verses must have been composed by Harihar, the living legend! Several times Indira had felt a strong desire to meet this poet. Having received the message of love, she couldn't control herself and went out to look for him. She was sure that he was somewhere quite close. She looked around for him and finally found him sleeping behind her cottage. She kept staring at his face in surprise mixed with pleasure. Flies were hovering over him. She began to swat them away with her *aanchal*. Harihar woke up but seeing Indira fanning him, pretended to be asleep, just to enjoy this expression of her love a little more. Then he got up. Indira touched his feet in salutation.

Now, Harihar began to live with her. She lived inside the cottage while he stayed outside. Both wandered about in the mountains and gathered flowers and fruits. The mountains reverberated with Indira's songs. Now, she no longer went to the town square to sing. Harihar was her only audience. Her devotees from the town still thronged her place. People visited her and presented her with gifts.

## 7

It was morning, Indira was sitting on a rock beside a lake and singing. Harihar was sitting in front of her and was weaving a garland for the deity. In the lake, wild fowls and swans were swimming. Antelopes and nilgais grazing there seemed to be enchanted by her song.

Suddenly, Prince Gyan Singh rode past the cottage on a horse. He had an entourage of armed guards and courtiers with him. He was tall and handsome; he had a manly figure with a broad chest and his moustache was barely sprouting. He was stunned when he heard Indira's song and his horse stopped right there.



He was stunned when he heard Indira's song and his horse stopped right there. His entourage stood still. Indira was lost in spiritual devotion. She was oblivious to Gyan Singh's presence. As the song ended, the prince got down from his horse, came over to Indira and greeted her with the utmost respect and asked her name. He wasn't married yet. He had rejected hundreds of marriage proposals from the royal families. He found himself captivated by Indira's beauty. He invited her over to the palace. Indira begged for one day's time. Gyan Singh promised to come the following day and left. However, he couldn't concentrate on hunting any more. He suddenly developed a hatred for hunting, and love for all living beings. Now, he felt great pain hunting, antelopes. Indira's song echoed in his ears and her image flitted before his eyes.

## 8

Indira was overjoyed at this invitation. She was not at all aware of the flame of love her beauty and music had ignited in the heart of Gyan Singh. She thought that she would be blessed with a royal endowment that would set her free from the anxiety of daily life and she would be able to spend a life of contentment with Harihar. Harihar felt that Indira would be very happy living in the palace because the real state of the prince's mind was not hidden from him. A woman who was so stunningly beautiful was not fit to wander about in the wilderness. If she lived with Harihar, what could she get except poverty and starvation? He did not want to put hurdles in the way of her happiness. For his own spiritual solace, it was enough for him that Indira had a place in her heart for him. This thought was enough for him to find a meaning in his life. He had no other desire, no other longing in his mind.

The night passed. Early in the morning, Harihar decked her in floral jewellery. He gathered all the gifts that her devotees had given her on that day. Indira's beauty was enhanced by these embellishments. But he also shed a few tears, unseen by Indira. It was as though he had no misgivings about Indira, even if he knew that perhaps it was the last time he was seeing her. In reality, he had apprehensions that Indira might not remember him any more. She was bound to forget him in the midst of all the luxury and comforts of the palace. His heart found consolation in the thought that at least she would live in comfort. She would prove to be helpful to the common people. Would she change so much as

to stay silent in the face of royal oppression? Could she forget the advice given to her by Mahatmaji?

As Indira dressed up and got ready for her departure, both sat down and sang a kirtan. That day, two different streams of thought were running in their minds. Indira was happy in the anticipation of what was going to happen. She could see only beauty all around her. She had had enough of a life of renunciation and wanted now to enjoy the blessings of life. She was thinking that the gifts from the court would open the door for a life of comforts for her. Right at that moment, she was dreaming of a life when she would prepare delicious food for Harihar and have good dresses made for him. She would oil his hair. When he slept, she would fan him. A great poet like him should not live his life in obscurity. But Harihar was drowned in unhappy thoughts. His future was dark. Just then, Gyan Singh reached there with his companions and carriage.

## 9

The palace was impressively furnished and had spacious rooms guarded by beautiful maids. The queen mother was holding court. Indira greeted her by touching her feet. The queen gave her a cordial welcome. She had taken her bath and was ready for the puja. Indira went to the temple with her and other women of the palace and did kirtan there. Indira's kirtan transported them to a different world. The queen mother embraced Indira, took out her own pearl necklace and gave it to her as a gift. Indira sang a second bhajan and the queen mother placed her head at Indira's feet. She had never felt such deep devotion to God. Right at that moment arrived Padma who was beautiful in a different way. Her beauty had grandeur, and was awe-inspiring while Indira's beauty had refinement and humility. One was like the jasmine flower, simple and delicate, while the other was a sunflower, bright-hued and attractive. Padma's father, Sardar Kesri Singh, was a minister in the court. He wanted Padma to marry the prince. Padma also truly loved the prince, even though the prince was not too enamoured of her. However, he always looked after her comforts.

When Padma came, she saw the prince staring at Indira. She could also see that Indira was being welcomed with cordiality and goodwill. She herself had never been shown such courtesies. This common, singing woman of the

marketplace was stealing a march on her. She felt wildly jealous. She felt a sense of rivalry with Indira and began to make plans to humiliate her. She wanted to turn the queen mother against her and made fun of her ordinary appearance and physical features. When these mean tricks did not have any impact on Indira, she hid her valuable bangles under the tanpura and began to look for it after some time. She pretended to search here and there and finally came to Indira and took out the bangles from under the tanpura. Indira began to cry out of embarrassment. The slave girls were very happy because Padma often gave them tips. They showed their displeasure against Indira. But just at that moment, Gyan Singh arrived and saved Indira from all allegations. He could sense that there was some mischief afoot. He could not imagine that Indira was capable of such an act. Upon seeing his attitude, the slave girls too changed their position and the queen mother chided Padma. Padma suffered great discomfiture. Harihar was standing outside the palace wall in a state of self-forgetfulness. He wanted to hear Indira's voice. Disappointed, he returned to the cottage, kissed every object there and burst into tears.

The following day the court sat in the palace. The king of Jarwal was presiding on the throne. Coincidentally, the king of Sangli had also arrived there. In the last fifteen years, he had had to bear with many shocks. His wife was no more. He looked very feeble after the loss of his wife and daughter. But his predilection for dressing up was still there. He was wearing a Jaipuri turban, a flowing achkan and the same Amritsari shoes. His hair was done up in the old style. It was another matter that behind these external decorations there was an aching heart. When Indira sang with rapt attention, streams of tears flowed down his eyes. He could see the image of his heavenly wife in Indira. When he had seen Indira's mother as a new bride, she had looked exactly like this. He had not seen such resemblance between two women before. When Indira was leaving the room, he accompanied her for a couple of steps and then upon getting an opportunity, he asked her name and the whereabouts of her parents. Indira related to him the incident of her childhood. The king realized that Indira was his lost daughter. He felt a strong desire to hold her in a tight embrace, but was too hesitant to do so.

He wondered where she had been all these years, what kind of people she had stayed with, what were the circumstances she had lived in, *etc.* How could he

accept her as his daughter? Indira also looked at him intently and faintly remembered that this person had some resemblance to her father. But she felt too diffident to express that fact lest the prince refuse to recognize or accept her.

The king of Jarwal was so happy with her kirtan that he endowed her with five districts of freehold land. Indira prostrated herself at his feet to express her gratitude.

## 10

The prince prepared his boat and took Indira for a cruise on the river. Indira was waiting for an opportunity to request him to appoint Harihar as a court poet. That was the reason why even though her heart was pining for Harihar and she wanted to leave as quickly as possible, she did not say anything and went along with the prince's plan. She was thinking that the cruise on the river would perhaps give her the opportunity to broach the subject. The boat moved gently on the river. Indira began to sing a verse written by Harihar. Suddenly, she saw Harihar standing on the bank of the river. He looked so forlorn and dejected, as though he had been permanently separated from her.

The prince was enchanted by Indira's singing. He could not hold himself any more. He opened his heart to Indira and presented it to her. Indira now realized that she had been trapped in a net of gold now. If she brought up Harihar's name, it would seem like poison to the prince.

The prince would buy for Harihar's blood. She regretted having accepted the prince's invitation. This was the first whiplash of misery her desires had brought her way. She also realized that even though the prince was standing before her like a suppliant, she was, in fact, his prisoner. She said, 'Dear prince, I am a poor woman. I am not worthy to become your queen. You will be defamed. It would not be surprising if the king and the queen become angry at this. The consequences will not be good. I do not want to put you into difficulties'.

The prince replied, 'I will reject the throne and the crown for you. Indira, I don't care for anyone's happiness or anger. I am ready to do anything for you'.

Indira made the excuse that she had embraced renunciation. If she broke her vow, Mahatmaji would be hurt. She considered him her guru. It would make him sad even in heaven. She said she had great esteem for the prince, but love was forbidden to her and that she could not break her vow.

forbidden to her and that she could not break her vow.

The prince sounded desperate. 'Don't you feel pity for me, Indira?'

Indira reiterated, 'I cannot break my vow'.

'These are mere excuses, Indira. Am I to understand that there is someone else in your life?'

'I have told that I am a sannyasin.'

'Is this your final decision?'

'Yes'.

In a state of desperation, the prince unsheathed his sword and tried to stab himself. Indira held him by his hand just in time.

'Let me die, Indira. If I can't have you in my life, then my life is of no use.'

Indira put his sword inside the sheath and said to him, 'You will find thousands of women like me. Even if you win the love of a poor woman, it will bring you no satisfaction.'

The prince's face lit up. He said, 'Love does not care for status and lineage.'

'But love isn't something that is born instantaneously. The love that is born of a single glance can also die in a second. You're a prince. How can I believe that you won't turn away from me when you happen to meet a woman who's more beautiful than me? What will I do then?'

'I understand your misgivings. Indira, give me some time so that I can prove to you the depth of my love for you. But if you do not give me a chance and leave, you'll receive the news of my death.'

Indira saw that Harihar was leaving the bank of the river and slowly moving towards the hamlet. Her eyes brimmed over, thinking of her own despair and helplessness.

## 11

Padma couldn't see her desires dying a premature death. She began to investigate the past life of Indira in the hope that she might come up with something which would enable her to put Indira in a bad light. One day, searching for her address, she reached her cottage. There she met Harihar. In the course of the conversation, she tried to tell Harihar how unfaithful Indira was to him. She had procured several pictures showing Indira taking walks with the

prince, and singing and reading with him. She told him that Indira was so happy in the palace that it seemed as though she had gained the wealth of the world. *And here you are, mourning over her separation.* Such an unfaithful woman deserved that she be exposed in such a way that she is not able to show her face to anyone! But this scandalmongering had no effect on Harihar. Being disappointed in this objective, Padma tried another trick. She brought Harihar to the court with her and introduced him to the prince. The prince was very happy listening to his verses. They were the same verses, as sung by Indira. The prince showed him the utmost courtesy. Padma wanted Harihar to make some utterances that would give away his love for Indira, and the prince would get to know that he was Indira's lover. But Harihar was cautious enough not to allow any word escape from his lips that would expose his love. If the prince praised Indira, Harihar listened to it impassively, as though he had never heard of her name. Padma went to the inner apartments and brought Indira with her. She was hoping that both would be greatly excited at this unexpected meeting and then she would be able to execute her plan of maligning Indira. But Indira behaved like a stranger with Harihar. Harihar too kept up the pretence. Then Padma organized a poetry-reading session where she invited known poets of the state. It was proposed that the poet whose poetry was considered the best would be given the post of the court poet. Padma was sure that Harihar's poetry would carry the day. That is why she appointed Indira as the judge. The prince appreciated her choice of the judge. Indira could see clearly that this was being done to ruin her prospects. Harihar's verses were certain to prove the best and she would be compelled to declare him the winner. To utter a word in Harihar's favour could prove fatal. To object to her decision and finding fault in Harihar's verses, and then prejudicing the prince would not be difficult. She wanted to forewarn Harihar, but didn't get an opportunity.

Padma was busy in the preparation of the poetry-reading session. All the invited poets arrived on the appointed day. The condition was that they must present their new verses. Harihar had not written any new verses. Other poets recited their verses to great appreciation by the audience. When his turn came, Harihar declared, 'I haven't written any new poem.' He had guessed the trick Padma was playing, and didn't walk into her trap. Indira took it to be a divine intervention and thanked God in her mind. The prize and the position were won by another poet and Indira's love for Harihar remained a secret. Harihar left the

by another poet and Indira's love for Harinar remained a secret. Harinar left the court happily. Indira was happy in the palace—what could be more pleasing for him?

## 12

It was the coronation ceremony of Prince Gyan Singh. The city had been illuminated. Gates had been erected on all crossroads. Electric valves had lit up the road on both sides from the main gate of the palace to the city square. The trees on both sides had prayers written on them in electronic letters. The pandits were finding out the auspicious moment. Just at that moment, Gyan Singh left the palace and came over to the mandap that had been put up especially for this purpose. The members of the court and the nobles presented gifts. Gyan Singh stood up, declared his policies and exhorted the officials and the subjects to do their duties. The subjects were very happy because he had written off their revenues by half. People blessed him and left the court. Then the poor were fed. After that the army gave him the gun salute accompanied by the band. The officers were given medals and citations, after which there were fireworks. Then a kirtan was held before the deity. Harihar had come there with the hope that he could catch a glimpse of Indira, but she was not there among the devotees. And, contrary to custom, courtesans were not invited. Gyan Singh had issued instructions against this. The city was agog with the news that Gyan Singh was going to marry Indira. Everybody, high and low, was happy at the prospect of getting such a kind and amiable individual as their queen.

After the kirtan, Gyan Singh went up to Indira and said, 'Indira, haven't you made up your mind yet?'

'Not yet. Let me be worthy of the high position.'

'I'd like to offer you a gift of love to commemorate this event.'

'I can't accept any gift of love yet.'

'You're very cruel, Indira.'

'And you want to make a queen out of such a cruel person! The queen should be kind.'

'You're the embodiment of kindness for the rest of the world. But for me, you're an image carved in stone.'

Gyan Singh was now totally in the hands of Indira. She was the soul that lived

inside Gyan Singh's body. Indira was always preoccupied with the rights of the subjects. Every second day, some royal edict was announced, allowing some new rights to the subjects. The royal expenses were cut down. The palace was no longer as plush and grand as it used to be. A whole army of servants had been dispensed with. There was also a caravan of beautiful women who were given marching orders. Several parts of the palace were earmarked for public service. A library was opened in one hall, while a hospital was opened in another. An entire building was earmarked for peasants and labourers where they held their meetings. Exhibitions were held of agricultural equipment. A big section of the army was suspended. Instead, young men from among the subjects were chosen, and a national army was raised. Gymnasiums were established for young people. Gyan Singh had grown up in an atmosphere of absolute monarchy. His orders could have been law for the subjects. But he had now chosen to restrict his own power by bringing about some new edict every other day. This was because of Indira. It was as though Indira was writing the edicts to which he was putting his signature blindly.

This led to great unrest among the courtiers and the nobles. They felt that the state was facing total ruin. If Gyan Singh continued with such policies, then someday he would do away with the nobles. People began to hatch conspiracies to arrest these revolutionary tendencies. Padma acted as the catalyst for all anti-revolutionary forces. They spread rumours among demobbed soldiers and retired royal officials. The nobles wanted to dethrone Gyan Singh by force and anoint another king in his place. Padma's sole intention in supporting this movement was to see Indira defeated and humiliated. She slandered her and held her responsible for the changes in Gyan Singh. Preparations for an armed coup were afoot.

Gyan Singh and Indira were playing chess in a small room in the palace. The room was bare, shorn of any furnishing. Indira had laid the wager that if she won the game, the king should fulfil whatever she desired. The king wouldn't be able to refuse her anything. The king also would have the same right. Both were happy in their thoughts. Gyan Singh was happy beyond measure. He had no doubts that he was going to win. Both were playing with full absorption. The king seemed to dominate the game in the beginning, and he conquered several of Indira's pawns. He grew more and more excited. Suddenly, the tables were turned. Gyan Singh's king was under threat and his queen was checkmated.



came. Gyan Singh's king was under threat and his queen was threatened. Then, one after another, all his pawns disappeared and he was defeated. His face was overcast with despair. Just at that moment, Indira took out an edict and requested the king to sign it. The king took a cursory look at the edict. The import duty on grains was done away with, which would result in considerable depletion of the royal coffers. The state had a shortfall of grains production and the shortfall was made good by import from neighbouring states. Because of the import duty, the grain was sold at a steep price, causing untold miseries to people. Indira wanted to provide grains at cheap prices to the common people. That day she got the opportunity to have this done. Gyan Singh had reservations about this policy, but he had given his word. So, he signed the edict without demur.

Just then they could hear some commotion outside the palace. One sentinel ran in to announce that the rebels had surrounded the palace from all sides and were trying to break into it.

## 13

Gyan Singh was furious at the news of the rebels and went out fully armed. He climbed the ramparts of the palace and from there addressed the rebels and asked them the reasons for their discontent.

A man replied from below, 'We will not put up with this injustice. Indira is the cause of our ruin. We don't want to see her as our queen.'

Gyan Singh described the people-friendly policies that Indira had initiated. But the same reply greeted him again, 'Indira is the cause of our ruin. We don't want to see her as our queen.' It was as though the same record was playing on a gramophone.

Gyan Singh brought out the latest edict which he had signed a while ago. This too didn't have any impact on the rebels. They kept on chanting, 'We don't want to see Indira as our queen. She is the cause of our ruin.' The rebels then tried to climb the ramparts. The guards were ordered to close the main gate.

Gyan Singh was now beside himself with rage and threatened the rebels with dire consequences. But his threats, like his entreaties, fell on deaf ears. The rebels persisted in their efforts to climb the walls. Gyan Singh rang the warning bell for the army. The soldiers heard it but did not come out. He rang the bell a

second time when the soldiers began to gather their arms. At the third bell the soldiers came out. But Padma appeared on the scene just then and exhorted them in the following words: 'Fools! Why are you bent upon causing your own ruin? How many of your own brothers have been dismissed from service? They are now begging from door to door. Soon, your turn will come. If things continue like this, then all of you will be kicked out within four months. Who are these rebels? They are your brothers who were sacked by Gyan Singh's unwed wife, Indira. How can you tolerate that a common whore from the marketplace should rule over you?'

Padma then went to Indira and gave her a friendly advice. 'Run away, Indira. Your life is in danger.' Indira grabbed this opportunity for escape and felt grateful to Padma. Padma took her to a secret tunnel that opened out to a temple outside the city. This tunnel was built for crisis situations such as this. Padma had already called Harihar there. He had two horses with him. It was dark all around.

Harihar made Indira mount one horse and himself rode on the other. Both sped away in the darkness of the night.

Padma came and stood beside Gyan Singh on the ramparts. She addressed the rebels: 'My brave people, let me give you the good news that Indira is no more there in the palace. Any responsible person from amongst you can come inside and check for your satisfaction. She has returned to the obscure world from which she had come. Go back to your home. I assure you that the edicts that were passed against you will be taken back.'

Gyan Singh took a deep sigh and fell down like a wounded bird. The rebels dispersed, and Padma got the credit of saving Gyan Singh from the public uprising.

Gyan Singh asked in a voice filled with despair, 'Where has Indira gone?'

'Where she had come from,' replied Padma. 'If you think that she was in love with you, you're mistaken. She was staying here out of compulsion. Her real lover is Harihar, that wretched poet. She is crazy about him. She was staying here in the hope of getting him appointed in a high position in the court. When she found that her life was in danger, she ran away. She was an unfaithful woman.'

Gyan Singh entered his room in a dispirited state and, in fury, began trampling upon all objects that belonged to Indira. When love is spurned, it turns into hatred. Several of Indira's pictures were hanging from the wall. Gyan Singh pulled them out and smashed them to pieces. Padma appeared to be an embodiment of patience and forgiveness. Ostensibly, she was trying to mitigate his anger, but she made such insinuations that made Gyan Singh mad with jealousy. He ripped apart her tanpura into a hundred pieces. Suddenly he remembered something. He got out and sent several reliable soldiers in hot pursuit of Indira. He ordered all exits from the city to be sealed. Then he went in and threw away the deity's seat and other paraphernalia of puja that Indira had. He fired the slave girls who were engaged in her service. Mad with rage, he cursed Indira time and again using words like 'traitor', 'witch', 'hypocrite', *etc.*

Padma offered him a glass of cold water. He swallowed it in one gulp and threw the glass away. His eyes were spouting flames, his nostrils flared. He turned soft towards Padma, thinking her to be an angel of restraint and loyalty. He felt grateful to her. Had she not intervened, the rebels would have captured the palace, putting his life and kingship in danger. He apologized to her for his earlier indifference. For the first time, he felt stirrings of love for her in his heart. In his state of despair and sorrow, Padma seemed to offer him a way out. He clasped her in a tight embrace. Padma placed her head on his shoulder and her pent-up love for him came out in the form of tears.

## 14

Indira and Harihar reached a door of the rampart that enclosed the city. The door was closed. They reached a second door which too was closed. Harihar knew that there was a secret aperture in the wall which was concealed by the creepers and grass. No one was probably aware of this. Harihar led his horse into the aperture and both crossed the wall wading through thorny bushes. Outside, a river flowed close to the wall. Finding no other way out, they led the horses into the river and somehow swam across to the other bank, where they took some rest, and then started the journey again. After travelling for quite a while, they reached a temple. They let loose their horses there and stayed there overnight. In the morning, they were on the road again. By noon they reached a large village. The landlord of the village was leading his wedding party to the bride's house.

The landlord of the village was leading his wedding party to the bride's house. Thousands of people were there. People from other districts had also gathered there. The party was about to start the journey. The bridegroom came out of the house and sat in the car. The car was about to start when a woman arrived there and threw herself before the car blocking the road. This was the landlord's former wife whom he had left fifteen years ago. Today when he was going to marry she stood in the way. Heated exchanges took place between the husband and the wife. The husband ordered the wife threateningly to move away from his path. The wife remained unmoved. The landlord lost his temper and ran the car over his wife, causing her death. At this, thousands of people pounced upon him and killed him. Indira and Harihar regretted not reaching the spot earlier. They would have tried to sort out the matter amicably between the husband and the wife. Having rested for a while in the village, they moved forward to a place where some people were dancing. Indira sang for them and they stayed with them for the night.

After some days, both left the borders of the state and reached the state of Sangli. There they started living in a village. They devoted themselves to the services of the villagers who were very happy to have them there.

There was a small temple in the village. Both sang kirtan there in the evening. The story of their service and devotion spread to the surrounding villages and the number of devotees began to swell. In the eyes of the villagers these two were heavenly creatures, and they worshipped them with great sincerity. Their songs and kirtans drove away baser feelings from their mind and they could see the glory of God in everything. Sometimes, Harihar went near the waterfall and the sound of the water filled his heart with spiritual feelings. Sometimes, the sight of a wild flower filled him with ecstasy and he saw the glory of the Creator in it.

One day, the king of Sangli arrived for hunting. There were armed guards with him who pitched their tents. It was evening. The king came to the village riding on an elephant. Preparations for the hunting began. Just then, Indira arrived on the scene and began to sing a devotional verse. The king felt the stirrings of paternal love in his mind.

When he had seen her for the first time, he had recognized her. But he hadn't been able to gather enough courage to accept her as his daughter. Since that moment, he had often felt restless whenever the thought of his daughter came to his mind. Now, he could not control himself and hugged Indira, saying, 'You are

my beloved lost daughter.’ He requested her to accompany him. But Harihar did not want to get entangled in wealth and luxury. He feared that he might lose Indira if they came into wealth. He did not say anything to Indira, but it was apparent what he felt in his heart. Indira refused to go with her father. Both were sitting in a cottage in front of the temple. There were no belongings in the cottage. On the other hand, the palace was full of wealth, fame and glory. But Indira sacrificed all these for her love.

## 15

Having expelled Indira from the palace, Padma now felt more relaxed. Her natural disposition for good that had been hidden because of jealousy now came out, and she began to look after Gyan Singh with loving care. In his state of sorrow and distress, if he ate anything, it was only because of Padma’s insistence. If he went out for walks, it was because of her persuasion. If he paid attention to the affairs of the state, it was because of her request. She entertained him, sometimes by singing songs and sometimes by telling him stories. Often, his sleep broke at night and he became restless thinking about Indira. The fire of jealousy kept burning in his heart. It was unbearable for him to even imagine that Indira should be with a stranger. If she had become a yogini, he would have probably touched the dust of her feet to his forehead. But she was now with a stranger. The mere thought made him furious.

Gyan Singh’s informers and spies had spread out in all directions. One day, he got the news that Indira was living in a village in Sangli. Immediately, Gyan Singh wanted to proceed in search of her, with some experienced soldiers and devoted friends. Padma tried to stop him, and entreated him, but he was not to be persuaded. Finally, when she found that he was bent on going, she also joined him. All of them rode horses and were advancing slowly. It was a hazardous road amidst mountains. Gyan Singh and Padma left others far behind. Suddenly, several armed dacoits attacked them. Padma took out her pistol and shot to death two of the attackers.

The other dacoits took to their heels. After several days, the group reached the village where Indira and Harihar were living peacefully.

In an instant, the news spread that King Gyan Singh had come to capture Indira and Harihar. People from near and far arrived there with sticks, hammers

Indira and Harihar. People from near and far arrived there with sticks, hammers and spades. Indira and Harihar came and stood between the two groups. Gyan Singh tried to strike them with his sword. Indira and Harihar sat right there with their heads bowed. The sword was about to strike Harihar when Padma arrived there and snatched it away from the king's hand. Seeing the courage and sacrifice of the two lovers, Gyan Singh was moved. It seemed as though a ray of light illuminated his heart.

He stood silent for a minute, and then fell at Indira's feet. Padma, by saving him from an act that could have put an end to the king's life, conquered his heart.

Gyan Singh stood on his feet and hugged Padma. Indira also embraced her. Then Harihar and Gyan Singh too embraced each other.

*Translated from the Urdu by M. Asaduddin*



## Peace of Mind

### 1

The late Srinath was one of my intimate friends. Even today, when I think of him, scenes of our togetherness flash before my eyes and some tears drop involuntarily. A distance of roughly two hundred and fifty miles separated us. I lived in Lucknow, he in Delhi; but hardly a month passed when the two of us did not meet.

He was an enlightened, zestful, friendly and generous man, one who made no distinction between his own relatives and strangers. He had no knowledge, and he didn't want to have any, of the ways of the world and how people keep up appearances. His life presented him with many opportunities to become more circumspect, to stay on guard against friends who took unfair advantage of his complete lack of guile and caused him embarrassment, even ignominy. But he was a man who had vowed not to learn any such lessons from life. His behaviour remained the same—he left the world exactly as he had been born in it—a simple man. His world was one of a kind—it had no place for suspicion, cunning or deceit; everyone was his own, no one was a stranger. I tried, time and again, to caution him but every time my endeavours produced the opposite result.

Any attempts to caution him against the seamy side of life made him sad. I used to worry over what would be the outcome of his inability to restrain himself and curb his generosity. The problem was confounded by the fact that his wife, Gopa, was of the same mould. A certain shrewdness, characteristic of our women, which often works as a 'brake' on the carelessness of such spendthrift men, was completely missing in her. She even had very little interest in clothes

or jewellery. In fact, when news of Srinath's passing away reached me, and I rushed to Delhi, I found precious little in his house except for the four walls and a few pots and pans. It is true that he wasn't that old to worry over amassing wealth; he had not even completed forty years of age. His firstborn was a daughter, and she was followed by two sons. The boys died as babies, the girl survived and this was the saddest scene of the drama. Seeing the sort of life he had lived, the small family he left behind would need, at the very least, one hundred rupees every month to survive. There was no other means of income. The girl had to be married off in two or three years. How would they manage? I could not think of any possible option.

The occasion provided me with the invaluable experience of finding out that those who do good to others and don't make self-seeking the objective of their lives are never short of well-wishers who will provide for their families after they are gone. It isn't as though this is a general principle of human behaviour, because I have also seen that people who have done good turns for others all their lives but no one bothers about their children after they are dead and gone. Be that as it may, Srinath's friends showed exemplary generosity and decided to build a corpus through individual contributions for Gopa's day-to-day expenses. One gentleman even offered to marry her, but Gopa displayed that same dignified pride which is the hallmark of our women and turned down all such proposals. The house she lived in was large. A part of it was let out on rent. It brought her fifty rupees a month. That was enough for her to live on. Her daughter, Sunni, was in school. Whatever little expense she had was due to her. As for Gopa, she had no longer any interest in worldly things.

## 2

A month after Srinath's death, I had to go to Europe in connection with some business, and contrary to all expectations, I ended up staying there for two years. Gopa's letters reached me with unfailing regularity—she was well, nothing to worry about. It was only later that I found out that Gopa never considered me to be 'one of her own' and she hid the true state of affairs from me.

Upon my return from England, I went straight to Delhi. Tears overwhelmed me as I reached the door of their house which looked desolate. The room that had always been crowded with friends was closed; cobwebs festooned its doors



had always been crowded with friends was closed, cobwebs festooned its doors. The familiar voice of the dear departed that made me forget all my worries was replaced by a mournful atmosphere. For a minute, I had the illusion that Srinath was standing at that door, smiling at me. I am not prone to illusions and I have my doubts regarding the soul's attachment to the body, yet at that moment I was indeed startled. A tremor ran through my heart, but when I looked again that image had disappeared. I knocked on the door which opened immediately. Who else was there now to open the door but Gopa? I looked at her and my heart missed a beat. She knew that I was coming and she had worn a new sari for the occasion and perhaps braided her hair too, but what could she have done about the onslaught of the past two years? She was at an age when women were usually at the peak of their beauty and femininity, when a ripe sweetness and voluptuousness replaces girlish waywardness and conceit. But Gopa looked old. Her face was lined with wrinkles and furrowed with despair that no amount of determined cheerfulness could erase. Her hair was fast turning grey and every limb and bone seemed to be ageing fast.

I asked her in a tearful voice, 'Have you been ill, Gopa?'

She swallowed her tears and said, 'No, not at all. I have never even had a headache.'

'Then why do you look like this? You look so old!'

'And what am I to do with youth? I am over thirty-five, you know.'

'Thirty-five is not very old.'

'Maybe, it's true for those who wish to live a long life. I want my life to come to an end as soon as possible. My only worry is Sunni's wedding. Once I am through with that, I have no desire to live any more.'

I soon discovered that the gentleman who had been taken in as a tenant had been transferred shortly after and gone away, and no other tenant had been found since. A dagger pierced my heart. How had these poor things managed all this while? The very thought was painful.

I asked her reproachfully, 'Why didn't you inform me? You've treated me like a stranger.'

Gopa was embarrassed and said, 'I thought living abroad you would have a hundred worries of your own; why should I trouble you with mine? We somehow managed to pull through. Though the house had nothing of any value, I did at least have some jewellery. Now my only worry is Sunni's marriage.'

Earlier, I had thought of selling the house; surely it would fetch twenty to twenty-two thousand rupees which would be enough for the marriage and I could have some left for myself. But it appeared that the house had already been mortgaged and I owed twenty thousand for it, including the interest. It was the moneylender's generosity that he had not turned me out. So, there is no expectation on that front. If I cringe before him, the moneylender might give me two thousand rupees but what good would that do? This worry is killing me. But, look at me, I am so selfish that I haven't even offered you water to wash up, nor given you any refreshments. I just started narrating the litany of my woes. Please freshen up and sit down. I'll get you something to eat; we will talk later. Is all well at home?'

I said, 'I have come here straight from Bombay; I haven't gone home yet.'

Gopa looked reproachfully at me but behind that reproach lurked a deep sense of kinship. I felt as though the wrinkles on her face had disappeared for a moment. A faint flush swept across her cheeks. Her reproach conveyed so much love, happiness and joy! But the beauty ruined by worries and distress revealed itself once more. She said, 'And now your wife will never let you come here.'

'I am no one's slave.'

'To make someone your slave, you must first become that person's slave.'

Evening was approaching. Winter days are short. Sunni returned from school. The slender, innocent girl of two years ago had turned into an attractive maiden whose every gesture exuded a special charm. I couldn't lift my eyes to look at the girl whom I once used to take in my lap and cuddle. And she who would happily cling to my neck and hug me could barely stand in front of me as though there was something she wanted to hide from me, as though I was not giving her the opportunity to hide it.

I asked, 'Which class are you in, Sunni?'

She answered with her head bent low, 'In class ten.'

'Do you do any work around the house?'

'Amma doesn't let me. '

Gopa butted in, 'I don't let you, or you don't want to go anywhere near a household chore!'

Embarrassed, Sunni turned away. She was her mother's darling. I am sure the day she entered the kitchen and did any household work, her mother would probably cry her eyes out. She wouldn't let her daughter lift a finger, yet she

went around complaining that the girl didn't help her one bit! The complaining was nothing but an expression of her motherly love.

I ate my dinner and lay down. Gopa started telling me about her preparations for Sunni's marriage. She had nothing else to talk about. There were grooms aplenty, but none worth talking about. Why should the girl think that had her father been alive, he would have found a boy from a better family? Then she hesitantly mentioned Lala Madarilal's son.

I looked at her with surprise. Lala Madarilal had been an executive engineer once. He received a pension now. He had amassed lakhs of rupees, yet his greed for money had not abated. He wanted to draw all the wealth of the world to his house. Gopa had chosen a family where her access was difficult.

I voiced my objection, 'Madarilal is an obnoxious man.'

Gopa contradicted me and said, 'No, no, perhaps you are mistaken. He is very generous to me, and often comes by to see how we're doing. And the boy is so good-looking that it seems God has created him for Sunni! Engineer Sahib has even told me that he expects no dowry from me'.

I realized Gopa was a victim of the same kind of trustfulness that had ruined Srinath. But then I thought why sow distrust in her heart. It is possible that Madarilal is no longer the same person. After all, one can change with time. Partially convinced, I said, 'But think of the great difference between him and you. Even if you spend every single thing you possess, it might still not be enough for him.'

But Gopa had obviously made up her mind. She wanted to marry Sunni into a family where she could live like a queen. She didn't attach any importance to my misgivings and said, 'Madarilal is a very decent and selfless person. You'll be delighted to meet him. Please go to him in the morning and settle this. I couldn't give him a clear answer so far. But I do hope he won't raise the question of dowry. He will take pity on a poor and helpless widow.'

The following morning, I went to see Madarilal and was charmed by the conversation I had with him. He may have been a greedy man once. Now I found him to be an extremely generous, sensitive and modest old man. He said to me, 'Bhai sahib, I knew Srinathji. He was a man of many qualities. I will consider it my great good fortune if his daughter comes to my house. Please tell her mother that I do not expect anything from her. By the grace of God, I have enough in my own house. I don't want her to worry about this.'

enough in my own house. I don't want her to worry about this.

A weight lifted from my heart. Often, we tend to make assumptions about others simply on the basis of hearsay. I returned and congratulated Gopa on this happy occurrence. It was decided that the wedding would take place in the ensuing summer.

### 3

Gopa spent the next four months in the preparations for the wedding. I visited her at least once a month, but each time I returned with a heavy heart. Gopa had a very exaggerated notion of her family pride and honour. The poor woman was labouring under the illusion that her act of courage would leave its mark on the life of the city. Little did she know that such spectacles are played out every day, and forgotten the following day! Perhaps she hankered for recognition from the world at large that, despite being down and out, she could still measure up to the family honour!

She remembered Srinath at every step. Had he been alive, this task wouldn't have been done like this but like that. And then she broke into tears. Granted that Madarilal was a good man, and did not expect anything from her but didn't Gopa too have a duty towards her daughter? I was amazed when I saw the clothes and jewellery she had put together for Sunni. Whenever I saw Gopa, she was busy stitching something or the other. Or, she would be sitting at the jeweller's shop. Or making arrangements to receive guests on the wedding day. There was no well-to-do person left in the neighbourhood who had not been approached for a loan. She thought she was taking a loan; the person extending it gave it as charity. The entire neighbourhood was helping her. Sunni was their daughter too. Gopa's honour was their honour. As for Gopa, sleep and rest had become anathema to her! It would be past midnight, her head would be splitting with a headache, but she would sit there stitching something. Her spirits were high; nothing could deter her.

A single woman, and a frail one at that! How much could she do? If she left the smallest thing to others, it would never be done quite the way she wanted it. But look at her courage and strength—she never acknowledges defeat!

The last time I had visited them, I could no longer restrain myself and said, 'Gopa, if you want to die, at least wait till after the wedding; I am afraid that

your call might come well before that.'

Gopa's half-dead face lit up. She said, 'Have no worries on that score, *bhaiya*; a widow's life is a long one. Haven't you heard the saying: "A widow doesn't die easily"? I have just one wish—that once I have sent Sunni to her rightful place, I should pass away. If there is any lack in the wedding, it'll bring disgrace to me! In these past four months, I've barely slept for an hour at night. But still, I am happy. Whether I live or die, at least I have the satisfaction of knowing that I did for Sunni whatever her father would have done had he lived. If Madarilal has shown his goodness, I must reciprocate appropriately.'

A woman came and said, 'Behen, come and check the syrup for the sweets.' And Gopa rushed to check the syrup. She returned in a minute to say, 'I feel like battering my head against something! I came here to talk to you and the syrup thickened so much that the laddus will now be too hard to eat! What can I say, and to whom!'

I said, 'Why are you taking all this trouble needlessly? Why not just send for a *halwai* and give him the contract for making the sweets? Moreover, how many guests are you expecting that you are making such a fuss? Sweets worth five or ten rupees should be enough!'

Gopa looked at me with hurt eyes brimming with tears. She said, 'Bhaiya, you will never understand these things. You have not had the opportunity to be a mother or a wife. Sunni's father had such a wide reputation and esteem. So many people had benefitted from his generosity. His mantle has fallen on me. You may not believe it, but I always find him within me. What you see being done is actually done because of his blessings. What could a witless woman like me have done on her own? He is my guide; he is my mentor. You could say this body is mine, but the spirit, the soul that resides in it, is his. You are his friend. You have spent so much of your own money and are doing so much of running around, and yet you show such surprise. I am his wife, in this world and the hereafter.'

I could not find any answer to that.

The wedding took place in June. Gopa gave Sunni a lot of things; in fact, she

gave far beyond her means. Yet, she was not satisfied. Had Sunni's father been alive, he would have done so much more, she cried endlessly.

I went to Delhi again in the winter. I had assumed that Gopa would be happy now. Her daughter was now married into a well-to-do family and must be living comfortably. After all, what else did Gopa want? But happiness was something that was not in store for her.

I had barely changed my clothes when she started her tale of woe. 'Bhaiya, the family is fine, the parents-in-law are good, but the son-in-law has turned out to be a good-for-nothing. My darling Sunni is spending her days shedding tears. If you see her now, you won't recognize her! She has been reduced to a shadow of her former self. She had come here a few days ago. I was heartbroken to see her condition. She looked like she had lost her way in life. She had no thought for herself or her health, no interest in clothes or jewellery. I had never imagined that my Sunni would fall on such bad days. She has become so quiet and still! How many times I asked her: "Tell me, why doesn't he speak to you? Why is he angry with you?" But she gives no answer. Only tears keep falling from her eyes. My Sunni has fallen into a ditch.'

I asked, 'Didn't you try to find out the reason from her husband's family?'

'Of course, I did, bhaiya, and I found out everything. The boy wants to lead his wayward life, but he still expects Sunni to worship him. Why should Sunni put up with such behaviour? You know her; you know she has a strong sense of self-respect. She is not one of those women who regard their husbands as gods and bear with their permissible or impermissible actions. She was brought up with undivided love and affection. Her father doted on her. She was the apple of my eye. And she got a husband who is a dandy who roams about the streets till midnight. I don't know exactly what transpired between them, but it is clear there's a conflict. He doesn't care for Sunni, nor does she care for him. While he is perfectly happy leading a life of his choice, Sunni is crying her heart out.'

'But didn't you try to make her understand?' I said. 'Nothing will happen to the boy, he'll marry a second time. But her life will be ruined.'

Gopa's eyes brimmed over. She said, 'How can I reason with her? It breaks my heart to see her like this. I feel like hiding her in my bosom so that no one can even look at her sternly. Had Sunni been clumsy or sharp-tongued or lazy, I would have tried to correct her. What should I tell her—that her husband might go around blackening his face in every street and alley but she must worship

him? I would never have put up with such insult myself. The very basis of marriage is that man and woman must be treated as equals. There are very few men who will allow their wives to stray even the slightest from the path though there are plenty of women who accept their husbands as being totally free. Sunni, however, is not one of them. If she has given her heart and soul to her husband, she wants the same in return. If her husband turns out to be unfaithful, she will have nothing to do with him. Even if it means spending the rest of her life shedding tears.'

Saying this, Gopa went to another room and fetched a jewellery box. She showed me the ornaments inside it and said, 'She had left this behind when she had come here the last time. In fact, she had come to leave it here. This is the jewellery I had got made for her with great difficulty. I had worked for months together to have them made. Sunni does not even look at them now. Who should she wear it for? Who should she dress up for? I had given her five boxes of clothes. My eyes had gone almost blind stitching those dresses. She dumped all these clothes here. She hates the sight of them now. Two glass bangles on her wrist and an ordinary sari—that's all she wears now.'

I tried to reassure Gopa, 'I shall go and meet her husband. Let me try to bring him around.'

Gopa folded her hands and pleaded, 'No, don't even think of it! If Sunni hears that, she'll die of shame. She would like to maintain her pride under any circumstances. She will never caress the feet that have kicked her. She will be ready to be someone's slave if the person loves her. As for obedience, she has never obeyed *me* unquestioningly, what to speak of others!'

I didn't say anything to Gopa at the time, but I met Lala Madarilal soon. I wanted to know the real story. By a happy coincidence, I met the father and the son at the same time. Probably they were debating some issue. Kedar touched my feet the moment he saw me. I was charmed by his good manners. He brought me tea, sweets and preserves. I hadn't seen such a gentle, courteous and well-behaved young man. No one could have imagined that there was a world of difference between what he appeared to be and what he actually was. When I asked him anything, he answered modestly, and didn't say a word that was improper or superfluous.

When Kedar went away to play tennis, I asked Madarilal, 'Kedar Babu seems to me to be a very reasonable person, then why is there such misunderstanding

to me to be a very reasonable person, then why is there such misunderstanding between the husband and the wife?’

Madarilal thought for a moment and then said, ‘What other reason can I give except that both are the darlings of doting parents? Love can make children wilful and obstinate. I spent my entire life in struggle. It is only now that I have found some peace. I never had the time to indulge in any sort of licentiousness. I worked hard throughout the day and in the evening fell fast asleep. My health was never too good, so the worry for securing the future of my family never left me. I was worried that if something were to happen to me, my wife and children would be at the mercy of others. My son, on the contrary, was born into wealth. All his wishes were immediately fulfilled. He developed a predilection for the theatre; thousands of rupees were blown up for that hobby. Studies took a back seat; he remained steeped in drama. As he grew in years, he began to enact the ‘drama’ of his own life. Seeing this, I planned to get him married. I thought he would settle down to normal life after marriage. When I received Gopaji’s proposal I promptly accepted it. I had seen her daughter. I thought a pretty woman like her would make him stable, but she turned out to be her mother’s darling too. Unaware of the rough and smooth of life, she has never learnt the value of tolerance and compromise. She wants to defeat him with her pride; he wants to put her down with negligence. To tell you the truth, I consider my daughter-in-law to be more at fault. Boys always tend to be a little wayward whereas girls are by nature more aware of their responsibilities. They conquer their men through devotion and sacrifice. My daughter-in-law is completely lacking in these qualities. This is the real cause for misunderstanding. Both of them are polite, gentle and have pleasant temperaments, but one is blinded by ego and self-esteem, and the other is obsessed with a warped notion of freedom and independence. God alone knows how this boat will reach the shore!’

Suddenly, Sunni came out from the inner apartments. She looked pale and had dark circles around her eyes. It seemed as though there was no blood in her body. There could not have been a more compelling picture of frustrated desires. She said complainingly, ‘You’ve been sitting here for a long time and did not send me word! You could have returned home from this room.’

I said, ‘No, Sunni, how can that be? I was about to come to your room when you showed up.’

Madarilal went out of the room to get his car cleaned. Perhaps he wanted to



provide Sunni and me the opportunity to talk freely.

Sunni asked, 'Is Amma well?'

'Yes, she is fine, but why are you looking so distraught?'

'I am perfectly all right.'

'What is going on? Why is there such conflict between the two of you? Gopa is ready to give up her life worrying. You too seem bent on laying down your life. Be sensible.'

'You have unnecessarily raised this unpleasant subject, Chachaji! I've resigned to the idea that I am singularly unfortunate. That is all, and a cure or way out is beyond my control. To me, death is preferable to a life of dishonour. I want trust in return for trust. I see no other way of living one's life. It is impossible for me to consider any sort of compromise on this subject. I no longer care for the outcome.'

'But . . .'

'No, Chachaji, don't say another word on this subject, or I will go away.'

'At least, think . . .'

'I have thought enough and reached this decision. It is beyond my power to turn a beast into a human being.'

After this, what else could I do except keep my mouth shut?

## 5

It was the month of May. I was in Mussoorie when I received a telegram from Gopa—'Come immediately; Urgent.' I was worried, but found some consolation in that no tragedy had occurred. I reached Delhi the following day. I stood face-to-face with Gopa—still, silent, lifeless as though she was suffering from tuberculosis.

I asked, 'Is everything all right? I felt so worried.'

She looked at me with her burnt-out eyes and said, 'Really?'

'Is Sunni all right?'

'Yes, she is.'

'And Kedarnath?'

'He too is all right.'

'Then what is the matter?'

'Nothing.'

nothing.

‘You sent me a telegram and you say nothing is the matter?’

‘I was panicky, so I sent for you. Sunni must be persuaded to come and stay here. I have tried everything but failed.’

‘Has something happened anew?’

‘Kedar has run away with an actress. There has been no news of him for a week. He told Sunni that he wouldn’t return home as long as she stays there. The entire family has turned against her, yet she refuses to leave. I have heard that Kedar has forged his father’s signature and pulled out several thousand rupees from the bank.’

‘Have you met Sunni?’

‘Yes, I have been going there every day for the past three days.’

‘Why don’t you let her be if she doesn’t want to come here?’

‘She will die in the stifling atmosphere there.’

I immediately proceeded towards Lala Madarilal’s house. As I reached there, I found it transformed into a scene of mourning and lamentations. My heart skipped a beat. Preparations for Sunni’s funerals were on. Scores of people from the neighbourhood had gathered there. The house echoed with sounds of lamentation.

Madarilal clasped me to his chest the moment his eyes fell on me. ‘Bhai sahib, I am ruined. My son left me earlier, now my daughter in law is gone. Oh my God!’

I was told that ever since Kedar had disappeared, Sunni had become more melancholic. That day she had broken her glass bangles and wiped the vermilion from her parting, both auspicious marks of a Hindu wife. When her mother-in-law reprimanded her, she answered back rudely. When Madarilal tried to explain things to her, she said rude things to him too. It seemed as though she had gone crazy. People stopped talking to her. She had left the house early in the morning to take a dip in the Yamuna River. It was dark and everybody in the house lay asleep. She didn’t wake anyone. When she wasn’t seen inside the house, everyone began to search for her. After much delay, it was discovered that she had gone towards the Yamuna. People rushed to the river and there they discovered her dead body after a thorough search. It was not too long ago that she had come to this house riding in a palanquin. She was now leaving that house in a bier on four shoulders.

I accompanied the corpse and by the time I returned it was ten at night. I consoled Madarilal and returned to Gopa. I was full of apprehensions thinking about the condition I might find her in. What could be more tragic for her than to lose Sunni who was her life and the object of her living? There was just this one plant in her ruined garden. She had brought her up shedding her heart's blood. She longed to see buds and flowers and fruits coming from that plant, and birds singing sweet songs from its branches. But cruel fate had uprooted that plant, leaving her bereft. The foundation on which she had built all her longings had disappeared.

I held my heart with both hands and knocked at the door. Gopa came out holding a lantern in her hand. In the light I saw that her face was lit up with joy. Seeing my crestfallen face she held my hand with motherly affection and said, 'You've spent the whole day shedding tears. There must have been many people in the funeral. I had also felt like going there to see her for the last time, but then I thought what's the point? When Sunni is no longer alive, what purpose will it serve to look at her corpse? So, I didn't go.'

I looked at Gopa with amazement. She knew about Sunni's tragic death, yet she looked so calm and content! I replied, 'Good you didn't go. You would have shed some more tears, and that's all.'

'Very true. I did cry, but not from my heart. I just had no control over my tears. To tell you honestly, I felt happy when I received the news of her death. The poor girl has left this world with her honour intact. No one knew what misfortunes she would have undergone had she remained alive. I'm happy thinking that she has preserved her self-respect. If a woman cannot find love and honour in her married life, death is preferable to her. Did you see Sunni's face? People say that it looked as though she was smiling. My Sunni was truly a Devi. A human being does not want to live to shed tears. When it became apparent that there was nothing save unhappiness in her life, what else could she do? I'm not saying that I won't remember her, and I won't cry. But the tears I'll shed will be tears of joy, not of sadness.'

'The mother of a heroic boy feels happy at his exploits. Sunni has accomplished something heroic. Why should I hurt her soul by shedding tears? It's quite late. Please go upstairs and sleep. I've laid your bed there. But look, do not shed tears any more. Sunni has done what she ought to have.'

When I went upstairs to sleep, I felt as if a big burden had been taken off my

heart. I kept on wondering whether Gopa's behaviour indicated contentment or deep pain.

*Translated from the Urdu by M. Asaduddin*



## Intoxication

### 1

Ishwari was the son of a big zamindar, and I a poor clerk, who had no assets other than labour and hard work. We would argue all the time. I condemned the feudal system, used to call the zamindars violent beasts, blood-sucking leeches and parasitic *banjha* flowering on the top of trees. He would speak on behalf of the landlords, but naturally he was on the weaker side, as he didn't have any logical arguments in their favour. To say that not all human beings are equal, that there have always been and always will be upper and lower classes, was a weak argument. It was difficult to establish through any humanitarian or ethical rules that the feudal system was just. In the heat of the argument, I would lose my temper often and make hurtful comments, but Ishwari, despite losing, would keep smiling. I never saw him lose his temper. Perhaps the reason was that he knew the weakness of his side. He was always arrogant with servants. He was abundantly endowed with the heartlessness and sense of superiority that characterizes the rich. If the servant delayed a little bit in making the bed, if the milk was a little hotter or colder than desired, or if the bicycle was not properly cleaned—then he would get out of control. He couldn't tolerate even a bit of laziness or insolence, but his behaviour with friends, and especially with me, was genial and courteous. Had I been in his place, then the same harshness may have grown in me, because my love for humanity was not based upon any principle, but on my material condition; but even if he had been in my place, he would have continued to act rich because he loved luxury and wealth by nature.

In the Dussehra holidays I decided not to go home. Neither had I the money

for the fare, nor did I want to trouble my family members. I know that whatever they provide me is beyond their means. Besides, I was thinking of the examinations as well. There was much left to study and who can study at home. I was unwilling to stay alone like a ghost at the boarding house. When Ishwari invited me to his home, I readily agreed. I could prepare extremely well for the exams with Ishwari. Despite being rich, he was hard-working and intelligent.

But he said, 'Look, remember just one thing, if you criticize the zamindars there, then things will get spoilt and my family members will be upset. They rule over their subjects—the *asamis*—as if God had created the *asamis* to serve them. The *asamis* also think in the same manner. If it were explained to them that there is no fundamental difference between the zamindar and the *asami*, then the zamindari would disappear.'

I said, 'Do you think that after going there I will become someone else?'

'Yes, I think so.'

'Then you are wrong.'

Ishwari didn't reply. Probably he left this matter to my understanding and he did well. If he had stuck to his point, then I too would have become stubborn.

## 2

Let alone second class, I hadn't even travelled by inter-class! Now I had the good fortune to travel by second class. The train used to come at nine in the night, but due to the excitement of travel we reached the station in the evening itself. After roaming around for some time, we had our meal in the refreshment room. Noting my dress and behaviour, the clever khansamas who served us, didn't take much time to discern the master from the follower; I don't know why, but I didn't like their insolence. The money went from Ishwari's pocket. Probably the tips these khansamas made was more than my father's salary. Ishwari himself gave them an eight-anna coin before leaving. Even then, I had expected the same alertness and courtesy with which they served Ishwari. Why did they all run on Ishwari's orders, but when I asked for something why did they not show the same enthusiasm? I didn't relish the meal. That discrimination had completely drawn my attention towards it.

The train came, we boarded. The khansamas saluted Ishwari, but didn't even glance at me

glance at me.

Ishwari said, 'How well mannered they are! And look at our servants who don't know how to do anything.'

I said with bitterness, 'If you tip your servants like this with eight annas daily, then perhaps they would become even more well mannered than these ones.'

'So, is that what you think—that they pay so much respect only for the sake of money?'

'No, never! Manners and courtesy run in their veins!'

The train started. It was a mail train. It started from Prayag and stopped only at Pratapgarh. A person opened our compartment. I shouted immediately, 'It's second class'.

After entering the coach, the passenger, looking at me disdainfully, said, 'Yes, your servant also understands this much.' And he sat on the middle berth. I can't express how embarrassed I felt.

We reached Moradabad at the crack of dawn. Quite a few people were waiting at the station to welcome us. Two of them were gentlemen. Five were servants. The servants picked up our luggage. Both the gentlemen followed us. One was a Muslim, Riyasat Ali; the other was a Brahmin, Ramharak. Both looked at me strangely, as if they were asking, 'How come you, a crow, is with a swan?'

Riyasat Ali asked Ishwari, 'Does this Babu Sahib study with you?'

Ishwari replied, 'Yes, studies with me and lives with me as well. You can say that I have lasted in Allahabad only because of him. Otherwise I would have come back to Lucknow long ago. This time I have dragged him along with me. Several telegrams came from his home but I convinced him to reply in the negative. The last telegram was urgent, which was charged at four annas per word; even that was replied in the negative.'

Both the gentlemen looked at me astonished, they seemed awestruck.

Riyasat Ali said in an unsure voice, 'But you are dressed so simply!'

Ishwari cleared the doubt, 'Sahib is a follower of Mahatma Gandhi. He doesn't wear anything except *khaddar*, home-spun cotton. He has burnt all his old clothes. Actually, he is a king. He has an estate of two and a half lac per annum, but, if you look at his face, it seems as if he has just come from an orphanage.'

Ramharak said, 'Such behaviour is very rare among the rich. No one can guess who he is.'

Riyasat Ali agreed. ‘Had you seen Maharaja Chaangli you would have bitten your finger off in astonishment. He used to wander in the market in a coarse cotton jacket and cheap leather shoes. We hear that he was once mistakenly arrested because he looked like a destitute, and it was he who founded the college with ten lakh!’

I was getting irritated, but I don’t know why this white lie did not seem ridiculous to me at that time. With every word, I was identifying more closely with that imagined grandeur.

I am not a trained rider. Yes, in childhood, I’ve ridden wooden horses. Two well-bred horses were ready for us. I nearly died in fright. Though I sat on the horse, my muscles were trembling. I didn’t let any sign of fear show on my face. I made my horse follow Ishwari’s. Ishwari didn’t ride fast, otherwise I would have broken my limbs. Possibly, Ishwari understood how deep in the water he was.

### 3

Ishwari’s home was more of a fort than a house. An imposing gateway like that of an *imambada*; a watchman pacing at the gate, countless servants, and there was even an elephant tied there.

Ishwari introduced me to his father, uncles and others; and with the same exaggeration. Don’t even ask how high he raised me. Not only the servants, even members of the family showed respect to me. They were the zamindars of the village, gaining profit in lakhs, but ones who would consider a mere police constable to be an ‘officer’. Some even started addressing me as ‘huzoor’.

When it became a bit quieter, I said to Ishwari, ‘You are very mischievous, yaar, why are you making me so embarrassed?’

Ishwari said with a wide smile, ‘This was necessary with these asses, otherwise they wouldn’t even have talked to you properly.’

After a while, a barber came to massage our feet. ‘The Kunwars have come from the station, they must be tired.’ Then Ishwari pointed to me and said, ‘Massage Kunwar Sahib’s feet first.’

I was lying on the cot. I don’t think anyone had pressed my feet in my life. I used to laugh at Ishwari by calling it the indulgence of the rich, the foolishness of the wealthy and the arrogance of the high and mighty and many other such



of the wealthy and the arrogance of the high and mighty and many other such names; and today I was pretending as if I had been born into the same riches.

By this time, it was ten. They were people who belonged to the old order. The new light had only managed to reach the top of the mountains. From inside came the call for meal. We went for a bath. I always wash my dhoti myself, but here I left my dhoti like Ishwari did. I was feeling ashamed to wash my dhoti with my own hands. We went inside to have the meal. In the hotel we used to sit at the table with our shoes on. Here it was mandatory to wash your feet. The Kahar was standing with the water. Ishwari put his feet forward. The Kahar washed his feet. I also put forward my feet. He washed my feet too.

I don't know where that ideology of mine had disappeared.

#### 4

I had thought that we would study with concentration in the village, but the whole day was spent wandering around. Sometimes we went boating in the river, sometimes hunting birds or fishing, sometimes we watched wrestling bouts, and at times we were stuck to the chessboard. Ishwari used to procure a lot of eggs, and omelettes would be made on the stove in the room. A group of servants always surrounded us. We had no need to move our limbs. Moving the tongue was enough. If we sat to bathe, a person was there to do it for us; if we lay down, people were there to fan us. I was popular as 'Mahatma Gandhi's Kunwar fellow'. I had made a strong impression on the people inside and outside the house. Breakfast was not to be delayed so that Kunwar Sahib should not get angry; the bed was to be made at the right time, the time for Kunwar Sahib to sleep. I became more sensitive than Ishwari, or was forced to become so. Ishwari could make his bed himself, but how could Kunwar Sahib—the guest—make his bed with his own hands! It would be a stain on his nobility.

One day this really happened. Ishwari was at home. Perhaps he was delayed because he was talking with his mother. It was ten. My eyes were heavy with sleep, but how could I make my bed? I was a Kunwar! At about eleven-thirty, a servant finally came. The servant was a much-loved one. Busy with household chores, he had forgotten to make my bed. Now, when he remembered, he came running. I gave him such a scolding that he would remember it forever.

Hearing my scolding, Ishwari came out and said, 'You did well. All these

ungrateful wretches deserve this.'

Similarly, one day Ishwari had been invited for a feast. It was evening, but the lamp was not lit. It was on the table. The matchstick was also there, but Ishwari never lit the lamp himself. Then how could Kunwar Sahib light it? I was irritated. The newspaper had already come. My mind was on that, but the lamp was unlit. By God's grace, Munshi Riyasat Ali arrived. Then I let loose on him, scolded him in such a way that the poor fellow was dumbfounded. 'You people don't even care to get the lamp lit! Don't know how such shirkers exist here. At my place they wouldn't be tolerated even for an hour.' Riyasat Ali lit the lamp with trembling hands.

A Thakur used to come often to the house. He was a man of his mind, an ardent follower of Mahatma Gandhi. Considering me as Mahatmaji's disciple, he regarded me highly, but was reluctant to ask me anything. One day, seeing me alone, he came and said with folded hands, 'The lord is Gandhi Baba's follower, isn't he? People say that if self-rule were to come here, then the zamindars wouldn't survive.'

I pronounced grandly, 'What's the need for zamindars? What else do these people do besides sucking the blood of the poor?'

The Thakur asked again, 'So then, my lord, would the lands of all the zamindars be snatched from them?'

I said, 'Several people will give them happily. Those who would not give happily, their lands will have to be snatched. We are ready. As soon as self-rule comes, we will transfer all our lands to our asamis.'

I was sitting on the chair. The Thakur started pressing my feet. He then spoke, 'Nowadays, zamindars inflict a lot of atrocities, my lord. If huzoor gives us a small piece of land in your area, then I will serve you there.'

I said, 'Now, I don't have any right, brother, but as soon as I have the right, I will call you first of all. I will teach you motor-driving and will appoint you as my driver.'

It came to our hearing that on that day the Thakur drank plenty of bhang and beat his wife badly and got ready to fight with the village *mahajan*.

The holidays were spent in this fashion and then we left for Prayag. Several people came to bid us farewell. The Thakur accompanied us to the station. I also played my role perfectly and left the impression of great decorum and authority on every heart. I wished to reward everyone, but where were the means? We had the return tickets, had only to sit in the train; but the train arrived completely packed. All the people were returning after spending the Durga Puja holidays. The second class had no space. The condition of the inter-class was even worse. This was the last train. We couldn't stay back. With great difficulty, we got some space in the third class. Our grandeur made an impression there, but I was feeling bad about sitting in that coach. We had come stretching out comfortably but we were going in a shrunken state. There was no room to even change one's position.

There were many educated people as us. They were praising the British rule amongst themselves. One gentleman said, 'Haven't seen such justice in any of the states. Higher, lower—all are equal. Even if the king does injustice to anyone, then the court grabs him too by the neck.' Another gentleman agreed, 'Hey, sahib, you can yourself file a case against the king. In the court, even the king is punished.'

A man, on whose back a big bundle was tied, was going to Calcutta. He found no space to keep the bundle. It was tied to his back. Restless due to this, he came to the door time and again. I was sitting next to the door. I did not like his coming to the door time and again and shoving his bundle into my face. For one, there was lack of air and on the top of that the bumpkin was almost standing on my face, suffocating me. For a while, I sat controlling myself. Suddenly I became angry. I grabbed and pushed him and finally gave him two tight slaps.

He said, opening his eyes wide, 'Sir, why do you beat me? We have also paid the fare.'

I got up and gave him two or three more slaps.

It raised a storm in the train. I was showered with remarks from all the sides.

'If you are so sensitive, then why didn't you travel in the first class?'

'If he's high and mighty, it has to be in his own home. If he had beaten me like this, then I would have shown him.'

'What was the poor man's fault? There's no space to breathe in the train; if he was standing near the window to take a few breaths, then why show such anger? Does a person lose his humanity on being rich?'

‘This is also the British rule, which you were boasting of!’  
A villager uttered, ‘Can’t even enter an office, and so much arrogance!’  
Ishwari said in English, ‘What an idiot you are, Bir!’  
And my intoxication seemed to be wearing off, little by little.

*Translated from the Hindi by G.J.V. Prasad*



## A State of Mind

### 1

If you were to see a beautiful young woman sleeping soundly on a marble bench in Gandhi Park early in the morning, it would startle you. Beautiful women come to parks for fresh air, to laugh, run around, play with flowers and plants, and none of this would cause a stir. But when a young woman is found fast asleep on a bench amid the flower beds at the end of a path, it's a very uncommon sight, and it draws attention to itself. So many people, young and old, walking along the path, would stop for a moment, look at the young woman and then move on. The young men would smile mysteriously, the old men shake their heads in disapproval, while women would lower their gaze in embarrassment.

Basant and Hashim, in their vests and shorts, are running barefoot as if they are preparing for the Olympic race to be held during the Christmas holidays. When they reach this spot, they stop; give the woman a stealthy look and start fantasizing about her.

'Couldn't she find any other place to sleep?' asks Basant.

'She must be a prostitute,' replies Hashim.

'If a prostitute isn't shameless, then who is?'

'There are many situations in which both a prostitute and a *kulvadh* behave in the same manner. No prostitute would normally choose to sleep on the roadside.'

'It's a new art to display one's looks.'

'The best art conceals, not reveals. And a prostitute knows this very well.'

‘She covers only to attract.’

‘Maybe; but just sleeping here doesn’t prove that she is a prostitute. See, she’s sporting a sindoor.’

‘Even a prostitute can become a *saubhagyavati* if the need arises. All night, glasses must have clinked, love games been played, and then, feeling weary, she must have slept in the cool air.’

‘She seems like a kulvadhu to me.’

‘Would a kulvadhu come to the park to sleep?’

‘Maybe she had a fight at home?’

‘Why not go and ask her?’

‘You are a complete idiot. How can you wake anybody up without knowing them?’

‘Okay! Let’s go and introduce ourselves. In fact, we will tell her we have done her a favour.’

‘And if she snaps at us?’

‘What is there to snap about? We will talk to her with kindness and gentleness. Such words won’t offend any young woman. Even old women would love to hear them. And she is just a young woman. I have never seen such a combination of beauty and youth.’

‘This image is imprinted on my heart forever. I don’t think I’ll ever forget her.’

‘I still say she is a prostitute.’

‘The goddess of beauty, even if a prostitute, can still be worshipped.’

‘Are you going to just stand here talking like a poet? Why don’t you go there? You stand there, I will lay the trap.’

‘She must be a kulvadhu.’

‘If a kulvadhu comes to sleep in the park, then it’s only meant to attract attention and that is the mentality of a prostitute.’

‘Today’s girls are becoming very forward.’

‘Forward women can look men in the eye.’

‘Yes, but she is a kulvadhu, and I think it’s very rude to speak about a kulvadhu like this.’

‘Come on then, let’s continue our run.’

‘But that image is haunting me.’

‘Then let’s sit down. When she gets up and leaves, we’ll follow her. I still say

she's a prostitute.'

'And I say she is a kulvadhu.'

'So . . . it's a wager for ten rupees?'

## 2

Two old men are shuffling along, gazing at the earth as if searching for their lost youth. One of them is bent, with black hair and a flabby body. The other has a straight back, grey hair and a tough body. Both of them wear dentures. Glasses are perched on their noses. The fat gentleman is a lawyer, the slim one a doctor.

The lawyer said, 'You see, this is a twentieth-century miracle!'

The doctor replied, 'Hmm! India is no different from the rest of the world.'

'But you can't call it decent behaviour.'

'This is not the time to talk about decency.'

'Seems to be a girl from a respectable family.'

'She is a prostitute, sahib. Can't you make out?'

'A prostitute would not be so brazen.'

'And girls from respectable families are brazen?'

'It's new-found freedom . . . it's heady!'

'Our lives are almost over. Those who have to face it will deal with it.'

'What a pity! Our youth is gone.'

'Life will now become worse than hell.'

'But the eyes haven't lost their sight, nor is the heart devoid of emotions.'

'Just look and feel envious.'

'I wish I could be young again. Actually, if you ask me, there is more excitement in today's life. In our times, we hardly ever saw a beautiful face. Nowadays wherever you go, you see the display of beauty.'

'Do you know the one thing young women hate is old men?'

'I don't agree. A man's essence is not his youth, but his manliness. So many old men are more virile than young men. I observe this every day. As a matter of fact, I don't consider myself inferior to any young man.'

'That's all right. But an old man's heart gets weak. If that wasn't true, we wouldn't have just gazed at this young beauty and turned away. I couldn't even look at her to my heart's content. I was afraid of what she would think of me if

she opened her eyes and saw me staring.'

'She'd have been happy that her charm had worked even on an old man.'

'Oh! Forget it.'

'Try taking "Okasa" for a few days.'

'I have already tried "Chandrodaya". It's all a money-making racket.'

'Why don't you get a monkey gland?'

'You fix me up with this young lady, I'd be quite willing.'

'Okay, it's my responsibility now . . . But I should also have my share, bhai.'

'Meaning?'

'That is, I'll also come to your house sometimes to soothe my eyes.'

'If you come with that intention, then I'm your enemy.'

'Oh ho! Just the mention of monkey gland has made you young! I think this is also a formula used Arré by doctors to loot people. Really!'

'Arré, sahib, where are you? There is magic in this beauty's touch—each part of her body, each limb, each gesture, each smile is exuding youth. A hundred monkey glands will not be equal to one embrace from her.'

'All right, all right, let's go now. Clients must be waiting for you.'

'I'll always remember this face. I'll never forget this face.'

'Again you talk of . . .'

'She's sleeping like this so that people may look at her beauty, her figure, her dishevelled hair, and her uncovered neck and get excited. It would be very unfair to her to go away like this. She beckons and you run away!'

'Can a young man love like us from the core of his heart?'

'I've come across some women who are in search of mature aesthetes like us. Young men are wild, impetuous, juvenile and vain. They expect something in return for their love. But we surrender ourselves unconditionally.'

'Your words tickle me.'

'But remember one thing—what if her young lover accosts us?'

'So what! We will face him. I am not afraid.'

'There was some talk about your marriage, wasn't there?'

'Yes, there was. But if one's own son becomes an enemy, what can one do? My eldest son, Yashwant, pointed a gun at me. That's a sign of the times.'

The October heat was increasing. The two friends walked away.



Two women—one young, the other old—stepped out of a car which stopped at the gate and entered the park for some fresh air. They also saw the young woman fast asleep.

‘Such a shameless woman,’ said the old lady.

Looking at her disdainfully, the young lady said, ‘Her airs are those of a respectable woman . . .’

‘That’s all, it’s only airs! That’s why men say—women shouldn’t get freedom.’

‘To me, she looks like a prostitute.’

‘Even if she is, she has no right to disgrace all women by such outrageous behaviour!’

‘See how she’s sleeping, as if she’s in her own home!’

‘Sheer wantonness! I don’t believe in purdah, I don’t want to be enslaved by men; but I don’t want to give up the grace and dignity of women either. I get furious when I see a girl smoking a cigarette on the street, just as I dislike those short cholis. Is it only by giving up our traditional decency that we can prove we are progressive? Men don’t go around baring their chests!’

‘When I argue with you about the same things, baiji, you get offended. Man is free; he knows in his heart he is. He doesn’t pretend he is liberated. While a woman believes deep inside that she isn’t free, so she keeps swearing she is free. The strong are not arrogant; it’s the weak who are boastful. Won’t you allow them even this opportunity to hide their tears?’

‘I tell you, a woman can make a man dance to her tunes by covering rather than exposing herself.’

‘Why should it be only women who think of attracting men? Why don’t men veil themselves from women?’

‘Now, don’t force me to say any more, Meenu! Wake this girl up! Tell her to go and sleep in her own home. So many men are passing this way and this hussy is sprawled out here. How could she have fallen asleep here?’

‘Last night was so hot, baiji! The cool air must have put her to sleep.’

‘I bet she was here all night long.’

Meenu goes to the woman and shakes her head. ‘Why are you sleeping here, Deviji? The sun is high in the sky, go home . . .’

The woman opens her eyes. 'Is it already morning? Had I fallen asleep? I often get giddy spells. I thought some fresh air would do me good. I came here but I felt so dizzy that I sat down. After that I don't remember anything . . . even now I can't stand up. I feel like I am going to fall. I've tried several medicines, but nothing has helped. You must know Dr Shyamnath? He is my father-in-law.'

'Arré!' said the girl, surprised. 'He just passed this way.'

'Really! But how could he recognize me? My *gauna* hasn't taken place yet.'

'That means you are the wife of his son, Basant Lal?'

The woman nodded shyly.

Meenu said with a laugh, 'Basant Lal went past just now. I know him from the university.'

'Really! But he has never seen me.'

'Shall I go and tell Doctor Sahib?'

'No, I'll be fine in a little while.'

'Basant Lal is also standing there. Shall I call him?'

'No, please don't call anyone.'

'Then come, I'll drop you home.'

'That would be so kind of you.'

'Which mohalla?'

'Begamganj, Mr Jayaramdas's house.'

'I'll speak to Mr Basant Lal himself today.'

'How would I know that he comes to this park?'

'But you could have taken someone with you!'

'Why? There wasn't any need.'

*Translated from the Hindi by Binish Aqil*



## The Secret

Neela asked, 'Why did you write that letter?'

Meena retorted, 'To whom?'

'You know very well who I'm talking about.'

'I don't.'

'I bet you know. The fellow insulted me, he spread scandalous rumours about me everywhere, and you make friends with him. Is that proper?'

'You're wrong.'

'Didn't you write that letter to him?'

'I did not!'

'Then I'm sorry, it's my fault. If you weren't my sister, I wouldn't have asked.'

'I haven't written a letter to anyone.'

'I'm happy to know that you didn't.'

'Why that grin on your face?'

'Grin?'

'Of course!'

'You're imagining things.'

'What do you think I am—blind?'

'If you say so.'

'Why did you smile?'

'I'm telling you I didn't!'

'I saw with my own eyes that you were grinning.'

'I'll never be able to convince you.'

'You think you're a smart one, don't you?'

‘Very well, I grinned. So are you going to kill me?’

‘Who gave you the right to grin at my cost?’

‘I beg of you, Neela. Stop tormenting me, please. I didn’t grin.’

‘I’m not a greenhorn.’

‘I know that.’

‘I’ve always been a liar to you, haven’t I?’

‘Whose face did you see the first thing in the morning?’

‘Your face, of course.’

‘Why don’t you give me some poison?’

‘So now I’ve become a killer, have I?’

‘I never said so.’

‘What else are you saying? Would you like to blow the trumpet and announce it? I kill, I drink, I’m vain, and you are the embodiment of all virtues. You’re Sita, you’re Savitri. That makes you happy?’

‘Well, I wrote him that letter, so? What business is it of yours? Who are you to question me on what I do or don’t do!’

‘All right. I knew it all along. It was stupid of me to ask.’

‘I’ll write letters to whoever I want. I’ll talk to whoever I want. Who are you to meddle in my affairs? I don’t poke my nose in yours. Don’t I see you writing bundles of letters to friends every day?’

‘If you’ve lost all sense of shame, do what you like. It’s your life.’

‘And since when have you become so bashful? If you’re thinking of telling Amma, let me tell you that I couldn’t care less. Indeed, I wrote him a letter, met him in the park and we actually spoke to each other. Go tell Amma, Grandfather and the entire neighbourhood.’

‘If you sow the wind, you’ll reap the whirlwind. Why should I tell anyone?’

‘Oh, you’re trying to put up a brave face! As they say, the grapes are sour.’

‘Whatever you say.’

‘You’re burning with jealousy!’

‘My foot!’

‘Go ahead, cry it off.’

‘You cry it off. I couldn’t care less.’

‘He’s given me a wristwatch. Want to see it?’

‘Congrats! Are you sure you want my evil eye on it?’

‘Tell me why are you so jealous?’

...tell me, why are you so jealous.

'I'm damned if I'm jealousy of you.'

'I'll make you even more jealous.'

'Come on, you can't make me jealous.'

'You're mad with jealousy right now.'

'When are you going to give us news about the happy event?'

'Go drown yourself.'

'Not before I witness you circling the sacred fire.'

'You are interested only in the sacred fire, aren't you?'

'Oh, you mean you're tying the knot without the sacred ritual.'

'I don't care for the ritual and the hypocrisy that go with it. I'm happy with love, thank you.'

'You mean, you'll really . . .'

'I'm scared of no one.'

'It's gone that far, has it? And you were telling me, "I never wrote that letter." You swore you didn't.'

'I can't bare my heart to everyone.'

'I wasn't asking you. It was you who blurted it all out.'

'But why did you grin?'

'Because I know that the scoundrel will play the same trick with you as he did with me, and then he'll go around spreading the same story. And then, like me, you'll regret ever having met him.'

'Wasn't he in love with you?'

'Wasn't he! He would lie at my feet and cry, and he declared that he'd take poison and die if I refused his love.'

'Are you telling the truth?'

'It's the absolute truth.'

'He tells me the same thing.'

'I don't believe it.'

'It's the truth, I swear.'

'And I thought he was just having a fling with you.'

'You mean he's really—'

'Yes, he's a habitual playboy.'

Meena sat still, lost in thought, her face buried in her hands.

*Translated from the Hindi by M. Asaduddin*



## The Minister of the State

### 1

Mr Mehta belonged to the category of those unlucky fellows who could not please their masters. He would do his work sincerely and wished to win appreciation for that. But he did not realize that he was not a servant to his work but to the master who employed him. While his colleagues recorded their presence in the court, he would be busy with his papers and files in his office. The obvious result of this was that the servants of the master got promotions, rewards and enjoyed themselves while Mr Mehta, the servant to his work, was scolded for this or that fault. Since he had gone through such harsh experiences quite often in life, this time when the king of Satiya offered him a good position, he promised himself he would work according to the will of his master and test his good luck by praising him. He lived up to his promise so well that not two years had passed before he was made the secretary to the king. To be the minister of a free state was indeed a big thing! Apart from the handsome salary of five hundred rupees per month, the privileges and prerogatives were many. He could freely manipulate the resources as he pleased to suit his interests with no one to object to or interfere with his actions. Raja Sahib was drowned in the luxuries of life and Mr Mehta took care of the affairs of the state. The workers and the office bearers would supplicate before him, the rich would give gifts, and even the queens would flatter him. Raja Sahib was a man of fiery temperament as is the wont of kings—a lion before the meek and a wet cat before the sturdy. Sometimes, he would admonish Mr Mehta, but he had already decided not to give any explanation in his defence. He listened to everything

silently with his head lowered. The fire of the king's anger extinguished for want of fuel.

It was summer. The Political Agent was on patrol. Preparations for his welcome to the state were in full swing. Raja Sahib called for Mr Mehta and said, 'I want that Sahib Bahadur should return from my state fully pleased, with my name on his tongue.'

With a bowed head, Mehta said politely, 'This is what I am trying to do to my level best, my lord!'

'As for trying—many people try but fail. I want you to say with resolution that it would be the same as I wish it to be.'

'Everything will be according to your wish.'

'Don't worry about the money.'

'Order me, sir!'

'There should be no complaint. Otherwise you will be responsible.'

'Will it be all right if he returns from here thanking you?'

'Yes, this is what I want.'

'I will put my life into the effort.'

'Now I am satisfied.'

While the Political Agent was to visit the state, Jai Krishna, the son of Mr Mehta had come to his parents to spend his summer vacation. He was a university student. Once, in 1932, he had served a sentence for six months for a rabble-rousing speech. When he came home for the first time after his father had been appointed as secretary, the king specially called for him, chatted with him freely and took him along on a hunting trip. The king played tennis with him daily. Jai Krishna was impressed with the communist views of the king. He came to know that Raja Sahib was not only a patriot but also a supporter of revolution. Both had a big debate over the Russian and French revolutions. But this time he noticed something entirely different. Every landlord and farmer of the state had been forced to donate money. The police visited village after village in order to extort money from the people. The amount was fixed by the minister. It was the duty of the police to collect it. There was no place the people could go with their grievances. Sheer unrest prevailed everywhere. Thousands of labourers were busy cleaning and decorating government buildings and repairing roads without pay. Grocers were intimidated into providing free stock to the officers. Jai Krishna was surprised over what was going on. How could there be



such a big difference between the views and actions of Raja Sahib? Maybe the king was unaware of all this or in their zeal to carry out his orders, the servants of the state had done this on their own accord. He held himself back for the night. In the morning he asked Mr Mehta, 'Did you inform the king about the way people are being tortured?'

Mr Mehta himself was feeling guilty about this disorder. He was a kind person by nature but was helpless against the circumstances. He said sadly, 'This is the order of Raja Sahib. What can anybody do?'

'Then you should distance yourself from all this. You know, for this disorder and anarchy you are being made the scapegoat and the entire responsibility rests on your head. People blame you for everything.'

'I can't help it. I suggested to the officers that as far as possible no force or pressure should be used on the people. But I can't be at all places at the same time. If I intervene directly, they will complain about it to Raja Sahib. They wait for such occasions. What they require is a pretext to rob people. More than what they deposit in the government treasury, they keep for themselves at home. I can't do anything.'

An excited Jai Krishna said, 'Then why don't you resign?'

Mehta said shamefully, 'Of course! That would be the most suitable thing to do. But life has tossed me around so many times that I cannot afford to do that. I have made up my mind that in a job I cannot keep myself clean. I have wandered much entangled in the notion of what is religious and what is not, what selfless service is and what conscience is. I have seen that the world belongs to those who adopt the ways of the world—those who act as per time and occasion. This is not a place for idealists.'

Jai Ram said in disgust, 'Should I go to Raja Sahib?'

'Do you think Raja Sahib is unaware of all this?'

'Maybe he will feel pity listening to the stories of people's woes.'

There was no way Mr Mehta could object to this. He wished to unburden himself of this injustice done to the people, but also had a fear if the eagerness of Jai Krishna may not prove harmful and lead to the loss of his power and prestige. He said, 'Make sure that you do not say anything to displease the king.'

Jai Krishna promised that he would not do any such thing. He was not a fool. But how could he know that Raja Sahib was no longer the person he used to be a

month before. One might say it was possible that after the departure of the Political

year before. Or maybe it was possible that after the departure of the Political Agent, he would revert to his previous self. He did not know that for the king the talk about revolution and terror was a piece of entertainment, as were the incidents of murder and rape or the tantalizing news from the flesh market.

Having reached the threshold of Raja Sahib, when he sent word of his arrival, he was told that the king was not well. As he was about to return, the king called for him. Perhaps he wanted to get the latest updates from him on the world of cinema. After he saluted Raja Sahib, he said, 'It is really good that you have come. Did you watch the MCC match? I was so caught up with these affairs of the state that I did not get time. Just pray that somehow the Political Agent goes from our place happy and content. I have got a speech written. Just have a look at it. I have lampooned these national protests and also criticized this mission for the emancipation of the poor.'

Controlling his anger, Jai Krishna said, 'You castigated national protests—so far so good—but as far as the emancipation of the poor is concerned, it has got the approval of the government. That is why they released Gandhi, and even when he was in jail, they allowed him to study and also meet people in connection with this revolution.'

With a natural smile on his lips, Raja Sahib said, 'You do not know. All this is a mere show. The government well understands it as a political revolution and analyses it closely. As long as you are loyal to the government, the agitations and protests, even if they cross the boundary of relevance, are things to be amused about just like the sentimental outpourings of poets please us even if they are ridiculous. We can take such a poet as a flatterer and a fool but cannot be upset with him. The higher he raises us, the loftier he becomes in our eyes.'

Raja Sahib took out a copy of the speech from the drawer and put it before Jai Ram, but it no longer attracted him. If he were a man of flattery, he would have looked at it—even if apparently—with attention, praised the diction and the beauty of its emotionally charged appeal and would have compared it with the speeches of the king of Bikaner and the king of Patiala. But he was ignorant of the ways of the world. What he thought was good he openly said it was good and what he considered bad he boldly called it just that. He had not yet learnt to alter bad for good or vice versa. Casting a cursory glance at the speech, he put it on the table and blowing the bugle of straightforwardness said, 'I am not familiar with the intrigues of politics, but in my opinion these descendants of Chanakya

understand these tricks very well. They won't be hoodwinked and taken over by false emotional warmth. Rather, it will cause one to lose one's dignity and reputation. If the Political Agent comes to know of the atrocities and tortures to which the people have been subjected to in order to contribute to the arrangements for his welcome, perhaps he will return from our state unhappily. As for me, I look at the whole issue from the people's point of view. The happiness of the Agent would be fruitful for you, but it will cause only harm to the people.'

Raja Sahib could not tolerate criticism. His anger would show itself slightly through cross-questioning, then transform into arguments and finally boil over in the throes of a raging quake which caused his dull body, the chair, table, walls and the roof to shake and shiver wildly. Looking from the corner of his eyes, he said, 'Let me know how it harms the people, by the way.'

Jai Ram realized that the machine gun of ire was in motion and could explode any moment. Cautiously, he said, 'You understand it better than me.'

'No, I am not that sharp-witted.'

'You will be offended.'

'Do you take me for a heap of gun powder?'

'It is advisable you don't ask me.'

'You will have to explain.' He clenched his fists unconsciously and added, 'You will have to tell me right at this moment.'

Why would Jai Ram accept this overbearing attitude? He threw his weight around princes in the stadium during cricket matches, took liberties and giped at officers of high ranks. He said, 'As of now, you have some fear of the Political Agent, but you can't freely oppress people. When he will bend under the weight of your gifts and favours, you will have no one stopping you and there will be none to pay heed to the grievances and complaints of the people.'

Looking at him with fiery eyes, Raja Sahib said, 'I am not a slave to the Agent that I should fear him. There is no reason at all, not a single reason in fact that I should get intimidated. I welcome him and offer my hospitality simply because he is the representative of His Majesty. I am on good terms with His Majesty and share a rapport with him. The Agent is no more than his ambassador. I am just following the protocol. If I happen to go to Britain, His Majesty will receive me with no less warmth and welcome. And what fear should I have? I am a free and independent king of my state. I can pass the death sentence on anyone. Who can

independent king of my state. I can pass the death sentence on anyone. Who can frighten me? Those who fear are impotent and lack guts. I do not even fear God! I have never known what fear is. I am not a blurter—a college student like you who keeps harping on revolution and freedom. You do not have any idea what revolution is. You have merely heard its name and not seen its horrifying scenes bathed in red. You will shake at the sound of gunfire. What do you want? Should I say to the Agent, “People are already going through the worst of times and you need not come.” I cannot be inhospitable to that extent. I am not blind, nor am I a fool. I know more about the condition of the people than you. You look at them from outside but mine is an insider’s view. You cannot misguide my people with the dream of revolution. You will not be allowed to sow the seeds of unrest and rebellion in my state. You will have to lock your tongue. Mind it that you cannot say a word against me. Not even heave a breath of disapproval!’

The rays of the setting sun as they reflected through the coloured glass of the living room with arches showed the angry face of the king all the more reddened. His hair turned blue, eyes yellow, face red and the body green. He looked like a monster from the world of demons. Jai Rama’s impudence evaporated. He had never seen Raja Sahib in such rage. But at the same time his dignity and self-respect was eager to meet this challenge. As politeness is answered by politeness, anger is the reply to anger when it flows out—beyond terror, fear, respect, and discipline.

He also filled his eyes with fire and said, ‘I cannot sit silently and see this atrocity perpetrated before my eyes.’

Furious, Raja Sahib stood up and said, ‘You don’t have the right to wag your damn tongue.’

‘Every man of feeling and discretion has a right to raise his voice against injustice. You cannot take away this right from me.’

‘I can do anything.’

‘You can do nothing.’

‘I can send you to prison right now.’

‘You cannot harm a single hair on my head.’

Just then Mr Mehta came into the room, and looking at Jai Krishna with wrathful eyes, said, ‘Just get lost, just be out of my sight and beware! Never again show me your face. I do not want to look at the face of a black sheep like you. You make a hole in the pot you eat from. Such an ill-mannered guy! You

say a word and I will drink your blood.'

Jai Krishna looked at his father with disgust, stood up straight with all pride and dignity, and exited the living room.

Raja Sahib said, reclining on his couch, 'He is a rogue, a scoundrel of the first order. I would not like such a dangerous man to stay for a moment in my state. You go and ask him to go from here at once to avoid unpleasant consequences. I put up with him only because of you otherwise he would have been taught a lesson immediately. It is for your sake that I restrained myself. If you want to remain a councillor, ask him to leave my state at once and tell him never to step into my kingdom. Or if you value the love for your son more, leave my state today itself. You cannot take anything with you—not even a trifle. Everything is the property of the state. Do you agree to this?'

Driven by anger, Mr Mehta had scolded his son but he did not expect the matter to have developed this far. For a second, he was awestruck and started pondering over the situation with his head held low. The king could have crushed him to dust. He was utterly helpless with no friends and no one to listen to him. The king would not stop till he reduced him to the status of a beggar. He shivered to think of the humiliation that awaited him and his expulsion from the state. He had no lack of enemies. They would all rejoice and beat drums. Those who stand before him as wet cats would then growl like lions. Moreover, who would offer him a job now that he was old? Would he have to spread his hands and beg from this cruel world? No, the better option was to stick to where one was. He said in a wavering tone, 'I will drive him out of the house today itself, my lord!'

'Not today—right now.'

'Yes, right now.'

'Drive him out forever.'

'Yes, forever.'

'Well, then go, and inform me within half an hour.'

Mr Mehta started for home but his legs shook because of the anger that raged within him. His whole body was on fire. Because of this boy, he had to face such humiliation. He was a donkey to bray about communism. Now he will realize how much one has to pay for not reining in one's tongue. 'Why should I disgrace myself for his sake? Yes, I love my position and prestige. And why should I not? I have toiled relentlessly for years together, shedding both my sweat and blood. I

don't like injustice. But this is not the only thing I disapprove of. There are thousand other things I equally dislike. When there is no solution to be had, why should I spoil my life over this matter?'

Having reached home, he called out, 'Jai Krishna!'

Sunita said, 'Jai Krishna went to Raja Sahib even before you. He has not returned yet.'

'Not yet come? He set out before me.'

He went outside and started inquiring with the servants. Still there was no news of him. *Was he hiding somewhere out of apprehension? But the king had ordered him to revert to him within half an hour! God knows what this boy is up to. He will ruin himself and drown me as well.*

Suddenly a constable came and handed him a piece of paper. 'Oh, this is Jai Krishna's handwriting. What does he say—"After this disgrace, I cannot stay a moment in the state. I know you keep your position and prestige above your soul, so you are free to enjoy them. I will not come back to give you pains. Give my regards to Mother."'

Mehta showed the letter to Sunita and complained in an irritated tone, 'God knows when this boy will grow up. But this turn of events is good for him. Now the pampered one will realize what it takes to live in this world. Without jerks and twists, the eyes don't open to realities. I have been a participant in many foolish games and don't want to spoil the rest of my life running after absurdities.' He went straight to inform the king.

## 2

In a flash, the news travelled throughout the state. Jai Krishna was popular among the people for his gentle nature. People started talking about this on the streets and at the crossroads. 'Let me say he was not a man but an incarnation of God. He went to the maharaj and boldly said, "Stop this forced labour, otherwise people will take to the road and protest." He made Raja Sahib speechless. Raja Sahib started looking sideways. Man! He is a lion—a real lion. Look at his tender age but such a daredevil he is. And take it from me, he could have put an end to this forced labour forever. Raja Sahib could have hardly escaped. I have heard that he started whining. Meanwhile, Divan Sahib came and ordered his son

to leave the state. At this, his eyes turned blood red with anger but he did not insult his father.'

'Such a father should be shot dead. More of an enemy than a father!'

'Whatever, but he is a father after all.'

Sunita sat crying the whole day. She felt as if someone was piercing her heart with spears. *God knows where the poor creature went. He had not even eaten his breakfast.* She would have thrown such comfort and luxury in to the hearth fire for the sake of her son. The flood of emotions in her heart was so intense that she felt like leaving her husband and the state then and there. *It was a kingdom ruled by demons. If her husband loves to be a minister, let him possess the position forever and be content with it.* She was ready to fast with her son as long as he was before her eyes.

She decided to meet the queen. She thought of pleading with her. *Maharani is also blessed with children. Will she not feel pity at a self-respecting mother?* She has already visited her many times before. Her despair-laden heart was filled with hope.

But when she reached the residence of the Rani, she found the latter's demeanour altered. As soon as she saw her, she said, 'Your son is very uncouth. Doesn't know manners at all! He has not learnt how to address people. What has he studied at the university? Today he misbehaved with the maharaja. He asked him to stop forced labour in the state and not to make preparations for the welcome of the Agent Sahib. He doesn't understand that a king cannot continue to sit on the throne for many hours this way. The Agent may not be a very big officer but he is the representative of His Majesty. It is our duty to respect him. Does it suit a good man to incite people to rebel? To make holes in the plate you eat from! The maharaja respects Divan Sahib or else he would have got your son imprisoned. He is not a child. He is a fully grown man with the length of five hands. He can see things and understand them well. If we offend our masters, how long can we get along? And he faces no harm. He can easily get a job for a fifty or a hundred rupees. But in our case it would be a loss of estates worth millions.'

Widening her eyes, Sunita said, 'You are right, Maharani, but please forgive his crime. The poor fellow has not come home out of fear and shame. I wonder where he is gone. He is the only support of our life. If we lose him, we will cry

ourselves to death. I spread my *aanchal* before you and beg you to forgive him. Who can understand the feelings of a mother's heart more than you? Please request the king on your behalf.'

The maharani looked at Sunita with her big eyes, as if she was saying something very strange. Then placing her bejewelled fingers on her red lips, she said, 'What do you say, Sunita? Should I plead for a man who is bent on ruining us? Should I nourish a snake up my sleeves? You have the nerve to ask for such a thing! And what will the maharaja think of me. No, I am not going to intervene. What he has sown, he shall reap. Had I such an unworthy son, I would never want to see his face again. And here you plead for such a son!'

With tearful eyes, Sunita said, 'Maharani, such talk does not behove you.'

The maharani sat up on the bolster and said reproachfully, 'If you thought I would wipe your tears, you are wrong. To have come to us pleading for the one who rebelled against us shows that you consider his offence a childish prank. Had you assessed the grimness of his crime, you would have never come to me. One who has tasted the salt of the state now pats the back of a rebel! He is a traitor. What more can I say?

Now Sunita flared up. The affection for her son came out of the sheath. She said, 'The duty of a raja is not merely to please his officers. The interest and well-being of his people should be the first on his priority list.'

Right then, the maharaja entered the room. The rani got up and received him, and Sunita stood there numb with bowed head.

With a sarcastic smile on his lips, the raja asked, 'Who is this woman preaching to you about the duties of a king?'

The rani said, 'She is the wife of Divan Sahib.'

Raja Sahib frowned. Biting his lips, he said, 'When the mother is such a sharp knife, there is no reason why the son isn't poisonous. Lady! I will not take this lesson from you what the obligations of a king are towards his people. I have been receiving this teaching for many generations. You had better learn the duties of a servant towards a master.'

Saying this, the maharaja left the place.

Mr Mehta was leaving for home when the maharaja called him harshly, 'Listen, Mr Mehta, as for your son, he is declared a rebel but here I have just come to know that your better half is a step ahead of him when it comes to



betrayal. Rather, I will say that your son is the mere tape on which the voice of this lady plays. I don't like that under the nose of the caretaker of the state, traitors to the state should flourish. You can't absolve yourself of this offence. I will not be unjust if I guess that you have chanted this air of rebellion.'

Mr Mehta could not bear this blame on his loyalty. With a choked throat, he said, 'How should I bring myself to say that in this regard, sir, the friend of the poor, is being unjust. But let me tell you that I am totally innocent. It really pains me to know that my faithfulness is being questioned.'

'Mere words don't prove loyalty.'

'As I remember, I have already proved it.'

'New justifications are required for new arguments. The provision for punishment in the case of your son shall be the same for your wife too. I will not accept any excuse in this regard. The order should be immediately carried out.'

'But, my lord of the poor!'

'I will not listen to another word.'

'Will I not be allowed to plead?'

'Not at all, this is my final order.'

As Mr Mehta walked out, he was feeling very angry with Sunita. *God knows what whim carried her over there. As for Jai Krishna, he is a mere boy, not much experienced, but what propelled this old woman to act like this? What things she would have said to the rani. Nobody has sympathy for me. All of them sing to their own tune. No one can understand what a hard phase I am going through. After numerous hardships, I had come to some respite and peace, and now these two have created this new storm. Are we the proprietor of truth and justice? This place witnesses nothing different from the rest of the world. This is nothing new! It is a sin to be born poor and weak. Nobody can escape punishment for this. The eagle never takes pity on the pigeon. To stand with truth and justice is an integral part of man's politeness and decency. Nobody can deny this fact. But can't we do the same like the rest of the people, vouchsafe for it by words? And the people you side with should also acknowledge this. Today, if Raja Sahib talks with these free labourers light-heartedly, they will forget all their grievances. Perhaps Sunita went to the Rani and outpoured her sentiments. Such an ass she is to not know that to manage to lead a life of respect is one's duty. If fate brought glory and fame to me, why would I slave for others? But the*

*problem is, where do I send this woman? There is no one at her parents' house, nor is there anybody at my place. Hmm . . . But why should I die worrying about this! Let her go where she pleases. She will suffer for what she has done!*

Guilty and sad, he reached home, and said to Sunita, 'So, you were driven by the same madness that gripped the boy. Will you ever grow up? Have we alone taken it as our duty to mend the ways of the whole world? Tell me of a king who does not torture and oppress his people and abduct the progressive leaders from among them. And also, why should the king alone be blamed? Me, you and in fact all of us, in one way or the other are being unjust to many. What entitles you to a retinue of servants and punish them for small offences? Truth and justice are hollow words. Their significance lies in the fact that they help the axe to fall on the neck of fools and allow the wise to win applause. You and your son are among such fools. And you will have to face the punishment. The order of the king requires you to vacate the state within three hours, failing which the police will come and throw you out. I have decided that I will not utter a word against the will of Raja Sahib. I have a bitter experience of siding with justice. It has brought me nothing other than humiliation. The people I took sides with are still the same, rather worse. I make it clear that I am not ready to pay for the impudence that you have committed. I would be providing help secretly. I cannot do any more than this.'

Sunita said with a sense of pride, 'I don't want your help. If the secret is disclosed, your friend of the poor will strike you with the thunderbolt of his wrath. You love your position and prestige. Enjoy them freely. If my son could do no big things, he can earn enough to arrange for a meal at least. Even I will see how long your loyalty to your master serves you and for how long you keep killing your soul.'

Vexed, Mr Mehta said, 'Do you want me to wander from place to place again?'

Sunita rubbed salt into his wounds, 'No, never. Till now I thought you loved failures. There was something more precious than position and privilege that you had with you and in order to safeguard it, you did not mind even wandering from place to place. Now I have come to know that you prefer your position to your soul. Then why would you be a loser? But I hope you will occasionally send the news of your well-being or will you have to seek permission from Raja Sahib even for this?'

even for this.

‘Is Raja Sahib so bereft of a sense of justice that he should interfere with my correspondence?’

‘Oh! Can Raja Sahib display that much humility? I can hardly believe this!’

‘You are still not ashamed of your action.’

‘I am not at fault. Rather I pray to God to provide me with such occasions to repeat my act again and again.’

Mr Mehta said with disinterest, ‘Where have you decided to go?’

‘To hell.’

‘You commit an offence and unleash your anger on me.’

‘I never thought you to be so shameless.’

‘I can use the same word for you.’

‘Yes. You can say it from your tongue, but not from your heart.’

Mr Mehta was ashamed.

### 3

When the time came for Sunita’s departure, the gathered men and women wept bitterly. But in a way, Sunita accepted her mistake. The truth was that in these days of unemployment, whatever Mr Mehta did seemed appropriate. *The poor man—where would he have wandered without work!*

The Political Agent paid his visit and enjoyed feasting and hunting to his fill for many days. Raja Sahib praised him and, in turn, he praised Raja Sahib. Raja Sahib convinced him of his loyalty and he called the state of Satiya an ideal state, and described Raja Sahib as an incarnation of justice and service to the people. He left after three days with the state incurring an expenditure of two and a half lakh rupees.

Mr Mehta was flying in the sky. Everybody praised the way he had managed things. The Agent Sahib was highly pleased with his deftness. He was conferred the title of ‘Rai Sahib’ and his privileges were raised. He had put his soul somewhere in a corner. His devotedness to the cause that the maharaja and the Agent Sahib both be pleased with him had shown a fruitful result. There was no servant more faithful in the state.

Raja Sahib had no worries at least for three years. As long as the Agent was happy, he had none to fear. The wave of lust, licentiousness and many immoral

activities gathered momentum. In order to spy on beautiful ladies, a secret service agency was started which was directly under the control of Raja Sahib. A wicked and cunning old man was made the president of this agency who was an expert in beguiling the beauties from the Himalayas and exploiting them to dupe the kings. For his dexterity in this art, he drew special attention in courts. New birds began visiting the court. Fear, greed and regard, every weapon was used for hunting down the target.

But on one occasion the team work as well as efforts at a personal level failed in this regard. The agency decided that the desired girl should be picked up. The charge of this special duty was given to Mr Mehta who was the most dutiful and loyal servant of the state. The Maharaja had full faith in him. When it came to others, he was not sure if they may exploit the girl for money or enjoy the gift themselves. In case of Mr Mehta, these doubts were out of the question. Raja Sahib called for him at nine in the night.

When Mr Mehta reached the threshold, he found Raja Sahib taking a walk in the garden. As their eyes met, he said, 'Welcome, Mr Mehta. I need to consult you regarding a very special matter. Some people in the court have suggested that your statue be erected before the Lion Gate so that you are remembered forever. I hope you do not have any objection to it. And even if you have any, I am going to act against your will in this regard. There is no way one can reward you for the unparalleled service that you have rendered to the state, but the veneration that people have for you will manifest itself in one form or the other.'

With profound politeness, Mehta said, 'This is the kindness of my lord, otherwise I am a petty servant. What I have always tried to do is to prove myself worth my salt for the favours I have received from you. But I don't deserve this honour.'

With a gentle laughter, Raja Sahib said, 'You are not the one to decide whether you deserve this honour or not. The power of a councillor will not work here. In fact, this is not an honour that I am giving you, but it is an attempt to showcase my devotion for you. Not far is the day when both you and I will cease to exist. At that particular moment, this statue with its unmoving lips would declare that the past generations knew how to honour and respect their benefactors. I have asked people to collect donations. The latest letter of the Agent Sahib has a special mention of your name.'

Kneeling to the ground Mr Mehta said 'That is his kindness. As I am your

...kneeling to the ground, the maharani said, 'That is his kindness. As I am your servant, so am I a servant to him.'

For many a minute, Raja Sahib looked at flowers in blossom. Then he said, as if recollecting something, 'There is a village called Laganpur under Tahsil Khas. Have you ever been there?'

'Yes, my lord. Once I have been there. I stayed at a rich moneylender's place. He offered me his living room. A nice gentleman!'

'Yes, apparently a good man but a real monster from inside. Perhaps you don't know that for the last some days, the maharani has been in broken health and her condition has worsened. I am thinking of sending her to some sanatorium. There she may live peacefully away from all worries and anxieties of the court. But there needs to be a queen in the Queen Residency. The officers visit us along with their maids and there are many English friends who come here as guests accompanied by their girls. Sometimes kings also pay a visit with their queens. Without a queen, who will entertain the ladies? For me this is a political issue, not a personal one, and I believe you will agree with me on this. Therefore, I have decided to remarry. The moneylender you talked about has a daughter. She has been studying for some time in Ajmer. Once, while passing through that village, I spotted her standing on the roof of her house. Instantly a thought crossed my mind that the queen's palace will dazzle if this jewel is brought there. With the consent of the queen, I sent a message regarding this to the moneylender, but my opponents cunningly dissuaded him from accepting it. He says that the girl has already been married off. I sent back word that it mattered little to me and I was ready to pay for that. But the rude man repeatedly says no to it. You know love is incurable. You may also have experienced it. To put it in straight terms, life has lost every taste. I have forgotten sleep and rest and also lost my appetite. If this continues, it may endanger my life. During the day or in my sleep, the same figure appears before my eyes. Having failed to convince and calm my heart, finally I have decided to resolve the issue strategically. All is fair in love and war. I would like you to go there with some respectable men and bring that jewel to our court. I don't care whether she comes willingly or by force. I am the ultimate authority in my state. Others don't have the social and moral right to possess a thing that I mark for my desire. Please understand, you can save my life. There is no one else who can discharge this business efficiently. You have done big things for the state. This would be

the final sacrifice and you would be eternally considered the majestic God of this royal dynasty.'

The sense of dignity that lay dormant in Mr Mehta suddenly gained consciousness. The blood, which had long lost its flow in his veins, erupted violently. With his eyebrows raised, he said, 'Why don't you simply say I should kidnap her?'

As Raja Sahib controlled his temper, he tried to throw water on the fire, and said, 'No, Mr Mehta, not at all. You are not being fair to me by saying so. I am sending you as my representative. To finish the job successfully, you can take recourse to any means possible. You have every right.'

Even more excitedly, Mr Mehta said, 'Such idiocy is beyond me.'

'To obey one's master is an act of idiocy?'

'To carry out an order against religion and nature is an act of foolishness.'

'To propose a woman for marriage is against religion and nature?'

'By calling it marriage, you blaspheme the very word. This is "rape".'

'Are you in your senses?'

'Yes, very much in my senses.'

'I can ruin you.'

'Then you will also lose your throne.'

'This is how you pay me back for my favours? You are unworthy of your salt.'

'Now you are crossing the limits of decency, Raja Sahib! So far I have killed my soul and carried out your orders—whether right or wrong. But there is a limit to serving one's selfish ends, and no essentially good man can go beyond that. This is a heinous crime that you are planning and one who assists you in this deserves to be hanged. May a curse befall such a job! I quit!'

Having said that, he came back home, gathered his belongings, although it was night, and moved out of the state. But before he went away, he wrote out the whole account of what had happened and posted it to the Agent.

*Translated from the Hindi by Sarfaraz Nawaz*



## Pandit Moteram's Diary

### 1

I don't understand—what's-it-called—the difference between a diary and a dairy farm. Diary is the word for that small notebook of plain binding which is used to write the record of everyday affairs and which almost every great man writes. And dairy farm is the place where cattle, like cows and buffaloes, are reared and where milk, butter and ghee are produced. I think this place gets its name because just as a diary is meant for recording everyday affairs, similarly, a dairy farm produces milk products every day. Whatever be the case, I have now decided to write my diary. Many years ago, a bookseller had presented me with a diary. Then I had used it for a month to write about myself, but I could not really think of anything to write about. For several hours before going to bed, I would think, *What do I write? There should be something to write about after all.* All that I would write was that I woke up in the morning, did my ablutions, took my bath, anointed myself, did the pooja, met the clients, read the horoscopes somewhere, then returned home for food and slept. In the evening, woke up again, drank hemp, bathed again, again anointed myself and went out to recite the scriptures; again returned home for dinner, and slept. I did not quite like writing all this, and so I finished that diary by jotting down the washerman's accounts and other expenditures. Ever since that diary got over, I gave up noting down such things, while the washerman's account has been handed over to the *panditayin*—my wife.

But why am I starting to write a diary again? I have been told that writing a diary increases one's years and blesses one with all the four achievements

recommended by the scriptures. Therefore, I hereby, in the name of God and bowing before Lord Ganesha, recommence the writing of the diary. Om Shanti! Shanti! Shanti!

These days I get to hear a lot of discussion over—what’s-it-called—communism and socialism. Communism means that all men are equal. So, I would like to ask our communist scholars, who are also experts on the subject, such as Shri Sampurnanand, Acharya Narendradevji and Acharya Shriprakashji, that how can all men be equal? May Acharya Narendradevji forgive me, or not, but three men like him can be well accommodated in my belly. What kind of communism is this? It can only mean that either I shorten myself like the *vaamana* avatar of Lord Vishnu or acharyaji takes the form of a giant.

Now consider this. You want everybody to have equal wealth, but please tell me, how will you ensure that everybody has equal appetite? Acharya Narendradevji may not need more than a roti or two and just a bit of milk, but I must have rich, lavish meals, which must have the provision of cream, almonds and sweets like laddu, halwa and kalakand, at least four times a day—after my pooja, early noon, in the evening and at night. If your communism can guarantee that it will provide me my desired food, then I may consider it, but if you want that I too should sustain on just two rotis and a bit of milk and vegetables, then I am already done with such communism. I don’t demand wealth, but my meals must be belly-busting. If such a promise can be guaranteed, then many of my friends and I will be willing to turn communists.

But only food is not enough. Think of clothing. You need just one kurta and one cap. A kurta doesn’t require more than one yard of the khaddar fabric. I wear the long *angarakhi* shirt, for which at least seven yards are required. I have myself had such lengths cut from the roll in the tailor’s presence and I can assure you that my angarakhi cannot be stitched in less. Moreover, twelve yards for the turban, and on top of that, five yards for the stole. Can communism guarantee this? What am I to do with wealth, but I do need food and clothing.

You will also say that all men will have to do equal work. If some good man does the pooja for one hour, I will better him and will do it for two; if he takes bath for one hour, I can take it for two; and if he can hold forth on the scriptures for an hour, I can do it for the entire day without a care for my meals and my pooja. I will not back out on this.

One thing more. I don’t care about where I live. I can manage even in a hut.



But if I am allowed equal space like other men on the train, then those sharing the berth will have to move away because I cannot be accommodated in less than a berth. Second thing, I cannot sleep quietly. I have a peculiar snore while I sleep. If ever a man sleeps near me, he invariably has to move away at night. Therefore, not for my sake but for others', I wish that I get a room to myself to sleep. If communism nitpicks with this, I will not even look that way.

I had written all this when the panditayin came and stood next to me, and asked, 'What are you writing this early in the morning? Why don't you draw the horoscope for the sethji's son? Why tire out your tongue for useless debates?'

I don't insult women. I think of them as the reigning deities of a household. They are like Goddess Lakshmi, but I don't consult them either except for matters of the household. I believe that the Goddess of the household must be limited to the house itself. What have they got to do with politics, society, religion, etc.? The madness of extolling these women, which has taken over these handful of educated babus, is something I don't approve of. So, when one day, the panditayin was about to go out of the house wearing a half-sleeved jumper—half her breasts showing—I immediately had her take it off. She became very upset but I showed her my ferocious form. Finally, when I moved to pick up the stick, she quietly took off the jumper and sat down with a sullen face. I declared, 'I don't care whether you are sullen or angry, or puff yourself up in rage, I am not letting you go out of the house in such clothes.' Anyway, when she scolded me, I told her, 'You won't understand these matters. Go, tend to your chores.'

The panditayin retorted, 'Just because you have read a few books, you think you have become very wise? All your wisdom will be useless if just for once I don't light the kitchen fire.'

What an illogical answer it was! Like, when you strike the knee the eyes get hurt. But I was not surprised. I am used to such responses from her. I said sternly, 'This is none of your concern, lady, or I would have told you.'

'You must be writing poetry. That's the affliction you have.'

I corrected her, 'Since when have I acquired this affliction! You are talking nonsense. I am as far from poetry as east is from west. Does this attire, this body belong to poets? How would know you what a poet is? A poet is one whose face drips with poetry. That's it. I can't write poetry. I am just trying to earn the

...of writing certain regulations on a social question.'

pleasure or posing certain speculations on a social question.

She seemed somewhat impressed by the exposition of this pandit. But I am a bit dumb too. That very moment I burst into laughter. That was it and the panditayin returned and snatched the essay from my hands, and said, 'Now I understand. Are you writing a love letter to someone?'

This was just too much. With *Gangajal*—the holy Ganga water—in my palms, I can swear that I have never known of this strange creature called love. The only lover I know is rich and lavish food. I don't understand the other kind of love, but wonder why the panditayin keeps suspecting me. Looking at the state that lovers bring themselves to only makes me laugh. They are always weeping and sighing. They neither eat nor drink anything, and are so emaciated that they can just be blown off. Falling for such love will kill me in barely three days. Anyhow, it was now important to ward off these suspicions.

In a few words, I tried to explain to her the substance of communism. When I was done with my speech, she rolled her eyes and said, 'What nonsense your communism is! Have you been eating grass? Let them who have no families speak of communism. God has blessed me with five sons and the sixth is on his way. Why should I bother with communism? This is like saying that my neighbour is equal to me and we must have the same food! Great communism this is! If my sons live long enough, they will beg for food but not communism!'

She kept on babbling some nonsense or the other, but her words gave rise to an apprehension in my mind: *Does communism outlaw childbearing?* If it does any such thing, I shall have nothing to do with it. I shall compromise with no one on this matter. I don't want any trouble later. Acharyaji should tell me beforehand if I would be required to give up the lie of a householder. I want the liberty of welcoming all my children into this world, because I know that it is God who creates and it is God who nurtures. I am merely the medium.

## 2

What-do-you-call-it?—I, Pandit Moteram, S/o Late Pandit Chhoteram, R/o Vishwanathpuri, which is located on the trident of Lord Shiva, is today zipping around in Bombay. A sethji, my client, had telegraphed me, 'I am in great trouble. Come soon.' Along with the wire, was also sent double the third-class

train fare, which is why I immediately departed for Bombay. How can I rest when my client is facing great difficulties? Sethji had once visited Kashi for an event where I had also been invited. That is where we became acquainted. I am a great talker. Take it that I just need to be extended a mere invitation. That's when I expound such wisdom, and explicate the Vedas and shastras in such a manner that the client has no option but to be enchanted. All the spheres of knowledge—yoga, palmistry, the science of fathering, mesmerism—in which the seths and merchants have great faith, reside on my tongue. If you inquire, 'Why, Pandit Moteramji Shastri, have you even studied these sciences?', I can declare confidently that I have never studied them. Why worry about these sciences? I have not read anything. I am absolutely ignorant. A great illiterate. But I will give up my name if I don't paste the greatest of the great crawling-in-the-book and drinking-in-knowledge pandits. Yes, sir. I can paste them. Paste them so, pound them so, that the pandit would not know a way to escape me! The reader will say, 'This is impossible. Just how can an idiot paste a learned pandit?' I say, dear fellow, that one does not attain wisdom just by licking the books. The wise man, who, in this age, believes in rituals like *shraadh*, and *pindadaan*, and institutions like *varnashrama*, and believes cow dung and cow urine to be holy, who thinks that worshipping the gods will bring salvation, how can he be a wise man? I myself make my clients perform all these rituals. I undoubtedly know that the halwa and kalakand do not go into the belly of some soul but into my own. Even then I cheat the clients because that is my livelihood. Livelihood is not to be given up, and this is why when the client himself wants to be made an ass of, and wants to cross the great ocean of life by donating five paise for cows, am I a dog-bitten fool to tell him that all this is false? Absolutely false? Who turns away the Goddess Lakshmi when she saunters in on her own? Amidst the pandits, it's an altogether different matter. There, I am not worried about my livelihood, and there I paste them left, right and centre, and in all ways cloud their vision and don't allow them a moment to breathe. All that the pandits then respond with is that I must be an atheist!

Wonder why I am digressing. When I was ready to depart for Bombay, the panditayin started crying. She said, 'Tell me, when will you return? Do come back within two or three days.' If I had told her that it would take me two days to reach Bombay, she would not have let me go, which is why I said to her in words full of love 'Dear my heart will only think of you. When I eat I will

words full of love, 'Dear, my heart will only think of you. When I eat, I will remember the soft rotis and water-like dal made by your lotus-like hands. Drinking water will remind me of your parched lips. All the time, whether awake or asleep, whether sitting or standing, my heart will only be drawn towards you.' This made her feel a little better. But a woman's heart—what-do-you-call-it—is very strange. Suddenly she said, 'I don't trust you. Who knows what will become of you there? What if you are up to some mischief?' I immediately tried to placate her, 'The love of my life, I have been in love with you for forty-five years. Do you think the colour of our love which has deepened over so many years will fade away in just a few days? What are you thinking!' She replied, 'Who knows what you men can be up to? Here you are talking so sweetly, who knows what you will do there? I will not be there to look after you. I will let you go only on one condition that you take the holy Gangajal in your palms and swear that you will commit no mischief there.' I laughed within myself and swore the oath with the Gangajal in my hands. Only then the panditayin's heart was calmed.

I departed because I had to, but there were tremors in my heart too. It was calm till Prayag, but when I saw that Bombay was nowhere near, it almost made me cry. Lord! This is like the Kaala Paani, like being sent across the ocean as a punishment. Journeyed all day, but still no sight of Bombay. Journeyed all night, but still no sight of Bombay. I understood that it was not my fortune to die in Kashi. In Kashi, I was happy with my dips in the Ganga, was earning the merit of Lord Vishwanath's darshan, and from somewhere or the other, I managed to make a rupee or so. But here I am, going to who knows which world in this train. Even the moon must not be so distant as this Bombay. I suspected that the other passengers and the railway staff were trying to fool me. Bombay must have been left behind. Finally, around ten, the word Bombay was heard, and life returned into my being. I noticed that the sethji, my client, was there to welcome me. He touched my feet, but who is going to bless him now when I was turning to ashes with rage? I roared with anger like that of Lord Brahma, 'Why didn't you write to me that Bombay is close to Lanka? I haven't even drunk water till now. My life force was all ready to abandon me. But I detained it with the power of my yoga.' I was lying. I had been eating fruits all the way and had got off the train at many stations to drink water. It is beneficial to beat the drum of one's own fame and power before such clients. The sethji picked up my luggage on his shoulders

and pleaded cringingly, ‘Maharaj, my lord, forgive me. I didn’t know that for your lordship, Bombay would be . . .’

I rebuked him again, ‘What has the lordship got to do with Bombay? Do people like me live in holy cities or in the city of demons? The one greedy for wealth should live here. Our dharma is dear to us Brahmins.’

This rebuke put the sethji in his place. The car was waiting outside the station. We sat in it and left for the sethji’s house. What a city you are, Bombay! You can drive people mad. Wonder why the roads have been made so wide. Our own Chaukhamba lane in Kashi is so much like a pleasure garden! The roads here are like the great field of Bahraich where Baale Miyan’s annual urs is held.

Anyhow, will write later about Bombay. Right now, I must tell the tale of the sethji’s troubles for which I have been summoned from so far away. His trouble is that he has dabbled in market speculation and wishes me to perform some auspicious rituals for the grand success of his bets. The stakes are big, some one and a half lakh rupees. Listening to his worries, I made such a face as if everything was in my control. Then I said, ‘Sethji, you are my client. I will not leave a single trick untried from all the knowledge I possess. And you already know that I have no attachments to anything. What has a Brahmin got to do with wealth? I could have collected lakhs if I had desired wealth. So many of my clients have turned multimillionaires—there is no count of millionaires—thanks to the ceremonies I conducted for them, but I continue to remain the poor Brahmin that I was. So how do I manage it? I do not let any allurements approach me at all. I dare them from hundreds of miles away to not even look in my direction! Of course, the ceremonies themselves require some expense. If I conduct the proposed ceremony as per the ordained rituals, it will cost no less than a hundred and fifty or two hundred rupees. Just know that.’

Even at the ripe age of sixty-five, I am still a duffer. I spoke of a hundred and fifty or two hundred rupees thinking it to be a large amount. I didn’t have the audacity to quote anything beyond that; though to be fair, I had never had the opportunity to catch such a big fish. How could I have known its pulls and punches? The sethji’s face was now downcast. He had estimated the expenses to be twelve thousand. When I spoke of a hundred and fifty to two hundred, all the respect that he had in his heart for me, simply deserted him. What a golden opportunity Lord Vishwanath had sent my way, but what could He do if my fortune itself is blighted? If I had quoted ten thousand, I would not have had to

quote again for my entire life, but what did I say? A mere hundred and fifty to two hundred! Damn it! Your stupidity be damned! Now my heart wishes to only go and jump into the ocean! The same day, a wire was sent to another wily shastriji. Now this scoundrel will come and fleece the sethji, and will not charge anything less than twenty thousand. But what's the point of lamenting now? Even so, I surmised that though I may be cursed, why allow someone else to take away the bounty? Is it not my dharma to protect my client from these bandits? I said, 'I had only mentioned the cost of the ingredients, and I don't accept fees, though you must count in thousand rupees for donations to the poor.'

The sethji said, 'That is a different concern. It will be given separately. Will your requirements be of just two hundred rupees?'

I replied, 'That's it and no more, though I know people who charge fifteen thousand for this ceremony. Fifteen thousand! It will cost them only a total of two hundred, and they pocket the rest. So, beware of such crooks.'

But the seth was not convinced, and said, 'What are you saying, shastriji? The more sugar you add, the sweeter your dessert will be. The ceremony you propose is for two hundred rupees. Go ahead, but I will not settle for anything less than an extravagant ceremony.'

This was a great opportunity for me to fleece this ass. I could have said, 'Sethji, your purpose can be served by a minor ceremony, but if it is your wish, I can perform the ceremony of the *mahamrityunjaya* path to appease Lord Shiva and the *brahmaprayeekshaka* ceremony to appease Lord Brahma, though the cost would then be thirteen thousand rupees.' But it was only then that this had occurred to me. My brain had been buried under boulders at that moment. My mind is strange. It thinks smart only when the moment has passed. Always. So, I resolved that I would not let the wily shastriji go without landing him a few punches. Either I will make him part with half the fees, or we shall combat in the fields of Bombay. He might be learned. So what? I have spent my entire life in the wrestling pit. I will completely smash him.

While I was regretting having such slow brains, a postman arrived and handed me a roughly triangular letter, without postage. I instantly understood that it was from the panditayin. Holding that letter in my hands truly reminded me of her. The poor woman has spent forty-five years with me and I have always been condescending towards her. Tears flowed into my eyes. I opened the letter. It

condescending towards her. Tears flowed into my eyes. I opened the letter. It opened with a greeting in Sanskrit but the rest was in dialect, ‘May all be well by the Lord’s blessings . . . So you go to Bombay and camp there, with your ears blocked. I have nightmares daily. I get so scared that I cannot sleep. My life ebbs away thinking what if you are up to some trouble or some mischief over there. You will say that you are sixty-five years of age and what trouble can you get into at this age? I have heard that doctors have invented such medicines that consuming them makes the mind go crazy. There is one such quack in Jhansi, and another I don’t know where. I pray to you with folded hands not to consume any potions. You must stick to the oath that you have taken with the holy Gangajal in your hands. I will not let you turn into a rogue bull.’

Did you hear that, gentlemen? Now I am a bull. I can’t even straighten my back, or digest one and a half seer of cream, and this panditayin thinks I am a bull. So here too I am the one who is at fault! I keep boasting about my lack of appetite and prowess before the panditayin. How would that bovine simpleton know that it’s all mere bragging. Whatever I say, she takes it as the unfailing word of Lord Brahma, and this is why she now thinks this way. It seems, though, that my eyesight is weakening over this trip.

### 3

When I saw—what-do-you-call-it—that I had already blundered and would not be able to make more than two hundred rupees despite all my efforts, I pondered that if nothing else, I should at least make him spend fifty or a hundred rupees for my meals. He too will remember this encounter. That was it. I prayed to Lord Shankar and pleaded, ‘O, Umapati! Only you can now take care of my life. I am abandoning it and directing my attention to food.’ When breakfast was served, I declared, ‘I do not relish the food prepared by your cook. Give me the ingredients and I will cook my own food.’ The storekeeper said, ‘As you wish. Command and I will present everything.’ I gave him the list for breakfast: ‘One and a quarter seer fresh butter, half a seer almonds, half a seer pistachios, half ounce saffron, a seer of semolina and a seer of sugar.’ The storekeeper was left gaping. I said, ‘What are you gaping at? Am I asking for these things so that I can carry them away? Go and get them quickly.’ That was it. I prepared the hemp drink and ate the ball of weed, and with a call to Lord Vishwanath, I sat

down to prepare the halwa. Thanks to Lord Shankar, I can't describe how delicious the halwa was! I planted myself on the floor cross-legged, and polished it within half an hour. There was nothing leftover even for the flies. The storekeeper was breathless now. In the afternoon, I prepared deep-fried puri bread, with flour and oil in equal measure for the dough. At night, despite not having any appetite, I ensured that I ate at least one and a quarter seer of cream.

Anyhow, I don't have the youthful body that can burn anything—even bricks and stones—that reaches the belly. On the third day itself, I noticed symptoms of an upset stomach. I pondered, *If I speak of this to anyone here, they will think of me as just another greedy Brahmin hankering after food.* So, I went to see some doctor in the neighbourhood to get some medicine. The doctor was rich. A big mansion, car and phone too. When I introduced myself, the doctor looked at me carefully and said in broken Hindi, 'Are you from Kashi?'

I said, '*Haan*, sahib, may Lord Vishwanath keep you happy. Here I did not get food suitable to my constitution, which is troubling my digestion. Prescribe me some medicine.'

The doctor ushered me into another room and after making me lie down, checked my belly, after which he examined my chest, back, eyes and even made me show him my tongue. In the end, after fussing over me for about half an hour in this manner, he said, 'Well, panditji, you seem to have the symptoms of TB. You will have to take medicines for that. I am a TB specialist. I can cure you, but you must go to a second doctor to have your blood tested. I cannot say anything unless I have seen it. I will write you a letter. Go to Dr Subedar. He lives in Chaupati. I am giving you the letter. He will test your blood and write to me.'

I was shocked. I remembered the panditayin. Lord, will you make me die in Bombay? I had come here thinking I would take away some profits, but it has become a question of my life itself now. There was nothing wrong with me when I had departed from Kashi. I was so fit and confident that Bombay's water would be nothing difficult to digest for this fit body of sixty-five. Vijayanand Dubey had cautioned that Bombay's water is not good and I must be careful, but how could I know that it would grind me down in just a few days. But what's the point of regretting it now? Fair enough, let's get the blood test done. And what is there to fear? At most, I will die. Who is immortal, anyway? The only worry is that my family is still not properly settled. If I know that my end was near, why



that my family is still not properly settled. If I knew that my end was near, why would I have fathered the last two boys, and why would the panditayin be pregnant with the third? Anyhow, this is how God has willed it to be. Has Tulsidas not said:

*Sons and wives only love your wealth, do not love them all  
Servants too will desert you in death, you should leave them all.*

I was heartbroken as I was leaving the clinic, but the doctor stopped me. ‘Thirty-two rupees. My fees. I should send the bill to the sethji, right?’

If Lord Yamaraj hadn’t come so long to take my soul away, he would certainly have come now. Thirty-two rupees! A fee that I have never paid in my life! Do the rich pay money to doctors and physicians? We, the devotees of Shankar, make do with his blessings only. In Kashi, whenever there was a need, I just went to anyone—Dr Chaudhary, Dr Bannerji, Dr Seth—and got the medicines, and on top of that, even extracted a rupee or thereabouts from them. And here in Bombay, thirty-two rupees, just for a minor check-up! Darkness spread before my eyes, but then I reckoned that since I am going to die anyway, why stay attached to money? Granted that thirty-two rupees were spent, but at least I also got to know that I have caught tuberculosis. Otherwise, I would have simply died any day and nobody would have known the cause. There would not have been even an opportunity to administer the medicines. Good that at least I have the time to treat it. Why else does a man earn, anyway? Even so, I thought it pertinent to inquire if I would be required to pay anything to Dr Subedar too. So I put the question to him.

Doctor Sahib laughed uproariously and said, ‘You wise men from Kashi are so given to bantering. In Kashi, will donating to one pandit please all the pandits? Tell me?’

With my hand on my heart, I asked, ‘What will his fees be?’

‘His fee is only ten rupees.’

I told myself, *Take heart, and bear this too! Even if I lose all that I earn in Bombay, I should be thankful that at least my life was spared, and I got a new lease of life. Otherwise, I will just die here and there would be nobody to even mourn me.* A strong yearning for renunciation came over me and I considered running away, abandoning everything. I recalled those lines from Kabir which I

had laughed at several times. I have lived a life of cunning. What wretchedness is to befall my body, my Lord—

O reckless heart, without prayer, misery shall be your fate.  
Ghost in your first life, next seven you'll regret.  
Drink water like a worm, and you'll die of dire thirst.  
Parrot in your second life, in the garden though you will nest,  
Hawks hovering when your wings are broke, you'll die of half-torn breast.  
The juggler's monkey in your third life, you'll dance to his threat,  
Begging the poor and the rich, no alms will you get.  
The oilman's bullock in your fourth life, blindfolded you must go,  
Walking miles within the home, without you will not go.  
Camel in your fifth life, whole burdens you must ply,  
Having sat, you will not rise, by crawling must you die.  
The washer's ass in your sixth life, with no grass to eat,  
Carrying yourself to cremation, your own burden you shall be.

Finally, I had to say that yes, he should send the bill to the sethji. After this, I set out, asking for Dr Subedar's address and reached his clinic. It was sometime around ten, and there was a mild pain in my belly. But I decided to deal with this hassle first, and anyway, whatever Lord Vishwanath has willed is bound to happen.

Dr Subedar was a young man, dressed in a suit. When I handed him the letter, he ushered me into another room, made me lie down, and slammed a needle into my arm with such force that it made my body contort. Blood oozed out of my arm. He put a glass plate in a test tube, and after applying something to my arm, went to another room to do I don't know what. When he came out, he said, 'Well, panditji, the germs of TB can be seen in your blood. You will have to go away to the hills and live there comfortably. You will have to stop reading and studying. But I can't say anything definite now. You go to Dr Ghode Purkar who will test your urine. Only after seeing his report, I will give my report. Then only you will go to Dr Lampat. Then, whatever he will say, you will have to do.'

Now I was seething with rage. For once I considered telling these doctors to go to hell, and get some asafoetida digestive, worth just a few paise, and eat it. If I am destined to die, not all the doctors in the world can revive me, but as it is, the lust for life is extremely strong. I carried his letter and set out for Dr Ghode Purkar's, inquiring for his address. This man made me urinate in a tube and I don't know what he did with it for hours. Then he wrote his report, gave it to me, and said, 'Go to Dr Subedar.' It was already three by the time I returned to him.

When this gentleman gave me his report, I reported to Dr Lampat with it. Dr Lampat studied the two reports very gravely and said, 'My speculation was correct, panditji. You have contracted TB.'

With tears in my eyes, I asked, 'Will I die?'

Dr Lampat assured me, 'No, no, I won't let you die. You must live in the hills. You must refrain from rich and lavish food. You must also consume eggs.'

I shut my ears with my hands and said, 'What? Eggs? I can't even touch eggs with my hands, how can I eat them?'

He was not one to listen. He declared, 'All this orthodoxy will not do here. You will have to eat eggs.'

'There is no way I can eat eggs,' I insisted.

He warned me, 'You will die!'

I too was not one to give up. I replied, 'I don't care!'

The doctor retreated a bit, and said, 'I will give you some medicines. At least those you can take?'

'No! Now, neither I will take any medicine nor will I visit any doctor.'

Having declared this, I returned to the sethji's mansion. Because I had not eaten anything throughout the day, I was ravenously hungry now. I drank the hemp potion, went to the toilet, and then ate to my heart's content.

Suddenly, the sethji arrived, looking very troubled, 'Panditji, did Lampat sahib examine you? He says you have TB.'

I said, 'That's my reward for visiting your house, what else?'

'You should return to Kashi today itself.'

'I cannot return without completing the ceremony,' I declined.

But the sethji insisted, 'No, no, there is no need. You must leave by the next train, at nine.'

When I observed his panic, I understood that he was worried about committing *Brahmahatya*—the murder of a Brahmin. That was it and I was all set.

I said, 'My life will be endangered if I return without completing the ceremony. The treatment for this will cost at least a minimum of thousand rupees. Where will I get this money from? And why be afraid of death! What's the worry if I die here itself?'

The sethji was now trembling. He said, 'No, panditji, whatever costs may be incurred to you, take it from me and leave today itself.'

meant to you, take it from me and leave today itself.

That was it. Munimji, the accountant, was summoned and ten hundred-rupee notes were offered at my feet. I thanked Lord Vishwanath, pocketed the notes, and drove each other out of each other's minds.

#### 4

Wherever I go—what-do-you-call-it—everywhere some people get after me and keep troubling me. Even in Bombay I could not get rid of such great men. Why can't they offer a gold coin at my feet and then narrate their sad stories to me? All that they do is tell their tales just like that and want that I should recommend some remedial ritual just like that, without any fees. But I too am no ass. I listen to their tales just like that, but do not recommend anything so easily. I make them run around scores of times, and harass them so much that they simply run away. When no doctor sees a patient without his fees, when no lawyer even touches a petition without his fees, why should I give away my knowledge for free, without any fees? I know what my knowledge is, just like the doctors and lawyers know their knowledge. There is no point in exposing each other's trade secrets. The world belongs to the one who can trick it. One who does not know this art is a man without pride and wealth.

Just yesterday, after getting done with hemp and weed, while I was polishing off the cream, a gentleman arrived and sat down. Wearing a coat, pant, collar, hat, he was a truly gallant sahib, but his face was downcast, as if his woman had died. He inquired, 'Are you Pandit Moteram Shastri?'

I replied, 'Yes, that is my name. Tell me, how can I serve you?'

The gallant sahib reached for his handkerchief in his pocket and wiping the perspiration on his brow, said, 'I find myself in great trouble, sir. My brain has stopped working. Only you can rescue me now.'

My heart was tickled with joy. This seemed like a good prey. I said, 'With God's grace, all your troubles will go away. Don't worry at all.'

He said, 'How do I say this? I am feeling hesitant.'

'There is nothing to hesitate about.' I said boastfully. 'I can produce children with a turn of my fingers. If only you say it, I can make your house teem with sons. Just one ceremony . . .'

He corrected me, 'No, sir. I am not fond of children. I am an opponent of

childbearing.'

'Do you wish for wealth, then?'

'Who would not wish for wealth? But at this moment, this is not what I have presented myself before you for.'

Annoyed, I told him, 'Then speak up. I have no dearth of rituals that produce nourishment. You don't have to consume anything—powders, jellies, pills, ashes, liquors, potions. Just recite the mantra five times and go off to sleep. It will work wonders.'

'I have come here now for something very different.' I was now getting disappointed. He didn't seem to be an easy man to fleece. Even so, I comforted him, 'Tell me your want without any hesitation.'

He asked, 'Will you not think of it to be an insult to you?'

Now my ears shot up to attention. My curiosity mounted.

I said, 'If it is something insulting, I will, of course, take it as one.'

He began to explain, 'The matter is that just yesterday evening, my parents arrived from the village.'

'That's very good. You should welcome them hospitably.'

He continued, 'But I don't understand how to do it. They have not eaten anything since yesterday.'

'Haven't eaten anything! That's a great disaster. Do they have some stomach ailments? I know Ayurveda too.'

'No, no, shastriji. Their bearing is even bulkier than yours.'

I questioned, 'Why? Do people of heavy bearing not fall ill?'

He agreed. 'They do. But my father never falls ill and mother has not ever had even a headache.'

'Then they and you are both fortunate,' I said.

'The trouble is that they both live by several ritualistic restrictions.'

'That's a matter of great joy. You are really fortunate.'

He now came to the real issue. 'But they cannot eat the food prepared by my cook!'

'So, even if your wife cooks for a day or two, will it lower her dignity? Serving the parents-in-law is the only great dharma of a woman.'

'I don't accept that, sir. Please don't be slighted. What you are saying was good a hundred years ago. Not any more. Parents-in-law should not trouble their son and daughter-in-law over such trivial matters. We live in advanced times

son and daughter-in-law over such trivial matters. We live in advanced times. Now there is no place for parents like this.'

I tried to reason with him, 'You are saying the absolutely right thing. But if the parents are visiting for just a few days, the wife must bear a little inconvenience.'

At this, the gentleman knitted his brow and said, 'But she has no practice of cooking at all, sir. When the cook is on a break, we eat in hotels. Once there was no cash at home, and since payments at hotels have to be made in cash, my wife thought that she should cook something. That day, sir, the dough was spoilt as if it was thickened milk, and rice turned coal like. On top of that, the lady suffered from a headache for three days. Finally, we had to go hungry. So, sir, I do not want to invite that trouble again. I don't know why they have great objections to eating in hotels. I think it to be nothing but plain obstinacy on their part. But what can I say, they are my parents. Will you not be so kind as to cook their meals for the few days that they live here? You will definitely be inconvenienced, but you are a Brahmin and a Brahmin does not care for his annoyance for the good of others.'

My blood boiled at this. In my heart, I wanted to thrash him soundly, but I controlled myself. What honour you have bestowed on Brahmins! And the funny thing is that this idiot did not even feel embarrassed saying such things to me. Seeing that I was silent, he said, 'Are you offended?'

I said, 'No, why should I take offence, but you should have caught hold of some lowly panda for this task. Perhaps you don't know me?'

He replied, 'I know you very well. You are the great learned scholar of Kashi. When I was in the hostel, a shastri from Kashi was my fellow student. He always cooked his own meals and whenever the cook in our mess would fall ill or run away, he would cook for me and feed me with great eagerness. This is why I have brought my prayer to you.'

What retort could I have to this? Whatever my ancestors have committed, I will have to compensate for it.

I said, 'Since this is your wish, I will come and cook the food, but only if you accept one condition of mine.'

He replied with great eagerness, 'Tell me, tell me, whatever you propose is acceptable to me. You have saved my honour from getting sullied.'

I declared, 'I will sit in the kitchen and dictate the recipes. The work will have

to be done by your wife.'

'But what if her head begins to ache?'

I countered him, 'I have the cure for that. Whether she feels giddy or darkness descends before her eyes, I can cure her instantly.'

'And what if she is bothered by the heat?'

I dismissed this excuse too. 'You stand by and fan her.'

'And what if she gets angry and says something inappropriate to you?'

In a matter-of-fact manner, I told him, 'Then I too will get angry, and when I am angry, I do not think anything even of Laat Sahib—the great English lord. I can assure, though, that after this, she will never be given to anger.'

'And what if she begins to argue? Can you counter her arguments?'

This was easy. I said, 'Great! What else have I done all my life? In the beginning, I retort arguments with arguments. If this does not work, I make my hands and feet take over. I have participated in several debates about the scriptures and have never returned defeated. Several great scholars and professors have had to take the medicinal concoction of jaggery and turmeric after jousting with me.'

The gentleman thought over it for a few moments and left, after making a promise to return. Till this day, he has not showed me his face.

*Translated from the Hindi by Vikas Jain*



## The Price of Milk

### 1

Now you have midwives, nurses and lady doctors everywhere in the big cities. But in the villages, even today the delivery wards are looked after by sweeper women. And this situation is not likely to change in the near future. Babu Maheshnath, the zamindar of his village, was an educated man and well aware that the maternity hospitals needed modernization and improvement, but how could he overcome the obstacles that cropped up in the way? There was no nurse who would be willing to move to a village, and if somehow someone could be persuaded, she would demand such a hefty fee that Babu Sahib could do nothing but sheepishly return. As for a lady doctor, he could not even summon enough courage to approach her, for he would probably have been forced to sell off half his property to pay her fee. So when, after three daughters, a son was born, there was just Gudar and his wife to fall back on for assistance. Children generally are born at night. On a certain midnight, Babu Sahib's orderly made such a loud summons for Gudar that the whole neighbourhood woke up as well. It wasn't a girl this time and he was not going to call out meekly.

Gudar had keenly looked forward to and prepared for this day months in advance. What they feared was that there would be another girl. If that were so, they could get nothing more than the usual one rupee and a sari. He had quarrelled with his wife several times over this issue, and wagered on it. His wife would say, 'If it isn't a boy this time, I'll never show you my face, that's for sure. All the signs are that it'll be a son.' To which Gudar said, 'You wait and see, it'll be a girl. If it's a boy, I'll shave off my moustache.' Gudar was perhaps



thinking that he would in this way strengthen his wife's exertions in favour of a boy and thus help bring this about.

Bhungi said to him, 'Now shave off your moustache, you bearded fellow. I told you a son would be born, but you never listened to me. You just stick to your own chatter. Today I am going to shave off your moustache and won't leave even a bristle.'

Gudar said, 'Well, you may do so, my dear woman. Do you think the moustache will never grow again? You will see that on the third day it will be just as it was before. But let me tell you, whatever you get, I am going to claim half of it.'

Bhungi made a dismissive gesture with her thumb and handing her three-month-old son to him, went out with the messenger.

Gudar called after her, 'Listen, where are you rushing off to? I too have to go to play the celebratory music. Who is going to look after this baby?'

Bhungi replied to him from where she was, 'Make him lie down on the ground and put him to sleep. I'll nurse him when I come back.'

## 2

Bhungi was thoroughly pampered at Maheshnath's house. In the morning, she got *harira*, for lunch she had puri and halwa, and was feasted again in the evening and then at night. And Gudar too had a hearty meal. Bhungi could nurse her own child just once or twice in the whole day and night, and so extra milk had to be arranged for him. Babu Sahib's son was the lucky one to drink Bhungi's milk. This went on till the twelfth day. The mistress of the household was quite healthy and strong but it so happened that there was no milk in her. The times when she had the three girls, her milk was so plentiful that it upset their stomachs; but for some reason this time she had no milk at all in her. So Bhungi acted both as a midwife and as a wet nurse.

The mistress would say, 'Bhungi, feed our son. Then you can just sit around and eat for the rest of your life. I'll have you given five bighas, rent-free. Even your grandchildren will live with ease and contentment.'

While Bhungi's own child, unable to digest the extra milk, threw up frequently and was getting weaker day by day.

Bhungi would say, 'Bahuji, I'll have bracelets at the *mundan* ceremony, I insist.'

To which the bahu replied, 'Of course, you'll have the bracelets. Why the threatening tone? Will you have silver or golden ones?'

'Come on, bahuji! If I put on silver bracelets, who am I going to show them to, and who do you think they are going to laugh at?'

'All right, have the golden ones. I give you my word.'

'And at his wedding I'll have a necklace, and for my husband, silver wristbands.'

'All right, you shall have them. But God grant that we see that day.'

The household was presided over by Bhungi, after the mistress. The maids, cooks and the servants, all followed her command. So much so that even bahuji gave way to her. Once she even rebuked Maheshnath himself. He just laughed it off. There was some talk about Bhangis. Maheshnath had said: 'Whatever else may happen in this world, a Bhangi will remain a Bhangi. It is hard to civilize them.'

To which Bhungi had said, 'Master, it is the Bhangis who made others humane, how could it be the other way round?'

If Bhungi had shown such impertinence on any other occasion, would the very hair on her head have been spared? But today, Babu Sahib just chuckled and said, 'Bhungi's remarks are indeed full of wisdom.'

### 3

Bhungi's rule could not last beyond a year. Those who were sanctimonious objected to the boy being nursed with a Bhangi's milk, and Moteram shastri even suggested penance. The nursing was stopped, but the talk of atonement was just laughed off. Maheshnath admonished the shastri and said, 'So you say, shastriji. You talk about atonement. Until yesterday he lived off and grew up on the blood of the Bhangi, and now she has become polluting. What a wonderful dharma you have!'

Shastriji whipped his top-knot and said, 'It's true he was nourished on the Bhangi's blood. He's been brought up on her flesh. But that was in the past. It's different today. In Jaggannathpuri the touchables as well as the untouchables all sit to dine in the same room. But it cannot be done here. During sickness, we eat

sit to dine in the same row. But it cannot be done here. During sickness, we eat food wearing our clothes, why, Babuji, we even eat khichri, but when we get better, we do observe the rules and customs. Don't we? Our dharma is unique.

‘Does that mean the dharma keeps on changing, sometimes this way, sometimes some other way?’

‘Yes, why not? The dharma is different for a king, the subjects, the rich and the poor. The royalty may eat what they like, and with whom they like; they can marry anybody they want; there are no restrictions for them. They are powerful people. It is the common folk who have to observe restrictions.’

So there was no atonement, but Bhungi had to step down from her pedestal. Of course, she got so many gifts that she couldn't carry them on her own, and she got gold bangles too. And, instead of one she got two beautiful saris—not merely as a formal gesture as when the daughters were born.

#### 4

There was an epidemic of plague that very year and Gudar was the first one to fall victim to it. Bhungi was left alone, but somehow her household carried on. The people thought Bhungi will choose a partner. They noted how she talked with a Bhangi and received a certain Choudhury, but Bhungi just didn't follow anyone, nor did she go anywhere. Five years passed on and her son Mangal, despite his poor physique and being nearly always sick, started to run around. In front of Suresh, he looked a mere pygmy.

On a certain day, Bhungi was cleaning the drain at Maheshnath's house. A lot of sludge had accumulated over several months. The water had begun to form pools in the courtyard. She thrust a long, thick bamboo pole into the drain and shook it vigorously. All of her right hand was inside the drain. Suddenly she let out a shriek and as she withdrew her hand, out came a black snake slithering away. People ran after it and killed it, but Bhungi couldn't be saved. They had been under the impression that it was a harmless water snake and hence wouldn't be poisonous, and so they didn't care much. When the poison spread through her body and seized her, they found out that it was not a water snake but a venomous corn snake.

Mangal was now an orphan. He kept hanging around the doors of Maheshnath's house all day. There was so much leftover food that five to ten

children like him could be fed on it. There was no scarcity of food. But he did feel bad when the food was dropped from above into his earthen bowls.

Everyone else was served on fine plates, but for him there were earthen bowls!

Mangal might not have been aware of this discrimination at all, but he could see that the village boys made fun of him and insulted him. No one even asked him to join in their games. So much so that even the canvas rag on which he slept was untouchable for them. There was a neem tree in front of the house. Mangal made his home under it. All he had was a tattered canvas rag, two earthen bowls and a dhoti cast off by Suresh babu. But he found comfort at this spot. Mangal, who was lucky enough, lived through whatever season, scorching summer, freezing winter or torrential rains. He grew stronger than ever. And if there was someone he could call his own, it was a pariah dog of the village who, tired of being picked on by his fellow dogs, had taken refuge with him. Both of them shared the same food, slept on the same rag, they even had similar temperaments and understood each other pretty well. They never quarrelled.

The self-righteous people of the village were surprised at this tolerance shown by Babu Sahib. They thought that it was against genuine dharma that Mangal should have settled right in front of the house. It couldn't have been fifty cubits. *Indeed, if this sort of thing were to continue, one would think the end of all dharma to be at hand. We know a Bhangi too is created by God. We should do no injustice to him. Who doesn't know that? God is called by the name of Patitpawan, redeemer of the lowly. However, social propriety is something that has to be taken into account. Now we feel embarrassed even to approach that gate. We know, of course, that he is the master of the village but this is something one finds disgusting.*

Mangal and Tommy, the dog, were very close to each other. Mangal would say, 'Come on, Tommy, move over a little and sleep. Where is the space for me? You've cornered the entire rag.'

Tommy would whimper, wag his tail and instead of moving on, would get astride him and lick his face. Every evening he would go to his own house and cry. The first year the thatched roof fell in, the next year a wall collapsed and now only the broken walls were standing with their edges as spurs. That was all he had as his treasured property. His loving memories, his yearnings, would draw him to this ruin, with Tommy invariably accompanying him. Mangal would sit atop the edge of the wall and recollect his past and dream of the future.

would sit atop the edge of the wall, and reflect his past and dream of the future while Tommy would leap up again and again unsuccessfully trying to sit in his lap.

## 5

One day, several boys were playing together. Mangal came along but stood apart at a distance. Suresh took pity on him or there were not enough players, it was hard to say. Whatever the case, it was suggested that Mangal should be included in the game. Who was going to see him here? 'How about it Mangal, will you play?'

Mangal replied, 'Oh no, bhaiya, if somehow the master would see me, I'll be shooed off. What about you? You'll just walk away.'

Suresh said, 'Who's coming to look up here? Come on, we'll play horse and rider. You'll be the horse and the rest of us will ride on you and make you run.'

Mangal expressed his doubts, 'Tell me this, will I always remain the horse, or will I later be a rider too?'

It was a tricky question. No one had considered it. Suresh thought about it for a moment and said, 'Who's going to allow you to sit on his back? Just think of that. Aren't you a Bhangi?'

Mangal also stood his ground and said, 'When did I say I was not a Bhangi? But you too have been fed on my mother's milk. As long as I'm not assured of being a rider, I'll not be a horse. You people are very smart. You'll enjoy being riders and I will just be a horse all the time.'

Suresh scolded him and said, 'You've got to be the horse' and ran after him to catch him. Mangal quickened his pace.

Suresh, being overfed, had grown flabby and was soon out of breath.

Finally, he stopped and said, 'Come here, Mangal, be the horse, or else whenever I catch you, I'll give you a good beating.'

'You too will have to be a horse.'

'All right, I too will be one.'

'You'll just slip away. First you be the horse and let me ride. Then I'll be one.'

Suresh, indeed, wanted to play the trick. Then he told his companions, 'You see his treachery? He's a Bhangi, after all.'

All three of them closed in on Mangal and forced him to be a horse. Suresh promptly set himself on his back and clicking his tongue commanded him: 'Trot on, my horse.'

Mangal walked some distance but his back was breaking under the burden. Quietly, he drew his back and slipped out from between Suresh's thighs. As Suresh fell down with a thud, he started crying loudly.

Suresh's mother heard his cry. Whenever he cried she would pick up the sound as he had a peculiar cry, like the whistle of a narrow-gauge engine.

She told her maid, 'Look, Suresh is crying somewhere. Go and find out who beat him.'

Meanwhile, Suresh came in rubbing his eyes. Whenever he cried, he would invariably approach his mother and appeal to her. And his mother would offer him sweets or dry fruits, and wipe away his tears. He was eight years old, but a blockhead. Too much love had spoilt his wits just as too much food had ruined his body.

His mother asked him, 'Suresh, why are you crying? Who beat you?'

Suresh went on crying and said, 'Mangal touched me.'

His mother couldn't believe it. Mangal was so meek that he couldn't be expected to do any mischief. But when Suresh swore it was true she had to believe him. She called Mangal and scolded him, 'Why, Mangal, have you now started making mischief? Didn't I tell you never to touch Suresh? Don't you remember that? Come on, tell me.'

Mangal said in a low voice, 'I do remember that.'

'Then why did you touch him?'

'I didn't touch him.'

'Why was he crying if you didn't touch him?'

'He fell down and started crying.'

'A thieving and cheeky fellow!' the lady broke out, grinding her teeth. If she were to beat him, she would have to take a bath immediately. She would have had to take a stick in her hand, but the lightning current from the untouchable would penetrate her body through the stick. So, she heaped as much abuse on him as she could and ordered him to leave the house immediately, warning that if she saw him at their door she would suck his blood. 'You get all this free food, so that is why you think of mischief.'

It is doubtful that Mangal had a sense of shame, but fear did have a grip on

It is doubtful that Mangal had a sense of shame, but fear did have a grip on him. He quietly picked up his pots, put his dhoti on his shoulder and walked off from there, crying. He wanted never to come back. At worst, he will die of hunger. So what? What is the point in living like this? Where else was there any shelter for him in the village? Who was going to give refuge to a Bhangi? He headed for the ruins where memories of better days might perhaps wipe away his tears, and he cried bitterly.

At that moment, Tommy came looking for him and the two of them forgot their miseries.

## 6

But as the daylight gradually faded, the shame in Mangal also abated. The hunger which unsettled his child's body grew stronger as it fed on his own blood. His eyes repeatedly turned towards the food bowls. There, by now, he would have been given Suresh's leftover sweets. *What is there to do here except to bite the dust?*

He took counsel from Tommy, 'Would you go and eat, Tommy? As for me, I'll go to bed hungry.'

Tommy whimpered as if to tell him, *This insult is to be borne throughout life. If you lose heart, what will happen? Look at me. If someone beats me with a stick, I let out a shriek, and then will follow the same person, wagging my tail. Bhai, both of us have been made the same way.*

Mangal said, 'All right, you go off. Eat whatever you get there. Don't bother about me.'

Tommy intoned in his dog language, *I won't go alone. I'll take you along.*

'No, I won't go.'

*Then I won't go either.*

'You will die of hunger.'

*And do you think you'll stay alive?*

'Who is there to weep over me?'

*My situation is exactly the same. The bitch I had fallen in love with in autumn turned out to be unfaithful and she is now with Kallu. Thank God she took the*

*pups with her or it would have got me into big trouble. Who was going to feed the five puppies?*

The very next moment hunger devised a new stratagem.

‘Why, Tommy, do you think our mistress will be searching for us?’

*Of course, both Babuji and Suresh must have finished eating by now. The servant must have picked up the leftovers from their plates and will be calling out for us.*

‘There is a lot of ghee in the plates of Babuji and Suresh, and also that sweet thing, yes, the cream.’

*All of that will be thrown into the garbage.*

‘Let’s see if someone comes looking for us.’

*Who will come? Are you a priest? They’ll probably just call Mangal-Mangal once and no more. And the plate will be poured into the gutter.*

‘Well, then, let us go. But I will hide myself. If no one calls out my name I’ll just come back. Take it from me.’

Both of them went back from the ruins and stood stealthily in the shadows at Maheshnath’s door. But how could Tommy remain patient? He crept inside and saw that Maheshnath and Suresh were seated with their food plates. He quietly sat down on the porch, but was scared that someone would beat him with a stick.

The servants were chatting among themselves. One of them said, ‘Mangal has not been seen today. The mistress scolded him. Maybe that is why he has run away.’

The other said, ‘It’s good that he’s been kicked out. Otherwise, we’d have to face the Bhangi first thing in the morning.’

Mangal receded into more darkness. His optimism was running out.

Maheshnath finishing his food and got up. A servant poured water over his hands to wash them. Now, he will smoke his hookah and fall asleep. Suresh, sitting by his mother’s side, will sleep while listening to some story from her. Who is there to bother about poor Mangal? It is already late now, but nobody has called out for him, even by mistake.

For a while, he stood there disappointed. Then just as he heaved a long sigh and was about to go away, he saw a bearer carrying in a *pattal* the leftovers of the meal.

Mangal came out of the darkness into the light. How could he now restrain himself?



.....

The servant exclaimed, 'Arré, you were here? We thought you'd gone off somewhere. Come on eat it; I was going to throw it away.'

Mangal said in abject helplessness, 'I've been standing here for a long time.'

'Then why didn't you speak up?'

'I was afraid.'

'Well, eat this.'

He dropped the pattal into Mangal's outstretched hands. Mangal looked at him with eyes full of humble gratitude.

Tommy too had come out. Both of them started eating from the pattal under the neem tree.

Mangal patted Tommy's head with one hand and said, 'See, how there is this fire in the belly? What could we have done had we not even these rotis been thrown at us?'

Tommy wagged his tail.

'Suresh's mother has brought me up.'

Tommy wagged his tail again.

'They say that no one can ever fully repay the price of a mother's milk, whereas I am being paid for her milk in this way.'

Tommy wagged his tail yet again.

*Translated from the Hindi by Satish C. Aikant*



## Undeserved Praise

Those days the district magistrate happened to be a connoisseur of arts. He had earned quite a name for his love of history and discovery of old coins. God knew how he got time from the dull office work to pursue his passion for historical explorations. If you asked one of the officers, the usual reply that you could expect was, 'Such a workload! Hardly leaves time for anything else. No respite for even raising one's head and looking around.' Perhaps hunting and touring is part of his job. I was a witness to the reputation of the gentleman and respected him in my heart of hearts. But his being an officer posed an obstruction to my mixing with him. I hesitated that if I initiated a conversation, people would attribute it to some selfish interest on my part and I could on no account take this blame on my head. I don't approve of the invitation to public functions or parties thrown by officers. When I come to know that an officer has been invited to preside over some public event, or a school, hospital or widow-house has been opened in the name of some governor, I feel sad for hours together for the slave mentality of my countrymen. But when on a day, a letter from the office of the magistrate came to me to the effect that he wanted to see me and inquired if I could take pains to go to his bungalow, I was in a dilemma. What should I say as a reply? I consulted some of my friends. They told me, 'Write to him clearly that you are not free. If he is a magistrate, let him be one where he is. If it were some official order, you are bound to comply. But to go to him on personal visit like this would be below your dignity. Why did he himself not come to your place? Will doing so tarnish his prestige? He did not come only because he is the district magistrate. These Indian idiots! When will they understand that outside their offices of power, they are just like any common man? Perhaps they pose as

officers even before their wives. They never forget their positions.'

A friend, who is a walking treasure house of jokes, shared many interesting anecdotes relating to Indian officers. An officer visited his in-laws. Perhaps he wanted to take his wife home. Following the tradition, his father-in-law did not think it appropriate to send his daughter back the very first time his son-in-law asked for it. He said, 'Son, she has come after so many days. How can I send her so soon? Let her stay for some six months at least.' And the wife also sent her message through a maid, 'I do not want to go immediately. After all, am I related to my parents or not? They have not sold me out to you.' The son-in-law, being an officer, his rage knew no bounds. Instantly, he sat on his horse and rode to the office. The very next day the father-in-law was issued a summons. Poor old man! He took his daughter with him and went to appear before his son-in-law. Only then he could be at ease! Such shallow and vain these officers are! Moreover, what do you have to do with this magistrate? If you write an instigative story or article, you will be immediately arrested. The magistrate will give you no relaxation. He will express his helplessness, saying he has to abide by the government order. You don't lust for the job of a *qanoongo*, or assistant *tehsildar* for your son. There is no reason why you should go running to him.

But I did not like the advice of friends. It would be mean to reject an invitation simply on the ground that it comes from the district magistrate. Of course, the officer could have come to my house and this would in no way have affected his dignity. A man who is generous and given to no formalities would have come anyway. But I know, to be the biggest officer of the district is not a small thing. And where does a novelist stand, after all! In America and England, even the prime minister will feel honoured to be invited by novelists or fable writers, not to talk of a district magistrate. But this is India. We have courts crowded with poets to sing the glory of every nobleman. Even today, our writers throng to coronations uninvited, sing the kings' eulogy and open their hands shamelessly for bounty. Thus, I reminded myself, *You are not even some sort of a nobleman that the officer should come to meet you. When, in your position, you put on airs and can have a temper, what do you say of him who happens to be the king of the district? If he is a little proud, it is justified. Call it his weakness, his rudeness, his foolishness or his lack of sophistication, still it is justified. And allow me to say that you should be thankful to God that the officer*

*did not visit your house, otherwise it would have been an occasion for your humiliation. Did you have the required provisions to serve as a host? You do not have even a good chair. What would you have offered him to sit on—a three-legged throne or a dirty carpet? You are happy to buy a pack of twenty-four bidis for smoking for three paise. Can you afford to buy a cigarette worth two rupees? You do not even know where to get the cigarette from or what its brand name is. Think it as your good luck that he did not pay a visit and invited you. Otherwise, you would have incurred a loss of four to five rupees with humiliation as a bonus. And just imagine, if as a result of your bad luck and the punishment for your sins, he would have brought his wife along, you would have been left with no option but to submerge in the earth. Could you or your wife play host to that lady? You would have been flabbergasted with your senses in disarray. The lady could not have confined herself to your poorly decorated drawing room. Sure, your poverty is manifest there, but not your clumsiness and uncouthness. Inside your house, at every step, one could come across untidy and messy scenes. You can be happy in your penury with your worn-out and shabby clothes, but the fact remains that no self-respecting person would like his misery to serve as entertainment for others. You could have been tongue-tied before that lady and would have wished the ground beneath your feet to open up and hide you.*

Thus I accepted the invitation of the district magistrate. Although he had airs about being an officer, his affection and large-heartedness kept it hidden. At least, he did not give me an occasion to complain. It was beyond his power to change his authoritative behaviour.

I had no intention to attach any importance to this meeting. He invited me and I went to him. We chatted for some time and thereafter, I came back. What was the need to talk to anybody about this? It was just like my going to the market to buy vegetables.

But the inquisitive people managed to find out. In special groups, it started being discussed that the district magistrate is a fast friend of mine and he respects me a lot. The exaggerated versions of people's talk added to my glory. It was also rumoured that without consulting me, he does not write any judgement or report.

Any sensible man could have exploited this fame. Selfishness makes man lose his mind. He would seek support even from a straw. It was not difficult to make

his mind. He would seek support even from a straw. It was not difficult to make such people believe that I could help them in all possible manner. But I hate this. Hundreds of people came to me with their individual stories. Some complained of atrocities by the police. Some were fed up with the income tax officers. Some said they were deprived of what they deserved at work while those appointed later than them were being rapidly promoted to higher positions; when it is their turn to be promoted, nobody cares. People with issues of some or the other kind approached me daily. But to all of them, I had just one answer—I am not interested.

One day while I was sitting in my room, a childhood friend of mine happened to visit. We went to the same *maktab*. It was some forty-five years ago. I was not more than nineteen years old then. He was also of the same age but far sturdier and sounder in health. I was intelligent, whereas he was dumb. Maulvi sahib, our teacher, lost his patience and entrusted me with the responsibility to teach him the lessons. I considered it a matter of glory to teach someone double my physique, and taught him with great interest. The result was that whereas the cane of Maulvi sahib failed, my love for my friend proved fruitful. Baldev picked up fast and even started reading lessons from the primary reader—*Khalik-e-Baari*. Meanwhile, Maulvi sahib breathed his last and the branch of learning was broken. All his students scattered. Since then I have met him twice or thrice. (I am still lean and thin while he has a profoundly large physique.) On these chance meetings, we greeted each other and asked about each other's well-being.

Shaking hands with him, I said, 'Come, brother Baldev. Is everything okay? Tell me how I can help you. What do you do these days?'

Baldev said with a sad voice, 'Counting my days, brother, what else to do? I have been wishing to meet you for long. Just remember those days of school when you used to teach me. It is because of you that I have learnt to read and write a little. This has helped me manage the affairs of zamindari, otherwise I would have been a pure illiterate. You are my teacher, brother! To tell you the truth, it was only you who could have taught a donkey like me. I fail to understand why everything that Maulvi sahib taught would disappear from my mind by the time I would come back to my seat. Whatever you taught did not require even to be revised. I could grasp everything without memorizing. Even at that time you were so intelligent.

Having said this, he cast a look at me with eyes full of pride.

I really become overjoyed when I meet my childhood friends. With my eyes wet, I said, ‘Whenever I see you, I feel like running towards you and hugging you. The span of forty-five years suddenly disappears. The school comes alive before my eyes and I am lost in the sweet memories of childhood days again.’

Baldev replied, choking with emotion, ‘Bhai, I have always thought of you as my elder brother. When I see you, my chest expands with pride and I say to myself, “Look, there goes my childhood friend who will never disappoint me in a moment of crisis.” To hear people admiring you I am secretly pleased. But tell me one thing, can’t you get enough to eat? Why don’t you have meals? Reducing to mere bones day by day! If you can’t get ghee, I will send you some two or four canisters of ghee. You are also an old man now. Eat with passion. Whatever energy and force you witness in my body is because I eat well. Still I take a seer of milk and digest a quarter kilogram of ghee. Lately, I have started taking butter as well. The whole of our life we spend for children. Now there is none to ask after our health. If today my health fails to the extent to be dependent on others, there would be none even to offer a glass of water. This is the reason I eat well and work the hardest of all. This allows me to exercise my control over home.

‘My boy, say, your elder son, has been implicated by the police and they have registered a fabricated case against him. Intoxicated by his youth, he seldom cares for anybody. He has got the body of a wrestler. Once he had a tiff with the inspector. Since then the inspector had been waiting for an occasion to corner him. There was an incident of robbery in the village. While the inspector did his investigations, he entrapped my son. He has been in jail for a week now. The hearing is in the court of Muhammad Khaleel and he is a bosom friend of the inspector. The boy is certainly going to be sentenced. He can be saved only if you intervene. There is no other hope. The worry is not only about his serving the sentence; the reputation of the family will go to dust. You please go to the district magistrate and tell him that the case is false and request him to personally investigate the matter. Brother, please don’t say no to me. I know you keep yourself away from issues like these and it is not appropriate for people like you to get involved in such matters. You fight for the cause of the people and if you mix up with officers, it will bring you a bad name. But here you have a

family matter. Take it from me that if the matter had not been false, I would not have come to you. The mother of the boy has been crying herself to exhaustion and his wife has refused to touch food. The hearth has been lying cold for a week. I take a little milk but the mother and daughter-in-law remain without food. If the boy is jailed, both of them will die. I have consoled them, saying as long as my younger brother is living, nobody can twist a single hair of ours. 'Your *bhabhi* has read a book that you have written. She thinks of you as a god. Whenever we have a discussion, she will cite your example and try to make me feel ashamed. I also say clearly, "How on earth could I get the wisdom that the lad has got!" In order to belittle you in her eyes I call you a lad, a weakling, etc., but I fail to convince her against you.'

This was a big trouble I had got in. Whatever objections I could have raised to his request, he had already brought up in his conversation and removed them. There was no point in reiterating them. I was left with no reply other than that I would go to the officer and talk to him regarding this. But I also added that chances were not very strong that my pleading would work because in government affairs, the officers always took the side of their subordinates.

Baldev said happily, 'Don't worry. I leave it to fate to decide. You just go to him and talk regarding this.'

'Okay.'

'Then you will go tomorrow?'

'Definitely, I will.'

'Make sure you request him to personally look into the matter.'

'Yes, of course I will say this to him.'

'And also add that Baldev is your brother.'

'Now, don't force me to tell a lie.'

'Are you not my brother? I have always thought of you as my brother.'

'All right, I will say that too.'

Having said goodbye to Baldev Singh I finished my article, took my meal and lay down to relax. To get rid of his importunity, I had made a false promise to him. I did not intend to talk to the district magistrate regarding this issue. As a pre-emptive measure, I had already suggested that the authorities generally don't interfere with the business of the police; therefore, if the boy is even sentenced, I will have an easy explanation to offer that the officer did not pay heed to my request

request.

Many days passed. I had almost forgotten this episode. Suddenly, one day Baldev Singh entered my room accompanied by his robust son. The son fell at my feet and then stood aside with respect. Baldev Singh said, 'He is absolved of every accusation and is freed, Bhaiya! Sahib called the inspector and chided him badly that he should not harass and defame harmless and gentle people, and warned him that if in future he falsely incriminated anybody, he would be terminated. I bent down to salute him. The boy really felt ashamed for everything that happened. This is all due to your recommendation and pleading, brother. Without your help, we would have been ruined. You have saved not one but four lives. I had come to you with great inhibitions. People warned me, "It is no use going to him. He is a very unkind man. He can benefit none. You call on a man who is ready to help another man. But, my brother, I did not pay heed to their words. The Lord Rama sitting in my heart said to me that however indifferent and unfeeling you may be, you will surely be kind to me.'

Having said this, Baldev Singh motioned to his son. He went outside and brought a big bundle with a variety of gifts from the village. Although I kept saying persistently, 'Why did you bring these things? There was no need to do this. Uncultured man! You are a typical villager. I did not do anything, did not even go to the magistrate.' But who was there to listen to me! Condensed milk, curd, green peas, dry mango pulp, fresh jaggery, and God knows what other numerous things.

In a way I had tried to say that I did not go to the officer. Everything happened on its own. I did not contribute to it. But they took my words as an expression of my humility and my excuse to return the gifts they had brought with them. I did not even have the courage to convince them about the truth behind my words. In fact, the meaning they inferred from my expressions was what I too secretly wished for. I did not like to forgo the glory that came my way for free. Finally, when I insisted that he should not disclose the whole affair to anybody, otherwise a flood of people will approach me with their grievances, in a way I had convinced myself that I did plead for his son.

*Translated from the Hindi by Sarfaraz Nawaz*





## God's Share of Stale Rice

### 1

When Dinanath came home in the evening and told Gauri that he had secured a fifty-rupee job in an office, she blossomed with joy. Her faith in the gods grew stronger. The last year had been a bad one. There was no work to be had and no money. Whatever little jewellery she owned had been sold off. The rent for the house had been piling up. Any friends they could touch for a loan, they had borrowed from. Their year-old toddler cried out for milk. As soon as they ate one meal, they began to worry about the next one. Poor Dinanath was so assailed by demands that he could scarcely leave home. The moment he stepped out, pandemonium would break out on all sides: 'Oh, wonderful, there you are! You said you'd return it in two days, and then we don't see your face in two months. This is not fair, brother. You think of your own needs, but what of our needs? No wonder, it is said that you are better off giving a loan to an enemy rather than a friend!' These words struck Dinanath like arrows, and he felt like killing himself. But he would look at his helpless wife and innocent child and he would hold his heart in check. At any rate, today God has taken pity upon him and his troubles are over.

Gauri beamed at him as she said, 'Did I not say that God remembers everyone? That He would remember us too one day, but you did not have faith. Now tell me, are you not persuaded of the mercy of God?'

Dinanath asserted, 'This is the outcome of my own labours. What has God done? I would have believed in God's mercy if He had showered His bounty upon us.'

But whatever he may have said, within his heart he was beginning to have faith in God.

## 2

Dinanath's master was a severe man and a very brisk worker. He was around fifty years old and not in the best of health, and yet he was the one who worked hardest in that office. Nobody dared to show up late by even a minute and nobody could leave the office a minute before time. They had a fifteen-minute break during the day, and they could choose whether they wanted to use the break to eat, or smoke a cigarette, or chew paan. Aside from this, they were not allowed even a minute's break. They were paid on the first day of the month. On festive days, the office would be shut, and nobody was made to work beyond the stipulated hours. All the workers were entitled to a bonus and the facility of a provident fund. And yet, no man was happy. They did not mind the work or the strict punctuality imposed on them. They only complained of the master's brusque behaviour. No matter how hard you worked, or whether you put your soul into the job, there was never a word of thanks to be had.

But though nobody else was content, Dinanath had no complaints about his master. He would listen to the rebuke and scolding, and go on working as hard as ever. Within a year, he had managed to clear his debts and even saved a little bit. He was one of those who could be content with a little, as long as this little came regularly. If they had to spend even one rupee on something special, the couple would spend hours discussing it, and they would agree only after much debate. If Gauri presented a bill, then Dinanath would oppose it. If Dinanath presented it, then Gauri would criticize it. For the bill to be passed, the presenter would have to argue forcefully. There was no third authority to certify the decision.

And now, Dinanath was a firm believer. He no longer had any doubts about the mercy or justice of God. He worshipped every evening and read the Gita regularly. One day, when one of his atheist friends began to criticize God, he said, 'Brother, so far, no one has been able to ascertain whether or not God exists. Both sides offer steely arguments to prove their case; but in my view, it is better to be a believer than an atheist. If God is indeed almighty, then atheists will have nowhere to go except hell. The believer wins in either case. If God

will have nowhere to go except hell. The believer wins in either case. If God exists, then all for the best, and if He doesn't exist, then not much is lost. You just spend a few minutes a day.'

His atheist friends would listen to his double-talk, purse their lips, and leave.

### 3

One evening, just as Dinanath was leaving the office, his master sent for him and, very civilly asking him to sit in a chair, he said, 'How long have you been working here? It must be a year at least, is it not?'

Dinanath very politely said, 'Yes, it is the thirteenth month.'

'Sit comfortably. You must be going home and eating a snack at this time?'

'No, I am not in the habit of snacking.'

'But you must be eating paan at least? Such a young man and such great restraint!'

Saying this, he rang a bell, and asked the orderly to fetch paan and some sweets.

Dinanath was getting suspicious. *Why am I being entertained in this fashion? The man who would not even return his salaam was now sending for paan and sweets. He is probably happy with my work.* This thought gave him some confidence and also reminded him of God. Surely, the Almighty is all-seeing and just. Otherwise, why would anyone pay me any heed?'

The orderly brought sweets and paan. After much insisting, Dinanath was persuaded to eat the sweets.

The master smiled and said, 'You must have found me very brusque. The thing is, around here, people are barely aware of their responsibilities. If the officer softens even slightly, people begin to take undue advantage of his good manners and the work suffers. Some are fortunate enough to be friendly with their staff, they can laugh and talk with them and yet the staff does not get spoiled. In fact, they work even harder. I do not have that skill, and so I maintain a distance from my men. And so far, this policy has not done me any disservice; but I keep observing the men and their behaviour to gauge their attitudes. I have come to the conclusion that you are a loyal worker and I can trust you. I want you to assume greater responsibilities so that you do not have to do a lot of the work yourself, you have to only supervise. Your salary will be raised by another

fifty rupees. I am certain that you will work with even greater dedication than you have thus far.'

Dinanath's eyes filled with tears and the sweets in his mouth were tinged with salt. He wanted to fall at his master's feet and say, 'I would give my life to serve you. I will surely rise to the honour that you have bestowed upon me.' But his voice was shaking and he could only look on, eyes filled with gratitude.

The sethji brought out a fat ledger and said, 'I want your help with a job upon which rests the future of this company. Of all the men, I have found only you trustworthy. And I hope you will not disappoint me. This is last year's ledger, and certain amounts have been entered in here which suggest that the company has made a profit of several thousands. But as you know, for several months, we have been operating at a loss. Your handwriting is remarkably similar to that of the clerk who wrote this ledger. If both sets of handwriting were placed side by side, even an expert would find it hard to tell them apart. I want you to rewrite a page and replace it with the page of the same number in this ledger. I have had the same page number printed out. I have also hired a binder who will rebind the ledger overnight. Nobody will find out. All I need is that you use your pen to copy out that page.'

Dinanath raised a doubt, 'If the page has to be replaced in any case, why does it have to be copied out?'

The sethji laughed. 'What do you think, that page has to be copied exactly? I just need to change a few numbers. I assure you, I am doing this only for the welfare of this office. If this alteration is not made, it will endanger the livelihoods of a hundred men. There is nothing to think about. It will take half an hour. You write very fast.'

It was a difficult situation. It was clear that he was being asked to commit forgery. He had no way of determining whether the sethji was saying what he was saying for his own selfish reasons or whether he was protecting the office, but in any case, it was forgery—serious forgery. Could he kill his own soul? No, not under any circumstance.

Timidly, he said, 'Forgive me, but I cannot do this.'

The sethji, his unfaltering smile in place, said, 'Why?'

'Because this is obvious forgery.'

'What would you call forgery?'

'To change the accounts is forgery.'

to change the accounts is forgery.

‘If this change could preserve the livelihoods of a hundred men, is it still a forgery? The company’s true situation is very different from its situation on paper; if this change is not wrought, thousands of rupees will have to be handed over as profits. As a result, the company will go bankrupt and all the men will be sitting at home, jobless. I don’t want to kill so many poor people for the sake of a few rich shareholders. If a little forgery is done for the larger good, then it does not amount to killing your soul.’

Dinanath could not think of an answer to this. If the sethji was telling the truth and this forgery could save the livelihoods of a hundred men, then it was really not a forgery; it was a solemn duty. Even if it did amount to killing the soul, he ought not to worry about it, for he would be saving a hundred men. But after finding a moral resolution, he considered his own security. He said, ‘But if this matter is found out, I will be destroyed. I will be sent away to Kaala Paani for fourteen years.’

The sethji guffawed. ‘If the matter is found out, you will not be caught out. I will be caught out. You can just deny it all.’

‘But my handwriting will be recognized.’

‘How can anyone know which page has been changed, the writing’s all the same.’

Dinanath was defeated. He began to copy out the page at once.

#### 4

Thus, a thief was born inside Dinanath’s heart. He could not tell Gauri anything about this business.

A month later, he was promoted. He was getting a hundred rupees. He got another two hundred as a bonus.

He had all this, there were signs of prosperity in the house but Dinanath’s guilty heart felt burdened. He did not believe that he could convince Gauri by using the same arguments that the sethji had used to silence him.

His faith in God kept him in a constant state of fear. Some terrible punishment lay in store. No penance, no ministration could prevent it. It may not happen now; not a year or two from now, not even five or ten years later; but the later it came, the more awful it would be. The interest would be greater than the

principal. He often felt regretful that he was won over by the sethji's inducement. The office could stay or go, for all he cared; the men could keep their job or lose them, for all he cared. At least he would have been spared an anguished soul; but what was done was done, and the punishment was certain to come. His doubt had eaten away all the joy, enthusiasm, and sweetness in his life.

Malaria had been spreading. The child got a fever. Dinanath's heart was in his mouth. His punishment had arrived. What should he do, where could he go, his mind would not function.

Gauri said, 'Bring him some medicine, or take him to the doctor. It's been three days already.'

Dinanath worriedly said, 'Yes, I'll go, but I'm very afraid.'

'What is there to be afraid of? Nonsense. Who doesn't get a fever these days?'

'Why is God so cruel?'

'God is cruel only to sinners. What have we ever taken from anyone?'

'Does God never forgive sinners?'

'If sinners are not punished, this world would be a disaster.'

'But a man may do something which is a sin if you look at it from one perspective, but an act of virtue from another perspective.'

'I don't understand.'

'Let's say, I tell a lie in order to save someone's life, is that an act of virtue?'

'I think such a lie would be a virtue.'

'So, a sin that leads to mankind's welfare is an act of virtue?'

'Of course, it is!'

Dinanath's wretched doubt was silenced for a little while. He called the doctor and started the course of treatment. A week later, the boy was fine.

But a few days later, he himself fell sick. *Surely, this was a divine punishment and he would not survive.* It was an ordinary malarial fever but Dinanath's punitive imagination managed to turn it into a delirium. A fevered mind, like an intoxicated one, turns hyper-imaginative. It had been only a doubtful fancy before, now it turned into an awful truth. His imagination conjured Yamdoot, complete with his spear and mace; it lit up the fires of hell. How could a spoonful of the doctor's medicine combat the sound of a mace weighing a hundred maunds and the conflagration of a boiling sea of fire? Dinanath was not

a superstitious man. He did not believe in the arcane abstractions of the Puranas. No, he was a rationalist and he started to believe in God only when his own reasoning persuaded him. But with God came His mercy and His vengeance. Mercy brought him his job and honour. If God had not taken pity upon him, he would have starved to death. But to starve was easier, it was child's play compared to being tossed into the fires of hell. The punitive mindset, cultivated over several generations, had such deep roots in his psyche that it was a part of his intelligence, his soul. Great waves of logic and rationalism would come rushing at these aeons of hide-bound beliefs, but would do little more than drench them before retreating. That mountain would stand there, unmoved.

Life was not done with him, so he survived. As soon as he recovered his strength, he went back to work. One day Gauri said, 'Those days when you were ill, one day your condition was critical, and I had promised God that if you get well, I'll feed fifty Brahmins. The very next day, your condition improved. God heard my plea. If He had not been merciful, I would have been reduced to less than a beggar. Go to the market today and buy everything so that I can fulfil my vow. If we send out invitations to fifty, a hundred Brahmins are sure to come. Another fifty poor folk; add another twenty or twenty-five of our friends. That's two hundred people. I'll bring a list of ingredients.'

Dinanath scrunched up his forehead and said, 'Do you think I got well because of God's mercy?'

'And how else did you get well?'

'I got well because my life was not done.'

'Don't say such things. I must fulfil my vow.'

'Never. I do not think that God is merciful.'

'So, is He cruel then?'

'There is none crueller. One who punishes the mistakes and idiocies of toys created by Himself by tossing them into hellfire, cannot be merciful. If He is merciful at all, still His cruelty is several times greater. I hate the very concept of such a God. Love is supposed to be the greatest power. Thinkers have held that love is the greatest glory of life, or the world. If not in our behaviour, at least in our ideals, love is the truth of our existence, but your God controls the universe through the fear of punishment. Then what is the difference between God and man? I cannot worship a God of that sort, I cannot. Those who are fat, for them God might be merciful for they rob the world. People like us can never witness

God might be merciful, for they rob the world. People like us can never witness the mercy of God. But yes, the fear of God is with us at every step. Don't do this, or God will punish you. Don't do that, or God will punish you. To rule through love is humanity, to rule through terror is barbarity. It is better to not have God at all than to have a terrorist God. I want to toss him out of my heart and be free of both—His mercy and His fear. One awful punishment can destroy years of love. I constantly shower love upon you, but if one day I were to take up a stick and start thrashing you, you would not want to look at my face again. I do not want God's favour in order to live such a fearful, terrorized life. There is no need to set aside God's share when the rice is stale. If you insist on all this ritual feeding, I'll consume some poison myself.'

Gauri's fearful eyes remained fixed upon his face.

*Translation from the Hindi by Annie Zaidi*





## God's Own Police

### 1

Today again, Seth Nanakchand received a similar envelope; the handwriting appeared to be the same too. Seeing it, his face turned pale. While opening the envelope, both his hands and heart trembled. He knew very well what there was in the letter. He had received two more letters like this. He had no doubt that in this third letter too, there would be similar threats. Taking the letter in his hand, he stared at the skies. He was a strong-hearted man; threats would not scare him as he knew how to recover his money even from the dead. Human emotions like pity or helpfulness hardly touched him; how else could he be a moneylender! On top of it, he was religious. Every full moon night, he would listen to the Satyanarayan *katha*. Every Tuesday, he would offer laddus to Mahavirji; every day he would bathe in the river Yamuna; he kept a fast on every eleventh day of the lunar calendar and invited Brahmins to feast, and till he started making huge profits in selling ghee, he was thinking of even making a dharmashala, a resting place for travellers. He had even decided on the plot of land. Among his borrowers, several were masons and construction workers, who were willing to work in lieu of the interest they owed. He now waited for a dealer in bricks and lime to be trapped in a loan of ten to twenty thousand rupees; then on the interest accrued, he would get his bricks and lime too. This religious commitment strengthened his spirits further. The power and blessings of the gods always ensured that he never lost out on any business transaction and even in times of severe crises, he was used to maintain a calm demeanour; but from the time he started receiving these letters of threat, he was assailed with fears of different

kinds and this distressed him. What if dacoits attacked him; who would come to his rescue? For divine impediments he could cushion himself in the hope of intervention of the gods, but for the sword that was now hanging on his head, his faith was of no use. At night, there was only one guard posted at his door. If ten to twenty armed men came, then what could he do? Probably he would run away the moment he sensed their approach. Among neighbours, he could locate none that could help at such an hour of crisis. Even though they were all either his present clients or had been so in the past. But such people are thankless; they make holes in the plates they eat from; they become enemies of those at whose doorstep they had pleaded for help. Yes, the knockers on the door are strong; it is not easy to break them; then, there is the inner door. Even a hundred men would not be able to break it open. There was no other way that could lead to an attack. The walls were so high that it was impossible to scale them. But they have rifles too. One rifle can shoot at dozens of men together. All these impediments overshadowed him with anxiety. Who knows if the guard too was mixed up in the affair; servants are like snakes in disguise! That is why he remained mostly inside. He met visitors only after confirming their names and addresses. He had to sit for three to four hours in the assembly hall; otherwise, wouldn't his business be razed to dust? The time he spent outside made him feel that his life was hanging precariously at the end of a spear. His temperament too had changed a lot. He had never been so humble and polite before. Leave alone abusing people, he would now talk only in a dignified way. He had even lowered his rate of interest somewhat; yet he had no peace of mind.

After a few minutes of gathering strength, he finally opened the letter, and it was as if a bullet hit him. His head started reeling and everything seemed to be dancing in front of him. His breath turned heavy; his eyes dilated. It was written, 'You have paid no attention to the two letters of mine. If you think that the police will protect you, you are under some delusion. Police will come only when we have done our job and have gone a hundred miles away. Your wits have blunted; the fault is no longer ours. We have asked for only twenty-five thousand rupees from you. It is not difficult for you to pay this amount. We know that you have gold coins worth a lakh with you; but at the time of destruction, one has upturned senses; we will no longer try to convince you. It is useless trying to reason with you. If by this evening we do not get the money, then we will come tonight. Call whomever you wish to protect you. Get as

then we will come tonight. Call whomever you wish to protect you, get as many weapons as you desire. We will come announcing our arrival and we will come during the day. We are no thieves; we are heroes and our faith lies in our strength. We know that Goddess Lakshmi garlands the one who can break the bow, spike through a fish. If . . .’

The seth immediately closed his accounts book and locked all the money in the safe, latched the front door from inside and like a dying man pleaded before Kesar, ‘Again, a similar letter came today, Kesar! They are coming today itself.’

Kesar was a stout woman who retained her youthfulness using cosmetics; she was like a fruitless tree that is shrouded in greenery even during the autumn. A considerable period of her life was spent living in the hope of bearing a child; but now her interest was only to immerse herself in pleasures. Who knows when one’s eyes would close; *who knows then who would enjoy all these possessions?* That is why she was most afraid of illness; she considered it to be the message of death and so every day she would consume one medicine or the other. She did not want to leave behind her physical body as long as there was a trace of hope in its survival. If she had children, she would have welcomed death, but now everything would end with her death; then why should she not live as long as she could? Yes, her life was definitely without any happiness, like that sweet serving that would go bad if not consumed.

She anxiously said, ‘I have been telling you for a while now that let us escape from this place for a month or two, but it is you who wouldn’t listen. After all, what is it that you are planning to do?’

The sethji was worried no doubt and it was but natural—under the circumstances, who could remain calm—but he was not a coward. He still believed that if some crisis did happen, then he would not retreat. Whatever weaknesses suffused him so far were soon dispelled as now the time came for direct confrontation. The deer too, on seeing no route of escape, turns around to attack the hunter. It is not sometimes, but always, in the face of adversity that the special characteristics of a man bloom. By now, The sethji had decided with certainty that he would confront the situation. *Why should one fear; whatever has to happen will happen. Our duty is to safeguard ourselves; whether we live or die is in the hands destiny.* He consolingly told the sethani, ‘You needlessly fear so much, Kesar; after all, these people are human. They too love their lives. Why would they do such things otherwise? I can bring down ten to twenty

people under cover of the window. I am going to inform the police. It is the duty of the police to provide us with protection. What for do I give an annual tax of ten thousand? I will go to the inspector right away. When the government takes taxes from us, it is their duty to protect us.'

She did not understand this aspect of politics. She wanted to somehow get rid of this fear that coiled around her like a hissing snake. Her mind could hardly be at ease with whatever experience she had of the police. She said, 'I have seen much of the police. During the time of any incident, one can hardly see them. It is only after everything is over that they come in full strength to show off their power.'

'The police are administering on behalf of the government. What do you know of it?'

'I must say, if the incident is to take place tomorrow, then it will definitely happen today if you inform the police now. They too have a share in the plunder.'

'I know, I have seen it and I keep seeing it every day; but I pay an annual tax of ten thousand. I keep the policewallahs happy too. During the winter, when the superintendent sahib had come, I had sent so many supplies. I had sent one whole canister of ghee and one whole sack of sugar. When will all this bribing come to help? Yes, a man must not depend wholly on others; that is why I have thought that I must teach you how to use the gun. If we both start firing at the dacoits, then how would they dare to set foot inside the house?'

The proposal was indeed comical. Kesar said, smiling, 'Yes, and what else? I will learn to use the gun today! This is laughable.'

'What is there to laugh in this? These days women are being trained for the army. Like soldiers, women too exercise and drill, use the gun and play in the fields. These days women no longer sit in their homes.'

'English women might be using the gun; why should women here do so? They might as well wag their arm-long tongues!'

'The feats of bravery that our women have achieved fill the pages of history. The world is amazed today reading such instances.'

'Leave aside all this talk about the past. Women might have been bold then. Who is acting brave today?'

'Come on now! Only a while ago, thousands of women left their homes and families and laughingly went to jail. Is that not an act of courage? Recently

happily and laughingly went to jail. Is that not an act of courage. Recently, Harnad Kunwar of Punjab single-handedly arrested four armed dacoits for which even the Governor had to praise her.'

'Who knows what kind of women they are? I will faint as soon as I see the dacoits.'

That very moment the servant came in to say, 'Sir! Four constables from the police station have come to see you. They are calling you.'

The sethji happily said, 'Has the *thanedar* also come?'

'No, sir, only the constables have come.'

'Why hasn't the police station officer come himself?' Saying this, the sethji took a paan and went out.

## 2

Seeing the sethji, the four constables bowed down to respectfully greet him, in the proper English way, as if they were saluting one of their own officers. the sethji got them seated on benches and said, 'Is the *darogaji*'s mood fine today? I was going to meet him today.'

The senior-most among the four, who had several badges on his sleeves, said, 'Why do you take the trouble? He was coming here himself. An urgent matter of investigation cropped up and that stopped him from coming. He will meet you tomorrow. The poor man has been anxious from the time he received the news about dacoits in the area. He is always concerned about you. He said many a time that he is most worried about the well-being of the sethji. You must have also received unsigned letters?'

The sethji showed a lack of concern and said, 'Such letters keep coming. Who cares for them? I have received three such letters and I have not mentioned it to anyone so far.'

The constable laughed and said, 'But the darogaji had received the information.'

'Is it true?'

'Yes, sir! Titbits of information keep reaching him. He has come to know so far that tomorrow they are planning to attack your house. That is why the darogaji has sent us in your service.'

'But how did he come to know of it? I have not shared the news with anyone.'

In a mysterious tone, the constable said, 'Sir, do not ask this. The wealthiest seth of the area receives such letters and the police would have no information? Is this something to ask? Again, we keep receiving reminders from above that the sethji should have no reason to complain. The superintendent sahib has given us special order regarding you. And sir, even the government runs on your support. If we do not protect the property and possessions of traders and moneylenders, then where do we go? When we are there, is it possible for anyone to dare set their evil eyes on you? But these wretched dacoits are so reckless and in such large numbers that it is difficult to take them to task outside the area. The darogaji was even thinking of deploying a regiment of forces, but these murderers never stay in one place; today, they are here and tomorrow, miles away. What would one then do by calling in the regiment? One is not bothered by the local subjects; you are our keeper, sir; why should we hide anything from you? Who else owns such possessions as you do? And if some have an asset of two to four hundred rupees, the police would hardly risk their lives chasing dacoits. What do they risk as they are free to shoot, and that too, mostly under cover? For us, there are thousands of obstacles. If something goes wrong, then it is we who get into trouble. We have to do a tightrope walk so that the snake is killed but the stick is not broken; so the darogaji has asked us to request you to hand over to us things that might be a hazard for you now so that it can be deposited safely in the government treasury. You will get a receipt for it. The lock and the seal for it would be yours only. When this trouble gets over, you can get it all brought over to you. In this way, you too would be at ease and we would also be saved from our responsibility. God forbid, if something does happen here, sir, then you would surely incur losses and we too would be left explaining it all. And these criminals do not stop at looting money and goods; they murder, set houses on fire and even dishonour women. You know, sir, whatever fate has ordained will happen.

'You are a man of dignity; the dacoits cannot harm you. The entire town is willing to risk their lives for you. The Almighty has Himself seen how devoted you are, and how well you observe all rituals of worship. It's His blessing on you that makes even the earth you touch turn into gold; but men, to the best of their abilities, try to protect themselves. Sir, you do have a motorcar; whatever you wish to hand over to us, you can keep in it. The four of us are with you; so there is nothing to fear. In one minute you would then be free. We have come to

there is nothing to fear. In one minute you would then be free. We have come to know that in this plan, there are twenty young men involved. Two are disguised as mendicants; two in the garb of Punjabis selling rugs and woollen shawls. There are also two carriers with slings on their shoulders with these two. Two men are dressed as Baluchis selling locks and knives. How much more should we recount, sir? In our police station, we have the descriptions of each one.'

When man is in danger, his heart weakens, and he starts believing in things, which he would never have believed in if he was in his senses. When medicine does not benefit patients, then they pray, keep charms, take refuge in wizards, witch doctors and such astute people; there was no reason to be suspicious here. Possibly, the darogaji had some interest here but the sethji was willing to comply. It is not a big thing, even if one has to suffer a loss of two to four hundred rupees. Such occasions keep coming up in life and in such a situation what better arrangement could have been done; one should interpret this as divine inspiration. Considering he had not one, but two guns and that some people would come out to help him, it seemed like a risky proposition.

He decided that he should take advantage of this benevolence shown by the subinspector. By giving something to these men, he thought of taking their help to pack his things. How could one rely on others? Suppose they fly off with some things, then?

He spoke to them in a way that suggested that the benevolence shown by the darogaji was not of a personal kind; it was but his duty. 'I had made such arrangements here that had they come, their mouths would have turned sour. The entire township was willing to help. I have friendly relations with all; but I like the darogaji's arrangements. With this, he is absolved of his responsibility and I'm relieved from this burden of worries; but it is not in my power to physically take out things from inside the house. Owing to the prayers of all, I have no dearth of servants and other staff; but who knows, what their intentions are? If you people help me, then the job will be somewhat easier.'

The head constable happily agreed to be of service and he said, 'We are your servants, sir; there is no question of "helping out" here. The government may pay us our salaries, sir, but you are our benefactor. You need to only keep showing us the things; we will keep chatting and take them out. We will surely be honoured and rewarded for our service too. We cannot live by our salaries alone, sethji; if your kind eyes are not on us, then we will not be able to survive

even for a day. Our children will die hungry; what can one do with fifteen to twenty rupees, sir; it is not even sufficient to take care of our personal needs!’

The sethji went inside to convey the news to Kesar, and on hearing it, she seemed to regain focus. She said, ‘God has helped us; otherwise my life was in danger.’

The sethji, with an air of omniscience around him, said, ‘This is what is called administrative efficiency. It is on the strength of this promptness that government-run administrations run. How well managed everything is; news of even insignificant matters reaches the authorities and immediate action is taken to prevent things from getting out of hand. And our people are such idiots that they keep shouting slogans for Swaraj, self-governance! Once they have authority in their hands, then there would be looting in broad daylight, and no one would listen to anything. There have been injunctions from above. Keeping the rulers happy is never fruitless. I think we should not keep anything of value in the house. Let those bastards come and go back empty-handed.’

Kesar was secretly happy. She said, ‘Throw the keys in front of them and tell them to take what they want.’

‘The goddamn rascals would be outwitted.’

‘Their faces would get blackened.’

‘Look at their audacity. They have even announced the date. What they did not account for is that the government is British. They are always a step ahead of others.’

‘They must have thought that their threats would subdue you.’

Three constables came in to take out the trunk and the chest. While one was outside loading the goods in the car, another was making a list of each item in a notebook. Jewellery, gold coins, banknotes, expensive saris, lehngas, shawls and embroidered wraps, everything was kept in the car. Apart from ordinary utensils, things made of iron and wood, and bedding, nothing else remained in the house. And for the dacoits, these things were not worth even a cowrie. The sethji himself came to fetch Kesar’s cosmetics box and while handing it over to the head constable, said, ‘Keep this very safely, brother.’

Taking the cosmetics box from him, he said, ‘For me, each and every item is as precious.’

A suspicion arose in the sethji’s mind. He asked, ‘The keys of the treasures would be in my possession, right?’



‘What else? I had already said so; but why does such a question come to your mind?’

‘I just asked casually.’ The sethji became ashamed of himself.

‘No, if there are doubts in your mind, then we can remain here to protect you. But yes, we will not be held responsible.’

‘Oh no, it was just a casual inquiry. You would give me the list of items, won’t you?’

‘You would get the list in the police station, duly signed by the darogaji.’

All the things were kept in the car. Many people of the town were watching the drama. The car was big, but it was full to the brim. With quite some difficulty, space was squeezed out for the sethji. The four constables managed to gather together and sit in the front.

The car started. Kesar stood at the door as if she was bidding farewell to her daughter. It was as if her daughter was going to the house of her in-laws where she would be the lady; but she was rendering her own house empty.

### 3

The police station was five miles away. Outside the township, there was the stony silence of the surrounding hills, which had rolling green fields skirting its edge, and it is through the middle of these fields that the red brick-laid road wound its way up like a huge red serpent.

The head asked the sethji, ‘How far is this true that twenty-five years ago your father had come here with nothing more than a brass pot and some cords?’

The sethji said with pride, ‘It is absolutely true. I had a total of only three rupees. It is with this that I opened a shop to trade in wheat and pulses. It is a play of fate; one needs the grace of God; it does not take long to either make or break a man. But I have never clung on to money. I have fulfilled my religious obligations in the best way I can. The glory that comes with wealth is complemented by one’s sense of dharma or religious duty; otherwise what benefit does wealth have?’

‘You are absolutely right, sethji. One should make a statue of yours and worship it. To earn a lakh from a capital of three rupees is no ordinary feat!’

‘Till midnight I don’t have the opportunity to raise my head from work, Khan

Sahib!’

‘You must be feeling that all this business is nothing but a bother.’

‘Indeed, it is a bother, but God creates such a fascination that even after understanding everything, man remains trapped in it all his life. It is only in death that one is finally relieved; the only wish that I have is to leave behind something memorable’

‘Do you not have any child?’

‘It was not ordained by fate, Khan Sahib, what else should I say! Even those who are extremely poor keep having children like how weeds grow; but those for whom the gods have provided so well otherwise, keep pining to see the face of one’s own child.’

‘You are very right, sethji! Happiness in life comes through our children. But if one does not, what is the use of all this money and wealth?’

‘If God so wills, what can man do. If it was in my power, I would have escaped from this illusion of life, Khan Sahib; even for a moment, I would not have remained here. I would have visited some holy place and sung bhajans for the gods. But what can I do? Even if I try breaking this web of delusion, it does not snap.’

‘Why don’t you steel your nerves and break it? Take everything and distribute it among the poor. Not the sadhus and other holy men; not even the fat Brahmins but to them for whom this life has become such a burden, that all that they desire is for death to come and end their difficulties and suffering.’

‘It is not possible for man to break this web of delusions, Khan Sahib! It is the will of providence that induces the feeling of detachment.’

‘The gods have been kind to you today. We have been sent to break this web of delusion like one that rips apart a spider’s web and set you free from it all. The gods are happy with your devotion and they do not want to keep you bound any more. They want to liberate you from this life.’

‘If God had been so kind, then there would have been no further query, Khan Sahib!’

‘Believe me, sethji, God has been really very kind. He had called us from the underworld and assigned to us this duty. We have released so many people who have been imprisoned in this web of delusion by breaking their shackles. Today it is your turn.’

It seemed to the sethji that the flow of blood in his nerves had stopped. With trepidation in his eyes, he looked at the *sipahis*. Then he said, 'You are great fun, Khan Sahib.'

'We have decided not to give pain to any one in our life; but these moneyed people are such fools that those who come to save them, they think that they are their enemies. We have come to cut off your chains; but if we tell you to leave behind all that you have hoarded and take the road home, then you would start screaming and shouting. We are God's own police whose letters have already reached you.'

You see, the sethji fell, like one hits the earth from the skies. All his senses failed him and it was in this state of semiconsciousness that he was pushed out from the car, and the car went ahead.

Senselessly, the sethji ran after the car, shouting, 'O sir! O my lord! I will be destroyed. Please be kind. I don't even have a cowrie in the house . . .'

The head of the group put his hand out of the window and flung on the ground three rupees. The car picked up speed.

The sethji sat down with his head held in his hands and with disbelief he looked at the motorcar leaving, like one's mortal remains would see the soul ascending the heavens. All the dreams of his life were flying away.

*Translated from the Hindi by Anuradha Ghosh*



## My Elder Brother

### 1

My elder brother was five years older than me, but only three grades ahead in school. He was admitted to school at the same age as I was, but in an important matter such as education, he would rather be patient. He wanted to lay a strong foundation to that magnificent edifice. He took two years to complete a one-year course, sometimes he took even three. How could the edifice stand if the foundations were not strong enough!

I was nine, he was fourteen. He had the full right of an elder to supervise and reprimand me. And decency demanded that I accept his order as law.

He was very studious by nature. He could always be found seated with his books open before him. And perhaps to rest his mind, he would sometimes draw pictures of sparrows, dogs and cats on the margin of his notebook. Sometimes he would write the same name, word or sentence ten or twenty times, sometimes he would copy out a couplet in beautiful letters a couple of times. Sometimes he wrote words that had no rhyme or reason. For instance, one day I saw the following word clusters in his notebook—*special, ameena, bhaiyon-bhaiyon, dar-asal, bhai-bhai, radheshyam, shriyut radheshyam, ik ghantey tak*—and the sketch of a man's face. I couldn't muster enough courage to ask him. He was in the ninth grade, I was in the fifth. I was too small to understand his creations.

I was not keen on studies. To stay with a book for an hour was like climbing up a mountain for me. As soon as I found a chance, I'd leave the hostel and go out in the field. There I'd throw pebbles, fly kites or just meet a buddy—what could be more fun? We scaled the walls and jumped down, sometimes we

clambered up the gate, swinging it forward and backward, as though we were driving motor cars. But as soon as I returned to the room, I'd be petrified seeing the intimidating look on my brother's face. His first question would be: 'Where were you?' Always the same question, asked in the same tone. My only answer was silence. I don't know why I couldn't manage to say that I'd been outside, playing. My silence indicated that I accepted my guilt and my brother's only duty was to reprimand me in words that conveyed both his affection and anger.

'If you study English this way, you'll be studying your entire life without getting the alphabet right. Studying English is not a joke that anyone who wants to, can learn it. Had it been so, any stupid fellow would have been able to master it. You have to peer into books day and night, work your head off, only then can you probably acquire some skill. And even then, what you actually have is just a smattering of it. Even great scholars cannot write correct English, to say nothing of speaking it. And I ask you, how much of a brainless fellow are you are that you don't learn a lesson by watching me? You've seen with your own eyes how much I toil. If you don't see it, there must be something wrong with your eyesight or intellect. How many spectacles and shows are held, have you ever seen me going to watch them? Cricket and hockey matches are held every day, but I don't even go near them. I study all the time, and even then, it takes me two to three years to pass one grade. How can you imagine that you'll pass when you indulge in sports and games like this? It takes me two to three years to pass one grade, but you'll rot in the same class for your entire life! If you want to waste your life like this, so be it. Go home and play tip cat as much as you want. Why waste our father's hard-earned money?'

Such drubbings would often reduce me to tears. I had no answer, because I had committed the crime. My brother was an expert in the art of giving advice. He'd say stinging things, would shoot such verbal arrows as would pierce my heart, and my spirits would collapse. I didn't find in myself the energy to work hard, and in this dispirited mood I'd begin to think—why shouldn't I go back home? Why should I spoil my life meddling with work that was beyond my capability? I was content to remain ignorant rather than doing such hard work. Just thinking about it made me giddy. But the clouds of despair dispersed after an hour or two and I took resolve to work harder. I promptly worked out a timetable. How could I begin my work without drawing a schedule or a plan?

This timetable had no period for games and sports. Wake up early morning, sit to study at six after washing and breakfast, study English from six to eight, eight to nine maths, nine to nine-thirty history, then meal and going to school. Rest for half an hour after returning from school at three-thirty, four to five geography, grammar from five to six, jogging for half an hour in front of the hostel, six-thirty to seven English composition, translation from eight to nine after dinner, Hindi from nine to ten, ten to eleven miscellaneous things, after that rest.

Planning a timetable is one thing, but implementing it is quite another. It was not adhered to right from the first day. The green expanse of the field, the light breeze blowing over you, the bouncing of a football, the kabaddi manoeuvres, the speed and agility of a volleyball match drew me irresistibly and I forgot everything. I wouldn't remember the life-destroying timetable and eye-ruining books. And my brother got an opportunity to advise and disgrace me. I ran away from his shadow, tried to avoid him by all means. I entered the room on tiptoe so that he wouldn't know. If he just looked at me, I stopped dead in my tracks. It was as though a naked sword was hanging on my head all the time. However, just as human beings, despite the awareness of misfortune and death, are always caught in temptations of all kinds, I could not give up games despite reprimands and rebukes.

## 2

The annual exams took place. My brother failed while I passed, securing first division. Now there was a gap of only two grades between us. I felt like giving him a piece of my mind—what came of your ascetic practice? Look at me, I enjoyed my life and yet passed in first division. But he was so sad and grief-stricken that I felt pity for him and didn't feel like adding insult to his injury. But yes, I felt more confident now and my self-esteem went up. I was no longer scared of my brother. I began to participate in games freely. My spirits were running high. If he disgraced me again, I'd have retorted—what glory have you achieved by working so hard? I obtained distinction so easily. Even though I didn't have enough courage to show off my new-found arrogance, it was clear from my demeanour that I was no longer scared of him. My brother could surmise this—he was clever enough. One day, when I was returning to lunch,

having played tipcat the entire morning, he burst out, with the air of unsheathing a sword: 'I can see that because you have passed this year, and that too in the first division, you're thinking no end of yourself. But, my dear brother, when great men lived to regret their vanity, who are you compared to them? You must have read about what happened to Ravan. What lesson have you drawn from him? Or did you read it just for the sake of reading? Just passing an exam is no big deal, the real thing is to develop your mind. Try to understand the significance of what you read. Ravan was the master of the earth. Such a king was called *chakravarty*, that is, ruler of the world. Nowadays, the British have spread their empire in different parts of the world. But you cannot call the British king a chakravarty. There are many nations in the world which do not accept English rule, they are independent. Ravan was a chakravarty, all the kings of the world paid tribute to him. Even great divinities were his slaves. Even the God of fire and the God of water were his slaves. But what was his end? Vanity destroyed him, no one was left to offer him even a fistful of water. Men may commit other crimes, but they must not be arrogant or proud. Whoever resorts to vanity, loses both the worlds. You must have read the story of Satan too. He was proud of the fact that he was the truest of God's devotees. Eventually, it so happened that he was pushed out of heaven to hell. The Persian emperor was arrogant and he died a beggar.

'You have just passed one exam. If it turns your head, then you are done for. Make no mistake, you've passed by fluke and not by the dint of your hard work. And you cannot be lucky again and again. Sometimes, you can hit correctly in tipcat too, but it does not mean you're a successful player. A successful player is one who doesn't miss his mark even once. Don't look at my failure. When you reach the same grade, you'll realize how tough it is. You'll have to cut your teeth in algebra and chemistry, and study the history of England. It's not easy to remember the names of kings. There are at least eight Henrys to remember. Do you think it's easy to remember which event had happened in the time of which Henry? If you write Henry the eighth in place of Henry the seventh, you lose all marks! A total washout. Not even a cipher, you know. What do you think? There are dozens of James, dozens of Williams and scores of Charles. Your head begins to spin, your mind is in a whirl. These wretched fellows didn't have enough names to go around. After every name they had to put first, second,

third, fourth, fifth, *etc.* If they had asked me, I could've reeled off a million names. And as for geometry—only God can save us! If you write A, C, B in place of A, B, C, your whole answer is marked wrong. Why doesn't someone ask these cruel examiners that ultimately what's the difference between A, B, C and A, C, B? And why do they kill students for this worthless exercise? Whether you eat pulses—rice—roti or rice—pulses—roti, what is so important about it? But no, these examiners don't care a bit. They blindly follow what is written in the book. They want students to mug up every word and this rote learning is given the name of education. After all, what's the use of learning these useless things? If you draw that perpendicular on this line, the base will be two times that of the perpendicular. Can you ask them, what's the use? Whether it becomes double or four times or remains half, what have I to do with it? But if you want to pass the exam you need to mug up all that nonsense. They ask—write an essay on 'punctuality' which should not be less than four pages. Now you open the notebook, hold the pen and begin cursing your fate. Who doesn't know that punctuality's a very good thing? It inculcates self-control in human beings, it evokes respect from others and facilitates the conduct of business. But how can you extend this little thing to four pages? If something can be expressed in just one sentence, what is the point of writing it in four pages? I call it stupidity. You don't save time by doing so, rather it is a waste of time since you're imposing a lot of things by force. We want a man to say what he wants to say promptly and then get moving. But no, you must blacken four full pages, no matter what you write. And the pages are of foolscap size. What is it if not tyranny on the students? It's even more useless when the instruction says, Write in brief." "Briefly write an essay on the punctuality of time", which should not be written in less than four pages! Come on! If "briefly" means four pages, then if it's not brief, should it run into one or two hundred pages! Run fast as well as slow. Nonsense, isn't it? Even a child can understand such minor things, but these teachers don't have this much common sense. On top of it, they've tall claims of being teachers!

'When you reach my class, sweetheart, you'll have to undergo the drill, and you'll realize how tough it is to survive in the world. Just because you've got a first division, you're giving yourself a lot of airs! Follow what I've just said. Even if I've flunked the exam a million times, I'm older than you, I've much more experience of this world than you. Follow my advice closely, you'll never



more experience of this world than you. Follow my advice closely, you'll never repent.

It was nearly school time, otherwise God knows when he'd have ended his peroration. The meal seemed quite tasteless to me today. I was given this reprimand even though I had passed the exam. Had I flunked, perhaps he'd have taken my life. The terrifying picture my brother had drawn of his class petrified me. It's surprising why I did not leave school at once for home. But despite the reprimands, my disinterestedness in books remained as it was. I did not miss any opportunity to participate in games. I studied too, but very little. I somehow completed my daily assignment so that I wasn't disgraced in the class. The confidence that I had gained disappeared, and once again, I began to live life like a thief.

### 3

Annual exams happened again and I passed again and my brother flunked. I didn't work too hard but I don't know how I passed in first division. It surprised me too. My brother had just about killed himself with work, mugging up each word in his syllabus. He followed a rigorous schedule—up to ten in the night, from four in the morning, six to nine-thirty before school. His face had become pale because of the hard labour, but the poor chap failed again and I felt sorry for him. When the result was declared, he broke down in tears and cried, and so did I. The joy of my passing was cut by half. Had I failed with him, he wouldn't have grieved so much. But who could prevent what was fated to happen.

Now it was the difference of just one grade between my brother and me. A wicked thought crossed my mind—if my brother failed one more time, we'd be in the same grade, and there'd be no basis for him to insult me. But I forced that mean thought out of my mind. After all, he scolded me for my own good. It might not have seemed good at the time, for sure, but maybe it was only as a result of his advice that I'd passed so effortlessly and with good marks.

Now my brother had become much gentler towards me. Several times when he got an opportunity to scold me, he behaved much more patiently. Perhaps he was beginning to understand that he didn't have the right to scold me any more, or at least not so much as before. I became more independent. I began to take unfair advantage of his tolerance. I started thinking that I'd pass next time,

whether I studied or not, that my luck was favourable. As a result, I stopped whatever little I studied before out of fear of my brother. I developed a new interest in flying kites, and now most of my time was spent in kite-flying. I still had esteem for my brother and concealed my kite-flying from him. Problems such as pasting the string with ground glass, tying the edges of the paper, preparing for the kite-flying tournaments were solved secretly. I didn't want to let my brother suspect the fact that my respect for him had lessened in any way.

One evening, far from the hostel, I was running frantically to grab hold of a kite. My eyes were fixed skywards and my mind concentrated on that heavenly traveller which was gently swaying to its fall. It was as if some soul had emerged out of heaven and was coming to earth dispassionately to take a new form. A whole army of boys came running to welcome this, holding long bamboo poles. Nobody was aware of who was in front or back of him. It was as though they were flying with the kite in the sky where everything was plain—there were no cars, trams or any other vehicles.

Suddenly I bumped into my brother, who was probably returning from the market. He grabbed my hand and said angrily, 'Have you lost all sense of shame that you're running with these street urchins after a one-paisa kite? You've no consideration for the fact that you're no longer in a lower grade. You're in the eighth grade now, just one below me. After all, a man ought to have some regard for his position. There was a time when students passing the eighth grade were eligible for the post of *nayab tehsildar*. I know many with a middle grade who are top-class deputy magistrates or superintendents. Many others are now our leaders and newspaper editors. Many highly educated people work as their subordinates. And you, forgetting that you're in eighth grade, are running with these ragamuffins for a kite.

'I pity your stupidity. No doubt you're intelligent, but what use is your intelligence if it kills your self-esteem? You must be thinking that you're just one grade below me and now I don't have any right to advise you. But you're mistaken. I am five years older than you—and even if you come to the same grade as I am in, and if the examiners act in this fashion, I'm sure, you'll join me next year in the same grade, and who knows you may become my senior one day—that difference of five years is something which not even God, to say nothing of you, can remove. I'm than five years older you and will always remain so. You can never catch up with the experience I've of life and the world even if

You can never catch up with the experience I've of life and the world even if you obtain an MA, DLitt or DPhil. Wisdom comes to one by not simply reading books, but through worldly experience. Our mother isn't educated at all, even our father probably never went beyond the fifth or the sixth standard. But even if we studied the wisdom of the whole world, they'll still have the right to instruct and correct us. Not just because they're our parents but because they'll always have more worldly experience.

'Maybe they do not know what kind of government they have in America, how many times Henry the eighth had married and how many constellations there are in the sky, but there are a thousand things they know more about than you or me. God forbid but should I fall sick today, you'd be at your wits' end. You won't be able to think of anything other than sending a telegram to Father. But in such a case, he won't send anybody a telegram or get nervous or distressed or confused. First, he'd try to diagnose the disease and find a cure, and if he fails he'd call the doctor. Well, dealing with sickness is something serious, we don't even know how to manage our expenses through the month. We spend whatever Father sends us for the month in twenty days and then we've to beg for each paisa. We cut out our breakfast, we run away from facing the washerman and the barber. But as much as you and I spend today, for half that amount father has maintained himself and looked after his extended family of nine members very honourably for the greater part of his life. Look at our headmaster sahib. He is an MA, is he not? Not from here, but Oxford. He earns a thousand rupees a month, but do you know who manages his household? His old mother. The headmaster sahib's degree is useless in such matters. Earlier, when he managed the household himself, his earnings always proved insufficient. He was always borrowing from others. Since his mother has taken matters in her hands, it is as though Goddess Lakshmi has taken up her abode there. So, my dear brother, put this pride out of your heart that you've almost caught up with me and you're independent now. Under my watchful eyes you can't go off the track. If you don't mend then (he said this showing me his fist), I can use *this* too. I know my words might sound like poison to you . . .'

I was filled with shame when I heard this new argument. I realized how small I was and I felt deep respect for my brother in the core of my heart. With tears in my eyes, I said, 'No, no. What you say is completely true and you have every right to say it.'

My brother embraced me and said, 'I don't forbid you to fly kites. I'd like to do it too. But what can I do? If I go off the track myself, how can I prevent you from going astray? That's *my* responsibility.

Just then by chance, a kite that had been cut loose flew over us with its string fluttering. A crowd of boys were chasing it. My brother was a tall man. He leapt to grab the string and began running frantically towards the hostel. I too was running after him.

*Translated from the Hindi by M. Asaduddin*



## The Farce

### 1

Just being born in a Rajput family doesn't make one a warrior—just as taking the surname 'Singh' doesn't automatically make a person valiant. Doubtless, Gajendra Singh's ancestors once belonged to the Rajput clan; however, for the last three generations, the only thing Rajput about them had been their name.

Gajendra Singh's grandfather had practised as a lawyer and sometimes the Rajput spirit did show in his courtroom performances. Gajendra's father opened a cloth shop and lowered the family name a few more notches down the masculinity scale. With Gajendra, the last remaining fragile puff of bravery got lost in the air. Even the physical appearances of these three men showed their devolution. Bhupendra Singh didn't have a massive chest, Narendra Singh had a massive belly and there was absolutely nothing massive about Gajendra Singh. He was a thin, light-skinned, fragile and fashionable babu. His interests lay more in literature.

But then, however non-Rajput a Rajput might be, he will always marry into the Rajput clan. Gajendra's in-laws still retained their Rajputness: his father-in-law was a retired subedar and his brothers-in-law were hunters and wrestlers. Gajendra had been married for two years now, but he had not visited his in-laws even once. His examinations had kept him too busy. But now that his studies were over and he was looking for a job, when he received an invitation from his in-laws to celebrate Holi with them, Gajendra accepted the invitation willingly. The subedar knew a number of people at high positions; besides, people respected army officers and didn't usually turn down their recommendations.

Gajendra hoped that his father-in-law's word would guarantee him a good government job. Moreover, he had not seen his wife, Shyamdulari, in over a year. Going to his in-laws for the holidays would be like scoring two targets with one shot. He got a new silk coat stitched and went to his in-laws a day before Holi. It was only when he stood before his brothers-in-law that he realized how small he looked, almost like a child.

It was evening and Gajendra was bragging to his brothers-in-law about his exploits as a student: he had tackled tall, godly white classmates on the football field and scored hockey goals all alone, and so on and so forth when the subedar suddenly presented himself and said to his elder son: 'Why are you wasting your time with gossip? The gentleman has come from the city; take him to the woods for a stroll. Show him a little hunting. There are no theatre shows here. He will be easily bored. It's the right time of the day. If you leave now, you can return by nightfall.'

The word 'hunting' made Gajendra Singh feel so depressed, it was as if the heavens had fallen on his head. The poor fellow had never hunted all his life. He wondered where these village brats would lead him; and if a wild animal showed up all of a sudden, what would he do? Even deer could turn violent, couldn't they? Say if they found no escape and charged at the hunter? And if a wolf showed up, that was it! He said, 'I am extremely tired, and in no mood for hunting at all.'

The subedar ordered, 'Sit on the horse, boy. These are the simple pleasures of rural life. Chunnu, go get my gun; I will accompany you. I haven't gone out for several days. Get my rifle too.'

Chunnu and Munnu ran to get the weapons and Gajendra's life force shrivelled. He repented having started a conversation with the boys. Had he known what he was putting himself into, he would have feigned illness on reaching the village and remained in bed all through the vacation. Now he couldn't make any excuses. The biggest worry now was of getting on the horse. Rustic horses were anyway unruly and when they discovered that they were being mounted by an inexperienced rider, they pushed their antics to the maximum. *What would he do if the horse went feral on him and ran into a ditch,* he wondered.

His brothers-in-law returned with the gun and a horse snorting at the end of a rope. Subedar sahib was dressed in his hunter's costume. Now Gajendra had no

option. He looked at the horse through a corner of his eye—it beat its hooves, neighed, and raised its mane and its red eyes, haughty demeanour and rippling muscles like living pieces of steak—it made his soul escape through his nose. His heart was sinking but just to retain his false honour, Gajendra walked to the horse, slapped it on the neck and like a seasoned horse rider, said, ‘This is a magnificent beast, but I couldn’t possibly ride it while all of you walked. I’m not too tired. I’ll walk with you.’

The subedar said, ‘Son, the forest is a long way off. The walk might tire you. The horse is very naive: even children can ride it.’

Gajendra replied, ‘No, sir, let’s walk. Lively conversation will make the miles seem short. Riding the horse will rob me of this pleasure. You’re our senior, why don’t you ride the horse?’

The four men walked. Gajendra’s politeness charmed everyone. *Only city folk know the rules of good conduct*, his companions thought.

After a little while, the road turned stony. On one side of the path was an open field and on the other, a hill rose steeply. Trees of all shapes and colours stood in discipline on the roadside. Subedar sahib narrated the old, oft-repeated battle stories. Gajendra tried to walk fast but kept falling behind the rest of the company. And then he would run to catch up with them. He sweated and huffed and constantly cursed his foolishness. *Why did he have to come to this God-forsaken place? Shyamdulari could have returned home in two or three months anyway; what possessed me to run like a wild dog in an unknown forest*, he thought. *And this is just the beginning; I don’t know what’ll happen when they see a prey. I can run a mile or two but when the hunting actually begins . . . my God, I will be reduced to mincemeat! I might faint. Already my feet have stopped following my mind.*

Suddenly, his eyes fell on a *simal* (cotton) tree. The ground was covered in a sheet of red flowers and above, the tree was in full bloom. Gajendra stood below and gazed at the tree with ecstasy.

Chunnu asked, ‘What is it, brother-in-law? Why have you stopped?’

Gajendra spoke like a man drugged, ‘Nothing; it’s just that the sight of this magnificent tree has made my heart overflow with happiness. Ah, the breeze, the glimmer, the splendour—it’s as if the forest Goddess has worn a red bridal suit to entice the evening sky, as if the souls of holy men have stopped here for a

while, as if the music of nature has materialized into this bewitching scene: Please continue with the hunt while I bask in the majesty of this moment.'

Gajendra's young brothers-in-law stared at him in surprise. What was the gentleman saying? Being children of the wilderness, a simal tree meant nothing to them; they saw it every day, climbed its branches, played beneath it, played ball with its flowers—they had never felt anything even remotely close to this feeling. But then they were village folk; what did they know about the appreciation of beauty?

Seeing the other men stop, the subedar sahib walked up to them and asked, 'Why did you stop, son?'

He joined his hands and said, 'Please forgive me, but I can't accompany you on the hunt. Seeing this shower of flowers, a strange ecstasy has overtaken me: my soul is enmeshed in the music of the heavens. See, it's my own heart that has transformed into a flower. There is a similar redness, a similar beauty, a similar nectar in it. A cloak of ignorance covers my mind now. Who should we hunt? Innocent animals? We are animals too and we are birds—it is in the mirror of our imagination that these beings take shape. Should we kill ourselves? Please carry on without me, let me sink deep into this extraordinary wave of feelings. No, not just that, I humbly request you, beseech you to refrain yourselves from the hunt. Life is a treasure trove of happiness—don't murder it. Open your mind's eyes to the scene around you. The light of happiness sparkles in each atom, each flower, each leaf. Do not contaminate it with murder.'

This philosophical discourse touched everyone. The subedar lowered his voice and said to Chunnu, 'This boy is young in years and still so full of wisdom!'

Chunnu too expressed his admiration, 'Truly, wisdom does awaken the soul: hunting is wrong.'

The subedar spoke with the wisdom of age, 'Yes, it is indeed cruel. Let's return. When one is capable of seeing oneself in all things, who is the hunter and who the hunted? I will never hunt again.'

He turned to Gajendra. 'Brother, your advice has opened our eyes. We are ready to swear a solemn oath never to hunt again.'

The spirit of ecstasy cloaked Gajendra so densely that he said in a voice filled with intoxication, 'A thousand thanks to God! He has opened your eyes. I can't tell you what a great connoisseur of sport I was. I must have killed hundreds of wild boars, deer, nilgais and crocodiles—even a cheetah. But the wisdom of age



has convinced me to leave all of it behind.'

## 2

The time of burning the holi was nine at night. At eight all the villagers made their way to the ground. Subedar sahib took his children and the guest along to watch the burning.

Gajendra had never attended Holi festivities in a village before. In his city people lit bonfires which burnt for days. Here, the holi stood in the centre of a large field, tall like a mountain talking to the sky. As soon as the priest completed his chants to welcome the new year, crackers went up in the air. The young and the old began to burst crackers and rockets. A rocket went flying over Gajendra's head. At the sound of every cracker, Gajendra moved back a few steps and in his mind, he cursed the rustic yokels. *This was foolish daredevilry—let a cracker set someone's clothes on fire and then they will understand! Accidents from fire crackers are pretty common but what do these fools know? Blind followers of tradition! They will do things exactly as their grandfathers did, even if there is absolutely no merit in it.*

Suddenly a bomb went off, almost tearing the sky to bits. Gajendra jumped almost two feet in the air with shock; he must never have jumped so high in all his life. His heart beat fast and he felt as if he was standing with his chest at the mouth of a canon. He cupped his ears and went back two more steps.

Chunnu asked, 'Brother-in-law, do you want to light one?'

Munnu said, 'Light a rocket, brother-in-law. You can light the bombs, brother.'

Chunnu said, 'Children light rockets; is he a child? The bomb's better suited for you, Bhai Sahib.'

Gajendra responded, 'These things do not excite me. You know it fills me with shock and wonder to see adults participating in the fireworks with such zest.'

Munnu replied, 'Arré, light a few *mahtabs* please.'

Gajendra considered the proposition and finally decided that mahtabs were innocent enough. He thought that in the red, green and golden flare of the mahtabs his own fair face, gorgeous hair and silk kurta would glow in a more

resplendent light. *There was nothing to be afraid of anyway!* He held the firework in his hand, the sparks fell like petals and everyone's eyes were on him. Even his rational mind took a back seat, unable to resist the temptation. He made a show of extreme sadness and received the mahtab with a limp hand. He was about to light it when a bomb went off. The sky shuddered. Gajendra felt as if his eardrums had split, as if someone had taken a hammer to his head. The mahtab fell from his hand and his heart began thumping. He hadn't got over his first shock when a second bomb went off. The sky splintered, a thudding filled the atmosphere, birds flew from their nests screaming in agony, animals strained at their tethers, and Gajendra ran with long strides—his feet flying to his head—and stopped only when he reached home. Chunnu and Munnu were both concerned. The subedar sahib almost lost his senses. The three men ran behind Gajendra. The rest of the audience thought that something had gone terribly wrong and followed them—after all, rarely did such an eminent guest come to the village and if anything had befallen him, it was the shame and sorrow of the entire community. Each person asked the other—what has happened to the guest? Why are the people running?

Within moments, a sizeable crowd had gathered outside subedar sahib's house to ask about the well-being of the guest. The son-in-law of the village might be a snob, a boring philosopher; yet, he was a son-in-law and naturally, deserved all their love.

The subedar asked with concern, 'Why did you run, brother?'

Gajendra had no way of knowing that his hasty retreat would cause such a scene. However, his orderly mind was already working on a response—a response so overwhelming that it would convince the villagers to look at him in an entirely new light.

He said, 'Nothing special—something struck my heart, making it impossible for me to remain on the grounds any longer.'

'No, there should be some concrete reason,' said the subedar.

'Why do you ask—and what is the point of asking? I don't want to make my fears explicit and deprive you of the joy of festivities.'

'Son, I can't rest in peace until you tell us what's troubling you. The entire village is in panic.'

Gajendra made a beatific face like a Sufi saint, closed his eyes, took a deep breath, looked at the sky and said, 'As soon as I took the mahtab in my hand I

breath, looked at the sky, and said, 'As soon as I took the match in my hand, I felt as if someone had snatched it from me. I have never lit a firework: indeed, I have been one of its strongest critics. Today, I did something which my conscience doesn't agree with. That was it, the unthinkable happened! I felt as if my soul was cursing me. My head bent in shame and I couldn't remain standing any longer. Please forgive me but I won't be able to participate in your revelry.'

Subedar turned his head to one side and sighed as if the mystery had been revealed to no one but him. When he finally broke the silence, it was as if he spoke through his eyes: 'Have you understood his words? How can you when I myself can understand it only dimly?'

The idol was burnt at the scheduled time but they dumped the remaining firecrackers in the river, save a few which the younger boys stored to burn after Gajendra had left.

When they were together, Shyamdulari said, 'You ran like a hero!'

To which Gajendra replied, 'I didn't. What could have frightened me?'

'I was scared that something untoward had happened. I followed you as fast as I could. Do you know that they threw away the remaining crackers?'

'It's simply a waste of money!'

'What's Holi without the fireworks? If the boys don't have fun during a festival, when else can they have fun?'

It was twelve at night then. Someone knocked on the door. Gajendra sat upright in fear. 'Who's there?'

Shyama was nonchalant. 'Could be a cat or something.'

But there were the voices of a number of men and then a clanking on the latch. A shiver shot through Gajendra's spine. He lit the lantern and peeked through the keyhole to see . . . a group of burly men in kurtas and shaggy beards, turbans on their heads and guns slung on their shoulders trying to break down the door. He put his ear to the door and listened— 'They must both be asleep. Break down the door. The stuff is in the closet.'

'And if they wake up?'

'What can the woman do? And if the man creates a scene, we will tie him to the bed.'

'They say that Gajendra is a famous wrestler.'

'Oh, come on! Can he fight four armed men?'

Gajendra was so drained with fear that if a knife passed through him, no blood

would seep out of his body!

He said to Shyamdulari, 'They sound like dacoits. What will we do now? My hands and feet are shivering!'

'Yell "thief thief" and everyone will wake up. Or wait, let me scare them. It's said that thieves have only half a heart.'

'Don't do anything reckless. All of them have guns. And why is it so silent? Where have the men gone?'

'Brother and Munnudada have gone to the granary to sleep. Uncle must be nearby, but he is a heavy sleeper. Burst a cannon near his head and he won't wake up.'

'There's no window to let our voices out. Is this a room or a prison?'

'Wait, let me shout.'

'No, no! Why are you so intent on killing yourself? Listen, I think we should shut our eyes and remain silent. Let the rascals take whatever they want, at least our lives will be safe. My God, the door is shaking! Good Lord! What should we do? Look down on us with mercy, oh Lord! Had I known that something like this would happen, I'd never have come! Be silent! Even if they shake you, don't respond.'

'I can't do this any longer.'

'Take off your jewellery. That's what they are after.'

'Oh, I won't take off my jewellery come what may!'

'Why are you bent on giving away your life, woman?'

'Let them tear the pearls from my body if they want to.'

'Wait, wait! Let's listen to what they are saying.'

A voice came from outside: 'Open the door or we will break in.'

Gajendra requested Shyamdulari, 'Listen to me, Shyama: take off your ornaments. I will get new ones made as soon as possible.'

Again, the voices came from outside. 'Are you dead? We give you only one minute's time. If you don't let us in, we will bring hell.'

Gajendra asked Shyamdulari, 'Should I open the door?'

'Yes, lay out a red carpet for them. Put your weight against the door, you fool!'

'And if the door falls on me? There are as many as five able-bodied men.'

'There's a staff on the wall. Arm yourself.'

'Have you gone crazy?'

‘Had Chunnidada been here, he would have faced all five of them alone.’

‘I am not a stick fighter.’

‘Come, hide your face under the sheets then. I will handle them.’

‘They will let you off, woman. The sticks will fall on my head.’

‘I can scream.’

‘Now I understand. You want me dead!’

‘I can’t take this any longer. I am opening the door.’

She did so and the five men rushed in. One said to his companion, ‘I will hold the man. Remove the woman’s ornaments.’

The second one said, ‘He has shut his eyes. Oye, open your eyes.’

The third goon replied, ‘Boy, the lady is really pretty!’

The fourth man replied, ‘Listen, princess, give me your necklace or I will slit your throat.’

Gajendra thought, *Why does the bitch not hand over her jewellery?*

Shyamdulari said, ‘Strangle or shoot me, I won’t surrender my jewels.’

The first man said, ‘Let’s carry her off. She won’t give up so easily; besides, the temple is empty now.’

The second man replied, ‘Seems like a good plan. Girl, do you want to come with us?’

Shyamdulari said, ‘Not before I mangle your jaw.’

‘If you don’t come with us, we’ll take your man and sell him off,’ said the third man.

Shyamdulari replied, ‘I will see handcuffs on all of you,’ to which the fourth goon said, ‘Why do you take offence, my queen? Why don’t you come with us? Are we worse than this weakling? If you fight, we will have to carry you off by force. To tell the truth, we don’t want to use force against a pretty little girl like you.’

The fifth man said, ‘Surrender your ornaments or come with us.’

Shyamdulari replied, ‘Let Uncle come, he will peel the skin off your backs.’

The first man responded, ‘She won’t listen to kind words. Let’s carry him off.’

Two men bound Gajendra’s hands and feet with the bed sheet. He stood like a corpse, not daring to breathe and his mind felt as if it had been tossed into a blender—*reckless woman, she won’t part with her jewels at the cost of my life! But if I live, let her see. I won’t even talk to her.*

The decoits lifted Gajendra and had just reached the courtyard when

The dacoits liked Gajendra and had just reached the courtyard when Shyamdulari said, 'If you let him off, I will come with you.'

The first man now said, 'Why didn't you say so earlier? Are you sure now?'

Shyamdulari replied, 'Yes.'

'Come then. We will let him off.'

They put Gajendra on the bed and started to leave with Shyamdulari. Gajendra opened his eyes in fear. There was no one around. He peeped out of the door. He flew like an arrow and reached the main gate but didn't have the courage to walk out of it. He thought of calling out for the subedar but his throat was parched.

At about the same time, five women came to Shyamdulari's room and the first one asked, 'Where is he?'

Shyamdulari replied, 'He must have gone outside.'

The second woman asked, 'Do you think he is ashamed?'

The third woman said, 'We knocked the wind out of his lungs!'

When Gajendra heard the voices, he felt life entering him. *Someone must have woken up*, he thought. He rushed into his room and said, 'Please look for Shyama. She left while I was sleeping. Let somebody look for her immediately.'

When all the ladies burst into spontaneous laughter, he was surprised.

Shyama's friends laughed and clapped.

One of them said, 'Such bravery, brother-in-law!'

Shyamdulari seemed to find it rather humorous. 'You are such devils!'

The third woman said, 'Your wife left with the dacoits and you didn't even stir.'

Gajendra realized that they had made a fool of him. But he still possessed the tongue of a tiger. So, he said, 'What could I do? Should I have interrupted your little farce? I was enjoying myself. Had I caught you and pulled off your moustaches, wouldn't you have been shamed? I am not so cruel, after all.'

All of them went silent and stared at Gajendra with incredulity.

*Translated from the Hindi by Shalim M. Hussain*



## Tulia

### 1

Tulia lacked the childlike brazenness that is typical of old age. Her hair had turned snow-white and her cheeks had developed wrinkles. She couldn't tell her age herself, but everybody's guess was that she was more than a hundred years old. She still covered her head with the *pallu* of her sari, her eyes downcast, as though she were a newly married daughter-in-law. She was from the tanner caste but without any greed for tasty food. There were many high-caste families in the village. Tulia went to every house. The entire village held her in esteem and the housewives had great regard for her. They invited her to their houses, oiled her hair and put sindoor on her hair parting. They wanted to feed her if any delicacies were prepared that day like halwa or kheer, but the old woman loved her self-respect more than the flavour of delicacies. She never ate the stuff. She had no one to call her own. Some of her people had left the village, some had died of the plague and malaria. The ruins left by them stood naked, as if in mourning. Only her shack stood there. She had reached that stage of her life when a human being becomes free from all shackles of religion and society. Now even the best in the society didn't discriminate against her on grounds of her caste. Everyone was ready to give her shelter in their houses. But the self-respecting woman didn't accept favours from anyone. She didn't want to stain the honour of her master whose face she had seen just once, one hundred years ago. Just once!

Tulia was engaged when she was only five. Her husband was a strong young man of eighteen years. After marrying her, he had gone to the East to earn his

livelihood. He had thought it'd be ten to twelve years before this girl came of age. During this period, he could earn some wealth and then work his land with ease of mind. Tulia came of age, then she became old, but he never returned. For fifty years, he sent a letter every three months. The letter contained an envelope with the address to which the reply should be sent. The letter was accompanied by a money order of thirty rupees. In his letters, he described his helplessness and lamented his fate: *What can I do, Tulia? I long to return, build my house and live with you happily. But everything depends on fate, we've no control over it. I'll come only when God brings me. Please have patience. I'll see to it that you've no difficulties as long as I live. I've taken my vows as your husband, and will continue to keep them till my death. Who knows what will happen when I meet my end.*

All his letters conveyed the same sentiments with slight difference of phraseology. Of course, the letters that he wrote during his youth conveyed his pain of separation, but the more recent ones were full of despair. For Tulia all the letters were equally dear, they were quite close to her heart. She hadn't torn a single letter—no one had the heart to tear them. They had made a thick bundle. The papers had lost colour, the ink had faded, but for Tulia they were a living reality. All of them were tied in red ribbon and stored in a box. They epitomized for her the love for her husband, accumulated over long years. These letters brought her happiness. She would often get someone to read them and she shed tears over them. On that day she would put oil in her hair, get sindoor on her hair parting and wear a colourful sari. She would touch the feet of her elders and take their blessings. Her love for her husband would rekindle. For women in the village whose husbands lived far away, a letter wasn't something that they just read and threw away, it symbolized the life of their husbands, dearer than the body. This sentiment is devoid of physical cruelty or pollution and expresses yearnings of the soul and true love. For Tulia, the letters were a substitute for her husband. She hadn't seen him in any other form.

Women teased her, 'Aunty, do you have any memory of Uncle? You must've seen him.'

Tulia's face would light up for a moment amidst the wrinkles that criss-crossed it, her eyes would sparkle. She would say, 'Why shouldn't I have any memory of him? His shape is before my eyes even today. He had large eyes,



blood red. His forehead was broad and his chest was wide. He had a robust body, the like of which is rare these days. His teeth were pearl-white, son. He was wearing a red kurta. When we got married, I told him, “I won’t go to your house unless you get a lot of jewellery made for me.” It was childishness, son; there was no question of shame or modesty then. Hearing this, he burst into a peal of laughter, placed me on his shoulders, and said, “I’ll have a lot of jewellery made for you, Tulia; how much can you wear? I’m going faraway to earn a livelihood. I’ll send you money from there; you can then get a lot of jewellery made. I’ll even bring a case of jewels with me when I’ll return from there.” Son, I was sent in a palanquin to my in-laws’ house; how on earth would my parents be capable of inviting my husband to our house along with the *baraatis*! It was only at his place that I was betrothed to him. Within a single day, he had impressed me so much that when he was leaving, I embraced him, cried, and said, “Take me along with you. I’ll cook for you, prepare your bed and clean your dhoti.” A couple of people his age were sitting there. Right before them, he smiled and said in my ears, “And won’t you sleep with me?” That was it. I detached myself from him and stood at a distance. I then hurled a stone at him and said, “You better not abuse me, I’m telling you!”

And through daily reminiscence and rosary, this life story had become a life mantra. Her face made quite a sight at such moments! It glowed! She would remove her veil, gesticulate, turn her face and smile as though there were no sorrows in her life. She would recount the sacred memories of her life and flash this light from the depth of her heart that saved her from the thorns of life for a hundred years. What a longing it was that couldn’t be wiped out by the hard realities of life.

## 2

There was a time when Tulia was a young woman. She was beautiful and moths would hover around the candle of her beauty. When she narrated in her trembling voice with her tearful eyes the tales of their love and madness and surrender, the souls of these martyrs probably danced in heaven. What they didn’t get when alive, Tulia was now giving them with both hands. She was a full-blooded woman. Wherever she went, young men pined for her. There was a Thakur whose name was Dandi Singh. He was a carefree and fun-loving young

Thakur whose name was Bansi Singh. He was a carefree and fun-loving young man whose songs reverberated far into the desolation of the night. He made rounds of Tulia's house a hundred times a day. He followed her like a shadow, on the bank of the pond, in the fields near the well, indeed wherever she went. Sometimes he took milk to her house, and sometimes buttermilk. He'd say, 'Tulia, I don't want anything from you. Just accept whatever gift I give you. Don't talk to me if you don't want to, don't look at my face if you don't feel like, but please don't turn down my gifts. I'll be happy if you accept them.' Tulia wasn't so innocent. She knew very well that he was simply biding for an opportunity. But one day, she somehow got into the trap—no, not really—she, in fact, took pity on his youth. One day, he brought her a basket of mangoes, freshly plucked from the orchard. Tulia had never eaten such freshly plucked mangoes. She took the basket from him. From then on, he began to gift her a basket of mangoes every other day. One day, when Tulia took the basket from him and was entering her house, Bansi quietly caught her hand and placed it on his chest. He fell at her feet and said, 'Tulia, if you don't take pity on me even now, then kill me today. Let me die in your hands. This is my only wish.'

Tulia flung the basket on the ground, disentangled her legs, moved one step back, and said with wrathful eyes, 'Enough, Thakur, go away from here, else either you won't live or I won't. Your mangoes can rot for all I care. Is my husband only living for my sake across the black sea miles away from here so that I should be false to him? He is a man who earns his livelihood; couldn't he afford another wife? Is there any dearth of women in the world? But he hasn't done it for my sake, even being a man. He is no less sturdy than you, even if he may not be as glamorous. Do you want to read the letters that he sent to me? Wherever he is, he sends money to me regularly, even though I don't ask him to. Is he doing all this so that I entertain other men? As long as he'll consider me as his own, Tulia will stay loyal to him, in mind as well as in actions. When I was married to him, I was a wayward girl of five years. What happiness could I have given him? But he has stayed loyal to the bond. Being a man if he can be loyal, how can I be disloyal to him being a woman?'

Tears were streaming down the Thakur's face and his lips were fluttering. It looked as though he wanted to be swallowed by the earth.

After a moment, he folded his hands and said, 'I've committed a great crime, Tulia. I haven't known you well. The proper punishment for this is that you kill

me right at this moment. A sinner like me can obtain salvation only in this way.'

Tulia didn't take pity on him. She felt that this man was still trying to hoodwink her. She said, annoyed, 'You should die, if you want to. Are there no wells in the world? Can't you find a sword or a dagger? Why should I bother to kill anyone?'

The Thakur looked at her with despairing eyes, 'So this is your command?'

'Why should you wait for my command? Those wanting to die don't wait for anyone's command.'

The Thakur went away. The following day people saw his body floating in the river. They thought that he must have gone for a bath in the river early in the morning and had drowned. People talked about him for months, but Tulia didn't utter a word. She stopped going in that direction.

As soon as Bansi Singh died, his younger brother took over his property and began to torment the widow and son. Her *devar* found fault with her and his wife made caustic comments. Eventually, the hapless widow couldn't bear it any more and left the house for good. The village was deep in sleep. Tulia had taken her dinner and was going to feed the cow some roti, holding the lantern in her hand. He saw the widow of the Thakur in the light of the lantern, advancing slowly. She was crying and wiping her tears with her sari. She was holding her three-year-old son with her arms.

Tulia asked her, 'Where are you going, thakurain, at this late hour? Listen, what is the matter? Oh dear, you're crying.'

The thakurain was going away from her house, but she herself didn't know where. With stoic eyes, she looked once at Tulia and moved forward without saying anything. How could she reply? Her throat was already filled with tears and she didn't know why they were brimming over, all the more at this instant.

Tulia came before her and said, 'Unless you tell me, I won't allow you to go even a step further.'

The thakurain stopped, filled her tearful eyes with fury, and said, 'Why do you ask? It's none of your business.'

'None of my business? Don't we live in the same village? If the villagers won't help each other out in their moments of sorrow and distress, then who'll do so?'

‘Whoever supports anyone these days in this world, Tulia? Whom should I expect from, when my own in-laws didn’t support me and became bloodthirsty as soon as your bhaiya passed away? Isn’t everything known to you regarding the situation of our house? There is no place for me there. The very devar and *devarani* for whom I did everything, have now become my enemies. They just want us to be satisfied with a mere roti and want us to lie in a corner like orphans. I’m not a concubine and I didn’t elope either. I’m a married woman; I was betrothed amidst people belonging to ten different villages. I won’t relinquish even the least bit of my property. They may not give me anything now as I’m helpless. I may lose all my self-respect, but I’ll ruin them and will certainly take my half.’

‘Your bhaiya,’—these two words felt so dear to Tulia that she hugged the thakurain, held her hands, and said, ‘In that case, sister, come and stay in my house. Others may support you or not, but Tulia will certainly support you till her death. My house is not suitable for your stay, but at least there is peace in it, if nothing else. And I’m still your sister, no matter how lowly I may be.’

The thakurain fixed her astonished gaze at Tulia’s face. ‘It shouldn’t happen that my devar should become your enemy too, behind my back.’

‘I’m not scared of my enemies and I don’t live alone in this hamlet either.’

‘But I don’t want you to get into trouble because of me.’

‘Who is going to tell them anyway, and who’ll ever find out that you’re inside my house?’

The thakurain found some solace. She hesitantly came inside with Tulia. Her heart was heavy. Someone who was the landlady of a concrete and stately mansion, was lying in this shack today.

There was only one cot in the house; the thakurain would sleep on it with her child. Tulia slept on the floor. There was only one blanket—the thakurain covered herself with it while Tulia would spend her nights by covering herself with a sackcloth.

She would only think about how to look after her guests properly. She would wash the thakurain’s utensils, wash her clothes and feed her baby with utmost sincerity. It was as though she was worshipping a deity. The thakurain couldn’t forget her status even though she had fallen on bad days. She was vain, brainless, and loved luxury. She lived there as though it was her own house and treated Tulia with such aggression as though she was her slave. But Tulia was

reated Tulia with such aggression as though she was her slave. But Tulia was maintaining her relationship with the wife of her unfortunate lover. She didn't mind her bad behaviour. There was never a frown on her face.

One day, the thakurain said, 'Tulia, please look after the child. I'll go somewhere for a couple of days. The way it is going, I'll sponge on you throughout my life for my daily bread, but how will my heart's fire be cooled? That shameless person doesn't even care where his brother's wife has gone. He must be happy in the thought that the only obstacle standing in his way has been removed. The moment he gets to know that I've not gone to my parents' house but stayed elsewhere, he'll promptly try to spread slander against me, and then the entire society will be on his side. I should think of a way out of this.'

Tulia asked, 'Where do you want to go, sister? Do you mind if I accompany you? Where will you go alone?'

'I'll look for a way to beat him at his own game.'

Tulia couldn't understand the meaning of this. She stared at her face.

The thakurain asked brazenly, 'You couldn't even understand such a simple thing! So, you want me to spell it out clearly? What weapon does a widow have for her defence other than her beauty? Now, I'll only take recourse to this weapon. Do you even know what the price of this beauty shall be? It'll be that wolf's head! My charm will only work on whosoever may be the lord of this district's subdivision. And what man has ever been able to escape a maiden's charm even though he might be an ascetic? My dharma may get compromised for all I care. I can't bear to watch myself plucking leaves from various forests while that rogue twists his whiskers and rules here.'

Tulia realized how deep the wound was in this vain woman's heart. She was not only living her life on the edge, but was also sacrificing her dharma to placate her anguish. That very dharma that was dearer to her than her own life. The supplicating image of Bansi Singh appeared before her eyes. He was strong and could've easily used force against Tulia. And who would've saved her on that desolate night? But her reprimanding virtue captivated Bansi Singh in such a way as a deadly, black cobra gets intoxicated by listening to the melodious tune of a fiddle. The honour of that very hero's family was at stake today. Will Tulia allow this honour to be tainted and do nothing? No, it can't be! If Bansi Singh could privilege her virtue above his own life, then she too would preserve the thakurain's honour with her dharma.

She consoled the thakurain and said, ‘Sister, don’t go anywhere now. First let me test my strength. Who’ll mock at me even if I lose my reputation? The honour of an entire family depends on your personal honour.’

The thakurain looked her with a smiling face. She said, ‘What do you know about this art, Tulia?’

‘What art?’

‘Oh, the very skill of duping men.’

‘Why, am I not a woman or what?’

‘But you don’t know about men’s character, do you?’

‘Oh, both of us have learnt about it from our mothers’ wombs.’

‘But tell me, what is it that you plan to do?’

‘Oh, the very same that you were planning to. You wanted to work your charm on the ruler of this district’s subdivision while I’ll cast my spell on your devar.’

‘He’s very shrewd, Tulia.’

‘That’s what I want to see.’

### 3

Tulia spent the rest of the night thinking about the scheme and its execution. Like a skilled army commander, she had prepared a strategy that was similar to that of attack and carnage. She was convinced of victory. The rival was unsuspecting; he didn’t even have the slightest idea about this attack.

Bansi Singh’s younger brother Girdhar was haughtily coming this way with a thick club, six-feet long, on his shoulders when Tulia called out to him, ‘Thakur, please pick this bundle of grass and put it on my head. I can’t do it.’

It was noon. The labourers had returned from their fields. Whirlwinds had started blowing. Tulia stood under a tree with the bundle of grass. Her head was sweating profusely.

The Thakur looked at her in surprise. At that very instant, Tulia’s sari slipped away and her red blouse flashed before his eyes. She quickly arranged her sari. But the flower braids in her hair in haste dazzled his eyes like lightning. Girdhar’s mind became restless. His eyes showed mild intoxication and his face turned crimson while a faint smile played on his lips. Every vein of his body became taut

became tall.

He had seen Tulia a thousand times with thirsty, lusty eyes. But Tulia, lost in the vanity of her beauty and chastity, didn't look at him, ever. Her gestures showed such rudeness and cruelty that the Thakur would feel dispirited and his urges vanished. What impact could his net and food have on a bird flying freely in the sky? But today that bird had come on its own and was sitting on the nearby branch, and it seemed as though she was hungry too. Then why shouldn't he cast his net and throw his food?

He said in an intoxicated tone, 'I'll take the bundle to your home, you needn't carry it on your head.'

'And if someone sees it, what'll he think of you?'

'I don't care if the dogs bark.'

'But I do.'

The Thakur didn't listen to her. He heaved the bundle on his head. He was marching ahead as though he had got the wealth of the world.

#### 4

A month passed by. Tulia had cast her spell on the Thakur and now she was playing with him as though he was a fish. Sometimes she would loosen the hook, while tightening it on other occasions. The Thakur had set out for hunting, but was himself trapped in the net.

Despite sacrificing his faith and his status, he couldn't receive the Goddess's blessings. Tulia was still at the same distance that she was at before.

One day, he said to Tulia, 'For how long will you tantalize me like this, Tulia? Come, let's elope somewhere.'

Tulia further tightened the noose and replied, 'Yes, that's what I thought. I won't be of any worth if you'll turn your face away from me. I'll lose both the worlds.'

The Thakur said with a complaining voice, 'Don't you believe me even now?'

'Bees fly away after collecting the flower's nectar.'

'And don't the moths burn and get reduced to ashes?'

'How should I trust you?'

'Have I ever disobeyed you?'

'You must be thinking that you'll be able to snare Tulia with a colourful sari

and a couple of trinkets. I'm not that naive.'

Tulia had figured out the inner motives of the Thakur. He kept staring at her face in wonderment.

Tulia said again, 'A man always arranges for a dwelling place before leaving his house.'

The Thakur said happily, 'Come and be the mistress of my house. I've told you countless times.'

Tulia looked from the corner of her eyes and said, 'Today I'll live like the mistress, and tomorrow I'll not have the status of even a concubine, that's what you mean?'

'Do as you please. I'm your slave.'

'You give me your word of honour?'

'Indeed. Not once, but a thousand times.'

'Then you won't leave me?'

'Only an impotent person reneges on his word of honour.'

'Well, then make over half of your property in my name.'

The Thakur was ready to give her a cottage, a couple of bighas of land and some jewellery and clothes, but he didn't have the heart to make over half of his property in her name. Tomorrow, if she is displeased with him for any reason, then he'd have to wash his hands off the property. Who could rely on such a woman? He couldn't have imagined that Tulia would subject his love to such a severe test. He was furious. *This daughter of a tanner considers herself an apsara! My love for her was simply an infatuation for her beauty. It's not the kind of love for which one can sacrifice one's own self and everything else.*

He frowned and said, 'I knew that you were in love with my property, not me.'

Tulia wriggled herself out and replied, 'Didn't I know that you were in love with my beauty and youth, not with me?'

'You think love is bought and sold in the market?'

'Yes, I do. For you, love is a game for a couple of days. For me, it's the question of my life. When I'm giving you whatever I have, I want to extract its price. If you'd really loved me, you would have made over your entire property in my name. Will I carry the property with me? But I could see your real intentions. In a way, this is good. God forbid, a time comes when you've to stretch your hands before me—good days are never permanent for anyone: if



...even you must concede me – good days are never permanent for any one, –  
ever such a time comes and you come to me, I'll show you how large a woman's  
heart is.'

Tulia left the place, annoyed. But she was not in despair, neither had she lost  
her heart. Whatever happened was part of her well-thought-out plan. She had no  
doubt about what was going to happen.

## 5

The Thakur had saved his property but at too great a cost. He lost the peace of  
his heart. It was as though nothing was left in his life. His property lay before his  
eyes while Tulia resided in his heart. Every day, she had appeared before him  
and had hurled shafts at his heart with her looks. She had been a concrete reality  
then. But the Tulia who was sitting in his heart now was a dream that was even  
more intoxicating and poignant than the truth.

Sometimes Tulia appeared like the flash of a dream and would vanish like the  
dream itself. Girdhar always looked out for an opportunity to share the anguish  
of his heart with her. But Tulia avoided even his shadow. Girdhar could now  
realize that she was more important than his property. He now felt angry at his  
stinginess. *What did it matter if the property was in her name or his? It was such  
a trivial matter. Tulia wanted this to be done so that in case I betrayed her, she  
wouldn't be helpless. Without her, I'm a worthless slave, so how can I be  
disloyal to her? I yearn for a glance, a word from her. How can I betray her? If I  
could see her alone, I would've said to her, 'Tulia, whatever I have is yours. I'll  
write whatever documents you want me to write. I'm ashamed of my fault. The  
natural weakness that a human being has for property made me say the words I  
said to you. This customary greed for money is standing between you and me.  
But now, I've realized that whatever gives joy in life is the most valuable object.  
If poverty and renunciation bring happiness, they should be the most coveted  
objects for which a man can sacrifice his land and property. Even today, there  
are such worthy sons of the soil who have renounced the world and its comforts,  
and have made jungles their abode. I couldn't understand such a simple thing. I  
was really unfortunate!'*

## 6

One day, Tulia sent a message to the Thakur: 'I'm sick. Come and visit me. Who knows whether I will survive or not?'

The Thakur hadn't seen Tulia for many days. Many a time, he would hover around her doorstep but he hadn't seen her. However, now that he had received the message, it was as if he had fallen down a mountainside. It must have been ten in the night. He didn't even listen to the whole thing and ran towards her house. His heart pounded and his head spun. *Tulia is sick! Oh God, what'll happen! Why don't you make me sick? I'm ready to die in her place.* The trees on both the sides loomed menacingly and seemed to chase him like two messengers of death. A voice issued intermittently from his throat—steeped in desire and pain. *Tulia is sick.*

His Tulia had sent for him. She had called for this thankless, vile and wretched assassin, saying, 'Come and visit me. Who knows whether I will survive or not?' *If you won't survive, Tulia, then even I won't live long. Alas! I won't. I'll die beating my head on the wall. Our pyres will be prepared together then and our funeral rites will be carried out simultaneously.*

He further hastened his steps. *Today, he'll lay everything that belongs to him at Tulia's feet. Tulia considers him unfaithful. Today, he'll show her how to keep the faith. If he wasn't faithful while living, he'll be so after his death. Whatever he wasn't able to do in this short span of his life, he'll do it for countless epochs. His love will become a legend and will be known in every house.*

A doubt crossed his mind. 'Will you be able to renounce the illusion of life?' He beat his chest forcefully and shouted, 'For whom is this illusion of life? Moreover, my life is the very same—that of the one who is sick. Let me see, how death takes away life, leaving the body behind.'

He entered Tulia's house with his heart pounding and his legs shaking. Tulia was lying listlessly on her cot, wrapped in a sheet. In the dim light of the lantern, it seemed as if her pallid face was resting in the lap of death.

He put his head at her feet and said with a voice suppressed by tears, 'Tulia, this wretched one is lying at your feet. Won't you open your eyes?'

Tulia opened her eyes, cast a pitiful glance at him, and said, groaning, 'You're Girdhar Singh, aren't you? Have you come? Now, I'll die in peace. My heart was impatient to see you if only for the last time. Forgive me for what I ever said and never cry for me. What is this corporeal frame worth Girdhar?

said and never cry for me. What is this corporeal name worth, Girdhar. Eventually, it'll merge with the earth. But I'll never leave your side. Like a shadow, I'll be with you forever. You won't be able to see or hear me, but Tulia will always remain with you. Girdhar, don't blame yourself because of me! Don't even mention my name before anyone. Yes, do sprinkle water on my pyre at least once. This will mitigate the fire burning in my heart.'

Girdhar started crying bitterly. Had there been a dagger in his hand, he would've pierced his heart at that very instant and died before her while writhing in pain.

Tulia took a deep breath and said again, 'I won't survive, Girdhar. Will you agree if I make a request?'

Girdhar beat his chest and said, 'My dead body will be carried out with yours, Tulia. What'll I do living now? And if at all I should live, how should I do so? You are my life, Tulia.'

He felt as though Tulia smiled.

'Oh, no, no. Don't be so stupid. You have a family and kids; look after them. If you truly love me, then don't do any such thing that may reveal this love, even slightly. Don't malign Tulia's name after her death.'

Girdhar cried and said, 'As you wish.'

'I just have a request for you.'

'I'll only live now to carry out your orders. This will be the sole mission of my life.'

'My only request is that you treat your *bhabhi* with the same respect and honour that she was accorded before Banshi Singh's death. Give her the share of the property that belongs to her—that is, half the property.'

'But she has been at her parents' house for the last three months and had said that she won't return ever.'

'Girdhar, you did wrong, very wrong. Now, I can understand why I would have nightmares. If you want me to recover, then have the documents read and signed as quickly as possible and leave it at my place. This stark dishonesty of yours has proved fatal for me. Now I know why Banshi Singh would repeatedly give me these dreams. I have no other disease. It's only Banshi Singh who is troubling me. That's it, go now. You won't find me alive if you delay. Banshi Singh is punishing me for your unjust deeds.'

Girdhar said in an undertone, 'But how can the documents be read and signed

at night, Tulia? Where will I find the stamp paper? Who'll write out the documents? Where are the witnesses?'

'Girdhar, my life will be saved even if you'll get the documents read and signed by tomorrow evening. Bansi Singh is after me. He's the one who's been troubling me because he knows that you love me. I'm dying only because of your love. You won't find Tulia alive if you delay.'

'I'll go for now, Tulia. Your command is the topmost in my mind. You wouldn't have been reduced to this condition if you'd told me about this earlier. But it shouldn't happen that I may not be able to see you and my heart's longing will remain unfulfilled.'

'Oh no, no. Have faith. I won't die till tomorrow evening.'

Girdhar set out from there right at that moment and covered a distance of twenty-five miles—all during the night. He reached the town at daybreak, consulted the lawyers and made over half of the property in the name of his brother's wife. He got the property registered on stamp paper and before the evening lights were lit, he returned and stood before Tulia, trembling between hope and despair. He looked harassed and totally exhausted. It seemed as though he hadn't taken any food or water throughout the day. It was ten in the night. In those days, there were neither railways nor lorries. He had to trudge through fifteen *kos* of distance. He was so exhausted that every step felt like crossing a mountain. But he was afraid that if he did the slightest delay, then there would be a disaster.

Tulia asked happily, 'Have you returned, Girdhar? Is the job done?'

Girdhar placed the papers before her and said, 'Yes, Tula, I've done the job. But now even after all this if you don't get around, then I'll also die with you. I don't care if people make fun of me or they weep. I swear on you that I haven't taken even a drop of water.'

Tulia sat up and placed the paper near her headrest. She said, 'Now I'm much better. By morning, I'll be perfectly all right. I'll not forget your good act till I die. But a few moments ago, I had dozed off for a while and I dreamt that Bansi Singh was standing near my bed and telling me, "Tulia, you are a married woman. Your husband is sitting a thousand *kos* away from you but taking your name constantly. If he wanted, he could've married again. But he's waiting for you, and will do so for ever. If you betray him, then I'll become your enemy and rest only after taking your life. If you want your own good, then stay on the right

path. I'll spell your ruin the day you betray him."

'Saying this, he glared at me with bloodshot eyes and left.' Girdhar looked at Tulia's face on which he could see a spiritual glow. It seemed as though a veil was lifted from his eyes and he could realize the intent of the entire plan. He touched Tulia's feet with the highest regard and kissed them. 'I can understand now, Tulia, that you are a goddess.'

*Translated from the Hindi by Shailendra Kumar Singh*



## The Rules of the House

When the mother laid bare all her grievances against her daughter-in-law, the son, already tired after a hard day at the office, said, What do you want from me, Amma? The job of educating women is yours, not mine. Scold her, beat her, do what you want with her. I will be extremely grateful if you succeed in turning her into an ideal wife. Don't tell me that she is impolite, improper and barbaric. Drill what virtues you want into her.'

The mother replied, 'Ah! You won't speak a word before her and when I do, I am the low-born one. I exercise restraint so that other people don't make fun of us.'

'What's my fault? Do I teach her to be discourteous to you?'

'If not you, then who?'

'I seriously don't know, Mother.'

'This is God's honest truth. Your support has turned her head. When she stands before you and let's loose her tear gates, do you ever scold her, tell her that she should be civil with your mother? You are her slave! Even she thinks: *My husband is the breadwinner, why should I not reign as a queen? Why should I let someone else rule over me?* So long as a man reins in his woman, she cannot go to such extreme lengths!'

'What do you want me to tell her then: that I earn nothing, that I am completely useless? What do you think; will she not consider me a good-for-nothing oaf? Every man wants his woman to believe in his special talents and his capacity for hard work. I agree that this makes him puff up more than his worth. I have never been so childish, I've never bragged to my wife, but should I let myself down in her eyes?'

‘If you give her your attention and look at her with docile eyes, will she not turn into a tigress? You, you want me to be insulted by your wife! God knows what sins I have committed to merit such punishment! I brought you up with such high hopes, with such difficulties even starved myself to feed you! You are the only reason I live for, the centre of my hopes. I mortgaged all my ornaments for your education. What does a widow have but her gold? And this is how you repay me!’

‘Tell me, Mother, what do you want from me? How can I repay you? You have not just given me an education, but the gift of life. You haven’t just mortgaged your jewels, but your life’s blood. Even if I take a hundred births, I will not be able to repay your debt. I don’t do anything contrary to your wishes; don’t try to offend you in any way; everything I earn I put into your hands. What else do you want? What else can I do? The good Lord has created you, me and the whole universe. If we don’t take his name, don’t sing his praises, does it mean that his benevolence diminishes? Even if a man gains the world, Mother, he will not be able to repay the debts of his mother. I always try to keep your heart and as far as I remember, I have never personally hurt you.’

‘Say what! You try to keep my heart! I stay at your house like a slave, a slave. Your wife never asks after me. I was a daughter-in-law once. I stayed up all night massaging my mother-in-law’s feet, rubbing oil in her hair. It was only after I had given her her daily glass of milk that I went to bed. Your wife locks herself up in her study with her books at nine o’clock, opens the windows and soaks in the night breeze. Even if I die, she will not stir. Is this why I gave you birth?’

‘You brought me up, Mother, you should have asked for these services from me. I have friends. I haven’t seen any of them massage their mothers’ bodies. Why do you put the weight of my responsibilities on my wife? If she serves you of her own volition, it will give me the greatest pleasure. She will rise high in my esteem. Perhaps I will love her more. But if she doesn’t serve you, why should you be so offended? Had I been in her place, I might have behaved in a similar manner. Had my mother-in-law treated me like a daughter, I would have pressed her feet, not because she was my husband’s mother, but because of her maternal love towards me. I personally do not like wives massaging their mothers-in-law’s feet. Earlier, wives used to massage their husbands’ feet. The tradition persists even today. But I would flinch if my wife were to massage my feet. I

periods even today. But I would think if my wife were to massage my feet, I wouldn't demand any service from her which I cannot return. It is a remnant of an age when wives were treated as serving girls of their husbands. Now man and woman are the same or at least that is what I would like to believe.'

'This is the problem: you are filling her head with progressive ideas. It's your mistake! There's no woman as shameless, rough or discourteous as your wife. Often the ladies of the colony come to meet me. God knows what rustics this princess grew up among that she doesn't know how to show love. She remains locked up in her room. Sometimes when they go to her room on their own, she doesn't so much as get up from her charpoy. She doesn't greet them, not to speak of touching their feet.'

'The ladies come to meet you, Mother, not her. If she intrudes upon your conversations, it might be misconstrued as insolence. I wouldn't like it if you or your daughter-in-law came in when I was with my friends. If my wife were with her girlfriends, I wouldn't disturb them. This is modern politeness.'

'God knows what potion she has fed you that you always team up with her. No one is asking her to interrupt conversations. The least she can do is to show proper respect to her elders.'

'How?'

'She can touch their feet, greet them, serve them paan, and fan them. This is how a daughter-in-law draws people towards her. This is how she gains admiration. Or else, people would say that the daughter-in-law is vain, that she doesn't talk to anyone with a straight face.'

After a second of introspection, the son said, 'Yes, this is a genuine fault indeed. I will talk to her.'

The mother was pleased. 'I tell you truly, son,' she said, 'she doesn't even leave her bed; the women talk to her and she remains silent as if she feels nothing while I die of shame.'

'I don't understand why you hold her responsible for everything. God knows how many things I have to hear every day at the office, how many explanations I have to give. Do you think that the officers have any personal enmity against me that they are so antagonistic? No, it is because I am not perfect at my job. I make some mistakes and indulge in laziness. When the officer leaves for a while, I begin reading the newspaper or play a game of cards. It's a little indulgence; don't we sometimes forget that we have work to do? Besides, what can the



officer do, at worst he will scold us; lower your head and listen and the difficulty will pass. Sometimes our card sessions are interrupted, but who cares? When I discuss these things with you, you know that I am guilty and still take my side: if possible, you would send my officer to a correctional facility for quarrelling with me.'

The mother was elated. 'If someone punishes my boy, am I supposed to worship him with paan and flowers?' she said.

'All sons pray for such grace from their mothers and all mothers veil their sons' mistakes. I fail to understand how women capable of such tenderness can harden their hearts against their daughters-in-law. If someone insults your daughter-in-law, it is your duty as a mother to ask for forgiveness on her behalf, make some excuse, and help her rise in the other person's esteem. Why do you add to the insult? Why do you so sadistically enjoy her humiliation? Even I do not respect every priest and every elder. I cannot bow my head in respect before someone towards whom I don't feel genuine respect. White hair, wrinkled skin, faltering speech and a bent back do not automatically make a person eligible for respect in the same manner that the holy thread, tilak and the title of "pandit" or "Sharma" do not make a Brahmin worthy of devotion. My personal ethics do not allow me to respect someone for their socially ordained positions. I respect only such people who inspire me by their intellect, words and acts. If I know that someone is self-serving and cynical, if I know that someone is a bribe-taker or a moneylender or if he lives only on other people's charity, I won't salute him even if he takes on the form of the divine deity himself. You might call this arrogance, but this is how I am. As long as my heart doesn't genuinely feel for someone, my head won't bow. It might be true that your daughter-in-law has similar feelings towards the ladies who visit you. I know a few of them: they are women of good houses, but their hearts and their views are extremely regressive. One of them is a doll filled with envy; another a paragon of foul speech. Each one is a slave to custom, and each burns with the fire of envy. There is not one among them who hasn't made their home a miniature hell. If your daughter-in-law doesn't respect such women, how can you grudge her?'

The mother was furious. 'Shut up now, boy! Mark my words—this queen will one day make you light your stove and clean your house. It is not good to let women get their way all the time. There should be some limit to shamelessness: the old mother-in-law cooks the meal while the young wife reads her novels.'

‘On this matter, I am on your side. I won’t tolerate you working while my wife reads novels, even if the novelist is Premchandji. Having said that, you should also understand that she never cooked even in her own house. There, they have their own cook. Besides, she gets a headache when she sits before the stove, so it’s wrong to impose upon her. I believe that as she learns the rules of this house, her nature will change. It is the fault of her parents that they did not marry her into a rich home. Even we did the mischief of tricking them into believing that we are old aristocrats. Now how can we ask her to cook, scrub the utensils and clean the house? We have tricked her family and now it is our responsibility to reap the harvest. The only strategy we can adopt is to bear her with tenderness, patience and support, and let her be comforted by the fact that if misfortune has placed her in a poor house, at least the people here are good. If we deprive her of this too, think of how it will pain her heart. She might begin to feel repulsed by our sight.’

‘Who forced her parents to marry her to my son? Did we go to them with begging bowls?’

‘Well, if they were in need of a groom, we needed both a girl and money.’

‘All our rich neighbours were eager to enter into a marital alliance with us.’

‘That is because we had created the false impression that we are rich. No one asked us about the true condition of our house.’

‘And how rich are your in-laws? It is because he prospered as a lawyer that your father-in-law made his wealth or else his father was an attendant in an office when I was young. And how is it that your wife has a headache every time she has to cook a meal? Girls from rich families get married into poor families and adjust according to the conditions. It’s not that they sit and curse their fortune all day. This chit of a girl doesn’t think of this house as hers at all.’

‘When have you let her? How can one feel for a house where all she gets is abuse, scorn and harsh words? A house is where one finds love and affection. Which woman can enter her in-laws’ house and immediately think of her mother-in-law as her own mother? She will imbibe that feeling only when the mother-in-law treats her like a daughter, or loves her more than she does her own daughter.’

‘Be silent! Don’t rub salt on my wounds. The times are such that a boy sees a girl’s face and becomes her slave. God knows what mantras they know! And what have I done that makes her wake up from sleep in the middle of the day?

what have I done that makes her wake up from sleep in the middle of the day!  
I'd rather not see the face of such an ominous girl!

'Even I wake up late, Mother. You have never scolded me.'

'Why do you equate yourself with her on every issue?'

'This is injustice towards her. As long as she feels uncomfortable in this house, her position here is of a guest and we respect guests and overlook their faults.'

'I pray that no one gets a daughter-in-law like mine. Is there a dearth of women in this world?'

'No, but there is a dearth of goddesses.'

'Damn such women! When she falls asleep, she won't stir even if her child dies crying. She took a child pretty as a flower to her parents' home and when she returned after three months, the poor thing had shrunk to half its size.'

'So, should I assume that you love her child more than you love her? This goes against the rules of nature! And if she is insensitive, it is her fault. Why do you take her responsibilities on your own head? She has every right to bring up her child according to her own wishes. If she asks for your advice, give it willingly but if she doesn't, understand that she doesn't need it. After all, every mother loves her child!'

'What do you want me to be, a dumb spectator? If the house is on fire, am I supposed to sit and stare?'

'You will leave this house soon, Mother, while my wife has a long life to live here. She has more worries about this house than you. Besides, what can I do? At best I can scold her; but if she doesn't respect me and replies in kind, what option do I have?'

'If you don't talk to her for two days, she will fall in line.'

'I don't think so. If I don't talk to her, she won't talk to me. If I get on her nerves, she will go to her parents' place.'

'I hope that happens. I will get you a new wife.'

'It's possible.'

Suddenly the daughter-in-law entered the room and stood before them. Mother and son went silent as if a bomb had dropped on their heads. She was a beautiful and gentle, yet haughty woman who seemed to have been made to rule. Her cheeks quivered; a poisonous smile dripped from her lower lip and in her eyes was a mocking laugh.

The mother said, 'Did I call you?'

The daughter-in-law replied, 'Well, there's a pretty good circus going on here. I want to watch.'

The son spoke now, 'You have no right to intrude when mother and son are talking.'

The daughter-in-law stiffened. 'Hold your tongue, sir! A husband who passively listens to his wife being maligned is no husband at all. He doesn't know the ABC of the duties of a husband. Had someone said something about you in front of me, even if it was my own mother, I would have grabbed her tongue. Whenever you go to my place you are received as a god. Everyone, old and young, runs around you like slaves. If it was possible, they would tear stars from heaven for you, and in return, what do I get but taunts and jowls? No one at home asks why you wake up late, why you don't salute so and so, why you don't fall at the feet of so and so. My father will never accuse you of not massaging him, or of not washing his dhoti, or of not cooking for him. Why do I have to face such ridicule here? I have come here as your companion for life, not as your kept woman. But this doesn't mean that you should climb on my back and torture me. It is my duty to fulfil my responsibilities towards you to the best of my capabilities. I should feel that in my bones and not be forced. If someone wants to teach me something, they should teach me with love, then I will learn. If someone wants to teach me by force, I will be stubborn, even if they are trying to pour nectar down my throat. I would have considered this my home long ago but at every step, needles are pressed into my skin and I am reminded that I am only a servant here; that my duty is to slave away. It makes my blood boil. If this situation continues, the day is not far off when the two of you will end up killing me.'

The mother said, 'Do you hear the words of your beloved queen? She hasn't come here as a serving girl but as a queen; her duty is to rule over us, and no one should tell her what her duties are. And you continue to pay heed to her words. It doesn't occur to you that you should scold her; and how can you? The moment she appears, you begin to shake like a leaf.'

The son replied, 'Think with a calm head, Mother. If I don't listen to her words, who will? Can't you show her basic human decency? When Father was alive, did he not listen to you? Did he not love you? So, if I listen to my wife, what is so new about it? And why should you be so offended? '

The mother turned hysterical. 'Hai hai hai! Will you now insult me in front of your wife? Is this why I raised you? Oh, why does my heart not burst in pain?'

She wiped her tears and left the room. Husband and wife looked at her with mockery which soon turned to sympathy.

'A mother's heart . . .' the son said.

'No,' replied the wife, 'a woman's heart . . .'

'What?'

'It is a woman's heart that needs the support of her man to the very end. She can't bear another woman dominating her man.'

'Now you are raving like a madwoman.'

'No, I speak the truth.'

'Your point of view is flawed. You will understand her grief when you are a mother-in-law yourself.'

'I don't want to be one. When my son comes of age, he should marry and set up his own house.'

'Don't you want your son to be a man, bring home a goddess and live a fulfilling life?'

'Am I not a mother?'

'Is there no difference between a mother and a mother-in-law?'

'Oh, as deep as the chasm between heaven and earth! A mother loves and a mother-in-law rules. Regardless of how caring, enduring and virtuous a woman is, she turns into a cow that has just birthed when a daughter-in-law comes home. And the more she loves her son, the crueller she is towards her daughter-in-law. I have no faith in myself. Who does power not corrupt? I have decided not to be a mother-in-law. The slavery of women will end when mothers-in-law go extinct.'

'My opinion is that if you maintain your cool, you can rule over Amma too. Did you hear what we talked about?'

'Not all of it, but I gathered the gist from the little I heard . . .'

'No, no, you have got us completely wrong. I have noticed something very different in Mother's words today. It is as if she feels ashamed about what she has said in the past. Until now the only problem she has had against you is that you wake up late. Now I think she is worried that if you wake up early, you might catch a cold. She asked me to warm water for your bath!'

The wife was surprised. 'Really!'

'Yes. It took me by surprise too!'

'Then I will wake up at the crack of dawn. How cold can it be? But are you being honest or are you just making this up?'

'Oh, how I would like to cure your suspicion! It is possible for a person to regret her wrongdoing.'

'Bless your heart! No, I will wake up early. Why should I let the poor thing warm water for me? I will do it on my own.'

'When I heard her speak, I felt as if some divine message had awakened her spirit. She talked so much about your childlike mannerisms and hoped that when older people came to visit, you would show them some respect by touching their feet. Perhaps she has now come to realize that at your age girls tend to be a little wayward. She must have seen flashes of her youth in you. She says: *this is your age to indulge in good food, games and finery. Old women keep visiting all the time, why and how long the younger people can go on touching their feet? Besides, they are only women, not goddesses.*'

'This is such happy news.'

'I know! I myself didn't believe it. It seems like a dream to me.'

'So, she has finally come on the right track!'

'Think of it as divine inspiration.'

'I will be an ideal wife from tomorrow. No one will know when I do my make-up. I will go to the movies only once a week. What's the problem in touching old women's feet? They might not be goddesses, witches even; but they will bless me and sing my praises.'

'She didn't say anything about the movies.'

'That's your indulgence, not mine. I will stop you from frequenting the cinema.'

'But think of it this way: you have had an excellent education and come from a good family; it doesn't seem appropriate that you should strike your head against old women's knees.'

'Does being educated give one the licence to look down on people? Old people might be illiterate but they are worldly-wise. The foundation of a lineage, after all, is based on gentleness and good conduct, not on vanity or arrogance.'

'I am surprised that she has changed so fast! Mother thinks that daughters-in-law shouldn't massage the feet of their mothers-in-law, or wash their clothes.'

She now thinks that a wife is not a serving girl.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes, I am telling the truth. Besides, Amma won't let you cook for her any more. She says that if you have a headache, you shouldn't be bothered with it. Let's keep a cook, she says.'

'I feel like I am flying. A mother-in-law like this deserves ultimate respect. Why are you so intent on hurting her emotions?'

'Mother is pure of heart. She deserves our forgiveness. The environment we grow up in influences us. The customs and traditions which she grew up in cannot be discarded in one day. And not just her, it would be difficult for anyone to change so fast. She is large-hearted. You don't have to keep a cook. We can hire one when our finances improve. I can take care of the kitchen on my own.'

'But it will hurt me to see you massage Mother's feet all night.'

'Why should you be so hurt? When she cares so much for me, this is just part of my duty. The day I sit by her side, her ankles in my palm, she will be willing to sacrifice her life for me. After all, she deserves a portion of the joy her son and daughter-in-law have found.'

'If this be the case, Mother will not mind your spendthrift nature. She says that I should hand over my salary to my wife.'

'Does she say so out of spite?'

'Not at all! She worries that you might be offended if she takes care of the finances. You might feel ashamed of asking her for money.'

'No, no! I can't take these responsibilities on my head now. You don't earn much. If I spend all of it in the beginning, we will have nothing to see us through the rest of the month. She knows how to do with little money. Besides, what needs do I have? I ask for money just to spite her. I always have fifty to hundred rupees on me. Whenever Father sends me a letter, he takes care to send me some money. But I have to control that too. How long can I go to Father begging for money?'

'Wait and see how Mother will love you now.'

'And you keep your eyes open and observe how well I serve her.'

'But she started all the mess.'

'Only in her thoughts. I put it in practice. Whenever it is time to cook, I run away. Would you like me to cook something special today?'

'Your dry bread is delicious enough for me.'

Your dry bread is generous enough for me.  
'Now you are beginning to behave like a child!'

*Translated from the Hindi by Shalim M. Hussain*





## The Curse of Life

### 1

Mr Kavas published a newspaper and earned fame. Mr Shapur started dealing in cotton and began earning wealth. Both of them were eking out decent lifestyles, but Mr Shapur was contented while Mr Kavas was distraught. Mr Shapur's line of work was such that respect and fame followed the money. For Mr Kavas, affluence wasn't even on the distant horizon. Thus, there was a certain peace, goodwill, blessedness and energy in Mr Shapur's life. Mr Kavas, on the other hand, was depressed, bitter and distraught, and drained of hope. He tried to tell himself that wealth was of little significance, but how could he ignore the hard facts? He compared his own life to the sweetness and peace that defined the Shapur household, and was filled with disgust at the poverty and unease of his own home. Compared to the sweet Mrs Shapur, his Gulshan Banu seemed like the embodiment of pettiness. When Mr Shapur returned home, his Shireen Bai greeted him with a honey-hued smile but when Kavas returned after a day of extreme exertion, Gulshan laid bare her bundle of woes and chided, 'Do you consider yourself a man? You are lesser than a bull. The bull is hard-working, poor and complacent in his misery, but at least it has the good sense not to take a wife!'

Mr Kavas had been asked this question a million times, 'If you had to ruin your life by publishing a newspaper, why did you marry me? Why do you want to destroy my life? When you have no bread to feed me, why did you bind me to you?' Mr Kavas didn't have the energy to answer these questions any more. He had no counterargument to offer. It was his mistake and he deeply regretted it.

But one fine day, he couldn't take it any more and he simply told Gulshan, 'Well, what's done is done, but I won't keep you any longer. Go to any man who satisfies you; what else can I say? It's not my fault that my earnings are not decent. What do you want from me—should I kill myself?'

Gulshan grabbed him by the ears and smacked him across the cheeks. 'Growing bones in your tongue, you oaf! Aren't you ashamed to suggest such a thing? Go drown yourself in a palmful of water! I will set fire to that other man's house, mangle his jaw.'

This sudden change in gears confused poor Mr Kavas.

Here was his wife, a bitter materialist and there was Shireen, the goddess of sweetness and grace—who bloomed like a flower every time she met him, whose words dripped with sweetness, who always welcomed him with tea, sweetmeats and flowers, who occasionally offered him a ride in her car. Mr Kavas didn't have the strength of imagination to imagine that life could be such a garden. Sometimes he got so fed up with Gulshan's bitterness that he sent a silent invitation to the Grim Reaper. His home was worse than a prison cell and whenever he could find the time, he went to Shireen's to ease his scorched heart.

## 2

One morning, Mr Kavas fought with Gulshan and went to Mr Shapur's terrace. He was surprised to find Shireen's eyes burning red, her cheeks flushed, as if she had been crying. Concerned, Mr Kavas asked her, 'Do you have a fever?'

Shireen gave him a look of extreme contrition and said tearfully, 'No, I don't have a fever, at least not fever of the body.'

Mr Kavas couldn't figure out the riddle.

Shireen remained silent for a while and said, 'I consider you a friend, Mr Kavasji. I have nothing to hide. I am tired of this life! To date, I have kept the fire in my heart concealed, but now it seems that if I don't let it out, the flames will char my bones. It's eight now but my dear beloved hasn't returned. After dinner, he said he had to meet a friend and hasn't come home yet. Nor is this something new—he has behaved in a similar manner for months now. I haven't shared this grief with you, but understand that even when I laugh and talk as if everything is all right, my soul weeps.'

Mr Kavas asked innocently 'Have you ever asked him where he stays

Mr Kavas asked innocently, 'Have you ever asked him where he stays overnight?'

'Do people open their hearts at such a simple question?'

'I don't think that there should be any misunderstanding between the two of you.'

'What can a man do if he isn't satisfied in his own house?'

'I am shocked, Mrs Shapur! A house with a goddess like you is heaven! Mr Shapur should thank his stars.'

'One believes in such things as long as one is poor. If you were to get a few million rupees now, you wouldn't remain the same. Money is a curse! One can maintain the facade of peace and calm as long as the volcano within is contained. He thinks that since he has filled the house with money, he has performed his duties and that I have no reason to be unhappy. He doesn't understand that extravagance is like gold in the belly of the earth—food for the dead.'

This was news for Mr Kavas. Experience had taught him that women were by nature materialistic. Sacrifice your happiness for them, give your life for them—it's of no use. Hay won't satisfy them; they need oats and apples. And then there was this goddess who felt no attraction for expensive trinkets, but was ready to be content with sweet love and comfort. He felt a tickle in his mind.

Mrs Shapur said, 'I am tired of this business, Mr Kavasji. Feelings of rebellion are rising in my mind and no holy book, no appeal to social constraints can hold them back any longer. I tell myself, don't widows also live? And yet, I have not been able to calm my mind. It is as if he is inviting me to the arena. I have not accepted his challenge yet, but now the waters have overflowed their embankments. I won't go down so easily—I will clutch for the last straw. You are his friend; try to make him see sense. I won't wear the false mask of propriety any longer.'

Mr Kavasji began building an imaginary heaven in his head. He said, 'Yes, yes, I will try to make him understand. It is my duty as a friend. But I am not sure if my words will have any effect on him. I am a poor man; will he value my advice?'

'That's one thing about him that I absolutely hate!'

'It is surprising that you have borne such treatment for so long! Any other woman would have broken down in a day.'

‘Well, all men nurture mischief in their minds, even if they do not put it to action; but that is in part because of their wives. What’s my fault? I have always treated him like a god.’

‘But what if men do not understand their women? I am afraid that he has other thoughts in his mind.’

‘What thoughts?’

‘Can’t you guess?’

‘Ah, those thoughts! But what’s my fault?’

‘Haven’t you heard the parable of the lion and the lamb?’

Mrs Shapur remained silent. They could see Mr Shapur’s car arriving. She looked at Mr Kavas with pleading eyes and entered the house through another door. Mr Shapur stepped out of the car, his eyes blood-red, and smiled when he shook hands with Mr Kavas. The woman’s eyes were red, as were her husband’s: one with tears and the other with the glories of the night.

### 3

Mr Shapur put his hat on the hatrack and said, ‘Pardon me, I slept at a friend’s place last night. We had a late dinner and I said to myself, “Why go home now?”’

Mr Kavas laughed mockingly. ‘Where did you have dinner? My reporter hasn’t submitted a report yet. Could you give me a quote?’

He removed his notebook from his pocket.

Mr Shapur became alert and said, ‘It wasn’t a big party; just a few friends.’

‘Well, I would still like to know. Any dinner party where you and your friends meet is no small matter. Who was the host?’

‘Promise me you won’t be surprised.’

‘Just tell me.’

‘Miss Gaur.’

‘Miss Gaur!’

‘Now you are surprised. Don’t you think that after a day of making money I am entitled to a little fun? Won’t my life be harsh otherwise?’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘Why?’

‘Because I think this kind of entertainment is an insult to one’s lawful wife.’

BECAUSE I THINK THIS KIND OF ENTERTAINMENT IS AN RIGHT TO ONE'S HUSBAND WIFE.

Mr Shapur smiled a fake smile. 'This is all talk. You of all people should know that times have changed. One doesn't have to follow these constraints any more.'

'My belief is that at least on this point our generation disagrees with our ancestors. We have now begun to accept the rights of married women.'

'Which means that women can rule over men?'

'In the same manner as men rule over women.'

'I do not accept this. The woman has to be dependent on her man, not the other way around.'

'Your point being that a woman has to look up to a man for food and clothing?'

'Well, if you want to use those words, I have no problem; but rights should be distributed in society as they are done in politics—the property of the rich and the strong.'

'Let's look at it this way—if a wife is the earner in the family and for some reason the husband doesn't have a job and is forced to stay at home, does it mean that the woman has the right to entertain herself in whichever way she thinks fit?'

'I can't give a woman any rights.'

'That is unjust!'

'Not at all! Nature has structured woman in such a way that try as she might, she can never aspire to positions accorded to men, or compete with them on a purely physical level. But yes, if she abandons her role as a wife and lives an unnatural life, she can do as she likes.'

'It is people like you who force her to live an unnatural life.'

'I cannot imagine a future where man's dominion over woman has ended. I might not understand how law and society function, but this I know: men have always controlled women and will continue to do so.'

Very smoothly, Mr Kavas changed sides. All this while he had been planning something which could now be put into action. He looked at Mr Shapur with pride and veneration, and said, 'We share the same opinions then! I was just testing you. Let a woman be a wife, mother and householder, but I can't bear to see her free. If any woman wants to be independent, my house is not the place for her. I was pretty surprised by Mrs Shapur's words. I can't believe that a

woman can be so rebellious!’

The veins on Mr Shapur’s neck tightened; his nostrils flared. He stood up from his chair and said, ‘So Shireen has begun to find fault with me! I will talk to her—talk to her right in front of you—and we will decide the matter right now! I don’t care about her. I don’t care about anyone. False woman! Am I to bind myself to the apron strings of a woman who doesn’t care for me, who can’t bear a little fun! Is this what she expects from Shapur? Bitch doesn’t know that if I twitch my eyebrows a hundred Shireens will fall at my feet right now; oh yes, they will dance to my tune. What I have done for this woman, few other men have . . . I . . . I have . . .’

He suddenly realized that he had crossed his limits. He remembered Shireen’s love and services, and his voice faltered, ‘I think she can be reasoned with. I don’t want to hurt her. I know that the worst she can do is to complain, nothing more. It is not difficult to tame a woman, at least from what little experience I have.’

Mr Kavas corrected him, ‘Oh, my experience says otherwise.’

‘Maybe, maybe; but you only have words. I have the blessings of the Goddess of wealth.’

‘When thoughts of upheaval clog one’s mind, they unsettle the scales of the Goddess of wealth.’

Mr Shapur was confused, ‘Maybe there is some truth in what you say.’

#### 4

Many days later, Mr Kavas met Shireen at a park. This was the opportunity he had been looking for. His heaven was ready; the only thing left was to install Shireen in it. Contemplating on when that would happen was nearly driving him crazy. He had already sent Gulshan to her parents’ home. Well, he hadn’t really sent her; they had quarrelled, and she had left. When Shireen was ready to accept a life in poverty with him, why did he have to go chasing after Gulshan? He jumped, grabbed Shireen’s hand, and said, ‘What a pleasant surprise! I was about to pay you a visit.’

Shireen seemed a little hesitant as she said, ‘I have strained my eyes looking for you, waiting for you to come. It is only in words that you are compassionate. Do you know how wet my eyes have been for the last few days?’

— I just know how many eyes have seen her the last few days.

Shireen appeared to Mr Kavas like a golden coin that when seen through a silk sari, glows more luxuriously. His heart felt like it had stopped doing whatever it was supposed to be doing, and he sat down. He felt like a student who has given his last examination and is now confronted with the question of life. If only, the student thinks, if only he could wait for a few more days and continue living through the maze of examinations and dreams! How frightening life is when compared to dreams! Until this point, Mr Kavas had only tasted the bee's honey. Now the bee was buzzing around his face and he was conscious of its sting.

He said in a subdued tone, 'I am so sorry to hear this. I tried to reason with Mr Shapur.'

Shireen took hold of his hand, guided him to a bench, and said, 'Oh, it's no use explaining things to him any more. And why should I sink so low as to grovel at his feet? I have made a promise to myself—that I will not return to Shapur's house. If he is interested in being shamed in court, he is welcome to file a case against me. If I don't want to live with someone, even God cannot force me, much less the court. Offer me shelter and I will remain with you as yours. If you do not have the confidence, other doors will open for me. Now tell me clearly, was there any truth in your sympathy?'

Mr Kavas hardened his heart and said, 'Shireen, God knows how much I love you! There is indeed a place for you in my heart.'

'What will you do about Gulshan?'

'I will divorce her.'

'Yes, I want that. I will come with you right now. Shapur and I are not related any more.'

Mr Kavas felt a sudden shiver in his heart. He said, 'But I have made no preparations for you.'

'I have no needs. You are everything for me. Let's take a taxi and leave right now.'

Mr Kavas left the park in search of a taxi. He needed some time alone to think and now he found his excuse. He was not a young man; the intoxication of youth which blindfolds logic and throws it in a garbage dump was long gone. If any remained, it had transformed into a deer which knows the trap it pokes its head in to. He knew, for example, that Mr Shapur would do everything to rub his face in the dirt. He also knew that Gulshan would shame him in front of the whole

wide world. He was ready to handle it all. He had enough toddler to stuff Shapur's mouth. He also had enough to make Gulshan a joke among women.

The only thing he feared was whether Shireen's love for him would last. Shireen had only seen his good side—his truthful, just and generous side. He could take on Mr Shapur on these grounds, but he seriously doubted if the charm would last after a few days. One could replace sweetmeats with dry bread, even with stale bread, but place dry grass before a group of monks and even they will walk away.

*Shireen loved him but even love has its limits. For a few days she would be drunk on her emotions and bear his poverty; but emotional zeal alone can't endure for long. What would happen to tender emotions when faced with the harsh realities of life?* Mr Kavas thought of such an eventuality and shivered. Shireen had lived in a palace; he could only offer her a cottage with no carpets on the floor, no platoon of servants, and only an old maid who would fume at her, argue with her, scold her. Half his salary would go into paying for her singing lessons and God forbid, if Mr Shapur was intent on taking extreme measures, he could get goons to beat him up. He wasn't afraid of the pain. It would be his victory, but what would happen when the old maid placed a meal of dry bread and gravy before Shireen, what would the look on her face be like? Would she stand up and blame their bad luck? No, goodness of heart cannot fulfil needs!

A car came towards him with Mr Shapur in it. He raised his hand to stop the car, then ran behind it and once he had caught up, said, 'Where are you going?'

'Oh, just cruising around.'

'Shireen Banu is in the park. I will get her.'

'Oh, she quarrelled with me and left, saying that she wouldn't step inside my house again.'

'And you were just cruising around!'

'What would you have me do, weep?'

'Well, she was in tears.'

'Really?'

'Yes. She cried a lot.'

'She must be regaining her senses then.'

'You should console her. She will return with you.'

'Oh, I want to see if she will return without my consoling.'



‘I am in a terrible state. Have pity on me; I entreat you.’

‘Well, I have a little joy in life and I don’t want to waste it in the drama of comforting and entreating.’

The car left and Mr Kavas stood still, not knowing what to do. It was getting late. He thought, *I hope Shireen doesn’t believe that I have tricked her; but why should I return?*

The idea of taking her to his poor journalist’s hovel sounded like a ridiculous idea. It was more suited for Gulshan. She was bitter, she spoke harshly, she wept, but at least she gave him his meals on time. She mended his torn clothes and when guests visited, she served them so much joy on her face as if everything was all right with her world. Even the tiniest gift made her so happy. A little flattery could turn her into a slave. He thought back on their little fights and how he responded to her simplest words with anger. What had she suggested last—that they send a small gift to her sister on her birthday. Why did he have to get so wound up about it? Agreed, he was writing an editorial then, but wasn’t the gift as important as his editorial? Agreed, he didn’t have any money then, but could he not have explained it to her in simple words? ‘My pockets are empty now darling, he could have said, I will try to make some arrangements in a couple of days.’ She would have not taunted him any more. He was so disciplined about his writing, he would be disturbed if his pen heated up even a little. Why didn’t he exercise such discipline on himself while talking to his wife? Was it because she was dependent on him and had no means of showing her dissatisfaction other than through angry outbursts? Why is it that we go wagging our tails behind something unachievable and try to bite those who have given their lives for us?

A tonga stopped before him and a woman stepped down. It was Gulshan! He hugged her and said, ‘What are you doing here? I was just thinking about you.’

Gulshan said, ‘I was returning to you. This evening I was sitting on the veranda reading your article. I don’t know when I fell asleep, but I had a bad dream. I woke up scared and rushed to meet you. What are you doing here? Has something happened? My heart was beating all through the journey.’

Mr Kavas reassured her, ‘I am fine. What did you dream of?’

‘I saw that you said something to a woman and she bound you and dragged you away.’

‘What a foolish dream! And you actually believed it! How many times have I

What a foolish dream! And you actually believed it! How many times have I told you that dreams are the product of a troubled mind?’

‘You are hiding something from me; I can sense it. Besides, what are you doing here? Isn’t it time for your studies?’

‘It is, I am just taking a stroll.’

‘That’s a lie. Swear on my head!’

‘What can I do if you do not believe me?’

‘Swear it.’

‘Swearing is justification of guilt.’

Gulshan looked at him. Then she said, ‘Fine then. Let’s go home.’

Mr Kavas smiled. ‘You will quarrel with me again.’

‘You fight against the government and still serve it, don’t you? I will continue to fight you and still remain with you.’

‘But when did we agree that the government provides for us?’

‘Oh, your words! Your bosses agree; or else you would be in jail now.’

‘Okay, you go on. I will join you in a while.’

‘I won’t go home alone. And I ask you again, what are you doing here?’

Mr Kavas tried everything to convince Gulshan to leave but the more persistent his attempts, the more Gulshan grew obstinate. Finally, he told her about the quarrel between Shireen and Shapur, and very conveniently left out the part he had played in the drama.

Gulshan mulled over the narration and said, ‘So madness has entered your head too!’

Mr Kavas was quick with his reply, ‘What madness? What have I done? When the wife of a friend requests your help, isn’t it simple human courtesy to respond?’

‘It takes a lot of skill to lie, sweetheart, and you don’t have it. Go greet Shireen Banu and ask her to return peacefully to her own house. Happiness is never complete. Fortune can never be too partial. All flowers have thorns. If one wants happiness, one must accept it with all its trappings. Science hasn’t made so much progress that we can distil pure joy from thorns. Is it foolish to assume that someone who has enough money to waste will not indulge in wantonness? If wealth cannot allow one the freedom to indulge in the pleasures of the world, what wealth is it? Have the doors Shapur has opened not opened for Shireen too? Ask her to remain at Shapur’s house, enjoy his wealth and forget that she is his

wife just as Shapur has forgotten that he is her husband. Better enjoy life than burn with anger and envy. Her wealth will draw good-looking, well-educated young men to her. I remember you telling me that once upon a time the wealthy, pleasure-loving women of France were the custodians of society. Their husbands saw everything, but didn't have the courage to open their mouths to protest. And why would they open their mouths? They were humming to the same tune. This is manna which comes with wealth. If you are not up to the task, let me go talk to Shireen. If the wife of a wanton man is not wanton herself, it is simply cowardice—and a lost opportunity.'

Mr Kavas was surprised. 'But you are attracted to wealth too, aren't you?'

Gulshan blushed and said, 'This is the curse of life. We latch on to the one thing that is to be our destruction. I have lived on my father's estate for a long time, you know. There were peasants and labourers all around us. The poor fellows worked all day and returned home at night. They had no time for pleasures or mischiefs. Now I hear the same sob story in all the big houses of this city. All of them make money and live unnatural lives. If you got some money now, you would turn into another Shapur. That's for sure.'

'Then maybe even you will follow the path you described a little while ago.'

'Not maybe; certainly!'

*Translated from the Hindi by Shalim M. Hussain*



## Paying the Price

### 1

There was hardly a month when some part of Allarakkhi's salary was not deducted as penalty. Sometimes she received just five or six rupees in all. She put up with all this, but didn't want to cross swords with Khairat Ali Khan, the inspector of sanitation. Hundreds of sweeper women worked under his supervision. He didn't cut their pay, scold them or fine them. He was a kind-hearted man with a good reputation. But Allarakkhi always got a reprimand from him. She was not a shirker, nor clumsy or supercilious; she was also not at all bad-looking. Even during the days of chill, she went out with her broom before it was daylight and swept the road vigorously until nine. But she couldn't avoid being fined all the same. Husaini, her husband, helped her with the work when he could, but Allarakkhi's was fated to be penalized. For all others, payday was an occasion to smile, for Allarakkhi it was a time to weep. On that day, she was always on tenterhooks. God knew how much would be deducted! Like students going to take their exams, she made mental calculations of how much was likely to be chopped off.

That day she had got tired and sat down a moment to catch her breath. At that precise moment, the inspector appeared there riding his ekka. She pleaded as much as she could, saying, 'Please, my lord, I'm going back to work right away,' but he just jotted down her name in his notebook without listening to her plea. A few days later, the same thing happened again. She had bought a paisa worth of candy from the sweets vendor and had just started eating it when the inspector dropped on her from devil-knew-where and her name again went down

in red. No one knew where he could be hiding. The minute she began to rest for a moment, he was upon her like an evil spirit. He had written her name down on only two days, but only God knew how much he would deduct as a penalty. More than eight annas? She hoped it wouldn't be a whole rupee! She went with her head bowed to collect her money and always found that the amount deducted was more than what she'd estimated. Taking her money with trembling hands she'd go home, tears streaming down her face. There was no one to turn to. Who'd listen to her if she complained against the inspector.

Today was payday again. Her infant daughter had been suffering from cough and fever the past month. The weather was very chilly. The cold and the little girl's cries kept her awake entire nights. On several days, she'd come to work late. The inspector had noted down her name; she was sure to lose half her pay in penalty this time. She would be lucky to come home with even half her pay. It was difficult to say how much of her salary might be held back. She picked up the baby, grabbed her broom and went to the street. But the naughty child wouldn't get down from her mother's lap. Allarakkhi threatened her, saying that the inspector would arrive any moment. 'He's on his way and if he finds you in my lap, he'll bash me up and chop off your nose and ears!' The child would rather have her nose and ears chopped off than get down from her mother's lap. When her threats and coaxing didn't work, Allarakkhi set her down and started to sweep. The child was left howling. But the poor little thing wouldn't sit in one place to cry her fill. She crawled behind her mother time and time again, pulled her sari, clung to her legs, then wallowed on the ground, and a moment later, got up to cry some more.

'Shut up, you wretch!' said Allarakkhi, brandishing the broom. 'If you don't, I'll strike you with the broom and that'll be the end of you. That bastard of an inspector will appear any moment.'

Hardly had she got the words out of her mouth when Inspector Khairat Ali Khan got down from his bicycle and stood before her. She lost her colour, her heart came to her mouth. *Ya Allah, I'm done for if he's heard me! What happened to my eyes that he's right in front of me and I didn't see him. Who knew that he'd come on his bicycle today? He always came in his ekka.* The blood stopped coursing in her veins. She stood transfixed, holding the broom in her hand.

The inspector said gruffly, 'Why do you drag this kid like your tail when you

come to work! Why didn't you leave it at home!'

'She's sick, my lord,' said Allarakkhi timidly. 'There's no one at home to leave her with!'

'What's the matter with her?'

'She's been suffering from fever, huzoor.'

'And you're making her cry by leaving her alone? Don't you care if she lives or dies?'

'How can I work if I carry her in my lap?'

'Why don't you go on leave?'

'My pay'll be cut, huzoor. How will we manage?'

'Pick her up and go home. When Husaini returns from work, send him here to do the sweeping.'

Allarakkhi picked up the baby and was about to leave when he asked, 'Why were you calling me names?'

Allarakkhi felt her life was going out of her. She was in a blue funk. Trembling all over, she said, 'No, my lord, may I go blind if I was calling you names.' And she burst into tears.

## 2

In the evening, Husaini and Allarakkhi went to collect her pay. She was feeling low. Husaini tried to console her, 'Why are you so sad? If they're going to cut the pay, let them. I promise, from now on I won't touch a drop of liquor.'

'... I'm afraid I'll be fired. Damn my tongue! How could I...'

'If you're fired, then you're fired. Let Allah be merciful to him. How long can you go on crying about it?'

'You're taking me there for nothing. Every one of those women will laugh at me.'

'If you're fired, won't we ask on what grounds? And who heard you calling him names? Is it so easy for him to fire anyone he pleases? If no one here listens, I'll complain to the panchayat. I'll beat my head on the headman's gate. If our people had such unity, would the inspector ever dare fine us so much? No matter how serious the ailment, there's always a remedy, silly.'

But Allarakkhi's mind was not set at rest. Sorrow enveloped her face like a

mist.

Why didn't the inspector scold her when he heard her abuse him? Why didn't he fire her on the spot! She wasn't able to fathom it. He actually seemed kind. She couldn't understand this mystery, and one is scared of things one doesn't understand. If he wanted to fine her, he would've simply noted her name in his diary. He had decided to fire her—that's why he was so nice. She'd heard that a man going to the gallows was given a delicious last meal, and he was allowed to meet whoever he wanted to. He was sure to have her fired.

They reached the municipal office. Thousands of sweeper women had gathered, wearing colourful dresses and make-up. Several vendors had also appeared, selling paan, cigarette and other stuff. A band of Pathans had also appeared there to extract money that they had lent to their debtors. These two also went and joined the queue.

The pay began to be distributed. The sweeper women were the first to be paid. When a name was called the person would go running, take her money and shower blessings on the inspector which he didn't deserve. Allarakkhi's name was always called after Champa's. Today, she was passed over. After Champa, Jahuran was called, whose name always figured after Allarakkhi's.

Allarakkhi looked at Husaini with despairing eyes. The women were watching her and began to whisper. She felt like leaving the spot and going home. She couldn't bear the humiliation. If the earth had given way, she'd have liked to go under.

One after another the names were called. Allarakkhi fixed her gaze on the trees across the way. She no longer cared whose name was being called, who was collecting pay, and who was staring or laughing at her.

Suddenly, she heard her name and was startled. Slowly, she stood up and walked ahead with slow steps like a new bride. The paymaster handed her the full amount of six rupees.

She was stupefied. The paymaster must've made a mistake! She hadn't gotten her full pay even once in the last three years. And now, she'd have been grateful if she was given even half her pay. She stood there for a second to see if the paymaster would ask for the money back. When he asked her why she was still standing there and not moving away, she said softly, 'But it's the full amount.'

The paymaster looked at her, puzzled.

'What else do you want—to be paid less?'

‘Was there no fine this time?’

‘No, there’s no fine this time.’

Allarakkhi moved away, but in her heart, she was not content. She was regretting that she had abused the inspector.

*Translated from the Hindi by M. Asaduddin*





## Splashed

It was like this: I had finished my bath and my prayers early in the morning, wore vermillion on my forehead, slipped into my yellow robe and wooden sandals, tucked the astrological charts under my arm, grabbed my skull-cracker stick and started out for a client's house. I had to fix an auspicious day for a wedding. I was expecting to earn at least a rupee besides getting breakfast. And my breakfast is by no means an ordinary one. Office clerks don't have the courage to invite me over. What they would spend on a single day's breakfast for me would last them a whole month. In this respect, I'm more inclined towards traders and moneylenders. How they feed you! And with such open heart that you feel happy all over! I accept an invitation only after reassuring myself about the generosity of the client. I lose my appetite if someone pulls a long face while feeding me. What's the point of feeding someone if you can't do it happily! I can't digest a meal like that at all. I appreciate a client who eggs me on with, 'Please, shastriji, have one more *balushahi*!' and I go on refusing, 'No, friend, no more.'

It had rained much during the night. There were puddles all over the road. Lost in thought, I was walking along when a car came splashing through the puddles and splattered my face. My dhoti looked as though somebody had thrown a bucketful of muck over it. My clothes were ruined, my body was covered with filth, to say nothing of the monetary loss. If I could grab the occupants in the car, I'd have given them a thrashing they would remember. I stood there, helpless. I couldn't go to the client's house in this condition and my own house was not less than a mile away. The passers-by were having fun at my expense and clapping. Never before have I been in such a mess. Well, dear heart,

what're you going to do now? If you go home, what will the wife say!

I decided in a moment what I was going to do. I gathered about a dozen rocks from all around and began waiting for the next car. I was fuming within to show them a Brahmin's power. It wasn't even ten minutes when a car came in sight. Oh no! It was the same car. It'd probably gone to fetch the master from the station. The moment it came close, I threw a rock. I threw it with all my strength. The master's cap went flying and landed on the other side of the road. The car slowed down. I threw again. The windowpane came crashing and one piece even landed on the sahib bahadur's cheek, drawing blood.

The car stopped and the sahib got out. He came towards me, aimed a punch, and said, 'You swine, I'll hand you over to the police!' The words were barely out of his lips when I threw my books down on the ground, grabbed him by the waist, tripped him so that he fell in the mud with a thud. I jumped on top of him at once and gave him a good twenty punches one after the other. He was trounced. Meanwhile, his wife got out. She was wearing high-heeled shoes and a silk sari. She had powdered her cheeks and worn lipstick and mascara. She began poking me with her umbrella. I left the husband and, wielding my stick, said, 'Deviji, don't meddle in men's affairs or you may get a scratch or a bruise and I'd be sorry about that.'

The sahib took advantage of the interruption to pick himself up. He kicked me with his booted feet on my knee. I lost my wits, picked up the stick and hit him in the legs. He crashed like an uprooted tree. Memsahib came running, brandishing her umbrella. I snatched it away from her with utmost ease and threw it away. The driver was sitting in the car all this while. Now, he got out too and pounced on me with a stick. I gave him a whack with my stick and he left the scene. A crowd had gathered to see the fun. Still lying on the ground, the sahib said, 'Rascal! I'll hand you over to the police!' I raised my stick again, aiming at his head but he folded his hands and said, 'No, baba, I won't go to the police. Forgive me.'

I said, 'All right, leave the police out of it or I'll leave you with a bloody head. At worst, I might be jailed for six months, but you'll be cured of your bad habit. You get blind with conceit when you drive your car, spattering people with muck. You don't give a damn if someone is walking in front of or alongside the car.'

One from among the crowd quinned 'Arré maharai! These drivers splash

One from among the crowd quipped, 'Hate, mamadaj. These drivers splash muck intentionally and when someone is drenched, then the onlookers watch the spectacle and laugh at him. You've put at least one of them in his place.'

'Do you hear what the people are saying?' I said to the sahib provocatively. He glared at the man with bloodshot eyes, and said, 'You're lying. It's an absolute lie.'

I reprimanded him, 'You're still as conceited! Shall I give you a thrashing with the stick!'

'No, baba,' he said meekly. 'It's true, whatever you're saying. I hope you're satisfied now!'

Another bystander said, 'He might say whatever he wishes now, but as soon as he sits in his car he'll start behaving the same way all over again. The moment they get into their cars they think no end of themselves.'

'Tell him to lick his own spit,' said another.

'No, no, make him twist his ears and do sit-ups,' opined a third one.

'And make the driver do the same. They're all rogues of the first order. If a rich man is vain, that's understandable. But what are you drivers so conceited about? As soon as they touch the wheel, they become brazen.'

I accepted the suggestion that the master and the driver be made to twist their ears and do sit-ups, while memsahib counted.

'Listen, memsahib,' I said, 'you've got to count a whole hundred sit-ups, not one less but as many in excess as they like.'

Two men grabbed the master by his hands to haul him up, two others grabbed the driver. The poor driver's legs were injured, but he began to do the sit-ups. The master was still trying to be aggressive. He lay down and began to blurt out gibberish. I was furious and took the resolve that I wouldn't let him off without doing a hundred sit-ups. I asked four men to push the car down the edge of the road.

It seemed they were waiting for my order. Instead of four, fifty men crowded around and began to shove the car. The road was quite elevated with the ground way below it on either side. If the car was slid down, it would smash to pieces. The car had already been pushed to the edge of the road when the sahib let out a groan and stood up. 'Baba, don't bash my car, we'll do the sit-ups.'

I ordered the men to lay off. But they were all having fun and nobody paid any attention to me. But when I picked up the stick and lunged towards them,

they all abandoned the car. The sahib began to do the sit-ups closing his eyes.

After ten sit-ups, I asked the memsahib, 'How many has he done?'

'I wasn't counting,' she said with arrogance.

'Then the sahib's going to be groaning and whimpering all day long, I won't let him go. If you want to take him home in one piece, count the sit-ups, then I'll let him go.'

The sahib saw that he couldn't save his life without doing the sit-ups. He started doing them in right earnest—one, two, three, four, five . . .

Suddenly, they saw another car coming their way. Sahib saw it and said with utter humility, 'Panditji, you are my father, please have mercy on me. I won't sit in a car again.' I felt pity for him and said, 'No, I've no problem if you sit in your car, I just want you to treat human beings with courtesy when you're in it.'

The second car was coming at speed. I gave a signal. All the men picked up two rocks each. The owner of this car was himself driving. He slowed down and tried to sneak through the crowd when I advanced and caught him by the ears. I shook him violently, gave him two tight slaps on both his cheeks, and said, 'Don't splash muck with the car, understand? Go quietly.'

The gentleman muttered under his breath, but when he saw a hundred men armed with rocks, he swallowed his resentment and slunk away.

A minute later another car came along. I asked fifty men to block the road. The car stopped. I gave the driver a couple of slaps. But the poor fellow was a gentleman. He took them as though he enjoyed them and continued his journey.

Suddenly, a man said, 'The police are coming!'

And everybody took to their heels. I too came down off the road and sliding into a small lane, I disappeared.

*Translated from the Hindi by M. Asaduddin*



## The Assassin's Mother

### 1

As Rameshwari lay sleeping at night, she dreamt Vinod had murdered an officer and was absconding. The police were interrogating innocents in his search, and a growing unrest had seized the city. She awoke with worry, to find Vinod had been sleeping. She got up and went near him, to lovingly brush his head with her hands. She pondered on the ominous dream and grew worried. She lay down but sleep was hard to come, a fear had settled in her heart.

Vinod, on finding his mother worried in the morning, asked, 'Mother, why do you look distraught today?'

Mother looked at Vinod with affectionate eyes and said, 'Son! What do I say? I had a very terrible dream last night, wherein you murdered an officer and were absconding while the innocent were being rounded up.'

Vinod smiled and said, 'Did you want me to be caught?'

Mother said, 'I don't want you near such deeds. Why should the question of being caught arise? Our belief is to live and let live. Killing others to live is against my beliefs.'

'Beliefs and principles are irrelevant now.'

'Beliefs and principles have always emerged triumphant and will always be. Self-governance will not be achieved by slaughtering and murdering; it requires sacrifice, penance and discipline. Without leaving greed, impure desires, and reflecting on the bad in oneself, you claim for self-governance. Accept the fact that the self-governance achieved by slaughter and murder will feed on the same. Self-governance achieved by peace will belong to the nation, its people and will

not depend on the violence of the sword. I want the self-governance of peace, not that of the sword that slaughters and murders.'

Vinod laughed and said, 'This is fit for the stage, but who is here to listen?'

Mother said, 'Son! You laugh and my heart is saddened. My right eye has been twitching for a few days. Definitely some trouble is coming.'

Vinod said, 'I am not afraid of trouble. What happiness do I enjoy now, that I should fear trouble?'

Saying this, Vinod walked out.

## 2

Vinod had been missing since this morning. Nobody knew where he was. Rameshwari initially thought he must be in the Congress office, but when it was past one and he did not return, she grew concerned. He did not loiter anywhere after ten. She then thought, maybe he had gone for some work. The night's dream began to trouble her and made her anxious and as time passed, her anxiety grew. By evening, she could no longer hold herself. She went to the Congress office.

On inquiring there, she found out that Vinod had not even come once that day since morning. Rameshwari's heart was gripped by some unknown fear and the dream haunted her. For a while she stood stunned and still. Then she thought, maybe he was back home. She immediately returned home, but Vinod was still nowhere to be found.

As it grew dark, her heart grew faint. Her right eye began to twitch as well. Her thoughts grew even more fearsome. No gods or goddesses were left to be pleaded to. She sometimes sat down and at times went to stand at the door. Like a frightened bird, her heart sometimes sat in the nest and sometimes on a branch. Who was bothered about cooking food! She kept thinking, *God, what is my fault that I am being punished? If I have made some mistake, please forgive me. I am suffering on my own. I don't have the strength to endure any more.*

Rameshwari began to cry with her hand on her head. The sky was overcast. Small droplets of rain were falling. It seemed as if in seeing no one to commiserate with her, it joined her.

It was past midnight. Rameshwari stood at the door, watching the road for Vinod. Suddenly, someone came in urgent haste and stood at the doorway. There was a blanket wrapped around him, which covered most of his face.

Rameshwari asked in fear, 'Who is it?'

It was Vinod. He quickly went inside and asked his mother to close the door. He then kept the blanket in the courtyard and asked for food.

Scared, Rameshwari asked, 'Where were you throughout the day? I looked for you all day.'

Vinod drew her close and said, 'I had gone for a very important work and will have to return again. I have only come to tell you that for a month or two, I won't be able to stay here. There is nothing to be afraid of. I have only done what I believe in. For self-preservation, it is necessary for me to run away.'

Everything grew dark in front of Rameshwari's eyes. She said, 'Why, son? Have you done what I had feared? Why did God cloud your judgement?'

Vinod said, 'Neither has God clouded my judgement, nor has anything bad happened to me. I have killed an officer in the shed. I took such a shot that one bullet was enough to turn him cold. Nothing moved.'

'Was no one else there?'

'No one, it was still.'

'The police must have come to know.'

'Yes, some have been caught, I ran away clear.'

Rameshwari's emotions changed. Her eyes filled with concern for her son, she turned red in anger. She said, 'I don't call this an escape where the culprit runs away hiding his face and the innocents are being punished. You are a murderer. I did not know that I would give birth to such a son, else I would have strangled your throat as soon as I gave birth to you. If you are a man, go and confess in the court, else the blame of the death of innocents would also be on you.'

This outburst made Vinod angry. He said, 'Your calling me a murderer does not make me one. And people who do the same become leaders. They are praised, people revere them. I did it and I become a murderer?'

'You are definitely a murderer, as are all those who murder others. In being your mother, I too am a part of the sin. My face too is blackened. Those that die for others are leaders. He who protects others is brave and respected. Their birth

is a blessing. Their mothers are fortunate. Don't you feel ashamed to brag about a murder?'

Vinod picked up the blanket and said, 'If you were not my mother, then I would have finished you off right away. As long as I live, I will never set eyes on your face.'

Saying this, he stormed out of the house.

#### 4

In a moment Rameshwari too stormed out of the house. So what if he was her son? She would not tolerate this injustice, she would immediately go to the police station and report the murder. It would be better if Vinod was made to hang till death than have innocents hung.

However, after walking some distance, the mother's heart grew restless. She returned and wept a lot after reaching home. The son for whom she had to endure such hardships to bring up, would she make him hang?

But then it came to her mind—those innocents who would hang must be having mothers too. For them their sons must be as dear. No, no, she could not commit such injustice. She could do without a son, but she would not have innocents killed.

Rameshwari was stuck in this dilemma, and when she could not find a way out, she would begin to cry. Then she thought, *why not commit suicide so that she is free from these sorrows, but her death would not save the life of the innocents. The mothers' hearts would not be at peace. She would not be free from that blame.* She spoke up on her own, 'Come what may, I won't let innocents be killed. I will confess that I am the culprit, because my son has committed this murder, we both are to be blamed. Hang us both. I won't turn away from my beliefs, even if my son is hacked to pieces before my eyes. Yes, with my own eyes I will see him hang, because I have given birth to him. God, give me strength to stick to my duty. I am weak, a sinner, a murderer.'

Rameshwari fainted and fell down.

#### 5



When Rameshwari regained consciousness, her determination had grown strong, but her heart was aching. Did I give birth to a son for this? Did I bring him up for this, to see him one day climb the gallows with my own eyes? Vinod was her crutch in life. Today her ties were being severed with the same Vinod. Vinod's face floated before her eyes. There were days when she would have him cling to her bosom. Despite suffering hardships, she was happy. Now it has come to this day when she is going to have him hanged. Vinod's books and clothes were kept in the room. She put each of them to her chest. Oh! How hard is the path of duty? Her heart ached to hug Vinod one last time and kiss him one last time. While punishing her son, does the mother stop loving him?

Rameshwari was going to punish Vinod, and she was filled with determination as well as affection.

## 6

A week passed. The police had discovered the conspiracy. Ten young men were arrested from the town. One among them turned state witness and a case was registered with the magistrate.

Vinod had been missing since that day. Rameshwari, torn in strife between duty and affection, was like a boat rolling between a stormy sky above and a tumultuous sea below. Sometimes duty made the heart strong, while at times affection made it grow weak, but as days passed by, duty grew weaker. New reasons made her determination towards her duty grow weaker. When everything is deemed to happen by God's wishes, this too must be His will. This was the most convincing reason. For the past seven days she had survived on only water, and the water too fell as her tears. She seemed as if she had been suffering from some illness for a long time.

It was around ten o'clock. She headed for the Congress office. Daily, around this time, she went there once to inquire after Vinod.

She saw nine to ten young men in handcuffs amidst a dozen armed policemen. A little behind them were some men and women who stood with their heads hung, painting a picture of sorrow and hopelessness as they were led away.

Rameshwari ran and asked a policeman, 'Are these Congressmen?'

The policeman said, 'Who else will kill the British but Congressmen?'

'Who has died?'

‘A sergeant of the police has been murdered by them. Today is the eighth day.’

‘Congressmen don’t murder people.’

‘If their guilt is not proved, they will be set free.’

Rameshwari stood there for a moment. Then she followed the men towards the court. Duty had rejuvenated itself with a new-found strength. No, she would not let so many young innocent men walk into the jaws of death. To protect her own murderer son, she would not let so many innocents be murdered.

The court was a huge place. Rameshwari asked a guard, ‘Has the officer come?’

He replied, ‘Not yet, must be on his way.’

‘He comes very late, it must be twelve.’

The irritated guard snapped, ‘Is he your servant that when you wish he will come ? He is a lord, he will come when he wishes.’

Rameshwari kept quiet.

There were a few women sitting beside her. One asked, ‘Why, sister, has someone been arrested from your house too?’

Rameshwari was absorbed in her worry. She did not reply.

The woman said again, ‘What do I say, who knows which sinner has committed this murder? He is hiding and we are losing our kids.’

One woman was weeping. Rameshwari too began to cry.

An old woman consoled her, ‘Sister, please stop crying. What is written in our fate will happen. My innocent son has been arrested. He worked for the Congress. Who has been arrested from your family?’

Rameshwari did not reply to her as well. She kept asking others, ‘When will the officer come?’

At two, the judge’s car arrived. There was a sudden spurt of activity inside. As the judge sat in his chair, the government lawyer presented the murder case. The police officers arrived. The accused too were lined up.

At that moment, Rameshwari came and bowed before the court and spoke up clearly, ‘Your Honour, before the case begins, I would like to say something.’

Everyone looked at her in surprise. Silence spread throughout the room.

The judge looked at her sharply and said, ‘What is the matter?’

Rameshwari said, ‘I have come before you to speak the truth about this case.

The sergeant was murdered by my son. These accused are all innocent.'

The judge asked in astonishment, 'Are you in your senses or not?'

Rameshwari said, 'I am in my senses and am speaking the absolute truth. The sergeant has been murdered by my son. His name is Vinod Bihari. I have his photograph at home. He has been missing since that day. I am in my senses. I have no enmity with my son. I love him the same way as any mother does her only son. A week ago, he was everything to me. Despite my repeated pleadings when he committed this murder, I made up my mind that he will no longer remain my son. To save his life I won't let so many homes be ruined. These sisters of mine too are equally fond of their sons. By making them lose their sons, I don't want to remain a mother. I have spoken the truth. Justice is now in your hands.'

There was commotion in the room. Men and women surrounded Rameshwari from all sides. Some woman wept at her feet. In their own joys, no one considered what was going on in her unfortunate heart. She stood there stunned. She could neither think nor hear anything. Only Vinod's face was in front of her.

Suddenly, from the crowd a man came in front of Rameshwari and stabbed her in the chest. Rameshwari screamed and collapsed, and was shocked to see the assailant's face. Involuntarily, she uttered, 'Oh! It is you, Vinod!'

Two teardrops fell from her eyes and they shut forever.

*Translated from the Hindi by Anindya Das*



## Miss Padma

### 1

When Padma got out of the car and embraced her sister, she experienced a deep shock instead of feeling happy. This was not the same Ratna, who she had seen leave her house happily with Jijaji a year ago—blooming, cheerful and ecstatic—that flower had wilted. Padma had judged from her sister's letters that she was not happy with her husband and that her life had become bitter. However, she could not have imagined that Ratna was in such a bad way. As though a portrait had been wiped out and what remained was merely its sketch.

‘What has happened to you, sister?’ she asked. ‘Are you unwell? You never told me about your illness.’

Ratna's smile was distressed and she said, ‘Why would I write to you about it? Whatever was destined has happened, and will happen in the future too. Why would I narrate the tale of my woes to you and Amma, and bother you needlessly? I was so eager to meet you and you are so wicked that every now and again, you would promise to come and then go back on your word. It made me so angry that I would have beaten you up had I laid my hands on you. My heart is filled with months of vexation. Come in and freshen up, eat something and brace yourself.’

But Padma was not in the least bit hungry. She had had only a cup of tea with some toast at noon, an orange in the afternoon, and now it was evening. When she got out of the car, she had felt like eating something, but now, she seemed to have lost her appetite completely. At the moment, she wanted to only hear from Ratna about her heartaches. She sat down on the chair and remarked, ‘Jijaji

loved you very much. What could have annoyed him so suddenly?’

Looking vacantly into emptiness, Ratna replied, ‘Now, how can I, look into someone’s heart! Perhaps I am not such a beauty; or perhaps I am not that efficient; neither am I his obedient servant; because I have now realized that even the men who claim to be votaries of women’s liberation are not any better than the others who think traditionally. On the contrary, they expect to receive even greater services, in return for their liberalism, without actually asking for them.’

Seeking greater clarity on the matter, Padma asked, ‘But both of you were so familiar with one another.’

An exhausted Ratna responded, ‘This is the sad part. Ours was not a marriage arranged by the elders of the family. We were both well aware of each other’s dispositions, habits and thoughts. We had known one another as neighbours for so many years. Few have had as many occasions to judge one another’s weaknesses and strengths as we did. We had examined the vessel very closely and satisfied ourselves that there was neither a crack nor a fault in it. It rang perfectly—the ring of a vessel made from the finest metal. Nevertheless, no sooner had it been filled with water than cracks began to appear on the surface from nowhere, and drained all the water away. And now, the vessel stands dry, emptied of all its contents, like somebody’s wrecked destiny. I have realized only now that a woman has no choice but to look upon marriage as a curse and that instead of marrying, she should live her life holding sway over her own affairs. Why only for a woman, I consider marriage an equally destructive force for men too. If Shyamoo has tired of me, then I too feel equally tired of him. Now I resent that cheerful demeanour and those very habits that I could have, once upon a time, died for. I cannot tell you why my feelings have somersaulted thus. But now, I do not want to live with him for another day. When he laughs, I can sense tawdriness in his laughter. When he talks, I can sense artificiality in his banter. When he wears an achkan and a pyjama, I feel he looks like a *mirasi* and when he wears pants and a jacket, I feel he looks like a Christian convert. I have to exercise tremendous control over myself while I am with him.

‘The only difference between the two of us is that he is the master of his own resolve’ but I am a slave to his will. There are many women like me, far more beautiful than me, available for his amusement, vying for his attention and seeking to receive it. My feet are bound in chains created by the judicial system.

by my own sensibilities and my sense of dignity. He is free and so he is happy, he is tolerant; he is outwardly ceremonious. I am confined. Each and every part of my breath and being is weighed down in cares. Unfortunately, I can never put on a show of pretence. I want affection. I can also put up with the anger that arises out of affection. But I cannot put up with a show of devotion and how can I give love when I do not receive any? I would like to advise you never to bind yourself up in these chains. Women consider marriage a source of income for their livelihood. I made a grave mistake by not equipping myself for any profession. But you have plenty of time still; you are intelligent; your perceptions are sharp; you are courageous. If you study law, I am certain that fairly soon you will make a mark for yourself. Men are worshippers of beauty. Their hearts hunger for beauty. Why shouldn't we make the most of their weakness? If a man can be an attorney for one case, then you, with your beautiful face, can serve as an attorney for two. This beautiful face of yours will be attractive to many men. But the same man who will offer adoration at your feet today and will be willing to sacrifice himself over your coquetry, will hurt you seventy times once you are married; he will want to control you.'

Silly Ratna wanted to have everything, without giving anything—only on the authority of her womanhood and on the strength of her beauty and her coquetry. She is beautiful and graceful; she is delicately built and so she has a right to receive love and affection; she has the right to acceptance; the right to obtain faithfulness. She wants to purchase precious jewels in lieu of peanuts.

They saw Mr Shyam Nath Jhilla approaching them. Padma went out of the room and shook his hand.

## 2

Padma was the kind of girl whose thoughts were no different from her sister's, and her advice only served to strengthen her resolve. She had finished her BA. She secured a first class in the examination. The avenue for studying law sprawled before her. In two years, she completed her law degree and set up a practice too. Her intelligence and her sagacity, coupled with her beauty, soon enabled her to be ranked among the finest lawyers of the day. She would create a tumult in any court of law she appeared. Young lawyers from all over would

gather in the courtroom and look at her with eyes soaked in desire. Even the court could not remain indifferent to her attractions and her sugared arguments. Even those lawyers given to seriousness could not help but delight in her company. Their faces began to glow. Everyone longed for her to look at him just once. And why wouldn't her practice flourish? She had never tasted defeat. For her, there was an element of victory concealed even in defeat. If the judgment was pronounced against any of her fraudulent clients, the sentence pronounced was ever so mild, or if her case was weak, the opposite party was subjected to severe questioning. If the judgments were pronounced against her, she would not be charged any court fees; low margins of interest were levied and the opposite parties would have to bear the brunt. If the judgment were in favour of her client, the opposite party would have to rough out a severe judgment. Her beauty had been casting its spell in unknown ways.

However, her reputation as a lawyer rested on the prosecution of the lawsuit her sister Ratna had filed for separating from Mr Jhilla. The relationship between husband and wife had soured to such an extent that the only recourse left to Ratna was the one provided by the law. However, her case was weak from every angle. It was utterly lacking in the legal standing on the basis of which separation could be granted. However, Padma argued so judiciously that the case turned course quite completely. When Padma stood in the courtroom and presented her case with the self-assurance and conviction of one articulating a sermon, absolute in its scope and comprehensive in its argument, the audience in the courtroom listened with rapt attention and murmured among themselves that Padma was indeed, God's own gift. Undoubtedly, in comparison to logical reasoning, her argument was coloured by shades of emotional involvement. But instead of being psychologically motivated, it was coloured so vividly with sincerity that even the court could not help but take notice of its intensity. The judgment was pronounced in favour of Ratna and the doors for the fulfilment of Padma's ambition opened.

The two sisters began to live together now. They belonged to a distinguished family of the city. Padma's father, Pandit Umanath Kaul, had been a prosperous barrister but his life was short and in the pink of youth he passed away, leaving behind two young daughters. However, he had left behind sufficient wealth for their widowed mother to bring up the girls and educate them without feeling any scarcity. Umanath had enjoyed a superior lifestyle, had been free-thinking in his

religious inclinations, and had a colourful disposition, but his domestic life had been calm and comfortable. Whatever he did outside the house, within it, his wife was undoubtedly in control and she was happy. If there was unpleasantness between them, it remained restricted to mild disagreements. No occasion arose for a heated exchange of harsh words. Umanath was familiar with the techniques of upholding dignity and self-respect. He had been certain that irrespective of the misdemeanours of which he was guilty, his wife would remain unwavering in her faithfulness, in her affection; that her trust in him would never waver.

Now, even though it was twenty years since his passing, that good lady still looked up to him in earnest devotion. She ate only one meal a day and that too without salt; she slept on the floor and fasted for half the days of the month, as though she were an ascetic. She felt deeply saddened by the behaviour of both her girls, but she had neither the understanding nor the courage to explain this to them. Both the girls poked fun at their mother; they believed her to be a naive, submissive woman with retrograde thinking, and pitied her for her notions. Had either of them been married to such a self-centred, unfaithful and frosty person, she would have booted him out of her life, never set eyes on him again and made it quite clear to him that if he could be disloyal, then she too could treat him in the very same manner. How could Amma have lived with such a dreadful, heartless and ignorant man and in fact, how could she still hold him in such deep reverence? This was a blessing conferred on her by lack of education. To this date, she held on to the backwardness popular during the days of Noah and the Great Deluge. How could this poor soul become aware of the fact that the world had come such a long way?

Padma had bought herself a new house soon after she began her practice so that she could live independently. Living with her mother meant that Padma would have to restrain herself in several ways; she would have to do certain things out of a sense of modesty, so she decided to live independently. Why should she be answerable to anyone else? She was answerable for her own good or bad deeds. Nobody had the right to interfere with the choices she made. The widow continued to live by herself in that old house, worshipping the memories of her dead husband. Ratna began to live with her sister after she was granted separation from her husband, but she realized within a few months that the two of them could not get along together. Padma had made arrangements to get her a job as a teacher in a school of a neighbouring town. The greatest advantage Padma



job as a teacher in a school of a mofussil town. The greatest advantage Padma received from her education was that she had learnt that life was all about fulfilment of desires. Limitations were anathema to success. Freud was her new deity and his philosophy was the guiding principles of her existence. If any part of the body were bound, it would become worthless in a few days' time because it would stop receiving blood. It would grow malignant tumours and endanger existence grievously with life-threatening maladies. Passion and misery and confusion are all figments of the imagination, surfacing merely because desires have been controlled. These principles of psychology were the new guiding principles of Padma's life.

She had begun to build up upon her individuality with great enthusiasm. After the initial hiccups, her practice flourished, and soon became the breath and being of her existence as water is to fish. However, most of her cases could be categorized as being similar to one another. Minor discrepancies arose in issues here and there, but there was no need for any out-of-the-ordinary preparation or investigations for the prosecution. The clerk could complete the preparations. She would stand in the courtroom and repeat the very same arguments with the same proficiency of language. That is how she found time for leisure now. Among her admirers were several wealthy young men who devised new excuses to be rewarded a glimpse of her. Besides, she was the goddess of the temple of the law and many dashing young lawyers made the rounds of her residence. Why only the young, even the middle-aged and experienced and also the grey-haired wise men, felt honoured if she so much as cast a look at any one of them.

Even if one strives, it is not humanly possible to behave like an animal. Padma spent the prime of her youth and beauty, toying with the hearts of young men. She took great pleasure in the wonders of coquetry, playfulness and heart-stopping grace, and did her utmost to attract admirers. But gradually, she began to resent these foolish pursuits and her heart began to quest for something meaningful—that in which she would discover tenderness, which would be enduring; in which there was depth, and against which she could sustain and shore herself up. Among those martyred on her, there were also those who were like the bumble bees that suck the nectar from a flower and fly away—those who posed as her lovers merely because they craved to be noticed by her and desired her attention and her favours. Now, she wanted someone who would love her so dearly that he could sacrifice his life for her, one who would make her love the

motive of his existence and for whom she would be willing to sacrifice herself.

Coincidentally, one day, she happened to come across Mr Jhilla. She brought her car to a halt and said to him, 'Please come over sometime.' Despite the broken relationship, it was not possible for her to be rude to him.

Jhilla responded warmly. 'I have come here only today and wanted to meet you too. Since I heard your argument that day and observed how you conduct yourself, I have become your admirer. I will come over when you are free.'

Padma felt a surge of sympathy for him. She wanted to demonstrate that though she had fabricated many falsehoods against him to implicate him in her sister's lawsuit, that had been part of a professional deal, and she did not bear him any personal grudges. She said, 'By all means do come over. You can come with me now. I am going home.'

Jhilla sat in the car and in that short meeting, Padma realized that he was a refined and modern person, who spoke his mind.

When they sat down to have tea, Jhilla protested with a smile on his face, 'You made me out to be such a devil during the litigation.'

Padma smiled and replied, 'Don't mention it, please. That was a professional matter.'

'Should I presume then that, after all, you do not consider me to be such a shallow parson?'

'On the contrary, I am very impressed with your bearing. I'm surprised that you and Ratna could not get along.'

'If one expects an individual to conduct himself like an angel rather than like a human being, then one is bound to feel disappointed. It requires being thick-skinned to sustain a marriage and perhaps Ratna was lacking in this ability. And so, our marriage was an unhappy one. Now I want to see for myself whether I can discover happiness in my freedom—I am done with matrimony.'

'My commiserations.'

'I see no merit in a compassion that is offered as mere lip service.'

Padma looked at him bewitchingly. 'What more than lip service can be paid to counterfeit men like you?'

'Do not forget that this is not a courtroom.'

'It is you who carry the burden of providing an explanation.'

'Grant me a chance.'

The next day Jhilla came again and stayed for longer and thereafter he would

The next day, Jhilla came again and stayed for longer and longer, he would drop in every day. Day by day, Padma began to be drawn towards him. She could perceive in him all the qualities which she craved. There was a similarity in the way they thought; he was a well-meaning person—willing to surrender, full of sensitivity and devoid of any selfishness.

One day Jhilla said, 'I feel like moving and continuing my practice over here. I have begun to feel that it is impossible for me to live far away from you.'

Padma responded happily, 'Please do come; that is my wish too. Come and live here, in this house.'

'Here, with you? That's quite impossible!'

'You claim to love me and yet you shun my shadow!'

'I don't wish to get in the way of your freedom.'

'Let's say then that you fear that your freedom will be compromised because of me.'

'I give up!'

'Honestly?'

'Why don't you make a deal with me?'

'In right earnest?'

'Yes, from the bottom of my heart.'

### 3

Ratna wrote Padma a letter full of intense anger and severe reproof. 'Haven't you heard that old adage, "It is foolish to assess one who has already been assessed"? I am amazed that you have attached yourself to that man. He will deceive you. He is a crook, too full of complexes.' But Padma was unmoved. She showed the letter to Jhilla. He responded, 'Write to her that you are going to marry me and that you will never file for divorce.'

Jhilla's medical practice was quite meagre. One room was reserved for him. He put up his signboard on the door and spent about two or three hours in the morning in that room reading novels—something he enjoyed tremendously. Patients were not to be seen. Padma had fallen so deeply in love with him that he could spend as much as he wanted; she neither complained nor withdrew any indulgence. Every day, she bought him some gift or the other. Even the wealthiest man in the city did not own such an expensive watch. He had a car

reserved especially for him. In addition, the servants had been issued strict orders that there shouldn't be even the slightest delay in carrying out any of his orders. 'You will be dismissed if he has even a minor grievance.' The best alcohol was purchased for him every day and Padma too was addicted to it. They were living in heavenly bliss.

Not only this, Padma was a slave to his will. Not only was his name Jhilla, temperamentally too, he could put one through the ordeals of endurance. At the slightest instance, he would lose his cool and then Padma would pander to his will. It was quite impossible for her to put up with his annoyance. Jhilla was aware of his power over her and he capitalized on this. Padma did not know her weakness. She considered these to be his heart-alluring antics. Love has an immense power to inflict hardship and it has an equally bottomless capacity for patient endurance. Jhilla inflicted hardship and Padma endured patiently. One smile from Jhilla, one word of gratitude from him or merely his happiness was sufficient to send her into joyous rapture. Like in the world of politics, there is in the constitution of love, a monarch and a subject. The subject sweats, suffers and dies, but his lips are sealed. The master inflicts penalties and patronizes, makes one cry and does not tolerate even a puckering of the eyebrows.

People were astonished at what they were seeing. This was the same Padma, the epitome of pride, the same delicately dispositioned enchantress, but how submissive she had become! Even a crook would not take such undue advantage of a woman he wished to captivate. Those devotees who were jealous of the attention Padma showered on Jhilla would sneer when her back was turned, 'What drug has this doctor administered?' Padma would simply smile and be quiet. They who had been disappointed by Padma's disregard would observe her quiet subservience and mock her, saying, 'As you sow, so shall you reap.'

One day, Padma opened one of Jhilla's letters by mistake. Angrily, he asked, 'Who opened my letter?'

Padma was unable to concede her fault. 'Perhaps it is the assistant's fault.'

'I consider you responsible for this and you will have to make amends.'

'Here I am, my head bowed low.'

Jhilla took her fondly in his arms, and Padma felt inebriated with ecstasy. The whole world seemed trivial to her now.

Two years passed by and the flower began to wither. It was going to bear fruit. The delicate Padma became emaciated. Her face pale, complexion sallow, her eyes worn out and her body drooping. She felt burdened with the heavy weight of cares and had nightmares; when she looked at her appearance in the mirror, she would sigh despairingly. All the beautiful sights and sounds of the world and the finest refreshments seemed but pale in her present condition, with dark circles beneath her eyes; and the desire for nourishment at its lowest ebb. But she hungered for love more than anything else. She wanted to be fussed over with warmth and affection. She wanted to be pampered, indulged, as though she were a delicate blossom; she wanted someone to hold her close to his heart, never to separate her from himself. She began to lose the confidence she once had in herself.

However, Jhilla went his own way, quite unconscious and quite oblivious to the change. He was still as irascible, as arrogant. *Why didn't Padma come to call him for dinner? He wasn't hungry! Why didn't she bring the paan to him herself? That sweet disposition has disappeared and so has that coquetry; that cheerfulness and that rich brown complexion too has faded but her mind still reins the skies.* He wanted Padma to continue to do all these things for him, with even more attention than before; he wanted her to surrender herself to his needs, to shoulder his distresses. Thus, the ill will between them began to increase. Padma would think to herself, *What a heartless man he is!* and Jhilla in turn would think, *How disinterested she is!* He began to harbour a grudge against her. The pleasures that could capture his heart had ceased to exist for him over here now. He knew that, after all, Padma was merely his mistress. So why couldn't he enjoy the pleasures of life? What could prevent him from celebrating its delights?

Padma would remain in her room, feeling quite miserable. He would go out for leisurely walks and return after midnight. She kept waiting for him.

One day, she complained, 'Why do you stay away till so late at night? Does it never occur to you that I suffer such severe discomfort?'

Jhilla made a sour face. 'Oh! So now it bothers you to have to wait for me even for a little while?' Disinterestedly, he went on, 'What do you want? Shall I remain at home, tied to the edge of your sari?'

‘All I want is a little sympathy.’

‘I cannot change my ways.’

Padma became quiet. She feared that there would be bad blood between them. More and more, she found herself subjugated by him. She feared that he would lose his temper, that he might go away. She quailed at the mere thought of that. She was also afraid of Ratna. Even now she was hostile towards her. If Jhilla went away, she would scoff at her—how she would scorn her! She wanted to prove to Ratna that she had been triumphant where Ratna had been unsuccessful. ‘You wanted to control Jhilla with your beauty—you failed. But I have bound him with my love, and despite the absence of a ritualistic or a legal or even a spiritual bond, I still have a hold over him.’ She was willing to suffer all his emotional onslaughts in order to prove this achievement of her love. More than feeling concern for herself, she was keen to ensure that that ideal triumphed.

Her pain was making her uncomfortable. The lady doctor came, the nurse came and so did the midwife, but Jhilla was not to be seen. Every now and again her heart sank, and she became faint with anguish. She cried and underwent severe pain, her body drenched in sweat; she thought she would die. Time and again, she asked for Jhilla, as though only he could remedy her pain. *Ah yes! If only he would come and stand by her side, if only he would stroke her head, if only he would utter loving words to her, she could suffer far more pain than this. But where is he? He hasn’t come in yet. Perhaps it is midnight now.*

The lady doctor said, ‘It is twelve-thirty and he has not yet come. Can someone send for him? Do you have any idea where he could have gone?’

‘No, I don’t know but send someone. He can look for him and bring him back.’

The lady doctor asked her not to worry, for it would only add to the pain. Padma became quiet; she began to writhe in pain once again, then lost consciousness. When she regained consciousness, she said, ‘I will not be able to survive this. Miss Jim, this pain will claim my life. When Shyam Babu comes, tell him I have forgiven him, I have no complaints against him. You can give him the child and tell him on my behalf that he should bring it up, for it is a reminder of his ill-fated Padma.’

Just then, she felt the dark shadows of death loom large upon her.

When her eyes reopened, she found herself—where? Oh! Where? Where? A sweet and refreshing breeze blew tender words into her ears. When the lady

doctor placed the baby in front of her, it seemed to Padma that her sore eyes were refreshed, and that cool refreshments soothed her heart and soon permeated her entire body. She held out her hands and took the baby in her arms, and asked, 'Has Shyam Babu come? What? Hasn't he come in yet?'

Her countenance fell once more, as though a candle had just been put out. But the greatest pleasure of life lay before her and everything else paled in comparison. All her coquetry and gracefulness; her adornments and toilette; all that embracing and kissing—nothing could compare with this happiness. She could not lift that newborn, cherubic child in her arms and hand him over to Jhilla with emotions brimming over with pride and gratitude. Tears fell from her eyes.

## 5

The next day dawned. Jhilla did not come. Evening came and night fell. Yet another day dawned, and yet another evening came. In this way, six days passed but Jhilla did not come. Neither had he said anything before leaving and nor had he left a note. Padma began to shrivel up with fear and anxiety.

On the seventh day, she dispatched Munshiji to the bank. She needed to withdraw some money. Munshiji returned from the bank, unsuccessful in his mission. Dr Jhilla had withdrawn all the money from the bank and made off with it. Padma had authorized him to conduct the monetary transactions.

She asked with astonishment, 'But I had twenty thousand rupees in my account.'

'Yes, he has withdrawn all of it and left.'

'Could you find out where he has gone?'

'Nobody knows anything over there.'

Angrily, Padma barged into Jhilla's room and taking hold of his life-size painting which she had had commissioned for one thousand rupees, she smashed it so hard on to the floor that the glass shattered into smithereens. Then she tore up the painting with both her hands, stomped with both her feet on the fragments, to her heart's content, and then set fire to them. Then she gathered up all of Jhilla's belongings—his clothes, books, suitcase, shoes, cigarette case and everything else that remained there—into a pile, doused it with kerosene, set fire

to it and proclaimed loudly, 'You callous man! You scoundrel, good-for-nothing, pervert, idiot . . . you, Jhilla . . . *you?*'

Yes, Dr Jhilla had emerged out of nowhere and stood at the door watching these destructive actions with amused but unruffled eyes.

Padma stood there, incredulous at what she beheld, then, steeped in indignation and anger, she demanded, 'Where have you been all this time and why have you taken away my money, you callous, dishonest man!'

Jhilla replied jocularly, 'Has your heart relieved itself of its fever or are you still smarting under its anguish?'

Beside herself with anger, Padma retorted, 'You have robbed me of my money, you ungrateful wretch! I'll make sure you rot in prison, you deceitful swindler.'

Jhilla threw a wad of currency notes at her and observed contemptuously, 'Take your money and my farewell too! This is what your love is about—which you expressed with such great enthusiasm. This is just as you do with your bulldog—you carry him in your lap and play with him; you kiss him; you take him out for leisurely walks; you feel thrilled to make him sit by your side; you bathe him yourself and call him your "darling" and what-not. But if the dog happens to so much as snarl even once, you will beat it mercilessly—you may even shoot him. I too was your bulldog—as beloved and as lowly. I was on the lookout and I wanted to test the waters, and now I am content that what I thought was not without reason. It was not such a great sin to abscond for one week, and twenty thousand rupees is not a very large sum of money, but I have seen what your love is all about. Ratna and I have separated, but our separation is merely a ruling of the court. We are bound to one another in a relationship that holds together our souls and nothing can sever that bond. Because she is Mrs Jhilla even today and I know that when I go to her, penitent and ashamed, she will be my wife once more and I, her obedient husband. You may congratulate yourself on your freedom. Do you wish to see Ratna's letters? Here, see them and feel ashamed of yourself. She still lives by my name, but you will ensnare someone else tomorrow. Yes, tomorrow! And once again, you will shower him with professions of your love as you did with me. But the irritable and ill-tempered Ratna, always imposing regulations, will continue to be jealous of me and continue to remain mine.'

Padma stood there like a statue



Fatima stood there like a statue.

Jhilla walked away—like a prisoner who had been released.

*Translated from the Urdu by Fatima Rizvi*



## Radiance

### 1

On my return to Hindustan after clearing the ICS examination, I was given the charge of a subdivision in the mountainous region of the United Provinces. I was very fond of hunting and there was no dearth of wildlife in this region. My heart's desire had come true. My bungalow was situated at the foot of a hill. I held court at my residence. My only grievance was that I had no social life. I remedied this by going out for leisurely walks and hunting, or by reading newspapers and magazines. I had access to several newspapers and magazines from Europe and America. How could I appreciate the articles published in Hindustani newspapers and magazines in comparison with the wealth of detail, the contemporaneity and the excellence of debate in the articles of those? I wondered when the day would dawn that we could witness the publication of such superior magazines in our own country.

It was springtime, the month of Phagun. I set out on a tour and having inspected the thana of Landhuar, I set out towards the thana of Gajanpur. A distance of about eighteen miles had to be covered, but the scenery was breathtakingly beautiful. The sun was shining quite brilliantly, but it wasn't an unwelcome brilliance. The air was redolent with an earthy fragrance. Mango blossoms had sprouted on the trees and the koel had begun to sing. I had slung my gun over my shoulder, just in case I happened to come across an animal. I also had some consideration for my safety because at that time, theft and robbery had become the order of the day. I stroked the neck of my steed and said, 'Let's go, Sonny, let's go.' It was a two-and-a-half-hour-long run. By evening, we

would reach Gajanpur; the orderlies commissioned under me had been sent out earlier.

I could see the farmers working in the fields. The rabi crop was ready for harvest. Several fields were being prepared for sugar cane and musk melon plantations. These divisions of land were rather small. The same, age-old, rickety ploughs dating back to the days of Abraham; the same woeful ignorance; the same shameful partial nakedness—only God could do something to uplift this community! The government expends lakhs of rupees on ordnance. New-fangled research is conducted and discoveries are made. Doctors and inspectors are all in attendance, but there is neither improvement nor progress in the living conditions of the masses. The storm of educational opportunities is dispersing misconduct! Dogs wander about in the madrasas, which are all in a state of vacant disuse. If I happen to enter into one, I come upon the teacher lying on his cot in a state of partial drowsiness. It takes many entreaties and a lot of hard work to gather up just about ten or twenty students. The future of a community that has been swallowed up so completely in harking back upon the glories of the Puranic past is extremely pitiable. I have come across decent and well-educated men crying over memories of a magnificent past. Agreed, that it was the Aryan preachers who had spread the word of God among the inhabitants of the islands of Asia. Agreed also, that once upon a time, the continent of Australia too owed a great debt to the Aryan civilization, but of what use is it to delve on a glorious past? In this day and age, it is the West that gleams as a beacon of light to the rest of the world. A small country like England controls over half the countries of the world. On account of the research and development in various quarters, the West has certainly provided a new set of conventions and values for the rest of the world. Moreover, any country that does not have the inclination to follow the policies provided by them is assured of a dark future. It is no surprise that a country where to this day, half-naked, reclusive fakirs are commemorated with words of grand praise; where blind faith and idol worship rule the roost; where to this day, religion is a composite part of each and every aspect of life, is in such a state of disarray.

Lost in these thoughts, I was going my way. All of a sudden, a draft of cold wind enveloped my body and I raised my head to look up. On the eastern side, the atmosphere was clouding over with dust. A dense curtain of dust had covered up the entire firmament—the prognosis of a gathering storm. I began to ride

faster but minute by minute, the screen of dust became thicker and darker; and I was riding eastward. In other words, I was riding right into the storm, to deal with it unaccompanied and single-handed. The wind blew faster, the curtain of dust began to gather round me and all of a sudden, I was engulfed in a sea of dust. The wind blew so hard and fast that I was nearly thrown out of the saddle several times. It made such a din as it blew that one could imagine that a single clarion call by nature had converted a strong wind into an enormous storm. Even if ten or twenty thousand cannons fired collectively, they would not produce such an appalling clamour. I could see nothing beyond the dust, not even the route I was to travel. Uff! It was such an awful clamour—very likely comparable to that of the portentous Day of Judgement—that to this day I shudder to think about it. I clung on to the neck of my horse and hid my face in its mane. Along with the dust, tiny pebbles and grains of gravel hit my face hard and fast as though someone were shooting them from a water gun. I was filled with a sinister sense of foreboding. My innards squirmed whenever I heard the creak of a tree being uprooted and I feared that if it were to roll down the hillside and fall on me, I would be lost and gone forever. It is in such storms that huge boulders are dislodged and if any were to come rolling down, death would close all. There wasn't even any possibility of being found. The route was mountainous and I could see virtually nothing; were I to err by even a foot either to the right or the left, I was sure to tumble down into a gorge, thousands of feet deep. I was caught in extraordinarily trying circumstances. If the storm continued to rage around me till the evening, I was sure to die. Some wild animal would surely make a meal out of me at night. Of its own volition, my heart filled up with horror—I would die in such conditions that even my mortal remains would not be found.

Uff! A spark of lightning pierced the darkness of the sky so sharply that I felt a spear strike through my heart. Suddenly, I was startled by the sound of tinkling bells. Despite the din of the storm around me, I could hear the sound of the tinkling quite clearly, as though a female mule were dashing towards me. Surely, someone was riding her, but how could he see the road? Were the mule to waver by even a step, she would surely fall into the deep gorge below. Perhaps he was a zamindar. My face was covered with such a thick layer of dust that he would perhaps not even recognize me; but he must be a mighty courageous man.

In a moment, the sound of the tinkling bell drew closer to me. Then I saw a

young woman carrying a basket on her head, advancing towards me, step by step. I could barely see a dim form even though she was just about a yard away. Despite being a woman, she was advancing rather fearlessly, like a man. Neither was she afraid of the storm, nor was she anxious about the trees that were being uprooted and nor was she concerned about the boulders being dislodged, as though, these were no more than yet another ordinary, day-to-day matter. Never before, in all my life, had I felt so embarrassed.

I took my handkerchief out of my pocket, wiped my face and addressed her, 'Hey, woman! How far is Gajanpur?'

I had spoken rather loudly, but in all likelihood, my voice had not carried beyond ten yards. The woman made no reply. I suppose she had not seen me either.

I screamed, 'Hey, woman! Wait a minute. How far is Gajanpur from here?'

The woman halted. She came close to me, looked at me, bowed her head a little, and asked, 'Where do you want to go?'

'How far is Gajanpur?'

'Follow me. My village is close by. Beyond it is Gajanpur.'

'How far is your village?'

'Right there—you can see it from here.'

'Why didn't you pass the time somewhere to take shelter from the storm?'

'I have little children at home. How could I wait? My husband is dead.'

A strong gust of wind pushed me back a couple of paces. A squall of dust lashed against my face. I have no idea about what became of that woman. I remained standing there, philosophizing to myself: *What relief does life have to offer that woman? She must be living in some ramshackle hut with two or three hunger-stricken children. What is death to the feeble? Surely, it would bring some sort of reprieve for her. My situation is different. Life lures me unto itself with all its rich temptations and its vibrant hues: I have courage and I have set myself targets—why should I endanger my life?* Once again, I hid my head in my horse's mane, just like an ostrich, unable to escape a hazard, hides its head in the sand.

That was the last breath of the storm. Thereafter, its force began to subside. To the extent that in about fifteen minutes, the skies cleared. There remained neither the sign of the dust the winds had kicked up, nor the trace of the winds. The air was now refreshingly cool and pleasant. It would barely be five o'clock yet. Ahead of me was a hill. At its foot lay a small *mauza*. Hardly had I entered the village when I saw the woman I had encountered en route, walking towards me, carrying a child in her arms. She looked at me and asked, 'Where have you been? I was afraid that you had lost your way. I was about to set out to look for you.'

Touched by her compassion, I replied, 'I am very grateful for your kindness. I was overcome by the strong gust of wind and could not see the road that lay ahead: I did not budge from where I stood. Is this your village? How far is Gajanpur?'

'Only a short distance away. It is a straight road that leads there. Do not turn either to the left or the right. You should reach there by sunset.'

'Is this your only child?'

'No, there is one elder than him. Both of them had taken shelter in the *chaupal* of the *numberdar* during the storm, fearing that our hut would be blown away. This one refuses to leave me since I returned. He says: "You will run away somewhere again." He is quite a rascal. He plays with the other boys. I work hard, Babuji! I have to bring them up. There is no one whom I can lean back on for support now. I had gone to sell grass. No matter where I go, these two children are foremost in my mind.'

My heart is not so easily moved. But that rustic woman's selfless talk was set apart by an unassuming simplicity, a motherly emotion that touched a chord in me and I became curious about her. 'How long ago have you been widowed?' I asked her.

Her eyes welled up with tears. She concealed her emotions by holding the child's face up against her eyes, and replied, 'Only six months ago, Babuji. How can man hold out against God's will? It all happened so soon. He was hale and hearty; he had returned with his plough. He drank a lot of water, threw up and died right there. He neither spoke nor took notice of anything. I thought he was tired; that he had fallen asleep. When I went to wake him up to eat, his body had already turned cold. Since then, Babuji, I have begun to cut grass and sell it in order to earn a living and feed my children. It was not possible for me to take in

order to earn a living and feed my children. It was not possible for me to take up farming. I sold the bullocks and used the money to perform his last rites. It would be enough for me now if God should give His blessings to these two servants of yours so that they may survive.'

The power of my discernment and perspicacity is by no means inadequate; I also have an understanding of human psychology. Nevertheless, at that moment, I was overcome with such deep emotion that my eyes filled up with tears. I took five rupees from my pocket and holding them out to her, I said, 'Take this and buy some sweets for the children on my behalf. I will come again sometime when I get a chance.' Then I touched the child's cheeks lightly with my fingers.

The mother stepped back and remarked, 'No, Babuji. Keep the money. I am poor but I am not a beggar.'

'These are not alms but money to buy sweets for the children.'

'No, Babuji.'

'Look upon me as your brother and keep the money.'

'No, Babuji. It is my responsibility to uphold the self-respect of the man to whom I was married. May God shower blessings on you! Now go away or you will be late.'

Never before had I felt so small. An ordinary woman of the same class of people whom I underrated as uneducated, gross and ignorant had shown such exemplary self-reliance, an extraordinary sense of duty and staunch faith! My heart felt burdened by the weight of my own worthlessness. If education is the means to cultivating self-discipline and not merely accumulating degrees, then this woman had achieved the pinnacle of success.

Embarrassedly, I put away the note in my pocket and spurring on my horse, I asked, 'Weren't you even a little afraid of the storm?'

The woman smiled. 'Why should I be afraid? God is present everywhere. If He wishes to destroy me, He can do so even over here. My husband died in a trice, after he had returned home. Had he been alive, you would never have travelled to Gajanpur alone. He would have gone with you; he would have looked after you.'

The horse galloped away; my heart was racing faster than my steed. My condition was much like that of a poor man who comes across a nugget of gold and makes up his mind to make good with it. This rustic woman had taught me a lesson that neither philosophy nor the high offices of the medical sciences could

have taught. Like a poor man, I carefully sanctified my nugget of gold—the new-found knowledge I had received from unexpected quarters—within my heart and galloped on, proud that I had received it, and yet wary that one way or another, I should be careful not to lose it. The only care that battered my heart was that I should be able to conceal my nugget of gold in some such corner of my heart where no avaricious person would chance upon it.

### 3

Gajanpur was still no less than five miles away. The route was exceedingly trying, rocky and barren. I was forced to control my horse. Riding at a fast gallop entailed a grave danger to our lives. I dropped pace, riding slowly and steadily. As I did so, clouds gathered across the sky. It had been partially overcast for some time, but now, the sky threatened menacingly. The clouds thundered and lightning struck. Then from the east, a new layer of a yellow cloud cover spread itself out against the ominous muddy grey and covered up the entire firmament. I knew this to be a hailstorm. The month of Phagun is often typified by the gathering of such clouds accompanied by loud thunder and lightning, auguring a hailstorm. In no time, the clouds began to grow thicker. Suddenly, I came upon a flat plateau; at the opposite end, I could clearly see an archway: inscribed on it was the crest of the Thakur of Gajanpur. Not a tree grew there to provide shelter. However, I did not experience any sort of apprehension at all. Rather, I felt as though I was under the protection of some sort of power that would guard me against every hazard, every harm.

The yellow clouds grew more and more ominous by the minute. I supposed that even the horse understood the imminent danger and neighed every now and again; it wanted to dash out of the perilous situation as quickly as possible. I too saw that the road was clear and let go of the reins. My steed darted swiftly. I felt the thrill of its fast pace. There was no trace of any fear within my heart.

I must have covered a distance of about a mile when I encountered trouble. I came across the bridge of a hill river, some fifty yards long. A little water still flowed over the bridge. Water had collected on either side too. I saw a blind man crossing the bridge with the help of his walking stick. He was so close to one edge of the bridge that I feared he would fall off. There would be serious trouble if he fell into the water because it was quite deep over there. I called out ‘Old



He fell into the water, because it was quite deep over there. I called out, 'Old man, move to your right.'

The old man sallied forth; I suppose he must have felt intimidated by the sound of the horse's hooves. Instead of moving to the right, he moved to the left and slipped and fell right into the water. Just then a tiny hailstone fell right in front of me. I was confronted with two problems at the same time.

On the opposite bank of the river was a temple. There was sufficient space to rest in it. I could have reached it in just about a minute. However, my new-found courage stood in the way of thoughts of my own safety. How could I leave this blind man to die and run for my life? My zeal did not permit me to do that; there wasn't much time for dithering either. Quickly, I leapt off the horse, while hailstones fell all around me. I dived into the water, which was deep enough to drown an elephant. The pit that had been dug to lay the foundation of the bridge was broader than required. The contractor had constructed a ten-foot-wide bridge, but he had not bothered to level out the earth that he had dug up. The old man had fallen into this pit. I too lost my balance, but I knew how to swim and was not afraid. I dived yet again and drew the blind man out of the water. He had already consumed about two litres of water! His body had become lifeless. With great difficulty, I managed to pull him out. When I came out of the water, I saw that my horse had strolled off to the temple. It was not easy to carry that dying man for the distance of about a furlong. Moreover, the hailstones were falling more rapidly now. They rained hard and fast like pellets, now on my head, now on my shoulder and now on my back. I writhed with pain but continued to walk towards the temple, holding that dying body as close to myself as possible. Were I to describe my innermost feelings at this point of time, one would imagine I am merely singing my own praises. It is always a pleasure to do a good deed unto others, but the elation I experienced at that time was altogether different. It was the bliss of having tasted victory; I had been victorious over myself. Prior to my experiences that day, I would have either gone on my way or filed a report with the police on seeing the blind man drown—especially when I was under siege from a hailstorm. I would certainly not have dived into the water. Every moment I feared that some large hailstone would fall upon my head and that would be the end of my dear life! Nevertheless, I was a happy man because this day marked the beginning of a new phase in my life.

By the time I entered the temple, my whole body was bruised. But I was not

concerned about myself. Long ago, I had trained in providing first-aid and now that knowledge came to my assistance. In about half an hour, I was able to make the blind man sit up. Meanwhile, two men came to the temple looking for him, and I was relieved of providing him any more assistance. By now, the hailstorm had abated. I patted my horse on the back, cleaned the saddle with my handkerchief and prepared to be on my way to Gajanpur. Daring and dauntless, my heart brimmed with supreme strength and courage. Just then the blind man asked, ‘Who are you, brother? To me, you seem like a mahatma!’

‘I am your servant!’ I replied.

‘It seems you have the blessings of a deity.’

‘Yes, I am protected by a goddess.’

‘Which goddess is she?’

‘She lives in the village we have left behind.’

‘Is she a woman?’

‘No, for me she is a goddess.’

*Translated from the Urdu by Fatima Rizvi*



## Reality

### 1

*That* secret remained hidden away in Amrit's heart. Poornima never had a clue from his looks, his words or even his deportment that he was attached, or could have been attached, to her by any greater bond beyond the ordinary companionship, or the friendship they'd had since childhood. It was true that every time she carried a pitcher to the well to draw water, Amrit would appear from God knows where, and compellingly take the pitcher from her hands and draw the water for her. When she was about to prepare the fodder for the cow, he would take the baskets filled with hay from her hands and empty out the silage into the trough; if she went out to the grocer's to purchase something, she would often come upon him and he would run errands for her.

There was no boy or elder male member in Poornima's house. Her father had died several years ago and her mother observed purdah. Every time Amrit went out to study, he made it a point to go over to Poornima's house and find out whether they needed anything from the market. His family owned agricultural land and buffaloes, and they owned groves and orchards. Avoiding the scrutiny of his family, he would go over to Poornima's and give portions of the season's yield as gifts. But why would Poornima consider those kinds of services as anything other than graciousness or cordiality on his part—why would she think otherwise? People living in the same village may not be related to one another as blood brothers, but they are certainly of a fraternity by virtue of their shared neighbourhood. There was nothing extraordinary in the civilities that were extended.

One day, Poornima said to him, 'You are at school all day. I feel so anxious about you.'

Amrit replied quite simply, 'What can I do? The examinations are round the corner.'

'I keep wondering how I will ever see you once I have gone away and if you would still come to my house.'

Startled, Amrit asked, 'Where will you go away to?'

Poornima was embarrassed. She replied, 'Where your sisters have gone—where girls go.'

Amrit responded regretfully, 'I see—that thing,' and became quiet. It had not occurred to him until then that Poornima would go away. He did not have the leisure to ponder that far. Delight thrives on the thrill provided by the here and now. How could delight be itself if it began to ponder on the future?

And indeed, Amrit soon stood face-to-face with the dilemma that had seemed quite inconceivable to him. A marriage proposal came for Poornima. The family was both wealthy and respectable, and Poornima's mother gladly gave her consent to the match. On account of their impoverished life, Poornima's mother valued affluence above all other worldly necessities, and this household could provide Poornima with all the material comforts required for a splendid lifestyle. It seemed as though her heart's desire had come true. She had been wasting away under the heavy weight of her cares. Every time she would think about Poornima's marriage, she became hypertensive. It seemed that by a mere stroke of the magical wand of fate, her worries and concerns had vanished into thin air.

When Amrit heard about it, he was beside himself with grief. He ran wildly towards too tight Poornima's house, checked himself and returned. Good sense prevailed. Of what use was this? How could she be blamed? How could anyone be blamed? He came home, covered his face and lay down. Poornima would go away. How could he live without her? He began to get restive. Why should he be alive at all? What did his life have to offer him? But this was restlessness; it passed and was replaced by the calm that follows a storm and he became indifferent. Why should he maintain any contact with Poornima when she was about to go away, or why should he meet her? And why would Poornima feel any concern for him now? In fact, had she ever felt any concern for him? It was he who followed her everywhere like a devoted dog, wagging his tail. Poornima never once asked him why he did so, and why wouldn't she be proud now? She

was going to be the bride of a wealthy man. Well, by all means, let her! Amrit too would survive—he would not die. These are the ways of the world, the harvest of devotion.

However, all this tumult remained concealed within his heart without transforming into action. How could he gather the courage to walk up to Poornima's mother and tell her, 'Poornima belongs to me; she will remain mine forever.' That would cause such a furore. It would kick up such a storm in the village. Such an incident had neither been recorded in the annals of the village and nor had anything such as this been traced in its environs.

Poornima was in such a state that she waited for Amrit to come by. Why did he pass by her doorway and never step inside? If she happened to see him, en route to some place, he seemed to avoid even her shadow. She waited for him, holding the pot by the well expecting him to come by, but he was not to be seen.

One day, she went over to his house, walked up to him and asked for an explanation. 'Why don't you come any more?' her voice choked with tears. She recollected that now she was merely a guest in the village for a few more days.

But Amrit sat there impassively. Nonchalantly, he simply said, 'The examination is about to begin soon. There is no time to spare. I suppose, since you are going away . . . '

He wanted to say, 'There is no point in letting love blossom now.' But it occurred to him that this would be a most unwise exchange. Does one leave an ailing person, for whom death is imminent, to die without treating him? On the contrary, as his condition worsens, people redouble their efforts to take care of him despite the heightened sense of doom, and as the hour of the end draws nearer, their attachment intensifies more significantly. Changing the topic, he remarked, 'I hear that those people too are very wealthy.'

Either Poornima did not hear these words or perhaps she felt that it did not merit an answer. Her ears were still resonating with the earlier part of his reply.

She answered in a heart-rending tone: 'How can I be blamed for this? I am not going of my own free will. I am under an obligation to go, hence I am going.'

Saying so, her countenance flushed a rosy pink, due to sheer embarrassment. In all likelihood, she had spoken more than was appropriate. But people in love are wont to make moves not very different from those made by players in a game of chess.

Amrit fixed his eyes on her in a gaze that was meant to ascertain the

Amrit fixed his eyes on her in a gaze that was meant to ascertain the genuineness of her sentiment. Was there any trace of truth in those words or not? If only he had the courage to look deeply into her eyes and learn the truth about her feelings; after all, all girls could express disheartenment in such a manner. Despite the fact that many of them were made to endure severe abuse soon after they were married, most girls enjoyed wearing gorgeous jewellery and leaving their homes in palanquins. He was not satisfied by her reply. By and by, he spoke hesitantly, 'Why would you remember me once you are married?'

His brow began to sweat; he was overcome with such a powerful emotion that he wanted to dart out of the room. He did not have the courage to look at Poornima. Perhaps she had understood the depth of his feelings for her.

Poornima bowed her head and spoke softly as though talking to herself, 'Do you consider me to be so false? You are angry with me without reason—right now, you should sympathize with me, utter words of comfort, but you are sitting there so arrogantly. Tell me, which other path lies open for me? My own people are sending me away to live among strangers. I do not know how I will suffer among them, or what will become of me. As if these fears are not enough to take the life out of me; here you are, getting angry in the midst of it all!'

Once again, she choked with tears. Today, on account of her reproach, Amrit began to believe that Poornima burnt with undisclosed ardour and he became acutely aware of his own shallowness and self-centredness, which he felt was noticeable on his countenance like a dark blemish. There was absolute sincerity, such reproach and such intimacy in Poornima's words. Why would one lodge such a complaint to an outsider? Surely, under the current circumstances, he ought to have expressed a greater understanding for Poornima's situation. It was his duty to do so, and he was obliged to perform his duty with utmost diligence. Poornima had placed before him a unique measure to assess his love for her and his conscience was unable to refute it. Certainly, true love calls for selfless sacrifice, both difficult to realize and heart-rending. He spoke penitently, 'Forgive me, Poornima. I am at fault—in fact, I have been foolish.'

## 2

Poornima got married. Amrit put his heart and soul into making the arrangements. The groom was middle-aged, potbellied, unattractive, and along

with all this, quite arrogant and grumpy, but Amrit was most hospitable. He took utmost care of him, as though he were a deity, and one smile from whom could transport him to heaven. Amrit did not get a chance to speak with Poornima and neither did he try to look for an occasion to do so. Every time he happened to look at her, he found her crying, and to the extent that his eyes could do so, he expressed consolation, sympathy and reassurance with silent glances.

On the third day, Poornima left for her husband's home after much crying and weeping. That day, Amrit went to the temple of Lord Shiva and prayed in absolute earnestness for Poornima so that she would remain happy everlastingly. His wound was still raw—how could there be space for any wicked thoughts? Grief is a malady which afflicts the spirit, and deep in his heart, he began to experience an all-encompassing anguish and the vacuum of loneliness. He felt as though his life had been laid waste now. It had lost all purpose, it had become quite meaningless.

Three years later, Poornima returned to her maternal home. Meanwhile, Amrit too had got married and had become preoccupied with gambling quite meaninglessly with the capricious dice of life. However, one far-fetched desire, the fulfilment of which he evidently had no control over, burnt within him like a fever ensconced in a thermometer. Poornima's return caused that fever to shoot up to the summit and take control of all his sensibilities. She had brought with her a bonny two-year-old child whom Amrit looked after all day long. Morning and evening, Amrit carried him in his arms and took him out for leisurely walks and bought him all manner of toys and sweets from the market. Early in the morning, he would arrive at Poornima's with halwa and milk for the boy's breakfast; he would bathe him, comb his hair and wash and clean any sores or eruptions on his skin; Amrit applied ointments on them and dressed them. Gladly he undertook all this responsibility upon himself. The child too grew so fond of him that he spent most of his time in Amrit's house. To the extent, that sometimes he fell asleep with Amrit, and refused to go with Poornima when she came for him.

Amrit would ask, 'Whose son are you?'

The child would blabber, 'Yours.'

He would feel thrilled with the child and hold him in a tight embrace.

Poornima looked gorgeous. A bud had bloomed into a flower. Now her demeanour showed self-respect and dignity; she also loved to adorn herself

her demeanour showed self-respect and dignity; she also loved to adorn herself. Decked up in expensive ornaments and clad in silk saris, she looked more attractive than ever before. It seemed that she was deliberately staying away from Amrit, as though abstaining from impropriety. She avoided speaking to him unless pressed by an important matter, and that too in a condescending manner as though she were bestowing a favour upon him. Apparently, it did not matter to her in the least bit how much love and affection Amrit showered upon her son. Nor did she care about the diligence with which he made sure the child's wishes were fulfilled. Rather, it seemed that these were duties Amrit ought to have carried out. His actions merited neither gratitude nor reciprocal kindness.

If the child cried, she threatened, 'Be careful; don't cry, or *mamoon* will never speak to you again.' And the child would become quiet.

Whenever she was in need of anything, she would send for Amrit and issue commands in authoritative tones. Amrit would oblige at once, as though he were her obedient slave. She too apparently believed that Amrit was her bonded labourer.

Poornima went back to her husband's house after spending six months in her maternal home. Amrit came to the station to see her off. When she had seated herself on the train, Amrit handed the child to her and tears fell from his eyes. He turned his face away and wiped them off. How could he let Poornima see his tears when her own eyes were dry? However, he could not help his heavy heart, for how could he know when they would meet again?

With great poise, Poornima observed, 'The child will miss you greatly for a long time.'

Amrit responded in a voice choked with tears, 'I will never forget his sweet face for the rest of my life.'

'You must write me a letter once in a while.'

'I will.'

'But I will never reply. You must understand that.'

'Don't. I do not ask for it. But do not forget me.'

The train chugged away and Amrit was left looking at her intently. After the train had covered a distance of about a furlong, he saw Poornima put her head out of the window and look at him; then she held the child out of the window and showed him to Amrit.



In that moment, Amrit's heart took wings and wanted to fly out to her. He was so happy that he felt he had reached his desired destination.

### 3

That year, Poornima's mother passed away. Poornima was at her in-laws' at that time and she was not able to see her mother before the hour came. Amrit did all he could to provide for her medicines and her treatment; he performed the last rites; fed the Brahmins; arranged for a feast for the community as though he had lost his own mother. He had lost his father and was the head of his family now. No one could prevent him from doing any of this.

For whom would Poornima come to her maternal home now? And how would she find the time? She was the mistress of her household. Who could she leave in charge of it and go away? She had given birth to two more children. When the eldest son grew older, he began to study in a school, while the younger son went to the madrasa in the village. Once a year, Amrit would send the village barber over to Poornima's to get word about their welfare. Poornima was well off and happy too. That was enough to give him solace. By now, Amrit's sons had grown up too. He remained caught up in the worries of running the household. Besides, he had now crossed forty years of age. Nevertheless, fond memories of Poornima still remained sanctified in a quiet corner of his heart.

All of a sudden, one day, Amrit heard that Poornima's husband had died. However, what was surprising was that he was not saddened to hear about it. Without any reason, he had concluded in his mind that Poornima could not be happy with that lot of a man. He believed that owing to ideas contiguous to being a dutiful wife and with a thought about self-respect, Poornima had never expressed unhappiness. It was quite impossible that other than the material and financial comforts she enjoyed on his account, she could have shared any special bond of love with that hideous-looking man. It is only in a country like India that such beauties are married off to such unworthy men. Had she been in any other country, young men would have sacrificed their lives for a woman like her. The desires that had lain dormant within him awoke once more. He was no longer the same man. Nor was he bound by the seal of silence any longer. Poornima too was a free woman now. In all likelihood, her beauty must have been tempered and she must have become a gentler woman. That sequestered, that

and she must have become a gentler woman. That coquetry, that mischievousness and that light-heartedness must have deserted her long ago. All those virginal traits must have been replaced by the wisdom conferred on her by her affliction; a wisdom which makes one grateful for the love one receives and for which one remains desirous.

He would go to Poornima's house in order to offer his condolences, bring her back with him to her own house and offer whatever services he could in order to make her comfortable. Now, he would be able to draw comfort from the fact that she was close to him. Now his soul would draw comfort from a mere observation by Poornima that she still spared a thought for him; that she still loved him the way she did when she was a young girl. He still remembered Poornima's countenance when he had seen her twenty years ago, her full body, her flushed cheeks, that rich-brown complexion, the well-formed chin, that intoxicating smile; that visage, with the slightest variation, had lingered in his mind's eye. And to his imagination, that slight alteration made her even more attractive now. Surely, the cares of the world must have caused some change in her. But he could not, by any stretch of imagination, perceive a change in Poornima's physique which would not make her any less alluring. He was no longer a slave to her perfection, but desired only her sweet chatter; her glances full of affection; her trust. Perhaps he was so chauvinistic and conceited that he supposed he could rekindle the unfulfilled desires of love in Poornima and imagined that he would make amends for past mistakes and for lost opportunities.

One day, by a happy chance, it so happened that Poornima herself came to her house with her younger son. One of her widowed maternal aunts, who had been spending the days of her widowhood with Poornima's mother, was still alive. That lonely house now got a new lease of life.

When Amrit got news about this, he became inebriated with longing and made haste to visit her, embracing fondly the sweet, sad memories of childhood and youthful ardour within his heart, just as a child would dart excitedly with his broken toys towards a playmate.

But the moment he set eyes on her face, his longing and excitement suffered an enormous setback. He stood there transfixed, in a state of shock. Poornima stood in front of him with her head bowed low; she had covered half her face with the edge of her white sari. She had doubled over from her waist; her arms

were wiry; the veins on her foot stood out prominently; tears ran down her eyes and her pale cheeks. She stood before him like a shrouded corpse.

Poornima's aunt came out and said to Amrit, 'Sit down, son. See what has become of her; she has shrivelled up like a spike. The tears don't stop rolling down for even a minute. She eats only bare rotis once a day and nothing else. She has given up salt; she has given up ghee and milk as well. Over and above, every other day she fasts, now for Ekadashi, now on a Sunday and now on a Tuesday. She sleeps on a wicker mat on the floor and performs pooja and reads the scriptures for a large part of the night. Her sons advise her against it, but she listens to no one. She says that because God has taken away her husband, everything else has become hopeless. She had come here for a change but here too, all she ever does is cry. How often I explain to her, "Daughter, what was destined has happened. Now you should accept your lot patiently. God has blessed you with children; look after them. He has blessed your home with all the comforts of life; you can feed several others and remain well-provided-for. You need to be strong-willed. What is the use of chastising your body?" But she does not listen to me. You talk to her—perhaps she will listen.'

And Amrit stood there, outwardly unfazed but concealing an ache within his heart that had aggrieved his soul. After all, the very foundation on which the edifice of his existence stood had been shaken. Today, he had come to realize that the very thing which he had believed to be a reality all his life was, in fact, only a mirage, merely a vision of his subconscious mind. The distinction between the captivating perfection of his imagination and the reality he witnessed caused his adoration, resplendent with longings and aspirations, to breathe its last, and an all-new realization dawned upon him—that if the heart has the power to make a deity out of a clay idol, then it could also raise up a human being to the status of a deity. Poornima had made a deity out of that disgusting man and was now worshiping him.

He spoke in a respectful tone, 'How can we needy people fathom the ways of God? Mausī, it is our duty to bow our heads at His feet, and not try to understand His ways.'

Poornima lifted the edge of her sari from her face and said, 'Your son keeps asking for you even now.'

*Translated from the Urdu by Fatima Rizvi*



## Intoxicants, All

### 1

On the day of Holi, Rai Sahib Pandit Ghasitelal was relaxing in his garden house, the *barahdari*, guzzling bhang with his friends, when the district collector, Mr Bull, was announced. Mr Bull had just arrived from England. He was gregarious by temperament, had great curiosity about Indian customs and manners and could always be seen frequenting various fairs and festivals. He was probably writing a tome on the subject.

The news of his arrival caused a stir. The revellers were sprawling there in various stages of dishabille, smoking hashish. Who knew that the sahib would drop by so casually! Some ran upstairs, some scurried inside, leaving poor Rai Sahib high and dry. It normally took him half an hour to stand on his feet and a full hour to put his best foot forward. He simply was not capable of making himself scarce from the scene. Seeing no other option to save his life, he made the best of a bad job by assuming the role of a typical Indian gentleman ready to receive a distinguished guest in native splendour.

Rai Sahib folded his hands and said, 'Congratulations on Holi, sir!'

Mr Bull complimented Rai Sahib, 'The red colour is looking great!'

'Yes, sir. Today is meant for a celebration of colours.'

The sahib picked up a *pichkari*, filled it with *gulaal* from one of the earthen pots and splashed Panditji's face with the jet. Panditji didn't get up. What an honour! He wasn't worthy of it! Such love for the subjects! How he wished that Seth Jokhanram had been present to witness the honour bestowed upon him by the officer! Could he claim to have been given such honour even by an ordinary

white-skinned official, not to mention the district collector himself? This could be nothing but the fruits of good karma. One could be worthy of such honour after a thousand years of *tapasya*, of deep meditation.

He folded his palms and said, 'My lord, my life is fulfilled today. If your lordship has deigned to play Holi with me, may I also have your permission to fulfil my heart's desire?' Saying this, he applied a red tika on the district collector's forehead.

Mr Bull asked, 'Rai Sahib, what do you have in that big pot over there?'

'It's bhang, prepared in the traditional way, my lord.'

'What's it good for?'

'It'll open your eyes. Great stuff, sir!'

'I'll take a shot.'

It seemed as though the doors of heaven had opened before Rai Sahib and he was floating in the air in the *pushpak viman*, the mythical flying chariot. He hesitated to offer the bhang in a glass for that was never done, but clay cups were too lowly for the sahib. After great reflection, he poured the bhang in a glass and offered it to Mr Bull, who downed it in one gulp. The aroma filled their minds with happiness.

## 2

Rai Sahib decided to return the visit the following day. In the morning, he consulted an astrologer for an auspicious hour, who found early evening to be most appropriate. Rai Sahib spent the entire day in preparations. He turned up at Mr Bull's residence at the prescribed hour. Mr Bull was having dinner. As soon as Rai Sahib entered the room, the strong smell of liquor assailed his nostrils. He didn't so much as touch British medicines, and the very thought of liquor was revolting to him. He wanted to cover his nose to keep the smell out, but what would the sahib think? He felt nauseous but he stood there, holding his breath. Mr Bull gulped down a peg, put the glass down on the table, and said, 'Rai Sahib, I drank your bhang yesterday, so you must take my bhang today. Jolly good stuff, that bhang of yours. I enjoyed it thoroughly.'

'Your lordship, we Hindus do not touch liquor. Our scriptures consider it a great sin.'

Mr Bull broke into laughter. 'Come on, Rai Sahib! What's sin - what's virtue?

MR BULL BROKE INTO LAUGHTER. 'COME ON, RAI SAHIB! WHAT'S SIN, WHAT'S VIRTUE? This is our bhang, that's your bhang. There's no difference at all. You get high on that, we get tipsy on this—end of story.'

'No, my lord, wine is strictly forbidden for us.'

'Impossible. If the scriptures forbid this, then they forbid that too. And they'll forbid opium too. Go ahead, take a sip. Don't worry, it's terrific stuff.'

MR BULL POURED A PEG OF WHISKY AND THRUST IT CLOSE TO RAI SAHIB'S LIPS. RAI SAHIB TURNED HIS FACE AWAY, CLOSED HIS EYES AND PUSHED THE SAHIB'S HAND AWAY FROM HIM. MR BULL DID NOT KNOW WHAT TO MAKE OF THIS. HE HAD THOUGHT THAT RAI SAHIB WAS NOT DRINKING OUT OF NERVOUSNESS. HE GRABBED RAI SAHIB'S NECK FIRMLY WITH HIS STRONG HANDS AND TOOK THE GLASS CLOSE TO HIS MOUTH. RAI SAHIB LOST HIS TEMPER NOW. HE WAS READY TO GO A LONG WAY TO PLEASE THE SAHIB, BUT THIS WAS A MATTER OF DHARMA . . . AND THERE COULD BE NO COMPROMISE ON THIS.

'My lord, we're Vaishnavites. We consider it a sin even to touch wine.'

RAI SAHIB COULD NOT UTTER ANOTHER WORD. HE WAS CHOKING WITH EMOTION. HE GOT BACK HIS WITS IN A MOMENT AND CONTINUED, 'SIR, BHANG IS PURE. ALL OUR SAINTS, SADHUS, MAHATMAS, GODS AND GODDESSES TAKE BHANG. THE GLORIES OF BHANG ARE UNDISPUTED IN OUR CULTURE. YOU CAN'T FIND A PANDIT WHO DOESN'T TAKE OPIUM. BUT, MY LORD, THE VERY WORD "WINE" IS A SIN TO US.'

MR BULL REMOVED THE GLASS AND SAT DOWN IN A CHAIR. 'YOU'RE BABBLING LIKE A MADMAN,' HE SAID. 'THE SCRIPTURES ARE EQUALLY AGAINST WINE OR BHANG. YOU'VE GOT IT ALL WRONG. THE WHOLE WORLD CONSIDER INTOXICANTS BAD BECAUSE THEY TAKE AWAY A MAN'S REASON. THE SAME WITH YOUR PANDITS AND GODS. DON'T TRY TO TELL ME THAT THEY REMAIN SANE AFTER SWILLING CPIOUS AMOUNTS OF BHANG. IT'S MORE LIKELY THEY TURN INTO DEMONS. LET ME TELL YOU SOME HOME TRUTHS. YOUR PANDITS HAVE TURNED CRAZY AFTER TAKING BHANG. THAT IS WHY THEY SAY OTHERS ARE UNTOUCHABLE, IMPURE. THAT'S WHY THEY'D RATHER EAT SWEETS AND NOT ROTIS, AND THEY WON'T DRINK WATER TOUCHED BY US. BLOODY LOT OF BRAINLESS CREATURES. GOODBYE!'

RAI SAHIB BREATHED FREELY AGAIN. HE STAGGERED OUT ONTO THE VERANDA, SAT IN HIS CAR AND DROVE OFF HOME.

*Translated from the Hindi by M. Asaduddin*



## The Hallowed Feet of the Bridegroom

The greatest enemy of principles is courtesy. One can deal with difficulties, impediments and temptations if one has robust resolutions and devout determination. Nevertheless, one cannot be discourteous to a close friend, irrespective of whether one's principles are upheld or whether they collapse. Several years ago, I had held my *jenewo* in my hand and pledged that I would never again accompany someone on his *baraat* even if it meant that my world turned topsy-turvy. What had prompted me to make such a fierce resolution? That is a long story and to this date, recalling it gives a new lease of life to my pledge.

It was a *baraat* for a wedding in the Kayastha community. The *samdhi* was an old friend. Most of the people accompanying the *baraat* were known to me. We had to go to the village. I thought I would enjoy village life for about two or three days and I joined them. However, I was shocked to see that once they reached there, the *baraatis*' sensibilities became quite debased. They fought among themselves and confronted one another at the slightest provocation. All of them seemed bent upon picking fights with the bride's people. *This thing has not been given and that thing has not been sent. Is he a man or is he an animal? Why should we drink water without ice? And the ass has sent merely ten seers of ice. Tell me, would one apply ten seers of ice over one's eyes or would one make an offering of it to a deity?*

There was such a commotion. No one listened to anyone. The *samdhi sahib* was beating his head because his friends had been treated so badly there. He would remain sore about it all his life. How could he have known that the girl's people were so ill-mannered? 'Why ill-mannered, one should say selfish. On the



face of it, they look respectable and cultivated, and by the grace of God, they have not been blessed with just a little wealth, yet they are such penny-pinchers. They send ten seers of ice and not a single pack of cigarettes. Surely, I have been cheated, what else?’

Without expressing any sympathy, I said to him, ‘What is the harm if they have not sent cigarettes? At any rate, they have sent ten seers of blended tobacco. Why don’t you smoke it?’

My samdhi friend looked at me, eyes full of surprise, as though he could not believe his ears. Such impropriety! He remarked, ‘You are such a strange man. Who smokes blended tobacco nowadays? People sold off their large and small hubble-bubbles in the flea markets long ago. A few old-fashioned people still draw on their hookahs—but only very few of them. By the grace of God, all of us here are enlightened people, up to date in our thinking, belonging to contemporary times and the girl’s people are aware of this and yet, they have not sent cigarettes. Several gentlemen here smoke about eight to ten packs a day. One of them smokes up to twelve a day and smoking four to five packets of cigarettes a day is quite commonplace. Even a hundred packets of cigarettes will fall short among so many of us, and have you seen the ice? It seems he has sent it to be used like a medicine. This much ice is consumed in each of our household. I can drink up to ten seers of ice myself. These villagers will never act prudently, no matter how educated they are.’

I responded, ‘In that case you ought to have brought a carload of cigarettes and a ton of ice with you.’

He was shocked. ‘You haven’t had bhang, have you?’

‘Certainly not! I haven’t had it all my life.’

‘Then why are you talking such utter rubbish?’

‘I am absolutely in my right mind.’

‘No one in his right mind can talk in this way. We have come here to get our son married. The girl’s family will have to take care of all our needs and wishes. All of them! They will have to provide us with whatever we ask for—even if they have to go through pain to provide it. This is no laughing matter. I’ll make sure we give them a hard time. We are being brazenly disgraced. They cannot invite us and then insult us at their doorstep. These people who have accompanied me are not barbers or palanquin-bearers. They are respectable

people. I cannot watch them being affronted. If they remain adamant, the baraat *will* go back.'

I saw that he was in quite a rage. It wasn't prudent to argue with him at that time. For the first time in his life, for a couple of days, he had a right over another human being. The head of the girl's father lay at his feet for him to crush. So, why wouldn't he become inebriated with power? Why wouldn't his head turn? Why wouldn't he patronize him to his heart's content? People belonging to the bridegroom's family have been exercising control over people from the bride's family for ages and it isn't easy to let go of this right. How could these people be made to understand this at that point of time that because they were guests of the girl's family, they would have to live within the limits of what those people had to offer? Guests have to satisfy themselves with the regard, the respect and the hospitality they receive, however meagre it may be. Courteousness can never permit anyone to collect a tax from the hosts who are looking after the guests' well-being. I thought it best to remove myself from there. However, as soon as the auspicious hour for the marriage ceremony was announced, the bridegroom's people asked for one dozen bottles of whisky with the stipulation that only after they were delivered would anyone go to the mandap for the marriage to be solemnized. I could not countenance this any longer. I realized that these people were like animals, devoid of compassion. Staying with them for even a minute was equivalent to murdering one's own soul. At that moment, I pledged that never again would I ever accompany any baraat. I packed my bags and my bedding, and left right away.

That is why when my best friend, Suresh Babu, gave me an invitation card for his son's marriage last Tuesday, I gathered up all my courage and said, 'Oh no! Please forgive me, I will not come.'

Taken aback, he asked, 'But why?'

'I have pledged that I will never accompany any baraat.'

'Not even your own son's baraat?'

'I will be my own master in my son's baraat.'

'Then imagine that he is your son and that you will be your own master.'

I was at a loss for words. Nevertheless, I did not forsake my point of view. 'I hope you people will not make unreasonable demands on the bride's people for cigarettes, ice, oil, alcohol, etcetera, etcetera.'

'Not even by mistake. In this regard my opinion is similar to yours.'

Not even by mistake. In this regard, my opinion is similar to yours.

‘I hope that despite having views similar to mine, you will not go there and agree with the other wretched people who will begin playing their games?’

‘I am appointing you as my representative. How is it possible that your resolution would be disallowed over there?’

My heart still felt uneasy. Nevertheless, it would have been rude to dismiss the offer after being given so many assurances. After all, these poor people would not receive any extraordinary endowment by my going along. They held me in high regard and so they had left everything in my hands. I agreed to accompany them. However, when Suresh Babu was about to leave, I probed further in order to ascertain the validity of his claims.

‘I hope there are no issues regarding the exchange deals between the two families?’

‘Not even in name! We will accept whatever they give of their own free will. You will reserve the right to make or not to make demands.’

‘That is good. I will accompany you.’

The baraat departed on Saturday. It was a train journey of only fifty miles. We took the afternoon express and by evening, we had arrived at the doorstep of the girl’s house. All manner of provisions had been provided. There was no need to send for anything. I did not have even the slightest idea that such great hospitality could be extended to a baraat. The hosts were so humble and courteous that merely at an utterance, four people would present themselves in readiness to comply.

The auspicious moment for the marriage ceremony was announced. All of us went to the mandap. There wasn’t an inch of space there. Somehow, we wedged our way in and made a place for ourselves. Suresh Babu was standing behind me. There was no place to sit.

The ceremony of giving away the bride began. The bride’s father, clad in a yellow silk garment, came forward, seated himself in front of the bridegroom, and began to wash his feet and make the flower offerings to them. By now, I had accompanied hundreds of baraats, but had never had occasion to witness the proceedings of a wedding. Only the close relatives of the bridegroom are witness to these. The rest of the baraatis either sprawl around the place or watch the dance or listen to records on the gramophone, and if nothing else, then several of them get together in groups to play cards. I do not remember how it was at my

own wedding. At that moment, my heart bled to see the girl's elderly father worship a young man's feet. Is this one of the ideals of a Hindu marriage or is it one of its jokes? The son-in-law is, in fact, almost a son to the girl's father, and it is his obligation to wash the feet of his bride's father and offer flowers and gifts in reverence. But this seemed like a traditional ritual. The girl's father had to wash the feet of the bridegroom and this practice did not fit within the ambit of good behaviour, spirituality or dignity. My ageing soul could not keep itself calm. I spoke in cross tones: 'What is this deplorable custom, brothers? The bride's father is being insulted in such a terrible manner! Have all of you lost all sense of propriety?'

There was pin-drop silence in the mandap. Everyone's eyes were focused on me. Nobody understood what I had meant.

Finally, Suresh Babu asked, 'Who has been insulted and how has he been insulted? Nobody is being insulted over here!'

'Should the bride's father wash the bridegroom's feet? What is this if not an insult?'

'This is not an affront, brother—this is an ancient tradition.'

The bride's father spoke up. 'This is not an affront against me, gentlemen. On the contrary, I am very fortunate that this day has dawned. You have worried yourself needlessly. There are at least a hundred people waiting to wash the bridegroom's feet. There are so many who crave for daughters so that they may pay adoration at her groom's feet and propitiate their lives.'

I was speechless. When the bride's father had performed the pooja at the groom's feet, a crowd of about a hundred men and women gathered round the bridegroom. Each and every one began to pay adoration at his feet. Whoever came, they made an offering at his feet in keeping with his or her financial standing. Everyone was merrily engrossed in watching this drama unfold and I was thinking to myself that when people have lost their sense of propriety to the extent that they misinterpret an affront against them as a form of reverence, then why shouldn't women in such a society suffer so extensively? Why shouldn't they perceive themselves as the slippers on their men's feet? Why shouldn't they lose all sense of self-respect?

When all the ceremonies of the marriage had been solemnized and the bride and the bridegroom came out of the mandap, I quickly moved forward, picked up some flowers from the tray and in a state of partial consciousness, overcome

with incomprehensible feelings, I placed them at the feet of the bride and left for home right away.

*Translated from the Urdu by Fatima Rizvi*



## The Lottery

Who does not want to become rich overnight? In those days, when lottery tickets were on sale, my friend Vikram's father, uncle, mother and elder brother each bought a ticket. Who could tell whose fate would be lucky? Whoever won, the money would remain in the family anyway.

But Vikram couldn't be patient. If any of the others won, who would remember him? At the most, they would give him five to ten thousand rupees. What was he to do with such a petty sum? He had lofty ambitions in life. First, he wished to tour the whole world, every nook and cranny. Peru, Brazil, Timbuktu and Honolulu—all of them were a part of his itinerary. He was not one to return after a whirlwind tour of just a couple of months. He wished to stay in each place for a considerable period, learn the modes and manners of the people and, following that, write a massive volume about his trip. He also wished to build a huge library that would house the best literature from all across the world. He was willing to spend about two lakh rupees for the library. A bungalow, car and furniture were insignificant necessities. If his father or uncle won the money, he could not expect more than five thousand from them; if his mother won, then he could expect to get twenty thousand; but if his brother won, he was not likely to get even a single penny. Vikram had his own pride. The very idea of accepting anything in the guise of a gift from his family members was humiliating for him. He always said, 'It's better to jump into a pit and drown than to spread your hands in front of someone. If a man cannot build a space for himself in the world, it is better to set off for good.'

He was utterly restless. Who would give him money to buy a lottery ticket in his house? And, besides, how could he even ask for it? After giving it careful

thought, he said to me, 'Why don't we jointly buy a ticket between the two of us?'

The suggestion appealed to me. In those days, I was a schoolteacher. I used to earn twenty rupees. It was a great task to make both ends meet on that salary. Purchasing a ticket for ten rupees was tantamount to buying a white exotic elephant for me. Yes, perhaps I could cut down on milk, ghee, refreshments and other expenses for a month to spare the five rupees. But still, I hesitated. If only I could procure an extra amount of money—that would have encouraged me further.

'Should I sell this ring? I can say that it slipped from my finger,' said Vikram. The ring was worth at least ten rupees. We could easily buy a ticket after selling it; if without spending anything, a share of 50 per cent of the ticket was available, then what was the harm in it?

Vikram jolted me back to reality hastily. 'But, my friend, you need to pay me five rupees in cash, otherwise I won't seal the deal.'

My morals asserted themselves at this juncture. I said, 'No, friend, this is unacceptable. If the truth comes out, it will be a great embarrassment, and with you I too will have to face the consequences.'

Finally, we decided to sell off our old books at a second-hand bookshop. Books were our most inessential possession. Both of us had completed our matriculation together. After discovering that those who had studied further, straining their minds and eyes, to obtain other degrees, having wasted their family's fortunes, were now merely wearing their soles off in search of a decent job, we decided to halt our studies. I became a schoolmaster and Vikram started loitering around. Other than a feast for termites, our old books were of no use to us. We had tried to extract everything we could from those books. Now, we weren't bothered whether rats or termites feasted on them. Today, after brushing the dust off them, we removed the books from the garbage heap, tied them up and placed the bundle in a big sack. Since I was a teacher it was embarrassing for me to sell the books at a bookseller's. All of them knew me; therefore, I entrusted this task to Vikram. After half an hour, he returned with a ten-rupee note, hopping with joy. I had never seen him so happy before. The books were worth not less than forty rupees, but to us, it seemed as if we had chanced upon that ten-rupee note on the road. Now there was to be an equal partnership. We would get a sum of ten lakh rupees. Five lakh would come to me as my share.

would get a sum of ten lakh rupees. Five lakh would come to me as my share, and five lakh would go to Vikram. We were lost in our own merry thoughts.

I spoke contentedly, 'Five lakh is not a small amount.'

Vikram did not seem quite satisfied. 'Five lakh, you say? Even five hundred rupees is a big sum for us at this moment, but brother, I am compelled to change my plan. My global tour plans cannot be altered, but yes, I will have to scrap the library,' he said.

I objected and said, 'You won't be spending more than two lakh on the tour, right?'

Vikram remarked at once, 'No, no, the budget for the tour is three lakh fifty thousand—a seven-year tour with a yearly expense of around fifty thousand.'

'That's about four thousand rupees per month. I think you can easily manage to live comfortably on a monthly allowance of two thousand rupees.'

Vikram was filled with indignation. 'I wish to live lavishly—not like a pauper.'

'You can live quite lavishly on two thousand too.'

'It won't be possible to build a library until you give me two lakh from your share.'

'Is it necessary that your library be the best in the city?'

'I will have the best one,' asserted Vikram.

'This is what you want, but I cannot spare anything from my share. Just think of my needs. You come from an affluent family. You don't really have any responsibilities. I am the sole breadwinner of my family. I have to get two sisters married, educate two brothers and build a new house. I have decided to deposit the entire amount in a bank and meet my expenses from the interest. I will impose certain conditions to ensure that no one is able to withdraw the amount after me.'

Vikram said in a sympathetic tone, 'Yes, it is unfair to ask you for anything at this stage. Anyway, I shall put up with the inconvenience; but the interest rates of the bank have fallen drastically.'

We checked with several banks about their interest rates—even about the provident fund and savings bank account. It was worthless to invest two or three rupees interest on a huge sum. I thought of getting into the moneylending business. Vikram wouldn't leave on his tour right now. Both of us could build a good business in partnership. He could leave for his tour once we accumulated a



large amount. We would earn good amount through interest in the moneylending business and our credibility would soar too. But yes, no matter how well-known the client was, money should not be lent unless the security is good. And why should one give money on security at all? There would be no risks involved if the client mortgaged his property.

This plan was eventually finalized. The question that now arose was in whose name the ticket was to be purchased. Vikram was keen that it should be in his name. He refused to purchase the ticket if it was not in his name. I had to agree because I could see no other way, and that too without signing any contract, which later caused me a great deal of trouble!

Days passed, one by one, in the anxiety of waiting. Each day, with the break of dawn, our eyes would scan the calendar. My house was adjacent to Vikram's. Every day, before going and after returning from school, we would sit together and discuss our plans in hushed tones so that no one could hear us. We wished to keep that fact that we had bought a ticket a secret. We imagined the surprise that people would get the day this mystery would turn into reality! We did not wish to part with the vision of that dramatic spectacle.

One day, the subject of marriage came up during our conversation. Vikram said, with philosophical profundity, 'Brother, I want to steer clear of marriage. It only burdens one with unnecessary worries. A huge amount of money is wasted in satisfying the whims and fancies of one's wife.'

I opposed his argument. 'Yes, that's true; but then as long as one does not have someone to share one's joys and griefs with, what's the point of life? I am not averse to the institution of marriage. But I would like a partner who will stay with me until I breathe my last and no one, other than her, can fill that slot.'

Vikram said facetiously, 'Anyway, everyone has their own point of view. Congratulations on finding a wife. Follow her around like a dog and consider your children the biggest bounty from God. I will remain a free man, will go wherever I please, and come back whenever I feel like it. I don't want a watchman to stand guard on my head all the time. If you're a little late returning home, you will have to give an explanation to the question, "Where were you all this while?" You step outside the house and you have to answer the query, "Where are you off to?" And if, due to unavoidable circumstances, your wife also accompanies you, then the only option you're left with is to drown yourself. No, brother, I have no sympathy for you at all. If the children fall sick, you rush

to the homeopathic doctor and as soon as you grow old, they will start coaxing you to move out so that they can make merry. They will look for an opportunity to even poison you and then later make a pretence that you were suffering from cholera. I don't want to fall into this trap.'

Just then Kunti came in. She was Vikram's younger sister and was around eleven years old. She was studying in the sixth standard and used to fail regularly. She was quite perky and loud. She opened the door with such great force that the both of us jumped up in alarm.

Vikram said rather crossly, 'You are very naughty, Kunti. Who asked you to come here?'

Kunti scanned the room like an investigative policeman and said, 'What do you two talk about after shutting yourselves in this room? Every now and then you come to sit here. You never go out for a stroll or to watch a performance—maybe you are engaged in some sort of black magic!'

Vikram shook her by the neck and said, 'Yes, we're doing black magic to ensure you get a husband who hits you with a belt five thousand times every day.'

Kunti clung to his back and said, 'I will marry someone who wags his tail before me. I will throw crumbs of sweetmeats to him and he will lick them up. If he tries to act smart with me, I will slap him hard. If Mother wins the lottery, I hope she gives me fifty thousand rupees from it. That's that, and I'll be content. I pray to God twice every day for Mother. She says that the prayers of unmarried girls never go unanswered. I have a feeling that Mother will surely win this lottery.'

It reminded me of a visit to my grandmother's village. There was a drought on and it was the month of Bhadon, yet not a single drop of water fell from the sky. The villagers had collected funds and invited all the unmarried girls of the village to a sumptuous meal. Three days later, it had rained cats and dogs. There was definitely some mysterious power in the prayers of unmarried girls.

I looked at Vikram purposefully, and he looked at me. We made a decision in that exchange of glances. Vikram said, 'Okay, we will tell you something, but do not tell anyone else. Yes, you are a very good girl, and I know you won't. I will help you with your studies now and you will pass for sure. The thing is that both of us have also bought a lottery ticket. Pray to God for us as well. If we win, we will get you some fine jewellery. Seriously!'

will get you some fine jewellery. Seriously:

Kunti could not believe her ears. We swore oaths to make her believe. She started to put on airs. Finally, it was only when we promised to cover her with diamonds and gold from head to toe that she relented and agreed to pray for us.

However, she could have digested tons of sweets but this small secret was beyond her ability to keep. She ran inside and within seconds, the whole house had heard the news. Now each and every person, including his mother, uncle, and father too, started scolding Vikram. I can't say whether this was because of Vikram's luck or something else, who knows.

'Why do you keep landing yourself in such situations?'

'He took the money and threw it away in the water.'

'When everybody in the house had purchased a ticket, what was the need for you to buy one? Wouldn't you have got your share of the winning? And you too, Master sahib, you are all the more foolish. What good can you teach the boy? You will only lead him astray.'

Vikram was their darling son. What more could they say to him? If misfortune befell him by any chance, he did not eat for a day or two in resentment. I had to bear all the animosity. As if Vikram was losing his integrity in my company.

'Nothing is given as freely as advice'—the adage was being played out right before my eyes. I remembered an incident from my childhood. It was the festival of Holi. A bottle of liquor had been bought. My uncle had come to visit. I quietly went inside the room, poured a small amount of liquor into a glass and quickly gulped it down. The burning sensation was yet to subside, my eyes were still bloodshot, when Uncle entered the room. It was as if I had been stuck in a tunnel that I had myself dug—he got so angry with me that I turned pale. Mother scolded me, and Father also rebuked me. I had to shed copious tears for their anger to abate; and the same afternoon, Uncle was so drunk on the liquor that he began singing, then sobbed, then he abused Mother and ran after my brother to hit him when he tried to stop him and finally, he dropped on the floor unconscious.

Vikram's father and uncle were both heretics who scoffed at any sort of worship, pure atheists; but now both of them were devoted and firm believers in God. Vikram's father would set out in the morning to bathe in the Ganges and return home in the afternoon after offering worship in all the neighbourhood temples, sandalwood paste smeared on his body. His uncle bathed at home itself

with warm water and then sat down to chant the name of Lord Rama despite suffering from arthritic pains. After sunrise, he would go to the park to feed ants. Later in the evening, both the brothers would sit next to their doorway and listen to spiritual discourses with great devotion till midnight. Vikram's elder brother, Prakash, had great faith in saints and sages. He used to visit the monasteries and huts of sages to seek their blessings and his mother spent the entire day in worships, baths and fasts. She loved to doll herself up, but had turned into a complete nun these days. People say underserving greed is a bad thing. But somehow I feel that the faith, devotion and religiosity that we possess are only due to our hunger and greed. Our religions are surviving only because of our selfishness. It was a new experience for me to discover how desire could have such a strong hold on the minds of people. Vikram and I also visited astrologers on and off, and made ourselves miserable by asking them questions.

As the day of the result neared, we lost peace of mind. We could think of nothing else. For no apparent reason, I began to fear what would become of me if Vikram refused to give me my share. He might just deny the fact that he had ever made this deal with me. There was no record or any other proof. It all depended on Vikram's intentions. If his intentions wavered, then everything was gone for good. I wouldn't be able to say anything, or even complain about it to anyone. Even if I said anything, it would be of no use. If his intentions had already gone awry, then he would deny the partnership now itself; if his morals were still inviolable, then my suspicion would hurt his feelings. A man possesses the ability to manifest his different guises. A man has many semblances of order, but wealth can cause a person to forsake his morals. The money had not been received yet. What was the harm in putting up a show of honesty? The real test would be when we had the ten lakh in our hands. I did a little introspection on my part—if the ticket were in my name and I won that ten lakh, would I hand over half of it to Vikram without any hesitation? Who could say? But chances were that I would have slightly objected and said, 'You had lent me five rupees. You can take ten for that, or a hundred. Why do you need more?' But no, I don't think I could have behaved so rudely.

We were going through the newspaper the next day when Vikram said abruptly, 'If we end up winning the lottery, I will regret having partnered with you!'

He smiled good-naturedly, but that was suggestive of the vein of his intention

which he wanted to conceal in humour.

‘Really!’ I exclaimed. ‘But I could also regret my partnership with you then?’

‘But the ticket is in my name.’

‘So what?’

‘Okay, what if I deny that we bought the ticket jointly?’

My blood turned cold. I nearly had a blackout.

‘I never thought you could be so dishonest!’ I hissed.

‘But it is quite possible. Five lakh. Imagine! Makes your mind go crazy!’

‘Then, brother, it’s better to draw up a contract. Why should there be any room for suspicion?’

Vikram chuckled and said, ‘You’re such a sceptical man! I was just testing you. Can such a thing ever happen? What is five lakh? Even if the amount was five crore, I would never let my mind waver.’

However, I could not believe his words. The seed of distrust had been sown in my mind.

‘I know that you can never do any wrong, but what’s the harm in doing the paperwork?’ I asked.

‘It’s worthless.’

‘So be it.’

‘Then we’ll have to get the papers registered. To sign an agreement pertaining to matters involving ten lakh would require a stamp paper worth seven thousand five hundred rupees. What la-la land do you live in?’

I thought that if we signed the agreement on an ordinary paper, it would not stand the legal test. But it would serve my purpose to make him feel ashamed, to prove his dishonesty before all. People who do not fear defamation would go to any length of dishonesty. The fear of defamation is in no way less than the fear of law. I told him that an agreement on an ordinary paper should do for me.

Vikram said nonchalantly, ‘When an ordinary paper has no legal validity, then why should we waste our time by signing an agreement on it?’

This convinced me that Vikram’s intentions had now started to falter. Why else should he hesitate to sign the contract on an ordinary paper? Piqued, I said, ‘Your intentions have already turned sour.’

He replied without any tinge of shame, ‘So you want to prove that your intentions would not have wavered in such a situation?’

‘My intentions are not so capricious.’

‘Oh, stop it. I’ve seen many intention keepers!’

‘You will have to sign an agreement right away. I don’t trust you any more.’

‘If you don’t trust me, then I won’t give you anything in writing,’ cried Vikram.

‘What do you think, you can cheat me of my share of the amount?’

‘Whose money? What money?’

‘I’m telling you, Vikram, this will not only be the end of our friendship but will have far greater consequences.’

I was overcome with a violent rage.

Just then sounds of a fight reached my ears and my attention was pulled to the drawing room. Vikram’s father and his younger brother usually sat there. They were the best of friends—a friendship which was found only among ideal brothers. Rama and Lakshmana would have shared the same bond. I had never seen them disagreeing with one another, forget quarrelling. The words of the elder brother were like law to the younger one; likewise, the younger brother’s wishes were readily fulfilled by the elder. The sudden eruption of frayed tempers came as a surprise to both Vikram and me. We stood by the door of the drawing room. Both the brothers had stood up from their chairs, they had each taken a step towards the other, their eyes raging, their faces contorted in anger, brows knitted in a frown and their fists clenched. It seemed as if a fierce battle was about to begin.

Vikram’s uncle stepped back as he saw us and said, ‘In a joint family, if someone acquires something, then that should be shared equally among all the members of the family.’

Vikram’s father took a step forward when he saw his son standing by the door. ‘Absolutely not! If I commit a crime, I have to face the consequences, not the entire family. This is a personal matter.’

‘That shall be decided in court.’

‘You can go to court if you wish to. But it shall have nothing to do with you if my sons, or my wife or I, win the lottery. Similarly, if you win the lottery, it shall have nothing to do with me and my family.’

‘Had I known about your intentions earlier, I too would have purchased tickets in the names of my wife and my children.’

‘That is your fault.’

‘It’s because I trusted you—you are my brother.’

‘This is a gamble, and you should have known that. If you lose five to ten thousand rupees in the races tomorrow, the family will not be responsible for that loss.’

‘But your conscience won’t let you live in peace if you seize your brother’s share!’

‘Neither are you Brahma nor God himself, nor a saint!’

When Vikram’s mother heard the raised voices and saw that the matter was turning into a hand-to-hand battle, she hurried to placate the two brothers.

Vikram’s uncle spoke in disdain. ‘Why are you pleading with me? Advise him, he who has four tickets in his kitty. What do I have? Just one ticket and slim chances. He has four times more chances of winning than I have, and if his intentions have wavered, it is a matter of shame.’

Vikram’s mother consoled him and said, ‘Okay, if I win, I will give you half of my share. Happy now?’

Vikram’s father could not stand this. ‘Why should he take half the amount? I will not give him a penny. Even if we think over this with a calm and composed mind, he shouldn’t get more than a fifth of the share.’

The uncle retorted, ‘It’s only you who knows all the laws of this world.’

‘Of course I do! Haven’t I practised law for thirty years?’

‘All your practice will come to naught when I hire a barrister from Kolkata against you.’

‘To hell with your lawyer, whether he is from Kolkata or London.’

‘I will take half of the share—just like half of the family property belongs to me’.

Just then Vikram’s elder brother arrived. His head and hands were bandaged and he was limping. There were bloodstains on his clothes. He flopped down on an armchair with a contented smile on his face.

Alarmed, Vikram’s father asked, ‘Look at the mess you’re in! What is this? How did you get hurt? Did you fight with someone?’

Prakash let out a sigh after resting on the chair and said with a smile, ‘Oh, it’s nothing. I am not hurt much.’

‘How can you say that you’re not hurt? Your head and entire arm are swollen. There are bloodstains on your clothes. What’s the matter? Did you meet with an accident?’

accident:

‘These bruises are not worth bothering about, I shall be back on my feet within a few days. You need not worry.’

A gentle, sanguine smile played on Prakash’s lips. There was no trace of anger, shame or revenge on his countenance.

Vikram’s father asked more anxiously, ‘But why don’t you tell me what happened? If you’ve fought with someone, then let me report the matter to the police.’

Prakash spoke in a calm tone, ‘I haven’t fought with anyone. The thing is that I went to see Jhakkad Baba. You know that he hates people and throws stones at them. Those who run away in fright remain deprived of his blessings. But those who are brave enough to stay near him to seek his blessings, despite being bruised, pass the test. This is how he tests his devotees. There were around fifty people when I went to see him today—some had brought sweets as gifts, others had brought valuables and many had brought clothes. Jhakkad Baba was meditating at that time. Suddenly when he opened his eyes and saw this huge crowd, he picked up pebbles and chased all the people. Everyone ran helter-skelter, avoiding the stampede. Not a soul remained apart from me, and I stood there straight as a clock tower. He started hurling stones at me—one hit me on the head. He never misses! My head spun and a stream of blood spurted out, but I remained rooted to the spot. Then he hurled another stone at me that hit my hand. I fell down unconscious. There was stillness around when I regained consciousness. Baba was not to be seen. He has the skill of vanishing. There was no one around to help me—whom could I call? The pain in my hand was killing me and my head was still bleeding. I somehow managed to get up and went to the doctor’s straight away. He said that I have fractured a bone. He wrapped a bandage and advised me to wash it with warm water. He will come and see me in the evening again, but despite all this—the lottery is sure to be mine. That’s it. It has never happened that the wishes of someone who has been hit by Jhakkad Baba have remained unfulfilled. The first thing I will do after winning the lottery is build a new hut for Baba.’

There was a look of deep satisfaction on Vikram’s father’s face. A mattress was immediately laid on the cot. Prakash lay down on it. His mother began to fan him, and she too looked contented. It was not a bad bargain to gain ten lakh rupee after suffering from such injuries.



Vikram's uncle was bursting with impatience and excitement. As soon as Vikram's father left for his meal and his mother went to fetch some food for Prakash, Uncle asked Prakash, 'Does he hurl stones with great force? I don't think he would though!'

Prakash understood the intended meaning and said, 'He does not throw stones, rather hurls grenades. Baba is so strong that he can knock down a lion with a punch. A man of ordinary build would fall flat with a single stone. Many have died, but there has been no case against Jhakkad Baba. And he does not stop after throwing a few stones, but keeps hurling till the victim drops down unconscious. But the secret is that the more you are hit, the closer you get to the fulfilment of your wishes.'

Prakash's words sketched an eerie picture of discomfiture for his uncle. He could not pluck up the courage to face Jhakkad Baba's stone hurling.

At last, the day of the results dawned. After the murderous night of 20 July we woke up in the morning with mixed feelings of hope and despair. Both Vikram's father and uncle had bathed before sunrise in the Ganges and were now sitting devotedly, worshipping in the temple. I was also overcome by a feeling of profound reverence that day. I went to the temple and chanted praises to God—*oh Protector of all orphans, will You not shower Your pious blessings on us? Don't You know that we deserve Your blessings more than anyone else?* Just then, Vikram dressed in his best clothes came towards the temple door, beckoned me, and said, 'I am going to the post office,' and disappeared. After a while, Prakash stepped outside the house, stood at the threshold of the temple and started distributing sweets among the beggars. A large crowd had assembled. Vikram's father and uncle stood before the idol's feet. Their heads bowed and eyes closed in devotion, both of them were immersed in deep worship.

Vikram's father lifted his head and looking at the priest, he said, 'God loves his devotees, isn't it?'

The priest agreed, 'Yes indeed, God is always protective of His devotees.'

A moment later, Uncle lifted his head and said to the priest, 'So, God is almighty, omniscient, and He knows about the desires of all His devotees.'

'Yes, of course, God is all-knowing. How could he read everybody's mind if He were not omniscient?'

The ceremony came to an end. Both the brothers chanted prayers with great

vigour that morning. Vikram's father dropped a two-rupee coin into the donation box. Uncle dropped four rupees. Looking at his brother with loathing, Vikram's father averted his eyes.

He turned to the priest and asked unexpectedly, 'What does your intuition say?'

'You may win,' the priest replied.

'And what about me?' asked Uncle.

'You may win too,' the priest said with the same promptness.

Vikram's father walked out of the temple in reverence, chanting, 'Lord, I have come to You for succour! Oh Lord!'

A minute later, Uncle also came out of the temple singing a similar hymn in praise of God.

I too stepped outside the temple and wanted to assist Prakash in distributing the sweets, but he moved the tray from my reach, and said, 'Let it be. I will complete the distribution. There are hardly any sweets left anyway.'

Disheartened, I started walking towards the post office when Vikram arrived on his bicycle. Everyone was wildly excited to see him. Vikram's father and his uncle both stood there in the front and flew at him like eagles. There were a few sweets left on Prakash's tray, but he flung the tray to the ground and rushed towards his brother. And above all, I embraced Vikram with great joy; but no one asked him anything, everyone was busy in their own celebrations.

Vikram's father raised his eyes to the sky and said, '*Raja Ramchandra ki jai!*'

Uncle leapt up and said, '*Hanumanji ki jai!*'

Prakash clapped his hands in joy and said, 'Praise be to Jhakkad Baba!'

Vikram broke into a loud guffaw, moved aside, and said, 'I will take one lakh rupees from the person who has won. Is that agreed?'

His father caught hold of his arm and said, 'First tell us.'

'No, I won't for nothing.'

Uncle said contemptuously, 'What? A lakh just to tell us the name of the winner? Wow!'

Prakash also frowned, 'As if we can't find out on our own!'

'Okay then, prepare yourselves to hear your names.'

Everyone stood in attention like foot soldiers.

'Keep your cool. Do not get too excited.'

Everyone stood alert

Everyone stood alert.

‘Fine, so listen to me. No one from the city, in fact, no one from the country has won. The winner is a black man from America.’

Vikram’s father shouted in disgust, ‘It’s a lie! Absolutely untrue!’

Uncle said dismissively, ‘Bah! That’s impossible. Three months of austerities just for naught?’

Prakash slapped his chest and said, ‘I have broken my head and hands—was it all for fun?’

Just then a group of people, who looked crestfallen, passed them. They too were coming, crying about their fates, from the post office. An American black man has won, the devil, the scoundrel, the rascal!

Now how could they not believe Vikram? His father stomped inside the temple in great rage and scolded the priest, ‘Is this why I have employed you for such a long time? You earn easy money and live in comfort!’

It was as if Uncle had broken his back. He slapped his forehead two to three times and sat down on the same spot; but Prakash was furious beyond control. He picked his thick staff and went in search of Jhakkad Baba.

Mother only remarked, ‘Everyone has done their bit of cheating. I can never come to terms with this. What can God do? He cannot snatch away the money from someone’s hands.’

Nobody ate that evening. I was also depressed when Vikram came to me and said, ‘Let us go to a hotel and eat something. Nothing has been cooked at home today.’

I asked him, ‘Why were you so pleased when you returned from the post office?’

He answered, ‘When I saw hordes of people near the post office, I felt like laughing at their stupidity. If there are so many people in a city, there would be a thousand times more that number in the country. And million times more in the world. The huge mountain of hope that I had erected suddenly became the size of a mustard seed and I felt like laughing out loud. It was as if a philanthropist with only a handful of grains had invited one lakh people for a meal, and here, every member in my family thought that . . .’

I also chuckled. ‘Yes, that’s true and both of us had quarrelled over signing a contract for this. But tell me the truth, did your intentions waver at all?’

Vikram smiled and replied, ‘What will you gain now by asking me that

question? Let the curtains remain drawn on that.'

*Translated from the Hindi by Shirin Bismillah*



## Two Sisters

### 1

The two sisters met after two years in a relative's house.

After weeping with excitement, the elder one, Rupkumari, noticed that her younger sister, Ramdulari, was adorned in ornaments from head to toe. Her complexion looked more radiant, her behaviour more dignified and she sounded cleverer in her conversations now. A costly Benaresi sari and a jujube-red, embroidered velvet blouse had further added to her beauty. Rupkumari wondered whether she was the same Ramdulari, who looked so unkempt in her childhood and would boisterously play around with her dishevelled hair. Rupkumari had last seen her two years ago, on the day of her wedding. Even then, there had been no significant change in her appearance. Although she had grown taller, but she was as lean, idiotic and muddle-headed as ever. She would get upset at petty things. But today, she looked different, radiant—as though a flower had blossomed. Where had she concealed this beauty all this time? No, maybe it was just illusory—not genuine beauty, but rather the power of attracting others' gaze through one's dress and ornaments. Merely wearing silk, velvet and gold ornaments cannot make one beautiful. Still, it pleased the eyes. Many women had gathered there, but none of them could exude such an attractive and magical appeal.

If a mirror were nearby, Rupkumari would have certainly appraised herself in it. No doubt, she had seen herself in the mirror just before leaving home and tried her best to beautify herself as much as she could. But now, unable to conjure a clear image of her own embellished face, she was becoming impatient

to catch a glimpse of herself again. Now, she would compare her beauty with Ramdulari's and try to unravel the mystery behind the latter's allure. Though she carried a small mirror in her make-up kit, she was not in the habit of using it or beautifying herself in front of others, lest the women misunderstand her. *There must be a mirror somewhere, and definitely so in the drawing room.* She went into the drawing room and saw her reflection in the life-size mirror there. There was no one in the room at that time. The men were out in the courtyard, and the women were busy singing. She minutely scrutinized each part of her body. She could not spot a single blemish either on her face or in her entire form. But the former freshness, the seductive attraction and the loveliness was missing. Surely, it was absent. She could not delude herself. But what was the reason for this unfortunate lack? Perhaps Ramdulari's youth had just blossomed whereas her own had withered a long time ago. But this thought could not pacify the conflict in her mind. She could not live eclipsed thus by Ramdulari. Men are such blockheads! None among them has the ability to assess true beauty. They are just after youthful flatteries and overexcitement. They fail to see, despite having eyes. What have these to do with real beauty? Beauty is nine days' wonder. True beauty transcends time.

If Ramdulari were to dress up in Rupkumari's clothes, all the magic of her beauty would disappear. She would look like a hideous witch. Who could make these foolish men understand all this? But the family that Ramdulari had married into was not very well off. Indeed, the clothes and jewellery that had come from her in-laws at the time of the wedding was very disappointing. Besides, there was nothing that could have indicated or assured her future happiness. Her father-in-law was a public attorney of a state, while the groom was merely studying in a college. So from where could she have found such a windfall during these last two years that could explain her prosperity? Who knows—maybe she had borrowed the jewellery from someone? And she might have borrowed her clothes as well. Some women have the habit of pretending to be richer and better off than they really are. *Let such pretensions remain with Ramdulari. I am better off the way I am.*

The fever of fashion is increasing every day. There may not be sufficient food to eat at home, with the husband earning no more than twenty-five to thirty rupees from quill driving, but the wife comes out of her home, all dressed up, as if she were some princess. She would hear the complaints of tailors and cloth

if she were some princess. She would bear the complaints of tailors and cloth dealers, the frowns and volleys of angry words hurled by her husband, she would weep or become annoyed—but nothing would dissuade her from continuing to make a fashion statement. Even family members might be laughing at her pretentious ways, but she was clearly too unashamed and stood unmoved by any such criticism. No matter how much one laughed at her, she was far too shameless to give any heed to it. She just aimed at attracting men whenever she appeared in the public. Ramdulari must have borrowed her jewels and dress from someone, the shameless woman that she is!

Now Rupkumari's sense of self-respect brightened her face. So what if she had no jewels and good clothes; she need not hang her head in shame in front of anyone. She need not hide her face from anyone. Her real treasures were her two sons. May God bless them with long lives! Her happiness lay in their welfare. Merely having good food and good clothes for oneself is not the main source of fulfilment in one's life. No doubt she came from a poor family, but they were well respected; they were not unjust to anyone, nor did anybody curse them.

She went out again into the veranda after cheering herself up in this manner. Once she was there, she noticed Ramdulari looking at her with pity.

Ramdulari asked, 'Has your husband been promoted, sister, or is he still rotting on seventy-five rupees?'

Rupkumari's heart was on fire. 'Such pride!' she whispered to herself, as if Ramdulari's own husband was a lord. She retorted arrogantly, 'Of course he got a promotion! He is now in the hundred-rupee grade. One should be thankful for this. These days, even people who have qualified MAs can hardly get a job. Your husband must be pursuing his BA, is he not?'

Ramdulari snorted and said, 'He left his studies, sister! Further education would've only marred his prospects. He works as an agent in a company and earns two hundred and fifty rupees per month, along with some commission. He also gets five rupees per day as travelling expenditure. In a way, his income is roughly five hundred rupees every month. He spends almost a hundred and fifty rupees on his own self, sister. A person in such a high position has to maintain a suitable standard of life. Out of the remaining amount of three hundred and fifty rupees, I get a hundred for my personal expenditures, and the household is managed smoothly from the remaining two hundred and fifty rupees. What would have he done by passing his MA examination?'

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For a moment, Rupkumari suspected that Ramdulari was telling her tall tales, but Ramdulari's expression exuded confidence and a sense of failure was clearly apparent on Rupkumari's face. But Rupkumari knew that if she did not want to lose her sanity completely, she would have to first extinguish the fire of jealousy in her heart. Hence, as a way of reassuring herself, she decided to concede that only one-fourth of whatever Ramdulari had said was true; anything more than that would have been too unbearable for Rupkumari to accept. However, at the same time, her heartbeat raced at the nagging fear that what Ramdulari had said might be the actual truth. She was afraid she might burst into tears at any moment. What a great difference there was between the seventy-five rupees that her husband earned and the income of five hundred rupees of Ramdulari's husband! She could not reconcile herself to the huge figure even if it were possible to earn that much as a result of self-abasement. At most, one's self can be valued at a hundred, but not five-hundred at any rate!

Mockingly, Rupkumari asked, 'Well, now that agents are earning so much money and other allowances, why don't all the colleges shut down? Why are thousands of boys wasting their lives in higher studies?'

Ramdulari, who was inwardly drawing pleasure from her sister's discomfiture, responded, 'Sister, now you are making a mistake. Anyone can get through the MA examination, but only a few can work as agents. It's God's gift. One may study for a lifetime, but it's not necessary that he can work effectively as an agent. To be a scholar is one thing, but moneymaking is a different thing altogether. It is not easy to win the customer's confidence about the quality of your products and to convince them that you're selling the cheap and best wares! As an agent, he has to deal with all sorts of customers. One has to perform convincingly before rich men—only then do goods get traded. These rich men and nobles are inaccessible to an ordinary person; and if by some stroke of luck, such a person happens to gain access to their presence, he is unable to speak, almost boggled. In the beginning, my husband also used to hesitate, but now he is as clever as a crocodile in his trade. Next year, he is going to get a promotion.'

It was as though the blood in Rupkumari's veins had ceased to flow. Why doesn't the cruel sky fall down and the stone-hearted earth explode at such brutal injustice? What kind of justice was it that, Rupkumari—who was so beautiful, well mannered, hard-working, so devoted to her husband and affectionate to her children that she valued them more than her life, so economical that she



managed the household within the meagre earnings—should be in such a pitiable condition, whereas Ramdulari—who was proud, arrogant, impolite, a pleasure seeker and an impulsive girl who used to roam around with untidy hair—was now living like a queen? Yet, there was a faint trace of hope left in her. Perhaps she would find a way to regain her peace of mind in the future.

Then Rupkumari replied mockingly, ‘So, perhaps your husband will start getting a thousand rupees?’

‘Not a thousand rupees, but undoubtedly six hundred.’

‘Some befuddled employer must have been caught in this trap!’

‘Businessmen are no fools, sister! They are far wiser than you and me. If you give them a benefit of six thousand rupees, only then are you likely to get six hundred. Who can fool the likes of those who are experts in fooling the whole world?’

Seeing that mere sarcasm was not working, Rupkumari deployed the weapon of insult, and argued, ‘I don’t consider it a very good profession. For the whole day, one primarily lies and cheats. It is nothing but trickery.’

Ramdulari laughed loudly. She realized that she had completely overwhelmed her sister.

‘In that way, all lawyers and barristers too are cheats. What do they not do for their clients? They even have to create false evidence. But we make the same lawyers and barristers our leaders, elect them as presidents of our national conferences, pull their vehicles, shower flowers and gold coins on them, name roads, institutions and build statues after them. Today, the world reveres money. It has always been like that. No one bothers to think about the means by which the money is earned. Whoever has money is worshipped, whereas people who are unfortunate, incapable and incompetent, console themselves with the idea of spirituality and righteousness. But who really cares about such virtues?’

At this, Rupkumari fell silent. Now she had to admit to the truth, with all its pain and agony, that Ramdulari was more fortunate than her. Now there was no escape. To continue criticizing and insulting Ramdulari would yield no fruit; rather, it would only exhibit her own narrowness of mind. Now she had to visit Ramdulari’s house on some pretext to find out the reality. If Lakshmi, the Goddess of wealth, had blessed Ramdulari, then Rupkumari had no option but to grieve over her own misfortune. She would understand that justice did not exist in this world and that honesty had no value.

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But would this explanation satisfy her? And in any case, who was honest in this world? Only the person who could not grab an opportunity to act dishonestly or the one who was not intelligent enough to create such an opportunity. Her husband, who earned seventy-five rupees only, wouldn't he feel happy to get ten or twenty rupees more? He would remain honest and truthful only until the moment he found an opportunity to become corrupt. His whole truthfulness would evaporate at the first temptation which might come along his way. Moreover, was Rupkumari morally strong enough to prevent her husband from using the ill-gotten gains? Far from stopping him, she would be pleased instead. Perhaps she may even pat her husband's back in encouragement. Presently, she sits without any enthusiastic anticipation of her husband returning home from the office. Then, closer to his return, she keeps a vigil at the door, awaiting his arrival, and the moment he reached, she would start searching his pockets.

There was singing in the courtyard. Ramdulari was singing joyously. Rupkumari was sitting disconsolate on the veranda. Who knows why her head had started aching? Whether someone was singing or dancing, Rupkumari was indifferent to the cheerful environment. She was unfortunate, born only to weep.

The guests started leaving at nine. Rupkumari also got up. She was going to order a horse cart when Ramdulari said, 'Sister, why send for a horse cart? My car must be coming here to take me home. Spend four or five days at my home before returning to your own. I shall send a message to your husband not to wait for you.'

And so Rupkumari's last weapon also failed. She now lost all desire to find out the reality of Ramdulari's household situation. Now she would go to her own home and cover her face, and lie down, brooding. And, how could she visit her sister's house in such shabby clothes?

Rupkumari said, 'No, I am not free right now. The children must be worried. I shall come some other day.'

'Won't you stay even for a single night?'

'No.'

'Okay, please tell me when you can come. I shall send you the car.'

'I will let you know.'

'You will forget. A year passed and you did not care enough to remember me, even by mistake, and I was waiting to receive an invitation from you. Even

though we live in the same city, we don't see each other for months.'

Rupkumari had no other option but to say that her home kept her very busy and that she had thought of inviting Ramdulari quite a few times, but failed to find an opportunity to do so.

Just then Ramdulari's husband, Gurusevak, arrived and greeted his sister-in-law. Dressed exactly like an Englishman, a cigar in his mouth, a gold watch on his wrist and gold-framed spectacles shielding his eyes, as if he was a civilian. His face exhibited gentlemanliness and worldly wisdom. Rupkumari had never imagined he would be so handsome. His clothes fitted him very well indeed.

Blessing him, Rupkumari said, 'How could I meet you had I not come here today!'

Gurusevak said laughingly, 'You are wrongly blaming me. Did you ever invite me home and I did not come?'

'I never thought you would consider yourself a guest in my house, for it is as much yours.'

Ramdulari was watching how, despite being jealous in her heart, Rupkumari was speaking in such a sweet, affectionate and courteous tone.

Gurusevak replied in a generous tone, 'Now I agree, bhabhi sahib. It is certainly my fault. I never thought that way. But you have to stay at my home today.'

'No, today I have no time. I'll come some other day. The boys must be getting anxious.'

Ramdulari said, 'I too requested her a lot, but she just doesn't agree.'

Eventually, both the sisters seated themselves in the rear seat of the car, while Gurusevak drove. In a few minutes, they reached the house. Ramdulari again requested her sister to stay the night, but her efforts were in vain. After all, the children would be anxious. At last, Ramdulari hugged her and took leave. Gurusevak carried on driving. Rupkumari cast a fleeting glance on Ramdulari's house and the true fact of prosperity cut her to the quick.

After covering a little distance, Gurusevak said, 'Bhabhi, I have chosen a good career for myself. If the work continues to progress like this for three or four years, I will become a prosperous man.'

Rupkumari said sympathetically, 'Ramdulari told me. May God keep you happy wherever you are. But you should move ahead cautiously.'

'Bhabhi. I consider it a sin to take even a single rupee without the knowledge

...them, I consider it better to take even a single rupee without the knowledge of my employer. One can enjoy wealth only when it is honestly earned. To earn money at the cost of one's respect is of no value. I consider such wealth unworthy. Further, who do I have to fear? I'm in charge of the whole operation. My employer is no more, only his widow lives and she has entrusted the charge of everything to me. Had I not managed the affairs of her business, she would have lost it. It was my third month in the business when my employer passed away. But he knew how to assess a person. I was hired at a hundred rupees, but the very next month, my salary was hiked to two hundred. With all your blessings, I amplified the business to the tune of twelve thousand in the very first month.'

Without any motive, Rupkumari asked, 'What is the nature of your work?'

'I work as an agent where different types of machines are imported and later sold,' he replied calmly.

They reached Rupkumari's dingy house. A lantern was dimly lit outside the door. Her husband, Umanath, was strolling at the door. But Rupkumari did not insist Gurusevak to come out of the car—she only invited him in once, merely as a formality. And as for Umanath, he did not even bother to greet Gurusevak.

Rupkumari's house felt a graveyard to her now, a symbol of misfortune. There was no flooring, nor any furniture or flower pots. All it had were a few broken stools, a broken table and some old cots. Till that morning, Rupkumari had been happy in that house. But now, it was grating on her nerves. The boys yelled out in excitement, 'Mother, Mother!' and ran towards her but she indifferently scolded them. Her head was aching. She wouldn't talk to anyone nor would she entertain any kind of disturbance. Dinner was still uncooked. Who else would have cooked it? The children had had milk, but Umanath hadn't taken anything yet. He was waiting for Rupkumari to return and cook. But Rupkumari's head was aching. So the only option left was to get puris from the market.

Rupkumari asked angrily, 'Why were you waiting for me till now? I wasn't brought here as your cook! And what if I had stayed there at night? Why don't you keep a cook? Or would you keep grinding me all my life?'

Startled and hurt, Umanath looked at his wife, unable to decipher the reason for her unusual behaviour. He had always received wholehearted cooperation from her. Not only cooperation, but also unstinting support. In fact, he had himself proposed many times that they engage a cook, but she would constantly

refuse by saying, 'What will I do sitting idle? Why should we add an unnecessary expense of four or five rupees? That much money could be spent in getting butter for the children.'

And today, she was spitefully taunting him, as if filled with resentment.

Defending himself, he said, 'I've suggested to you several times that we should keep a cook.'

'Then why didn't you engage one? If I had turned her out once she was appointed, then you could complain!'

'Well, then I'm at fault.'

'You never proposed this wholeheartedly,' Rupkumari retorted more angrily. 'You only said this to please me. I am not such a simpleton that I don't understand your inner motives. You never thought of my comfort. You were happy to have a servant at your disposal, one who was satisfied with little food and a few clothes, and that too, when there was some money left over after all the household expenses. You place the petty amount of seventy-five rupees in my hand, out of which I am supposed to manage all sorts of expenses. Only I know how I make both ends meet. I am troubled with the thought of what I should wear! You have ruined my life! There are men in this world who pluck stars from the sky for the sake of their wives' happiness. Why go far, look at Gurusevak! He is less educated than you are and even younger than you, but still earns five hundred rupees a month and Ramdulari lives like a queen. But you are satisfied with the petty amount of seventy-five rupees, and busy in your own world. What kind of a man are you, you should've been born a woman. A woman's heart is filled with countless desires and wishes. But you are not bothered about me. You have no problems. You want to have good food to eat and good clothes to wear just because you are a man, the sole earner, but you don't give a damn about how I exist.'

This verbal volley of abuses continued for a few minutes while Umanath remained silent. In his whole life, he had never given Rupkumari a chance to complain. It was undeniable that he got only a small amount as salary, but he was helpless in this matter. He did his work faithfully and tried his best to stay in the good books of his officers. This year, he had taught the head officer's younger son for six months without a break only to please him. What else could he do? He understood the reason behind Rupkumari's rage. If Gurusevak was indeed drawing five hundred rupees as salary, then he was definitely a fortunate

man. But one does not break one's head at other's good fortune! Gurusevak might have been fortunate enough to get this opportunity, but not everyone was so lucky. He would investigate whether Gurusevak was actually getting five hundred rupees or was it just a hoax. But even if he was getting that much money, how did it give Rupkumari the right to insult and abuse Umanath? What if he too started abusing and taunting his wife the same way, finding a more beautiful and generous woman? Of course, Rupkumari was beautiful, soft-spoken and self-sacrificing, but surely there are other women in the whole world who surpass her in all these qualities? So should he start disrespecting her for this reason?

There was a time when no other woman was as beautiful as Rupkumari in his eyes in the whole world. But that feeling no longer existed. A long time had passed since he had emerged from that romantic world into a more practical one. Now, he had gained experience of married life. They were now familiar with each other's virtues and flaws. Contentment was the only way for them to stay happy. But Rupkumari, despite being wise, had failed to understand such a simple truth.

Still, he sympathized with Rupkumari. He was good-hearted and an imaginative person. So, he remained silent at Rupkumari's angry outburst and swallowed it without complaint. It was natural for Rupkumari to get disturbed for a moment seeing the lavishness of her sister's life. Rupkumari was no ascetic or self-denying person to stay happy under every condition.

Convincing himself thus, Umanath resolved to investigate the matters of Gurusevak.

## 2

For about a week, Rupkumari remained distraught.

She would get irritated at every trifle, scold the boys, curse her husband and bemoan her fate. She did the household chores as usual, but not wholeheartedly; now they seemed a burden to her. She was no longer preoccupied with the cleaning and maintenance of those things that she had once developed an emotional attachment with and upon which she used to lavish so much attention. There was only one servant in the house. When he saw that Rupkumari hardly

cared about managing the household, why should he bother to clean it? Chaos and disorder ruled the house—who would care to bring order? The children were afraid of talking to their mother, whereas Umanath would evade her very shadow. Whatever was served, Umanath would silently gulp it down and leave for his office. After returning from the office, he would take both his children for a walk. Speaking to Rupkumari was like wilfully setting a spark to an explosive. But his investigation of Gurusevak continued.

One day, when Umanath returned from his office, Gurusevak was accompanying him. That day, after many days, Rupkumari had finally reconciled with the situation and was dusting chairs and tables, when Gurusevak entered and greeted her. She burnt with anger upon seeing him with Umanath and bit back the urge to scratch her husband's face. Why had he brought Gurusevak home with no prior notice? What would Gurusevak be thinking after seeing her in this condition? But Umanath had always lacked brains. Despite all her efforts to conceal her sad plight, Umanath was himself exposing the reality of their circumstances. He was shameless. Who knows what she had done to Umanath for him to keep on insulting her?

After giving him her blessings, she asked Gurusevak after the well-being of his family and offered him a chair to sit. Sitting down, he said, 'Today bhai sahib has invited me home. I would not have come on his invitation but when he said that you were insisting, I spared some time to come here.'

Rupkumari diverted him by saying, 'That day I couldn't talk to you as I was preoccupied.'

Gurusevak, glancing around the room, remarked, 'You must be facing great difficulty living in this cage.'

Rupkumari realized that he was very inconsiderate and insensitive, with no regard for others' feelings. She thought, *He doesn't even understand that not all people are fortunate enough in this world. Only one among lakhs is lucky, and if it were not so, how else would he stand out as an exception, as the fortunate one? Where most people don't even have enough to eat, what greatness could there be in the pleasure and prosperity of the few? In contrast, their extravagance is a sign of their impudence and insolence rather than of their fortune.*

Irritated, she said, 'It is better to live in a cage rather than in a big house, for in the cage, the birds live in harmony, while a spacious place befits the dwelling of

fierce animals.’

Perhaps Gurusevak could not catch the drift; he said, ‘I’d feel suffocated in this house. I’ll arrange a spacious house for you in my neighbourhood. You’ll not have to pay any rent, for it belongs to the widow of my employer. I also live in one of her houses. She has hundreds of such houses. All of them are under my charge. It is entirely my discretion to give any of them on rent or for free. I’ll get the best one repaired for you because of my love and respect for you.’

Rupkumari understood that he was inebriated; that was why he was talking nonsense. On closer inspection, she found his cheeks swollen and his eyes getting smaller. He was stammering as well. She began to loathe his handsome, smart and innocent face which had turned shameless and brazen because of his bragging.

After a moment, he started babbling again. ‘I respect you a lot, for you are my Badi Bhabhi. I am always at your service. Not only one, but a hundred houses could be at your disposal. I am Mrs Lohia’s attorney. Everything is in my hands—everything! Whatever I say she accepts blindly. She considers me her son. I am the owner of all her property. Mr Lohia employed me for just twenty rupees, just twenty rupees! He was very rich. But no one knew the secret of his wealth except me.

‘He was a smuggler. Don’t tell anyone! He sold cocaine secretly and earned lakhs of rupees. I’m doing the same business now. We have our secret agents in every city. Working under Mr Lohia has made me an expert in this business. No one dares arrest me, for I am securely in the good books of all the higher officials. I silence them with bundles of money. No one can utter a word. I sell drugs openly. I write in the accounts that I paid a thousand rupees as a bribe, whereas I had actually paid five hundred only—the rest is for me and my friends. Money is limitless and I spend extravagantly. I am not accountable to anyone. The old woman is engrossed in prayers all the time. After devouring so many mice, the cat is now seeking salvation!’

Taking a bundle of notes from his pocket, he continued, ‘Take this as my token of love to you and bless me that I should live my whole life in the same luxurious manner. Whoever thinks of the soul and righteousness is eventually abandoned by Kuber, the Lord of wealth. And Lakshmi, the Goddess of wealth, showers her blessings only upon those who renounce their religion and honesty



for her sake. Don't get me wrong. I am not that rich. All the wealthy men are robbers and dacoits. If tomorrow, I get fortunate enough and build a dharmashala, I will be praised and admired by all. Who cares how I earn the money? I can hire any priest to sing my praises. Mr Lohia, who was an unsurpassed sinner, was given the title of *Dharmabhushan*, the ornament of religion, by priests—those selfish, material worshippers. This hypocrisy rules the day. A lawyer earns five hundred rupees in a half-hour argument, a doctor pockets a thousand rupees by giving a simple injection, and a gambler exacts lakhs in a day. If their income is legal, then mine is too.'

'In my eyes, there is no respect for even the wealthiest of them. I know their tricks. The one who is a master swindler is successful. Becoming rich by robbing poor people is the oldest tradition of our society. I am also doing the same and this is my life's sole aim. I will rob as much as possible and enjoy limitless wealth and will give large sums of money in charity in my old age, and one day I will become a leader. Should I count how many people have become rich through gambling and trafficking women?'

Suddenly, Umanath came in and said, 'Mr Gurusevak, what are you doing? Come and have your tea. It is getting cold.'

Gurusevak was startled and tried to stabilize himself in order to act normal. But his legs faltered and he fell down. Then he collected himself to stand up, and staggering and stumbling all the while, went out of the room.

Rupkumari heaved a sigh of relief. She felt suffocated, as if the air in the room was nauseating. The ugliness of the things that had attracted and fascinated her a few days ago were now revealed in their stark reality. The entry of such ideas like selfishness, dishonesty and trickery in her life—till now lived with simplicity, sacrifice and devotion—was akin to the invasion of a herd of bulls into a garden. She did not want worldly pleasures and riches at such a heavy cost. No, not at all. Now she would never compare her fate with that of Ramdulari's. She was happy with her lot. She pitied Ramdulari as she was selling her soul for material pleasures. But her sister was also helpless and Gurusevak could not be blamed either. Apparently, the fault rested not with them, but rather with society where wealth was worshipped so outrageously, where a person's worth was assessed by his bank accounts and lavish lifestyle; where temptation ruled at every step, and where base thoughts of jealousy, hate and exploitation were flagrantly encouraged. And it should not surprise one if

and exploitation were flagrantly encouraged. And it should not surprise one if Ramdulari and Gurusevak too were driven by the same pressures.

Just then Umanath asked his wife, 'What was Gurusevak blabbering about? I bade him farewell lest the police may be after him. Otherwise, I too would have been in trouble.'

Rupkumari replied in an ashamed tone, 'He was bragging about his smuggling business.'

'He even asked me to meet Mrs Lohia.'

'No, you better stick to your clerkship. We are better off as we are.'

'But a clerkship does not offer such luxuries. Why not take leave for one year and experience the pleasures of Gurusevak's world?'

'All such luxuries don't attract me any more.'

'Are you serious?'

'Yes, wholeheartedly.'

After a minute's silence, Umanath spoke again, 'Had I told you the same story, would you have believed me or not? Tell me honestly.'

'No, never. I could've never imagined that anyone can dispense poison to others in order to benefit himself.'

'I found out the whole story from the subinspector. I made Gurusevak drink heavily so that he would vomit the truth himself in his inebriated state.'

'Perhaps you too were tempted.'

'Yes, I was tempted. I still am. But where would I learn the shrewdness required to earn in this business?'

'God forbid you should never learn such skills. I pity that poor man. I don't know whether he reached home safely.'

'Don't worry. He left in his own car.'

Rupkumari stared at the ground for a moment and said, 'Take me to Ramdulari's home. I might be of some help to her. The garden of pleasure in which she is strolling in right now is surrounded by demons on all sides. Maybe I can save her.'

Umanath saw that Rupkumari's visage was brimming with pity and concern for her sister.

*Translated from the Hindi by Shaiqta Ayoub and Kalyanee Rajan*



## My First Composition

I must have been thirteen years old at the time. I didn't know Hindi at all. I was crazy about Urdu novels—both reading and writing them. Maulvi Sharar, Pandit Ratan Nath Sarshar, Mirza Ruswa and Maulvi Muhammad Ali of Hardoi were the popular novelists of the time. Whenever I got hold of any of their works, I devoured it to the end, putting aside my schoolbooks. In those days, books by Reynolds were also very popular. His books were translated into Urdu and sold like hot cakes. I too was one of his fans. Mr Riyaz, who was a famed poet and who had died recently, had translated one of Reynold's novels, *Haram Sara*. Maulvi Sajjad Husain, the immortal humorist and the editor of the Lucknow weekly, *Avadh Punch*, had translated another of his novels and gave it the title *Dhoka Ya Tilism-i Faanus*. I had read all these books during those days. And I just couldn't have enough of Pandit Ratan Nath Sarshar. I read all his books.

At that time, my father lived in Gorakhpur and I studied in the mission school there. I was in class eight, which was called third standard. There was a bookseller, Buddhilal, in Reti whose shop was my haunt. I had read all the novels that were in his stock. He wouldn't allow me to sit in his shop the entire day. So, I brought the 'keys' of English textbooks and 'notes' from his shop and sold them to the schoolboys. In return, the bookseller allowed me to take novels home to read.

I must have read hundreds of novels in two to three years. When Buddhilal's stock of novels was exhausted, I started reading translations of the Puranas, published by Naval Kishore Press, and several volumes of *Tilism-e-Hoshruba*. As many as seventeen volumes of this huge tome had already been published by then, each running into no less than two thousand pages of super-royal size.

After these seventeen volumes, about twenty-five separate books have been published on different events described in these volumes. I read some of them too. One can only guess the massive imagination the writer of these volumes had. It is said that they had been originally written in Farsi by Maulana Faizee for Akbar's entertainment. I cannot vouch for its veracity, but one thing is certain—such a vast book would scarcely be available in any other language of the world. It is like a veritable encyclopedia. A man, in an ordinary lifespan of sixty years, cannot even copy such a vast volume of materials—what can be said about writing them down!

At that time, a distantly related maternal uncle used to visit us occasionally. He had reached middle age, but had not yet married. He had a home and some landed property, but everything looked incomplete without a wife. That was why he was not too attached to his home, and wandered about visiting relatives. He expected that some or the other of his relatives would find him a wife. He was even ready to spend a couple of hundred rupees for this purpose. It was a puzzle why he couldn't find a wife yet. He was of medium height, with a strong physique, long moustaches and a dark complexion. He smoked hemp, which was why his eyes looked red. He was pious in his own way. He offered an oblation of water to Shiva every day and didn't eat fish or meat.

Eventually, he ended up doing what unmarried people often do. He fell for a *chamarin*, a woman from the low caste of tanners. He employed her to make cow dung cakes, give fodder to the cattle and do similar other chores. She was young, lively, and like the women of her class, she had a pleasant and happy demeanour. It is said that even a sow looks beautiful in her youth. Uncle's thirsty heart slipped the moment it found this stream of sweet water. He began to make passes at her. She could guess what was on his mind, she wasn't such a simpleton. She took recourse to coquetry—she began to oil her hair, applied kohl to her eyes and colour to her lips. She became slack at her chores. Sometimes, she appeared at noon and left before Uncle had a glimpse of her, and sometimes, she appeared at sundown and left after throwing a piercing glance at him. Uncle looked after the animal feed himself, while others took care of the cow dung. He could ill-afford to displease her. Love was sprouting in his heart after all these years. During Holi, he gifted her a sari, not an ordinary one as he would have given her earlier, but a *chanderi* sari costing two and a quarter rupees. The tips

he gave her at this time had also increased fourfold. Matters proceeded in this way and it appeared that she was no longer the charwoman, but the mistress of the house.

One day, all the Chamars held a panchayat, a village council, to discuss this matter. *Granted he is a big man, but why should he play with someone's honour,* they argued. *As for his father, he never looked at women with evil intentions (which was not true)! Look at him, he doesn't spare even women of a lower caste! Persuasion would be in vain. If we try to argue with him, he won't agree. He might even retaliate. He has the might of the pen at his disposal.* They decided that Uncle should be taught a lesson he would never forget. The proper punishment for dishonour was death, but a sound thrashing would also go quite far to achieve their goal.

The following day when Champa arrived, Uncle closed the door of the inner room. After months of dithering, hesitation and mental conflict, he had decided to give physical shape to his love. He didn't care any more for his family honour and the reputation of his forefathers.

The Chamars were lying in wait for an opportunity. They began knocking at the door the moment it was closed. At first, Uncle thought that it must be one of his tenants who would return seeing the door closed. But when he heard the commotion outside, he felt nervous and looked out through the keyhole. He saw there were about twenty to twenty-five men armed with sticks, trying to break open the door. What could he do? There was no way of escape, and no place to hide Champa. He realized that he had landed himself in a soup. He had not expected that his love would lead him in such a situation. If he knew, he wouldn't have allowed the love of the charwoman to invade his heart. On top of it all, Champa was cursing him, 'What's it to *you*? My honour is at stake. I asked you never to close the door. I requested you with folded hands. But you're like someone possessed. You have been well-served indeed!'

Poor uncle was a novice at the game. A really smart fellow would have found some way to extricate himself from the mess. But he was like a wet cat, standing there helpless and chanting the Hanuman Chalisa.

Outside, the uproar was reaching a crescendo. The entire village had converged there. Brahmins, Thakurs, Kayasthas—everyone had reached there to witness the spectacle. What could be more entertaining and exciting than to see a man and a woman closeted behind closed doors? However high and mighty or

man and a woman crouched behind closed doors. However high and mighty or humble the gentleman in question, the public never pardoned such a man. The carpenter was called in, the door was broken open and Uncle could be seen hiding amidst haystacks. Champa was standing in the courtyard and crying. She took to her heels the moment the door was opened. No one stopped her. But Uncle had no way of escape. He was lying there, mentally prepared for a thrashing. There was a veritable shower of blows. Whatever objects one could lay one's hands on—umbrellas, sticks, shoes, fists, legs—were used liberally. Uncle couldn't bear it any more and fell unconscious. People left him for dead. Even if he survived, they argued, he wouldn't like to stay in the village after such humiliation, and all his land would pass on to others.

The news of this incident reached us too on the wings of rumour. I enjoyed it intensely. I laughed to my heart's content, trying to picture the scene of his thrashing.

For a month, he drank a mixture of turmeric and molasses as a cure for his injuries. As soon as he was fit enough to move about, he came to see us. He wanted to sue his fellow villagers for criminal assault on him.

If he had showed humility, I might have felt sympathy for him. But he was his old self, displaying annoyance at my playing games or reading novels, and threatening to complain to my father. I was not ready to put up with it any more, for now I had enough ammunition at my disposal to humiliate him!

Finally, one day, I penned this event down in the form of a play and read it out to my friends. They laughed heartily. I was encouraged. I made a fair copy and left it under Uncle's pillow, and then went to school. I was nervous about the consequences, but happy at the thought that I could, at last, get even with him. My greatest curiosity was, however, to see how he reacted when he read it. I couldn't concentrate on my work at school as my mind wandered towards home. I raced home as soon as school got over. But as I reached the doorstep, I stopped in my tracks. I was scared that Uncle might want to thrash me. But I was sure about one thing—he could not slap me more than once because I was not one to take such things lying down.

But what was the matter? Uncle wasn't on his cot, where he could always be seen, relaxing. Had he left for his home? I went to his room, which was also vacant. There was no trace of his shoes or his bundle of clothes. I was told that he had some urgent work for which he had gone home. He didn't even stop for a

meal.

I rummaged through his room, but my play, my first composition, couldn't be found anywhere. I didn't know whether Uncle had consigned it to the fire or carried it to heaven with him.

*Translated from the Hindi by M. Asaduddin*



## The Shroud

### 1

The father and son were sitting right in front of the entrance to the shack beside a fire that had long gone out. Inside, Budhia, the son's young wife, was writhing in labour pains. Her heart-rending cries made both the father and son hold their hearts. It was a desolate, wintry night and the whole village was enveloped in darkness.

'She won't last, it seems', said Ghisu. 'She has been tossing and turning the whole day. Go in and see what's wrong.'

'Why doesn't she just die if she has to? What's there to see?' Madho whined piteously.

'You are so cruel. You spent a whole year with her happily, and now you're turning your face away from her.'

'I can't bear to see her writhing in pain, flailing her hands and legs.'

Ghisu and Madho were Chamars by caste, and were treated with contempt by the whole village. For every day that Ghisu worked, he shirked his duty for three days. But the real shirker was Madho, who sat and puffed at the chillum for an hour after each hour of work that he put in. That was why no one hired them. They wouldn't seek work if they had even a fistful of grain at home. Only when they'd missed a couple of meals did Ghisu climb up a tree to gather some dry branches which Madho carried to the market to sell. As long as that money lasted, they simply roamed about. Once they were faced with starvation again, they would gather dry wood or seek some other work.

There was no dearth of work in the village. The peasants who lived there



could have given them all kinds of jobs, but they called them only when they were desperate and had no option but to employ both to get the work done, which could otherwise have been accomplished by one person. Had the father-son duo been sadhus, they wouldn't have been required to practise self-restraint to attain contentment. It was second nature to them.

A strange life they led! They had nothing in the house except for a couple of clay utensils. They covered their nakedness in tattered rags. Even though they were free from the temptations of life, they were burdened with debt. They listened to people's insults and abuses with perfect equanimity. They were so destitute that people lent them things without any hope of getting them back. They would enter other people's fields, steal potatoes and peas, and roast them to fill their stomachs. Or they would uproot a few sugar cane stalks and suck the juice through the night.

Ghisu had been living this spartan life for sixty years, and now Madho, like a truly obedient son, was following in his father's footsteps. Rather, he outdid his father in this regard. At that hour as well, sitting by the fire, they were roasting potatoes that they had stolen from somebody's field.

Ghisu's wife had died a long time ago. Madho had married only the previous year. This woman had brought some order in the family. She ground wheat or chopped grass and somehow managed to get together a seer of flour to feed these two shameless rascals. Since she had arrived, they had become lazier and more laid-back than before. They had even started giving themselves airs. If someone wanted to hire them, they wouldn't show any interest, and then demand double the wages. This woman had been tossing and turning in mortal labour pain since morning, but the father and the son seemed to be waiting for her to die so that they could have a good night's sleep.

As he peeled the potatoes, Ghisu said, 'Just go in and see what's wrong. She must be possessed by an evil spirit. The exorcist will demand no less than a rupee if you send for him. Where will we get the money from?'

Worried that if he went in, Ghisu might polish off most of the potatoes, Madho replied, 'I'm afraid to go in.'

'Afraid of what? I'm right here.'

'Why don't you go in and see?'

'When my wife died, I didn't budge from her side for three days . . . She'll feel shy, won't she? I have never looked at her face, how can I look at her bare

body today? She wouldn't know how to react. If she sees me, she'll go stiff with embarrassment.'

'I wonder what we will do if the child comes. Dry ginger, jaggery, oil—we have nothing in the house.'

'Everything will come. If God gives a child, those who don't give a paisa now will give something on their own. I had nine sons. There was never anything in the house, but things worked out fine each time.'

It was not surprising to come across such a way of thinking in a society where the condition of those who toiled day and night was not much better than the condition of these two, and where those who took advantage of the weaknesses of the peasants were much better off than the peasants themselves.

Ghisu, it seems, was shrewder than ordinary peasants, and rather than joining their thoughtless herd, he had enlisted himself in the group of the sly and crafty ones. However, he didn't have the ability to use the mores of the crafty to his advantage, and that is why the others in his group had gone on to become leaders and headmen in the village whereas everyone pointed accusing fingers at him. Still, he had one consolation: no matter how wretched his condition, he, unlike other peasants, was able to evade their back-breaking labour and no one could take advantage of his dumb simplicity.

The duo peeled the potatoes and hastily popped them into their mouths. Starving since the previous day, they didn't have the patience to let them cool. The outer part of the potatoes didn't feel too hot, but as they dug their teeth in, the hot insides scalded their tongues, palate and throat. The safest thing to do at that moment was to gulp down the burning ember hurriedly and consign it to the place where it would cool down soon enough. So they kept on gobbling up the potatoes frantically even as tears streamed down their eyes from the effort.

Ghisu was reminded of the Thakur's marriage, which he had attended twenty years ago. He remembered that extraordinary feast to this day. He said, 'I can never forget it. Never have I been to another feast like that where I could have such a bellyful. The bride's family fed everyone, big and small, puris fried in pure ghee. And there was curd, three kinds of dry saag, one spicy curry, chutney, sweets and many other things. I can't tell you how I relished it! There was no one to stop you. You could demand anything you wanted and eat as much as you liked. People gorged so much that there was no space for even a drop of water in their stomachs. But the common habit of drinking water during the feast was to

their stomachs. But the servers kept on dishing out piping hot, fragrant kacoris. They didn't listen to you even if you said no or raised your hand to restrain them. And when people finished eating and rinsed their mouths, they were served paan as well. But I had no desire left for paan as I could barely stand! I somehow managed to reach home and stretched out on my blanket . . . the Thakur was large-hearted indeed!

Madho listened to the description of the sumptuous list of delicacies with relish, and said, 'I wish someone would feed us like that now.'

'Who'll feed you now? Those times were different. Nowadays everyone is saving money. Stingy in marriages and weddings, stingy in rites and rituals. What are they going to do with all the money they grab from poor people, I ask you. They are not tight-fisted when it is a question of grabbing, they are so only when it comes to giving.'

'You must've stuffed yourself with at least twenty puris?'

'More than twenty. I was a hefty fellow. You aren't even half the size I was.'

They finished the potatoes and drank some water. Then they covered themselves with their dhotis, tucked their knees up against their chests and went off to sleep right there beside the ashes of the fire. Like two huge, coiled-up pythons.

Budhia was still writhing in pain.

## 2

The next morning, Madho went inside the shack to find his wife's body stiff and cold. Flies were buzzing over her face. She was covered with dust and her two stony eyes were staring vacantly upwards. The child in her womb had died.

Madho rushed out to Ghisu and both began to howl and beat their chests. Hearing their lament, the neighbours came running in panic and muttered time-worn consolations.

But there was not much time for mourning. They had to arrange the firewood and the shroud. Money was as scarce in the house as meat in an eagle's nest.

The father and son went wailing to the zamindar of the village. He hated the very sight of them, and had thrashed them a couple of times with his own hands. For stealing and for not showing up for work after they had promised to. He said, 'What's the matter, Ghisua? What are you howling for? One doesn't see

your face nowadays. It seems like you don't want to live in this village.'

Ghisu prostrated himself before the zamindar and said tearfully, 'Sarkar, we're in deep trouble. Madho's wife died last night. She suffered the whole day. We sat by her late into the night. Gave her all the medicines—the best we could. But she gave us the slip. We have no one left now to prepare a roti for us. Master, we're ruined. My family is destroyed. Now, who will see to her last rites except you? We spent whatever little we had on her treatment. She can be given her last rites only if you have mercy. We have no one else to turn to.'

Though the zamindar was kind, he knew that his kindness would be wasted on these fellows. For a moment he felt that he'd shoo them away and tell them to their faces that the corpse could rot for all he cared. They didn't come when they were sent for, did they? Only because they had found themselves in a tight spot today had they shown up to flatter him. Rascals! But this was not the occasion for anger or revenge. He reluctantly flung two rupees at them, but didn't utter a word of sympathy. He didn't even deign to look at them. It was as though he was getting a load off his head.

When the zamindar himself gave them two rupees, how could lesser mortals like the village banias, shopkeepers or moneylenders avoid making some contribution to the good cause? Ghisu made much of the zamindar's name and some contributed two annas and some four. Within an hour, Ghisu managed to collect a sum of five rupees which was adequate. Some gave grains, others gave firewood. Thus reassured, Ghisu and Madho set out for the market at noon to buy the shroud, while others got busy splitting bamboos for the bier.

The kindly village women came to take a look at the corpse, bemoaned the helpless fate of the dead woman, and left.

### 3

As they reached the market, Ghisu said, 'We've got enough firewood for the pyre, what do you say?'

'Yes, there's enough wood. We need only the shroud now.'

'Let's get a cheap one.'

'Of course. It will be night when the corpse is carried to the pyre, no one will look at the shroud.'

‘What an unjust custom! She, who didn’t have even tattered rags to cover her body while she was alive, must now have a new shroud.’

‘And it burns to ashes with the corpse.’

‘So it does. Now if we had these five rupees earlier, we could’ve bought her some medicines.’

Each was trying to gauge what the other was thinking. They kept wandering around in the market until it was evening. And either intentionally or by coincidence, they found themselves in front of a liquor shop. They entered together and stood hesitantly for a while. Then Ghisu bought a bottle of liquor and some titbits and, sitting in the veranda, both began to drink. Soon, they were drunk.

‘What good would it have done if we’d bought the shroud? It’d only be burnt to ashes,’ said Ghisu.

Madho looked up at the heavens as though he was reassuring the angels of his innocence, and said, ‘This is the way of the world. They give thousands of rupees to the Brahmins. Who knows whether it brings them rewards in the next life?’

‘Rich people have money to burn, let them. What do we have?’

‘But what’ll we tell people? They’ll ask where the shroud is?’

Ghisu grinned. ‘We’ll say the money slipped out from my waistband. We looked everywhere, but couldn’t find it.’

Madho giggled. He was excited by his father’s unexpected ingenuity, and said, ‘She was a good soul. Even in death, she saw to it that we were fed well.’

By this time, they had finished off more than half the bottle. Ghisu ordered two seers of puri, along with mutton curry, liver pieces and fish fry from the shop opposite the shack. Madho ran to collect them all in two bowls. The sumptuous fare cost them one and a half rupees. They now had very little money left.

The two of them sat there in all splendour and helped themselves to the puris with the gusto of a lion feeding on its prey in the jungle. No one could hold them to account, and there was no fear of humiliation. They were past the stage of such sensitivities. Ghisu said philosophically, ‘She made us so happy, she’ll definitely get rewarded for it in heaven.’

Madho lowered his head respectfully to indicate his agreement. ‘Sure. Bhagwan, you are all-knowing. Take her to paradise. We pray for her from the

depth of our hearts. We have never had such a hearty meal in our whole life.'

After a few moments, Madho had some doubts.

'Dada, aren't we all bound for the same place, sooner or later?'

Ghisu didn't deign to reply to such a childish query. He looked at Madho reproachfully.

'What answer will you give her there if she asks why we didn't give her a shroud?' Madho asked.

'Don't talk rubbish!'

'She's going to ask—you can be sure of that.'

'How do you know that she won't have a shroud? Do you take me to be a donkey? I haven't lived in this world for sixty years for nothing. She *will* have a shroud, and a much better one than we could have given her.'

Madho was unconvinced. He asked, 'Who'll provide it? You have blown up all the money.'

Ghisu was really angry now. 'I'm saying she'll have her shroud. Why don't you believe me?'

'Why don't you say who'll provide it?'

'The same people who gave us the money. They won't hand over the money to us any more. If they do, we'll have another feast here. And they'll pay for the shroud again.'

As the darkness deepened and the stars shone brighter, the atmosphere in the liquor shop became livelier. If one sang, another reeled, someone else clung to his friend's neck while yet another held a glass to his companion's lips. There was intoxication in the air. The revelry became more boisterous. Some got drunk after just one swig. Many came there only to taste the joy of forgetfulness. More than the liquor, it was the ambience that made them happy. The sorrows of life had brought them here, and for a while they would forget whether they were dead or alive or something in-between.

The father and son were still taking swigs from the bottle merrily. All eyes were glued to them. How fortunate they were to have a whole bottle all to themselves!

Having finished the meal, Madho picked up the leftover puris and gave them to a beggar who was staring hungrily at them. For the first time in his life, he was experiencing the pride and pleasure of drinking and being on a high.

'Take it,' said Ghisu, 'eat to your heart's content and give us your blessings.'

Take it, said Ghisu, eat to your heart's content and give us your blessings. She who has earned it is dead. With your blessings, she is sure to go to heaven. Bless her from every pore of your body. The money was hard-earned.'

Madho looked up at the sky and said, 'She'll go to heaven, Dada, and be a queen there.'

Ghisu stood up and said ecstatically, 'Yes, she'll go to heaven. She hurt no one, harmed no one. In death, she fulfilled the greatest wish of our life. If she doesn't go to heaven, who will? These fat bloodsuckers of the poor who go for darshan of the Ganga to wash their sins and offer prayers in temples?'

This exuberance soon wore off. Fluctuation in mood is an integral feature of the drunken state. Sadness and remorse took over.

'Dada, how the poor thing suffered in life, and now she's dead and gone!' Madho covered his eyes with his hands and burst into tears.

Ghisu consoled him. 'Don't cry, my son. Be happy that she has been released from the web of maya, from all fetters. She was very lucky she could snap all ties so soon.'

And then they both broke into a song: *Deceiver, why do you cast such enchanting glances, oh deceiver . . .?*

The entire shack was drowning in a drunken stupor and the two went on singing. Then they began to dance—they leaped and jumped, staggered and tumbled, made faces and gestures, and finally crashed to the ground.

*Translated from the Urdu by M. Asaduddin*



## The Holi Holiday

### 1

After graduating through the vernacular final examination, I got a position at a primary school, which was at a distance of eleven miles from my home. The headmaster of our school was obsessed with teaching the children even during holidays. At night, the boys would come to the school after dinner and the headmaster sahib tried teaching them even as he lay on his charpoy and snored. When the boys got too boisterous and raised hell, he would suddenly wake up from his sleep, which was rather like that of the fabled hare. He would then dole out a few slaps to the boys and return to the pleasures of his dreams. The drama would continue till eleven or twelve at night till the boys became restless and sleepy, and dozed off on their burlap mats.

The annual exam was scheduled for next April and so the hullabaloo had erupted since January. The only concession granted was the discontinuation of the night classes, but no holidays were approved. Festivals like Somvati Amaavas, Basant and Shivratri came and went by without holidays; and the Sunday offs are not worth mentioning. The thought of travelling the long distance for only one day's leave had prevented me from visiting home for several months at a stretch. But this time, I had firmly decided to go home, for Holi, regardless of whether I retained my job or not. I had given a prior ultimatum, a week in advance to the headmaster sahib that the Holi holidays would begin from 20 March, and this gentleman would excuse himself from the evening of the nineteenth. The headmaster sahib reasoned with me and said, 'You are just a boy and are unable to appreciate the difficulties of landing and



keeping a job. It is more difficult to keep a job than to get one. The exams are scheduled for April and how many lads do you think can pass if the school was to remain shut for three or four days? Will it not lay waste the effort of the entire year? Listen to me, don't go during these holidays. Go off during any holiday that falls after Easter. The Easter holidays will be for four days, I won't proscribe it even for a day.'

I stood my ground. Attempts to reason and cajole, threaten and admonish, and demands for explanations had no effect whatsoever on me. On the nineteenth, as soon as the school shut, I did not even greet the headmaster sahib and slunk away to my lodging. Had I gone to meet him, he would have detained me on some pretext or another—update the fee register, calculate the average attendance, check the boys' copies and update them—as if this was going to be my last journey and I should finish all my tasks right away.

Once I was back in my lodgings, I swiftly picked up my bundle of books, slung my light quilt over my shoulders and left for the station. The train was to leave at five minutes past five in the evening. The clock at the school was set half an hour ahead at reporting time and half an hour behind at closing time. By my calculations, there was enough time to reach the station. Even so, I had the same apprehension in my heart as travellers usually have regarding missing a train. Even when they have a wristwatch or even if they know the correct departure time of the train, they get anxious upon hearing a train's faraway rumble or whistle. My bundle of books was heavy and the quilt was adding to the weight. I kept shifting them from one hand to the other and walked as swiftly as I could. I could now see the station at a distance of two furlongs. The signal had already been turned down, and seeing that my spirits also followed suit on a downward course. Given my age, I ran a hundred steps but this was nothing but the audacity that comes from disappointment. I could see the train pulling into the station, halting for a minute and then leaving. Surely the clock at the school had been set behind more than the usual time today.

It was useless to go to the station now. The next train was at eleven and would reach my home station at twelve and it would be one by the time I reached home. Covering the distance on foot was akin to a battle in that dead of night and I was not spirited enough to win that battle. It occurred to me for a moment to go and confront the headmaster, but I controlled myself and prepared to walk. It was a total of only twelve miles and if I walked two miles an hour, I would

surely reach home in six hours. It was five now. If I kept walking, I would certainly reach by ten. Amma and Munnu would be waiting for me, and I would get hot food as soon as I reached. There would be jaggery simmering at the cane crusher and they would bring hot juice for me to drink, and how people would wonder when they found out that I travelled such a great distance on foot!

I immediately started towards the Ganga. This town was on one bank of the river and the road to my village was on the other side. I had never had the occasion to take this road, but I had heard that the untarred road led straight to my village and there was nothing to worry about. I would cross the river in a boat in ten minutes and then just sprint across. Twelve miles is just a count; actually it totals to six *kos* only!

When I reached the bank, not even half the passengers had boarded the boat. I leapt in and sat in the boat. I even paid the boatman, but the boat was still in its place, unmoving. There are not too many travellers, how can the boat start? People from the tehsil and the court kept sitting in the boat and I was simmering with anger from the inside. The sun was racing to set as if in a bet with me. White just a moment ago, it started turning yellow and very swiftly it had turned orange. Hanging on the horizon, on the far side of the river, like a bucket perched on the side of a well. The air had turned slightly nippy and I was beginning to feel hungry too. In the enthusiasm and hurry of going home, I had not made rotis because I had reckoned that I would reach by evening, and bought and ate a paisa worth of gram. The enthusiasm and the gram had only seen me through so far, but they had now simply vanished—I wonder where. But why worry? Would there not be shops on the way? I would purchase and eat sweetmeats for a few paise.

When the boat touched the bank on the other side of the river, the sun was taking its last breaths, its base caressed by the expanse of the river.

I picked up my bundle and started walking briskly. There were gram fields on both the sides, and a thin film of dew had started settling on their flowers. Without a care, I entered a field and plucked some gram and continued on my way.

The destination was twelve miles away, the road was desolate and evening had fallen. For the first time, I realized my mistake. But youthful passion told me that there was nothing to worry about and a couple of miles could be covered running. In my mind, I multiplied twelve by one thousand seven hundred and sixty and concluded that the distance was just twenty thousand yards. Compared to twelve miles, twenty thousand yards seemed light and easy. And when I was just two or three miles away, then, in a way, I would already be in my village, so there was no point counting those. I regained courage. One or two travellers too were walking some distance behind me, which gave me more consolation.

It had turned dark and I was sprinting. In the distance, I could see a hut on the side of the road. There was a lamp too. Must be the shop of a bania, I surmised. If nothing else, I could at least find some jaggery and gram. I quickened my steps and reached the hut. For a moment, I stood in front of it. Some four or five men were sitting on their haunches, between them was a bottle, and in front of each one of them lay a clay tumbler. There was a high *gaddi* alongside the wall, on which the shopkeeper was sitting with several bottles placed before him. Some distance behind him was a man roasting dry peas in a pan. The petrichor-like fragrance of the gram rushed through my body like electricity. Slipping my hand into the pocket nervously, I took out a paisa and proceeded towards the man, but then my legs froze. This was a drinking house, I realized.

The shopkeeper asked, 'What do you want?'

I replied, 'Nothing.'

And so I moved on. The only shop for miles came and that too a liquor store, as if alcohol was the most important thing that a man needed in the world. All those men must be washermen and tanners. Who else consumes liquor in the countryside? Yet, the alluring scent of the roasting peas chased me as I hurried along.

The bundle of books was turning out to be a bother. I was tempted to just dump it anywhere along the road. It hardly weighed five seer, but at that moment, it seemed like more than a maund. My body felt weak. The full moon had climbed up the trees and was peeping at the ground through the leaves. I was walking all alone. I felt no pain because hunger had dominated and suppressed all other sensations.

Aha! Where was the fragrance of jaggery coming from? There was jaggery being cooked somewhere. There must be some village nearby. Sure, I could see the light coming from a grove of mango trees. But who will sell jaggery only for a paisa or two? And I won't be able to ask for it without payment. I moved on, my mouth still salivating. I love jaggery. Whenever I have thought of opening a shop, it has always been a sweetshop. Whether or not I would sell sweets, I would at least get to eat them. Look at the *halwais*. So fat they can't even move! But that's because they are stupid and grow their paunches out of sloth. I would keep exercising.

Meanwhile, the patience-testing, appetite-inducing fragrance of jaggery was still wafting across to me. I still remember the incident when Amma had gone away to her *maika*, my maternal grandmother's house, for three months and I had polished off a full maund of jaggery in just three months. It was the jaggery season. Grandfather was sick and had called for Amma. I had my exams and could not go with her. She had taken Munnu along. Before leaving, she had kept a maund of jaggery in a pot and placing a clay plate on its mouth, had sealed it with clay. She had given me strict instructions not to open the pot. She had kept a small quantity of jaggery in a pipkin for me, which I polished off within a week. Jaggery with milk in the morning, jaggery with roti in the afternoon, jaggery with gram in the evening, and again jaggery with milk at night. This expense was legitimate and even Amma would have had no objections to it. But I would repeatedly run home from school on the pretext of drinking water and eat a block or two of jaggery. How could that be accommodated in a budget? And I got so addicted to jaggery that I hankered for it all the time. My presence at home was a disaster for our stores of jaggery. While the pipkin was emptied in a week's time, there was still the strict injunction against opening the pot, but Amma's return was still three months away. With great difficulty, I somehow consoled myself for a day, but on the second, a deep longing defeated my patience and just the sweet sight of the pot made me lose my resolve.

With a sense of extreme guilt as if I was committing a sin, I opened the pot and, filling up the pipkin, I sealed it back as it was and swore that I would make the jaggery in the pipkin last a full three months, no matter what. I would think of the pot as that great building which even Rustam could not unlock. I arranged the blocks in the pot in a clever manner, just like cunning shopkeepers would fill in matchboxes for sale. Even after taking out a pipkin full of jaggery, the pot

up matchboxes for sale. Even after taking out a pipkin full of jaggery, the pot was still full up to the brim. Amma would not even realize what had happened—there would be no question of interrogating me.

But such a tug of war was unleashed between the palate and the heart that I cannot describe and every single time, the palate won. This tiny palate was making this valiant heart dance to its tunes, just like a ringmaster makes his monkeys dance. That heart, which soars in the sky and resolves to scale the seven heavens, and that which in its arrogance thinks nothing of the Pharaoh. I would repeatedly resolve to not eat more than five blocks of jaggery the entire day, but this resolve could not last more than an hour or two like the resolutions of drunkards. I would curse and reprove myself, ‘Sure, you are consuming so much jaggery, but the body will rot in the monsoon. You will go around with sulphur ointments on you and no one will even want to sit near you.’ I would solemnly take oaths and make pledges—in the name of wisdom, in the name of my mother, in the name of my deceased father, in the name of the holy cow, or of God—but these too met the same fate.

By the end of the second week, the pipkin too was empty. That day, I prayed to God with great devotion. ‘Lord, this shaky, greedy heart of mine is troubling me. Give me strength to control it. Give me chains made of *ashtdhatu* steel to restrain my wayward heart! This cursed one is bent on getting me beaten and reprimanded by Amma. Only your protection can save me.’ Out of the pathos of devotion, a few drops of tears flowed out of my eyes, but God did not pay heed to even these and the voracious hunger for jaggery still hung over me—so much so that I considered breaking the pipkin and writing an elegy for it.

Just then, there was a three-day holiday declared at my school and so I went to meet my mother. Amma asked, ‘Did you inspect the pot of jaggery? Are insects swarming over it? Has it got damp?’

I swore that I had not even glanced at the pot and thus proved my honesty. Amma looked at me with pride, and as a reward for being a dutiful son, she allowed me to take out a pipkin full of jaggery. And along with the permission, she also issued instructions to firmly seal the mouth of the pot. After this, even one more day spent at my grandmother’s felt like an aeon. On the fourth day, the first thing that I did upon reaching home was to open the pot and take out a pipkin full of jaggery. In one go, I polished off five blocks. The same jaggery addiction came over me all over again. But why worry now when Amma had

granted permission! With the thief and the protector rolled in to one, the pipkin too was empty within eight days! Helpless before my weak willpower, I finally decided to lock the room in which the pot of jaggery was kept and deposited the key in a deep joint in the wall. Let's see how you eat jaggery now, I told myself. Retrieving the key from this joint meant digging nearly three feet into the wall, which required more effort than I could summon.

Yet my cup of patience overflowed within three days and it is impossible to describe what I went through in those three days. I would repeatedly walk past the room where *shirin*—the sweet jaggery—was stored, look at it with longing and rub my hands in desperation. I knocked, tugged and jerked at the lock several times, but that heartless lock refused to budge at all. I inspected the joint in the wall, peered into it and tried to measure its depth with a wooden stick several times, but I could not get to the bottom of it. I felt listless all the time. Food felt tasteless and there was no fun in games too. My lust for jaggery tried all it could using several tactics to convince my heart. *What else is jaggery good for? I am not throwing it away. I just eat it. And what difference does it make whether I eat it now or a month later? No doubt Amma has forbidden it, but what right does she have to keep me from a sensible deed? If today, for instance, she tells me not to play games or not to climb trees or not to swim in the pond or not to lay traps for birds or not to catch butterflies, will I listen to her? Don't I have some rights too? Then why should I, in just this one case, sacrifice my desires for the sake of Amma's proscriptions?*

Finally, on the fourth day, lust triumphed. I woke up at daybreak, picked up a hoe and started digging the wall. It was a joint anyway, and didn't take long to dig. After half an hour of gruelling toil, a block, which was nearly one yard long and three inches thick, fell off the wall, and at the base of the joint lay the key to success, like a pearl oyster at the bottom of the sea. I drew it out and immediately opened the door, took out a pipkin full of jaggery from the pot and shut the door. This sacking of the pot had now resulted in a demonstrable deficit in it. Even a thousand tricks could not fill up the crater in the pot. But this time around, to destroy my epicurean indulgence before Amma's return, I threw the key in the well. It's a long story now. If I begin to tell the tale of how I broke the lock, took out the jaggery, broke the pot after it became empty, threw the broken pieces into the well at night, and upon Amma's return I wept and narrated the entire story of how the pot got stolen, the incident that I am today penning down

would be left incomplete.

At that moment, the sweet aroma of jaggery made me delirious, but I controlled myself and moved on.

As the night progressed, my body was becoming more and more tired, so much so that my legs started trembling. On the untarred road, there were depressions in the mud made by the wheels of passing carts. Whenever I stepped into these depressions, it seemed as if I had fallen into a ditch. Time and again I thought of lying down on the side of the road. The small bundle of books felt like it weighed a maund. I cursed myself for having carried those books along. I was preparing to write the second-language exam, but there would be no occasion to even open the books while I was at home. I was uselessly carrying this burden. I felt frustrated enough to dump that stupid load right there. At last, my legs refused to walk any more. I collapsed. When I got up again, gathering my wits about me, I found my legs wobbling. It was now impossible to lift my legs without having something to eat, but what could I have eaten there? I felt like crying uncontrollably. Fortunately, just then, I spied a field of sugar cane and I could not control myself.

I wanted to sneak into the fields and pluck some cane and walk away happily, sucking on their juice. The journey would seem easier and my tummy wouldn't rumble. But just as I stepped on the boundary of the field, I was entangled in thorns. The peasant, it seemed, had spread thorns on the boundary. Perhaps it was a berry shrub. My dhoti and kurta got entangled in the thorns. If I tried to withdraw, the shrub got pulled along and if I tried to dislodge my clothes from the thorns, they pricked my hands. I pulled hard and came away with the dhoti in tatters. My hunger vanished and I was now troubled by the question of how to get out of this new predicament. If I tried to get rid of the thorns in one place, they stuck to another, and if I bent over, they pricked my body. If I tried calling for help, I risked being discovered in the act of theft. What a strange predicament to be in! It was then that I almost cried at my condition. Even the mad lover wandering through numerous deserts would not have got so entangled in thorns!

Only after an excruciating struggle of half an hour could I rescue myself, but the dhoti and kurta were ruined, and my hands and feet were terribly scratched with thorns as an additional prize. Now it was impossible to go even one step further. I did not even know how much of the road I had covered. and how much

was left. There was no one I could ask for help. I was weeping at my condition as I walked further. A big village then came into sight. I felt a great surge of happiness. I knew I should be able to find some shop or the other. At least I would get to eat something, and spend the night in somebody's barn. The rest would be taken care of in the morning.

In the villages, people usually sleep early. I found a man drawing water from a well. When I inquired about food, his reply was gravely disappointing, 'You will not get anything here at this hour. The banias sell only minor provisions. There is no sweetshop. This is not a town. Who will run his shop so late in the night?'

With great humility in my voice, I asked, 'Can I get some place to sleep?'

He inquired, 'Who are you? Do you know anyone in this village?'

'If I knew anybody, why would I ask you?'

The man replied, 'Then, brother, nobody will let a stranger halt here. Just like you, there was a traveller who stayed here yesterday, and there was a burglary in a house in the night. In the morning, there was no trace of the traveller.'

'So, you think I am a thief?'

'Nobody has this written on his forehead, and who knows what's in someone's heart!'

'If you don't want to give me shelter, so be it; but at least don't call me a thief. If I knew this village was so cursed, why would have I even come here?'

I did not plead much, but I was singed from the inside. I walked on to the road. At this moment, I had no control over my senses. I had no clue which way I had entered the village from and which way I would exit it. Now I had no hope of reaching home. I would pass the night away, wandering in this manner, so why bother about where I was headed? I didn't know how long I was in this state of mind.

Suddenly, I spotted a fire burning in a field like a beacon of hope. Someone must surely be there, I thought. Maybe I would get a place to pass the night. I quickened my pace and approached the fire when a large dog ran towards me, barking. Its bark was so ferocious and frightening that I shook with fear. In a moment, the dog was before me and repeatedly lunged at me, barking. I was not carrying either a stick or a stone. How could I chase him away? What would I do if the beast grabbed my leg? It looked like a hunting dog of an English breed. The more I tried to shoo him away, the more he roared. I stood silently and took



off my shoes. I must have some weapon to protect myself with! I was staring at him thinking that if he came too close, I would hit him so hard with the shoe that he would remember the blow. He, however, seemed to have gauged my intention and lunged at me so fiercely that I trembled in fear and dropped the shoes. And at that very moment, I called out in a voice full of fear, 'Arrey, is there anyone in the field? This dog is intent on biting me! O peasant, look! Your dog is biting me!'

'Who is it?' came the reply.

'I am a traveller, and your dog is biting me.'

'He won't bite. Don't be afraid. Where are you going?'

'Mehmood Nagar.'

'You have already crossed the road to Mehmood Nagar. If you go ahead, you will find only the river.'

My heart sank. Almost crying, I asked, 'How far behind me is the road to Mehmood Nagar?'

'About three miles.'

And then a burly man with a lantern in his hand came and stood before me. He had a hat on his head, and was wearing a thick military overcoat with military shorts underneath and boots on his feet. Well built, fair-complexioned and sporting a big moustache, he presented a picture of true masculine beauty. He said, 'You look like a boy from some school.'

'I am not a boy, but a teacher of boys. I am going home for the three-day holiday.'

'Then why didn't you take the train?'

I answered, 'I missed the train and the next one was leaving at one.'

'You will be able to catch that train. It's only twelve now. Come, I'll show you the way to the station,' the man offered to help.

'Which station?' I inquired.

'Bhagwantpur.'

'That's where I am coming from. It must be far behind.'

He corrected me, 'Not at all. You are within one mile of the Bhagwantpur station. Come, I will show you the way. You will be able to catch the train. But if you want to stay, you can stay in my hut and leave in the morning.'

I was so angry at myself that I wanted to hit my own head. I had been wandering around like the oil presser's ox and all I had travelled was one mile

from Bhagwantpur. I had lost my way. I would surely remember for life that I walked for six hours, but covered just one mile. The resolve to reach home was fired up again.

I said, 'No, it's Holi tomorrow. I should reach home tonight.'

He tried to dissuade me, 'But the road is hilly. What if some animal comes after you? Okay, come on, I will walk with you. But you have made a grave mistake. How dangerous it is to walk alone at night on an unknown road! Come, I will walk with you. Wait here, I will be with you in a moment.'

The dog started wagging his tail and it seemed he wanted to be friends with me now. Tail wagging and head bowed, he came and stood before me as if seeking forgiveness. I too, with great benevolence, forgave his offence and petted him. In another moment, the man came out with a gun slung on his shoulders, and said, 'Come. Don't commit such folly again. It was good that you found me. If you had reached the river, you would surely have encountered some animal.'

I inquired, 'You look like an Englishman, but your speech is exactly like ours?'

He laughed and replied, 'Yes, my father was an Englishman, an army officer, but I have spent my life here. My mother used to cook for him. I too have been in the army. I participated in the war in Europe and I now receive a pension. The scenes that I had to witness in the war, the circumstances in which I had to live my life and the extent to which I had to murder my humanity—all of it made me hate my profession. So, I availed the pension and came here. Papa had built a small house here. I live here and provide security to the fields nearby. This is the Ganga valley, with hills all around. There are many wild animals here. The Pigs, nilgais and the deer attack the crops. My job is to protect the crops from the animals. I receive a maund of grain from the farmers after the harvest, which is enough for my sustenance. My mother, though now old, is still alive. The way she used to cook for Papa, she now cooks for me. Do visit me sometime. I will teach you how to exercise your body. You will become strong like a wrestler within a year.'

I asked, 'Do you still exercise?'

He said, 'Yes, I exercise for two hours every day. I am passionate about the club and the Lezim mallet. This is my fiftieth year, but I can run five miles without pausing for breath. How can I live in this jungle if I don't exercise? I

without pausing for breath. How can I live in this jungle if I don't exercise? I have taken part in numerous bouts of wrestling. I was the strongman of my regiment. But now when I reflect on the conditions of life in the army, my head is bowed in shame and regret. So many innocents fell to my rifle. What harm had they done to me? What animus did I have for them? To me, the German and Australian soldiers seemed as truthful, as brave, as sanguine and as empathetic as the English and French soldiers. We had established great friendships with them. We used to sit and play together. The thought that they were not one of us didn't even occur to us. Even then, we were thirsty for each other's blood. Why? Only because big English merchants were scared of losing their business to the Germans. It was the merchants who ruled. Our armies were puppets dancing to their tunes. It was poor people like us who lost our lives, while the fat merchants filled up their pockets.

'Then such hospitality was extended to us, such praises bestowed on us as if we were as special to the kingdom as the king's son-in-law. Flowers used to be showered upon us, garden parties were thrown in our honour and tales of our bravery were published every day in the newspapers with our pictures. Delicate ladies and princesses used to sew clothes for us, and send us a variety of confectionary and pickles. But when peace was established, we were forgotten and nobody asked after us at all. So many had become handicapped. Someone lost his arm, another his leg, and still someone else his eyes. Nobody was there to offer them even a morsel of food. I saw so many of them begging in the streets. Since then I have only disgust for this profession. I came here and took up this responsibility and I am happy now. Soldiering is meant to protect the lives and property of the poor, not to increase the unlimited wealth of millionaires. Here my life is always in danger. I have imperilled my life numerous times, but I will not regret it even if I were to die doing this work because I will have the consolation that my life was of some use to the poor. And what can I tell you about how these poor peasants serve and regard me! If I fall ill and they find out that I would need their blood to regain my health, they would give it away without any hesitation.

'Earlier, I used to drink a lot of alcohol. You must be familiar with the ways of my community. There are many among us who must have liquor, no matter whether they can manage food or not. I too used to finish off one bottle of liquor every day. Father had left behind a lot of money. If I knew how to live frugally, I

could have lollled around all my life. But alcohol ruined everything. I used to live in great luxury during those days. Donning a collar and tie, I made a dandy of myself and used to flirt with all the young ladies. My life was limited to betting at horse races, drinking alcohol, playing cards at the club and courting women for pleasure. In the course of three or four years, I blew up some twenty-five or thirty thousand rupees. I didn't save a paisa even for my funeral shroud. When the money was over, I was worried about my livelihood, and enlisted in the army. But thank God, I returned with a lesson. The truth that the profession of the brave is not to kill, but save lives dawned on me.

'After having returned from Europe, I set out one day to hunt game and wandered this way. I saw many peasants standing morosely by their fields. I asked them, "What is the matter? Why are you standing here so sadly?" One man replied, "What to do, sahib? We are fed up with our lives. There is no harvest and even death does not take us away. The animals eat up all our produce. How can we pay the tax, the moneylender, the government and then feed ourselves? Just yesterday, our hearts were filled with joy looking at these fields. Today, the sight of them brings only tears to our eyes. The animals ate everything up."

'I wonder which God or Prophet had blessed my heart then that I felt pity for them. I said, "From today, I will protect your farms. No animal will dare stray this way. Let me be fined for the loss of even a single grain." That was it. From that day, this has been my only work. It has been ten years. I have never skipped my duty. I get my livelihood, people feel indebted to me, and the best part is that this work makes my heart happy.'

We had reached the river. I noticed it was the same bank from where I had boarded the boat. In the moonlit night, the river looked bedecked with jewellery, as if it was dreaming some pleasant dream.

I asked, 'What is your name? I will visit you sometime.'

He lifted the lantern to look at my face and said, 'My name is Jackson. Bill Jackson. Do visit me. Ask anyone near the station for me and he will direct you to me.'

Saying this, he turned to leave, but came back suddenly and said, 'You will have to spend the night here, but your amma must be worried. Sit on my shoulders and I will carry you across the river. These days, there is not much water in the river. I often swim across.'



the Holi bonfire. From the station, I ran all the way for two miles. I wondered where a famished body got all this strength from. Amma came out to the courtyard the moment she heard my voice and hugged me close, and said, 'How did you get so late? I have been waiting for you since the evening. Come, eat. Have you eaten anything or not?'

Amma is now in heaven, but even now I can see that face of hers beaming with motherly affection, and my ears still ring with her voice laden with love. I have visited Mr Jackson several times since. His goodness has made me a devotee of his. I think of him not as a man, but as an angel.

*Translated from the Hindi by Vikas Jain*



## The Mystery

### 1

Vimal Prakash reached the door of the *sevashram*, took the handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped the dust off his hand. With the same handkerchief, he also wiped the dust off his shoes and entered. Every morning, he went for a walk and while returning, he checked on the daily necessities of the *sevashram*. He was both the founder and the manager of the *sevashram*.

The activities at the *sevashram* had begun. The teachers were teaching the girls, the gardener was watering the flower beds, and the little girls of the first standard were running on the green. Vimal took great care of the health of the girls.

For a moment, Vimal stood there happily watching the games the girls were playing, and then he went to his office. The clerk put the previous day's mail in front of him. Vimal opened one letter after another, read them cursorily and put them aside. His face was enveloped in worry and despair. The advertisements that he had taken out in the newspapers for monetary help had had no impact. How was the organization going to run? Were Indians so unkind? He had dedicated himself totally to this task. He had given all he had to the ashram. What more did people expect from him?

Wasn't he worthy of their kindness and confidence?

Immersed in this thought, he left the office and returned home. He kept thinking about how he would tide over this crisis. Half of the year had not passed yet, and the ashram had already accumulated a debt of twelve thousand rupees. By the time the year was over, it would reach twenty thousand. If he increased

the fees of the girls by one rupee, the income could increase by five hundred. And if he increased the hostel fees by two rupees per head, that would bring in another five hundred. This way, he could add twelve thousand rupees per year to the income of the ashram. But where would that leave his ideal of educating girls from poor families at nominal fees? If he could have enough teachers who were ready to teach without a salary, his task would have been easier. Were there not even ten or twenty educated lady teachers of this kind? He had put up advertisements in newspapers for this requirement several times, but no one responded. Now he was left with no option but to increase the fees.

Right at that moment, a tonga appeared and stopped at his door, and a lady stepped out. Vimal came out of the house, welcomed her and took her inside. She was not a beautiful woman, but it seemed she was from a good family, and her face had an aura of gentility. She was of medium height, soft temperament, sallow complexion and had a pleasant appearance. She was a little overdressed, but there was a lack of luxury about her that was discernible. This was no uncommon occurrence for Vimal. Since he had opened the ashram, ladies from genteel families came to visit him quite often.

The lady sat on a chair and began, 'First, let me tell you my name. I am Manjula. A couple of days ago, I saw your notice in the *Leader* and that is why I'm here. I have been intending to meet you for a long time but there was no occasion earlier, and I didn't want to waste your time by coming here without any work. I simply cannot express in words the respect I have for you for the sacrifice and total dedication with which you're working for women. You might think it flattery if I begin to talk about it. I too had the desire to do social service like this, but I cannot do as much as I would like. Perhaps with your encouragement, I could do a little more.'

Vimal was a silent worker. Hearing himself being praised was always the severest test for him. In those moments, he always felt like a man drowning in water. He couldn't praise anyone openly, and that is why people who were hungry for such praise thought him to be mean. He would praise people behind their back. Of course, he would criticize people to their faces and expected others to do the same.

He said, somewhat embarrassed, 'That would be very good. Please do join me. I hope you are aware of the financial status of the ashram?'

'I have come here with no such intentions.'



‘I understood that even before you told me. I didn’t expect it. I just asked the question without meaning anything. Now tell me, do you live around here?’

Manjula Devi was from Lucknow. She had been educated at the girls’ school in Jalandhar. She was competent in English. Her family circumstances were also comfortable. Above all, her heart was filled with the zest for service. What could be better that such a lady should take the responsibility of managing the ashram on herself! There was a question in Vimal’s mind and he asked her, ‘I hope your husband will be with you?’

It was a normal question, but Manjula didn’t like it. She said, ‘Not at all. He will live in his house. He works in a bank and draws a good salary.’

Vimal thought the situation was getting somewhat complicated. *Why should the wife of a man who draws a good salary want to live in Kashi?* But he simply muttered, ‘I see.’

Manjula could guess what was going on in his mind and said, ‘You might find this unusual. But do you think that the main purpose of marriage is that the wife should always remain in the shadow of her husband?’

Vimal said energetically, ‘Certainly not!’

‘If I can reduce my requirements from life to zero, why should I live as a burden on someone else?’

‘Undoubtedly.’

‘There are differences between us on a lot of counts. I consider my devotion to and worship of God to be the truth of human life. But he considers this useless, so much so that he has no belief in God. I consider Hindu culture to be superior to others, while he finds all kinds of faults with it. How can I get along with such a person?’

Vimal himself thought worship and rituals were useless. But he didn’t consider this sufficient reason for a man and wife to be separated. He knew of many instances where the wives did not leave the family even when their husbands became apostates. He was aware of the practical side of the question and asked, ‘I hope he will have no objections?’

Manjula said with pride, ‘I don’t care for such objections. If men are independent, women are too.’

Then she softened a little and said in a pitiful voice, ‘You can say that we have been separated for three years. We stay in the same house, but don’t talk to

each other. Whenever he falls sick, I look after him. In times of crisis, I have extended my sympathy. But he won't feel sad even if I die. In fact, he'll be happy and relieved. All this because he takes care of my material needs.'

Her voice choked. She kept looking down at the ground. But then she realized that Vimal might think of her as a woman of easy virtue who went about revealing family secrets to everyone. It was necessary to dispel this impression from Vimal's mind. She convinced him that no one had ever heard of such words from her mouth. She had not shared her sufferings with even her mother. Vimal was the only individual in whom she had confided. The reason for this was that he had a sympathetic heart and he could understand the state of her mind.

Vimal was embarrassed. He simply said, 'It is simply your kindness that you think about me this way.'

He felt respect for Manjula. It had been a long time since he had met a lady who could take such a step based on her own conviction. His own mind often rebelled against society. The sevashram was the outward manifestation of his mental rebellion. He could safely entrust its responsibility to such a lady. Manjula had come prepared for that.

## 2

Manjula's life was informed by a feeling of self-sacrifice. She considered her body to be a vehicle of that emotion. Even the wisest person in the world could not have given her the peace she was looking for. She could not stand Mr Mehra because, like other common human beings, he was given to a life of the senses. Life for him was a series of desires that needed to be fulfilled. He did not want religion to stand in the way of his selfish interests. If he had some generosity and had shown some consideration for Manjula's feelings despite the differences between them, and showed some sympathy for her even for the sake of appearances, then Manjula could have been happy. But that gentleman had no sympathy for his wife and he always stood in the way of what she wanted to do, and Manjula shrunk within herself. Her feelings were suppressed and finding no proper outlet, they began to wander in all the wrong directions. If she could transform this lack in her life into art, her soul would have had peace. Art could have been a substitute of what she could not find in her life. But she didn't have

the genius or the creativity to do it. Her soul became restless, like a bird imprisoned in a cage. Her self-esteem had suffered so much that she could have retired to a passive life. She had an individuality that was separate from her husband's and she wanted to protect it. She felt happiness and pride in the fact that she was an independent entity. She was not a creeper that required the support of a tree to grow and spread itself. She had a different personality and a different sphere of action.

But when she involved herself in the practical affairs of the ashram, she realized that her concept of self-sacrifice was flawed. Many people from whom she could get money with some flattery visited the ashram. But Manjula's pride did not allow her to use weasel words. Praising the donors to the ashram to the skies, making rounds of their posh mansions, inviting them to visit the ashram and going to the railway station to welcome visitors—these were tasks that she intensely hated. But she had the responsibility of managing this ashram and suppressing her deepest feelings; she had to carry out all these activities. She tried her best to hide her innermost thoughts, but how could she find joy in the work when her heart was not in it? She had left her house because she didn't want to make compromises on her individual freedom. But these compromises were chasing her here in an even more distorted form. Her heart would often fill with bitterness and she would be distracted from her single-minded devotion to service.

As opposed to this, she always saw Vimal relaxed, without a frown on his face. He had the same smiling face, same enthusiasm and the same kind of absorption in his work. He was always ready to do even the smallest task. If a student or a teacher fell sick, he was ready to attend upon them. He had an inexhaustible treasure of sympathy. He harboured no suspicion or ill feeling against anyone. He had adapted a way of life and was walking on that path. He had the conviction that he would reach his destination walking on this path. Whoever he met on the way, he made them his friends. He found pleasure in sharing whatever he had with others. He faced difficulties on a daily basis—he had to flatter people, bear with humiliations, bow his head to worthless people, and even beg—but he was not sad. He never gave in to despair, and he did not allow his mind to be bitter. The vitality within him was not affected even after he had been betrayed a thousand times. The teachers often complained for very trivial things. Sometimes, they got angry and threatened to leave the ashram. If

trivial things. Sometimes, they got angry and threatened to leave the ashram. If the washerman did not wash the clothes properly, if the woman dyeing the sari left a spot in it, if the attendant shooed away their dogs, if the rooms were not swept clean, if the milkman adulterated the milk—what could the officials of the ashram do? But a lot of fuss was made about all these things, and Vimal, like a devoted servant, tried to pacify everybody. He listened to the reprimands, but only smiled. The result—the teachers slowly began to respect him. They came to regard him as their friend and not an official.

But Manjula remained aloof from Vimal. She did not complain to him, nor did she consult him on any matter. She knew deep down that though she laid very little in store by worldliness and considered it a degradation of the human soul, in fact, it was a manifestation of human aspirations. Despite this realization, it was difficult for her to break away from the attachment she had developed for her particular mode of life. Vimal's pure and practical wisdom drew her towards him. He was above the limitations that she had seen in ordinary human beings. There was not even a trace of selfishness in him. In Manjula's spiritual world, this was the highest ideal one could follow. However, seeing Vimal reaching close to that ideal also filled her with a sense of her own defeat. To her, the validity of an ideal consisted in the fact that it should be beyond reach. It didn't remain an ideal if it was achievable. By raising the bar of her ideal, Manjula would have liked to think that Vimal was still far from reaching it, but Vimal became a revered figure for her despite her desire to the contrary.

She realized through her searching gaze that Vimal was not satisfied with her performance. Why did he not complain and ask for explanations? She was also sharp enough to understand he was not unaffected by her looks. Then why this indifference and coldness? Didn't this prove that he was either a hypocrite or a coward? He met others so openly and treated them with great courtesy. Why, then, was he so aloof with her? Why did he talk to her so mechanically? Where was the openness he displayed the first day they met? Did he want to show that he didn't care at all for Manjula? Was he displeased with her because she didn't bow her head at wealthy people's doorsteps? Let him do it if he so wants! She would serve others, but maintain her self-esteem.

One morning, Manjula was walking in the garden when Vimal appeared there and greeted her. He informed her that the annual festival of the ashram was close at hand and that they should start preparations for it.

Manjula said nonchalantly, 'Well, this gathering is held every year.'

Vimal replied, 'That's right. But this year we're going to do it on a larger scale.'

'I'll do whatever I can. But you know very well that I don't have a particular knack for it.'

'The success of the festival depends entirely on you.'

'On me?'

'That's right. If you want, you can take the ashram to new heights.'

'You've all the wrong notions about me.'

Vimal said, in a voice filled with conviction, 'Whether my notions about you are right or wrong will be proved very soon.'

That was the first demand that Vimal had made on Manjula. Since the day he had given her the responsibility of the ashram, he had given her no instructions about the same. In fact, he didn't have the courage to do it. When they met, they simply talked about sundry affairs. He probably thought that Manjula had made enough sacrifices already. It was not fair to burden her with additional responsibilities. Or he had thought that once she settled down in her job, he could give her additional responsibilities. Today when Vimal approached her with such trust and humility, she felt a new energy coursing through her veins. She had never felt such attachment to the ashram earlier. The misgivings she'd had about Vimal disappeared in a moment and she threw herself into the task with single-minded dedication. It felt strange that she had been so indifferent to the affairs of the ashram earlier. Now, she couldn't even find time to eat—she ate lunch in the late afternoon. Guests began to arrive at all hours in trains. Often, she had to go to the station to receive them, and sometimes even at night. She also had to supervise the rehearsals of various events. She had to prepare her own speech. She was adequately rewarded for her efforts. The festival was a success on all counts and they were able to collect several thousand rupees as donations.

But the day the guests left after the festival, Manjula was laid up in bed. Never before had she had such a terrible fever. In three days, she began to look as though she had been sick for years!

Vimal too was busy running all kinds of errands. The first few days were spent installing the pandal and organizing hospitality for guests. Once the event was over he had to arrange for the things that he had borrowed from different

was over, he had to arrange for the things that he had borrowed from different places to be returned. He couldn't even thank Manjula. Someone had informed him that she was sick, but he thought it was sheer exhaustion because of which she must be running a temperature and he didn't take it seriously. But on the fourth day, when he heard that the fever hadn't yet subsided and that it was quite high, he got scared and ran to her. He stood before her with a sense of guilt and said, 'How are you now? Why didn't you send word to me?'

Manjula felt as though her fever had suddenly subsided—and her headache too. Lying on her bed, she gazed helplessly at Vimal and said, 'Please sit down. Why are you standing? If you do not sit, I'll have to get up.'

Vimal looked at her as though if it were in his power, he would have taken all her aches and suffering upon himself. He said eagerly, 'Oh no, please stay as you are. I'm sitting down. I'm responsible for this. I had imposed this task on you. I'm sorry. You did all the work that I should've done. Let me go call in a doctor right away. What can I say? No one sent me word. I was caught up in all kinds of trivial affairs.'

He had got up to leave when Manjula gestured with her hand to prevent him, and said, 'Oh no, there's no need for a doctor. Please don't worry. I'm perfectly all right. I'll be up and about by tomorrow.'

She wanted to say so many things to him at that moment, but she resisted the urge. In the emotional state she was in, she might end up saying something she shouldn't say. So far, Vimal had revered her as a Devi. He had maintained his distance, but it was not because he didn't want to come close. In his simplicity and devotion, he felt that she might not like it if he tried to be close to her. She could not afford to lower her estimation in his eyes. Vimal himself didn't know how stoic and large-hearted a man he was! How difficult and self-defeating a task it was to play the role of a heavenly, spotless and guileless woman in front of such a person!

She said with humility, 'Of course. You're a man, and I'm a puppet.'

'Oh no, you're a Devi.'

'No, I'm a simple woman.'

'I couldn't have achieved what you have even if I had taken seven births.'

'Have you thought about the reason behind it? For a woman it's not a victory, but defeat. If I were a man with the same foibles, I wouldn't have succeeded on the same scale; in fact, I would've barely done a fourth of what I have. It's not

my victory but the victory of my womanhood. Physical beauty is transitory, it has no substance. It's an illusion, a chimera—a screen to hide one's weaknesses.'

Vimal said with emotion, 'What are you saying, Manjula Devi? Physical beauty is the ultimate truth in life. Our sadhus and saints have done a grave injustice to the world by treating beauty as something terrible.'

Manjula's beautiful face lit up with pride. So far, she had been unable to treat beauty as something insubstantial. It was as though she was doing penance for her beauty through her service and devotion. For a moment, she was enthralled by this paean of beauty, but she regained her composure, and said, 'Vimal Babu, you're under some delusion. Let me tell you, with my apologies, that the fascination you're showing for beauty is not something new. Men have always worshipped beauty. A few pandits might have spoken against physical beauty, but men have always turned out to be addicted to women's beauty, so much so that they haven't even cared for their religion if it was the hurdle. Even the so-called pandits and lofty souls, who might have spewed venom in their utterances or writings against women's beauty, lusted for them in their minds. Whenever beautiful women have confronted ascetics with their beauty, they have triumphed. Nevertheless, whatever is untrue will remain untrue. The fascination for physical beauty is only for the naked eye. Truly wise people have no value for it. At least, I don't want to hear paeans of beauty from you because I consider you like a god and revere you from my heart.'

Vimal was dumbstruck by this outburst and fixed his gaze on the ground. It was as though he was in a trance. After a few moments he stood up, took a few tentative steps and slunk out of the room like a guilty man.

Manjula lay in her bed, unmoved.

### 3

From that day it seemed as though someone had thrown cold water on Vimal's vitality and zest. He didn't have the courage to show his face to anyone. It was as if his innermost secrets had been revealed and everyone was laughing at him. He began to go to the ashram less and less, and he didn't talk to the teachers. He was hiding from everyone. He didn't give Manjula any opportunity to meet him, and if, having no other option, she came to his house, he sent his servants out to

and it, having no other option she came to his house, he sent his servants out to tell her that he was not at home.

Manjula was unable to fathom what was going on in his mind. There was no doubt that Vimal had drawn her with his selfless work and dedication. From a woman's insight, she could also guess that he was drawn towards her, and given the slightest encouragement, he would lay himself at her feet. Love had no role in the way of life she had followed for years. And the service and duty to which she had dedicated herself only brought a realization of her imperfections. She didn't feel any bond—moral or spiritual—with a man who didn't love or trust her. She considered herself a free spirit. Even if society didn't accept her as a free entity, she considered herself so in her own mind. But the fascination for being considered an object of devotion by Vimal was so strong, it didn't allow her true feelings for him to assert themselves. She wanted to be close to him, but without losing her pride. Besides, she didn't want to taint Vimal's pure and spotless life. She wanted Vimal to stay close to her, to appreciate her beauty and not go beyond that. One could appreciate the light of a lamp by staying at a distance from it. If one touched the lamp, one would get burnt. Now she realized that it was difficult to control one's emotions. Vimal was not the kind to stay aloof. Whatever he did, he put his heart and soul into it. And if he was repulsed, he would shut himself off totally. Manjula interpreted his new behaviour as an insult to her. And she gradually felt alienated from the place.

One day, she finally caught up with him. She knew that he went for a walk on the riverbank every day. She confronted him there and handed him her resignation.

Vimal felt like a noose tightening around his neck. He fixed his gaze on the ground and asked, 'Why are you doing this?'

'Because I don't find myself worthy of the task.'

'The institution is running very well.'

'Still, I don't want to stay here.'

'Have I done something?'

'Ask your own heart.'

Vimal interpreted the statement in ways Manjula didn't even mean remotely. He lost his colour, his blood stopped coursing through his veins. He had no answer to give her. It was a decision against which he couldn't make an appeal.

He said in a hurt tone, 'As you wish. But be kind to me.'



Manjula softened a little, 'Can I leave then?'

'As you wish.'

He left the spot hurriedly. It was as though he wanted to throw the noose off his neck. Manjula's piteous gaze followed him. It seemed to her that a ship was sinking.

#### 4

Suitably chastised, Vimal hitched himself to the work of the sevashram. It was put out that Manjula Devi had to leave because her husband was sick. A man of business could not get lost in romantic imaginings. He wouldn't have the time to write love letters, compose verses or sighing deeply. He would have a hundred duties to perform, ambitions for progress and ideals to fulfil. Vimal got engrossed in his work. Of course, there were occasions when he remembered Manjula and automatically, his head bowed in embarrassment. He had received a lesson for life. He had dared to show disrespect towards a pure and chaste woman like her!

Three years passed. It was summer. Vimal had gone to Mussoorie for a holiday and was staying in a hotel. One day, he was standing near the bandstand and was listening to the band when he saw Manjula sitting on a bench. She was bedecked in finery and shiny jewels. A young man, formally dressed in a coat and trousers, was sitting beside her. They were smiling and talking to each other. Both seemed deeply in love and looked happy. Vimal wondered who this person was. He couldn't be Manjula's husband. Or maybe he was. They might have resolved their differences. He didn't dare face her.

On the following day, he went to the cinema hall to watch an English movie. During the interval, when he came out of the hall and went to the café, he saw Manjula there. From top to toe, she was dressed in the Western style. The same young man was with her. Today, Vimal couldn't restrain himself and went up to her.

Manjula was stunned to see him. She went pale, but she recovered herself in an instant. She smiled and said, 'Hello, Vimal Babu! What brings you here?'

She introduced him to the young man. 'Meet this great soul. He's the manager of a sevashram in Kashi. And this is Mr Khanna, my friend. He has just returned from England after acquiring a high professional degree.'

from England after acquiring a high professional degree.

Both men shook hands.

Manjula asked, 'The sevashram must be running well. I read its annual report in the newspapers. Where are you staying here?'

Vimal told her the name of the hotel.

The film had started again. Khanna said, 'The film has started. Let's go back in.'

Manjula replied, 'You go ahead, please. I'd like to talk to Mr Vimal.'

Khanna glared at Vimal and strutted into the hall. Manjula and Vimal walked a few steps and sat on the green grass. Vimal's heart was overflowing with pride. He was swept away by a new wave of optimism.

Manjula said solemnly, 'You'd have no time to remember me. I thought of writing to you several times, but couldn't bring myself to it because of my hesitation. I hope you've been well.'

Vimal didn't like her change of mood. Just a while ago she was enjoying herself, and now she became serious at the sight of him. He replied nonchalantly, 'Of course, I've been well. How about you?'

Manjula's eyes became moist. 'There's no happiness in my destiny. My husband died last year. He had left more debt than property. I was entangled in the mess. I even fell sick. The doctors advised mountain air. I've been here since then.'

'You didn't let me know'.

'You've a hundred worries of your own. How could I burden you with my personal affairs?'

'Still, you should've shared your worries as a friend.'

Manjula said in a tone of high regard, 'Vimal Babu, you shouldn't get involved in such mundane affairs. God has created you to be of service to humanity. That is your field of action. I know you think well of me. I can't tell you how much I value it. It's natural for someone who has never received any kindness or love to be drawn towards them. You'd understand the extent of my sacrifice in giving them for a greater cause. I can bear with everything, but can't bear to see you fall from your high position. You're wise, you know very well how transitory worldly happiness is. Please don't be tempted by them. You're a human being. You too have desires and aspirations. But you've been able to triumph over them and reach this position, so please maintain it. Only spirituality

can help you. It will purify your mind and help you achieve mental equilibrium.'

Vimal had seen Manjula indulge in little pleasures just a while ago. He could also guess what kind of relationship she had with Mr Khanna. Nevertheless, he felt that she was really sincere in her feelings towards him. She appeared to him to be a Devi and not a licentious woman. His pride was stronger than his desires. Filled with gratitude, he said, 'Deviji, I'm really beholden to you for your kind words. Tell me what can I do for you?'

Manjula stood up and said, 'Your good wishes are enough for me.'

Just at that moment Mr Khanna emerged from the cinema hall.

*Translated from the Hindi by M. Asaduddin*



## Apples from Kashmir

Last evening, I had gone to the market to buy some daily necessities. Dry-fruit sellers from Punjab had their stores lined up on the way. I could not control myself on seeing the red apples on display in one of the shops. These days, educated people have started paying attention to things like vitamins and proteins. Earlier, no one ate tomatoes even if they were available for free; today, the tomato has become an essential part of a meal. Carrots too were poor people's food; the well-off would only eat carrot halwa. But since it has become known that the carrot too is a storehouse of multivitamins, it has started appearing on the dining tables. And about apples, they say that an apple a day keeps the doctor away. To keep the doctor away, one is ready to eat even the bitter fruit of the neem tree. Apples, after all, if not better than mangoes, are not worse off when it comes to matters concerning taste. However, the *langda* mango of Benares, the *dussehri* mango from Lucknow and the alphonso mango from Bombay are in a different league. They cannot be compared to any other fruit in the whole world. But do these contain vitamins and proteins? If they do, is it sufficient? No observations by any western doctors have been brought to light regarding this. The apple, on the other hand, has already received the verdict. It is not a tasty fruit any more, it also has nutrition now. So I bargained with the fruit seller and asked for half a kilogram of apples.

The fruit seller said, 'Babuji, very delicious apples have arrived—especially from Kashmir. You should take some, you will enjoy them.'

Taking out my handkerchief, I handed it to him and said, 'Select them carefully—I want only the best ones.' He picked up his weighing scales and ordered his attendant, 'Hey! Get half a kilogram of apples. The best ones.'

The boy brought out four apples. After weighing them, the fruit seller wrapped them in paper, put the parcel in my bag and then returned the bag to me. I put four annas on his palm.

Reaching home, I put aside the parcel as it was. It was not advisable to eat apples, or any other fruit for that matter, at night. Early morning was the time to eat fruits. The following morning, when I washed my face and took out an apple for breakfast, I realized there was a rotten spot the size of a rupee coin. I thought the fruit seller might have missed it last night. I took out another apple. Half of this one too had gone bad. Now I began to be suspicious. Had the fruit seller deceived me? The next apple I tried had shrunk on one side. I checked the last one. It looked spotless. But it had one black hole, the kind usually seen in berries. When cut, it had the same spots inside as those in worm-infested berries. Not a single apple was fit for eating. It was not the loss of money that bothered me, but the declining morals in society. The fruit seller had cheated me deliberately. Had only one apple been bad, he could have been given the benefit of the doubt that he might not have seen it. But since all four were not fit to eat, it was obviously an attempt at deception. But I too had a hand in it. I had handed him my handkerchief, as if urging him to cheat me. He had reckoned that this gentleman did not use his eyes; nor did he look cautious enough to get the fruits exchanged later. A man is deceitful only when he is given a chance. To provide someone with an opportunity to dupe, out of one's own laxity and simplicity, is to contribute to the crime. No one trusts educated officers and clerks any more. Go to any police station, court or municipality office, what you experience there will be enough to keep you from going again, even if it means a great loss to you. The traders and businessmen have still not lost their credibility. They might cheat you a little while weighing your purchase, but if you ever mistakenly gave them a ten-rupee note instead of a five-rupee note, there was no need to worry. You would get the money back. I remember I had once bought sweets worth one paisa from a kiosk during the month of Muharram, but had paid the vendor fifty paisa instead. After reaching home, I discovered my folly, and I rushed back to the kiosk. I did not expect he would give my money back. Not only did he return the money, he also apologized. And here these fellows are selling worm-infested apples and peddling them as delicious Kashmiri apples. I hope readers will not keep their eyes shut, like I did, while shopping. Or else, they too will meet the same fate

same text.

*Translated from the Urdu by M. Asaduddin*



## An Incomplete Story: A Fragment

Babu Sevaram had studied all the famous philosophers. He had a master's degree in philosophy, but he couldn't find an appropriate philosopher to guide him through the journey of life. In the world of logic, he was a follower of Bergson and Dante, but in the real world he followed the dictates of Lajjavati, his wife. He didn't do anything contrary to her wishes and incur her displeasure. As a consequence, it was Lajjavati who ruled the house. The servant would be sitting, watching nonchalantly, when Sevaram arranged his own charpoy, but would be alert at the sight of Lajjavati. When she entered the house, it created quite a stir, whereas no one would even notice when Sevaram came in. He returned from college, went to his room to change his clothes and then came to eat some afternoon snacks. That day, before going to his own room, he came over to Lajjavati. She glanced at his face and said, 'You could've changed your clothes! You look pale. Are you all right?'

Sevaram threw the bundle of books on the charpoy, kept standing, and said, 'There's a new problem. We should reason with Mohini and persuade her to leave. The principal has severely reprimanded me today.'

Looking at Sevaram, no one would even suspect that he was a philosopher—thick lips, small eyes, a big moustache, a fat body and skin the colour of coal tar. He wore his achkan of a shorter length, and his pyjamas were held aloft . . .

*Translated from the Hindi by M. Asaduddin*



## A Cricket Match

*1 January 1935*

I cannot express the disappointment I experienced during today's cricket match. Our team was far stronger than the opponents, but we still lost and they ran away with the trophy, beating their victory drums. Why? Only because we do not consider merit an eligibility for leadership. Instead, we consider wealth as the prerequisite for leadership. His Highness was chosen as the captain and everybody had to accept the cricket board's decision. Only the players can say how many hearts were incinerated and how many acceded to the decision because it was a royal decree. And how can there be any zeal, any passion, any resolve, any enthusiasm to fight till the last breath when only the face counts? We played but only pretended that we played wholeheartedly. The team was no platoon of men who would give up their lives for the sake of truth. Nobody's heart was in the game.

I was at the railway station trying to buy my third-class ticket, when a young lady who had just got off a car, stepped forward to shake hands with me and said, 'Aren't you too travelling by the same train, Mr Zafar?'

I wondered who this girl was and was surprised at how she knew my name. For a moment, I was dumbfounded, as if all the concerns of courtesy and good manners had simply abandoned me. Beauty possesses such brilliance that it conquers the greatest of men. I had never felt such acute awareness of my own inferiority. I had shaken hands and dined with the Nizam of Hyderabad, His Excellency the Viceroy and the Maharaja of Mysore, but this weakness had never overpowered me before. My heart only wished to kiss her feet with my eyes. This was not the prettiness for which men give up their lives, nor the



tenderness that poets swear by. Instead, she had the glow of wisdom; there was sobriety, dignity, passion and the uninhibited impulse of self-expression. In a half-questioning tone, I replied, 'Yes.'

How could I ask her when we had met before? Her comfortable demeanour was a declaration that I was known to her. How could I profess ignorance? So, I continued to be familiar and performed the duty of being the man, saying, 'How can I be of service?'

She smiled and said, 'Of course, I have a lot of work for you. Come, let's sit in the waiting room. You must be going to Lucknow? I too am on my way there.'

In the waiting room, she made me sit in an easy chair, and seating herself on a regular chair, she extended her cigarette case to me, and said, 'Your bowling today was terrific, otherwise we would have had an innings defeat.'

My surprise grew further. Was this damsel fond of cricket? I was feeling hesitant while occupying an easy chair in her presence. I had never been so rude. And that was where my attention was. I felt suffocated. I didn't feel the onrush of excitement in my veins as I should have. I inquired, 'Were you there?'

Lighting up her cigarette, she replied, 'Yes, from the beginning till the end. I liked only your game. The others seemed disinterested and I understand why. Our people do not have the courage of putting the right people in the right places. It's like this political instinct has trampled upon all our virtues. The one who has wealth can claim everything for himself. He can be the president at any congress of science and knowledge, or literature and society, irrespective of whether or not he is capable of it. He is the one to inaugurate new buildings or lay their foundations; he is the one to lead cultural movements, speak at convocations and distribute prizes. It is the result of our slavish psychology. It's no wonder then that we are so downtrodden and fallen. It is understandable that we have to supplicate at people's feet when it is a matter of power and protocol, but even when we can use our independent thoughts and conduct, we are unable to get rid of this "Yes, Sir!" habit. You should have been the captain of this team. Then we would see how the opponents could have won. The maharaja's competence to be a captain of this team is the same as yours to be the Speaker of the assembly, or mine to be a film actress.'

These were exactly the feelings in my heart, but how effective and how eye-opening they had become only because she spoke of them. I said, 'You are right

opening they had become only because she spoke of them. I said, 'You are right. Truly, it is our shortcoming.'

'You should not have been part of this team.'

'I was helpless.'

This damsel's name was Miss Helen Mukherjee. She had just arrived from England. She had come to Bombay only to watch this cricket match. She had completed her medical education in England, and serving people was the aim of her life. In England, she had seen my picture and had read about me in a newspaper. Since then, she'd thought well of me. She was influenced further when she saw me play here. She intended to build a new team for India, with only those people who could rightfully represent the nation. Her proposal was that I be made the captain of this team. She wanted to tour across India with this intention alone. Her late father, Dr N. Mukherjee, had left behind a lot of wealth and she was the sole inheritor. Listening to her proposal gave wings to my mind. Who could have thought that the golden dream of my life would shape into reality so unexpectedly? I don't believe in providence but today, my whole being was filled with gratitude and devotion. I thanked Miss Helen with the appropriate and courteous words.

The bell for the train was sounded. Miss Mukherjee called for two first-class tickets. I was unable to protest. She had my luggage carried, picked up my hat herself, and without any hesitation, she went to sit in a cabin and called me also inside. Her cook travelled in the third class. It was as if I had lost my will to action. God knows why I let her take the lead in all these matters, which, being a man, were my domain. Perhaps her beauty, intellectual dignity and nobility had impressed me. Perhaps she had made a lamb of me like those witches of Kamrup, and my own willpower had abandoned me. In such a short time, my whole being was lost in desire for her. My pride demanded that I not let her buy me a first-class ticket, and travel comfortably in the third class. Or if I had to travel first class, then I should have bought the tickets for both with the same gallantry. But at this moment, my will to action had deserted me.

## *2 January*

I was surprised as to why Helen was so sympathetic towards me, and it did not seem like just friendly sympathy. It had the verity of love. Pity does not call for such hospitality and respect, and as for admiration of my qualities, I am not so

have brained to fall into this trap. The affability of one's nature can, at the most

have-blinded to fall into this trap. The amiability of one's nature can, at the most, get one a cigarette or a cup of tea. I receive such service and respect only where I am called to play a match. Even there, such heartfelt hospitality is not extended to me, only formalities are. She seemed to have devoted herself to my comfort and privilege. I probably could not have conducted myself so intimately with anyone other than my lover. Remember, I say lover, not wife. We don't serve our wives. On the contrary, it has become our nature to extract service from our wives and that's the truth of it. But as it stands now, I am unaware of the conditions of either. Not only was I included in her breakfast, lunch and dinner at every station (the train was a mail and stopped only at important stations), she called for fruits—dry and fresh—and served me lovingly. She had immense knowledge of the famous foods of various places. She had bought a variety of presents for my friends and family, and the surprise was that I did not decline these even once. How could I decline? She did not ask me before buying anything. How could I refuse if she buys something and offers it to me with love?

I wonder why despite being a man, in her presence, I turned bashful and reserved with speech like a woman, as if I had no tongue to speak. I was restless throughout the night because of the tiring day. I had a mild headache, but I reported it to be severe. Had I been by myself, I would not have bothered at all about the pain, but I was deriving pleasure out of speaking about it with her. She began to massage my head with oil and I was getting weary without cause. My restlessness only made her bother even more. She would repeatedly ask if I felt better and I would respond with feigned disinterest, 'I'm fine.' The touch of her delicate fingers was tickling my soul. Her attractive face was bent over my head, her warm breath was kissing my forehead, and I felt as if I was savouring the pleasures of paradise. The desire to conquer her was now blowing through my heart. I wished her to indulge my tantrums. I should not initiate anything that might make her think that I have fallen head over heels for her. In the space of twenty-four hours, why has this upheaval wracked my psyche? Why have I turned into an object of love from a seeker of it? She continued to sit engrossed, her hand on my head, without as much as a by-your-leave. Then I felt pity for her. I too was not free of that feeling, and was enjoying her attention. It is slavery to love; to be loved is mastery.

Pretending to be concerned, I said, 'You went through all this discomfort only

because of me.'

She almost jumped, saying, 'No discomfort for me. You were restless because of the pain and I was sitting idle. If only I had the ache.'

I felt I was coursing through seventh heaven.

*5 January*

We reached Lucknow last evening. On the way, we had several conversations on the subjects of culture, politics and literature. By God's grace, I too am a graduate, and ever since college, whenever I have leisure, I do read books and socialize with scholars, but the extent of her knowledge made me acutely aware of my own inferiority at every step. She had an opinion of her own on every issue and it seemed she formed that opinion after much investigation. As opposed to this, I am one of those men who flow with the tide and are easily convinced otherwise even by momentary considerations. I kept trying to impress her with my wisdom, but her perspectives would leave me speechless. When I realized that I could not best her in knowledge and wisdom, I mentioned the war between Abyssinia and Italy, about which I believed I had read a lot, and exhausted all my eloquence in praise of the pressure built upon Italy by England and France. She smiled and said, 'You are mistaken if you think that England and France are inspired by the sentiment of humanity and helping the oppressed. Their imperial lust cannot tolerate that any other power should grow in the world. Mussolini is doing what England has done countless times and still continues to do. This entire charade is to acquire trade opportunities in Abyssinia. England needs markets for its business, it needs more land for its increasing population, and it needs high positions for its educated class; so why not Italy? Whatever Italy is doing, it is doing so openly and by declaration. It has never trumpeted universal brotherhood or sung the song of peace. They openly declare that struggle is the sign of life, man progresses only by war, and man's good qualities are recognized only on the battlefield. For them, the thought of universal equality is akin to madness. They include themselves among those big nations who have a right to rule over the peoples of colour. That is why we can understand the way they work. England has always resorted to deceit. It has made the colonized countries latch on to their coat-tails by dividing the various factions of a nation or based its politics on the manipulation of their political differences. In fact, I want that Italy, Germany and Japan should progress greatly

in the world and England's monopoly to be broken. Only then will true democracy and peace be established in the world. As long as the current civilization is not decimated, peace will not reign in the world. Weak nations have no right to live, they just exist like weak saplings. Not just because their existence is a source of misery only for them, but because they are the ones responsible for this entire war and bloodshed in the world.'

'Why, for goodness' sake, would I agree with this argument?' I retorted, and refuted these thoughts in very strong words. Yet, I observed that in this matter she did not either want to reason with balanced and sensible words or was incapable of it.

As soon as we got off at the station, the only concern that bothered me was how I could treat Helen as a guest of mine. God knows what she'd think if I put her up in a hotel. It would be embarrassing to bring her home. What comfort and luxury can be afforded there for a young maiden who is rich and used to such things? It was a coincidence that I was rather good at cricket and had given it my all, quitting my studies. Although I teach at a school, the circumstances at home were not good. The same old, dark, dilapidated house in a narrow bylane. The same old ways. The same old rundown structure. Amma probably wouldn't let Helen even step inside the house. But why would it come to that? Helen herself would run away from the door itself. If only we had our own house, a beautiful house! If only I was capable of hosting Helen. What would be a greater fortune than this? The mess of poverty be cursed!

While I was reflecting thus, Helen had a porter pick up the luggage, and upon exiting the station, she called for a taxi. What option I had but to sit in it? I am certain that if I had taken her home, she would have been happy despite the mess around. Helen was used to luxury, but not one to throw tantrums. She was always ready to try all kinds of experiences. She probably went out of her way to invite trials and exasperating experiences. But I had neither the imagination nor the courage.

If she had only observed my face a bit carefully, she would have known how embarrassed and helpless I was. Anyway, it was important to follow manners and so I objected, 'I wished to host you, and here you are—taking me to a hotel!'

She responded mischievously and said, 'Only so that I don't lose control over you. What could have been more pleasurable for me than to enjoy your hospitality but you do know that love is jealous. In your house, your friends will

hospitality, but you do know that love is jealous. In your house, your friends will demand a big share of your time. You will not have the leisure to talk to me and besides, I am experienced enough to know how inconsiderate and quick to forget men can be. I cannot leave you for even a moment. My constant presence with you will not let you forget me even if you want to.'

I was not merely astonished at my good fortune. In fact, I felt as if I was dreaming. This beauty, a single glance from whom could make me sacrifice my life, was expressing her love for me! My heart only longed to embrace her feet and shower them with my tears.

We arrived at the hotel. I was put up in a separate room. We dined together and then strolled on the green lawns for some time. The process for selecting the players had to be attended to. But my heart only desired to stroll along with her all night, but she said, 'You should now go rest. There is a lot of work in the morning.' I went to my room and lay down, but sleep eluded me all night. I still did not know what lay hidden in her heart. With every passing moment, Helen was turning into a riddle for me.

### *12 January*

All through the day, there was a gathering of cricketers of Lucknow. Helen was a flame and the moths circled round her. Apart from me, Helen liked the game of two other men—Brijendra and Saadik. Helen wished to include them in the all-India team. Without doubt, they were both masters of the game but the way they started, it gave the impression that they had not come to play cricket, but to test their fortune. It was difficult to gauge Helen's temperament. That Brijendra was more handsome than me, I accept. His lifestyle makes him a real sahib. But he is a confirmed rake and a loafer. I did not want Helen to have any relations with him. He remains untouched by manners. A first-rate foul mouth, with smutty, dirty humour, he cannot converse and was injudicious of occasion. Sometimes, he made such suggestive gestures towards Helen that I had to bow my head in shame, but it seemed Helen did not realize his foul mouth, his flippancy—not at all. Perhaps she even enjoyed his dirty gestures. I had never seen her frown. I am not saying that it is bad to have a jolly disposition, nor am I an enemy of vivaciousness, but a decent and mannered conduct must be observed with a lady.

Saadik is the scion of a respectable clan; he is of extremely immaculate conduct and could even be said to possess a cool temperament. Quite haughty, and inevitable but demagogic, he too is not one of the mortals. Yesterday, he kept

and irritable by demeanour, he too is now one of the martyrs. Yesterday, he kept reciting poetry to Helen and she kept smiling. I didn't find those verses enjoyable. I have never seen this gentleman reciting poetry before. I wondered where from had this jollity exploded in him! What else can be said other than that beauty has the power of magic? It didn't even occur to him that if he wanted to recite poetry, he could have memorized a few verses from Hasrat or Jigar or Josh. As if Helen had read the poetry of all these greats! What was the need to recite poetry but if I had said this to him, he would lose his temper and accuse me of being jealous. Why would I be jealous? Was I the only one to worship Helen? All that I want is that she should be able to tell the good from the bad. I did not like her unreserved and easy conduct with everybody, but everybody was equal in Helen's eyes. She withdrew from each one by turn and loved each one by turn. It was difficult to conclude if she was particularly partial towards anyone. She does not seem to have been impressed at all by Saadik's wealth. Last evening, we had gone to watch a film. Saadik displayed extraordinary generosity, and taking money out of his pocket, he went ahead to get tickets for all. Helen had awakened the generosity of Mian Saadik, who is otherwise so tight-fisted, I would even call him a miser. Helen, however, stopped him from doing this and went in herself to buy tickets for everybody. She anyway spent money with such recklessness that it put Mian Saadik in a fix. By the time his hand found its way to his pocket, Helen's money had already made its way to the counter. Whatever be the case, I was impressed with Helen's knowledge of general conduct. It seemed as if she anticipated our demands and took special pleasure in fulfilling them. She gifted Saadik an album, which is a collection of reproductions of rare European paintings. She had collected these on her visits to various museums. How appreciative of beauty her eyes are! When Brijendra arrived in the evening, wearing a new suit which he'd had stitched recently, Helen said, smiling, 'Beware, lest someone cast an evil eye on you! You resemble Yusuf today!' Brijendra could not contain his glee. When I read out my latest ghazal to her, every verse made her almost jump with elation. What a marvellous appreciation for poetry! I had never experienced such happiness over my poetry composition, but what value does praise have if one and all receive it.

Mian Saadik had never been praised for his handsomeness. He possesses a wealth of internal beauty but is a pauper on the outward. Today, however, the moment his eyes turned crimson under the influence of alcohol, Helen, in a

voice laced with love, said, ‘Man, these eyes of yours are penetrating through my heart!’ And at that moment, only a concern for propriety prevented Saadik sahib from prostrating himself at her feet. Hardly ever would have anyone lavished such praise on his eyes. The desire to be praised for my beauty and demeanour had never caught me. I knew what I was. I have never had illusions about being handsome. I am also aware that all this service from Helen means nothing. But now, even I was getting restless as to what beneficence would be lavished on me. There was nothing the matter, but I was still restless. In the evening, when I was returning from the university ground after practice, my unkempt hair had become only more unkempt. Looking on with enamoured eyes, she said, ‘My heart wishes to sacrifice itself over these unkempt tresses of yours!’ I was thrilled, so much so that I can’t speak of the storms that raged through my heart.

But God knows why none of the three of us could ever praise her style, manner or beauty in words. We felt that we were unable to find the appropriate words. We were more impressed than we could express. Also, we could not summon enough courage to say anything.

### *1 February*

We came to Delhi. In the meantime, we toured places like Muradabad, Nainital, Dehradun, etc., but could not find any suitable players. We were expecting to find several good players in Aligarh and Delhi, and would stay here for many days. We would go to Bombay the day we got our eleven, and practise there for one month. The Australian team departs from Bombay in March and by then it would have played all the matches scheduled in India. We would take them on in the last match and God willing, we would avenge all the defeats of India. Saadik and Brijendra also accompanied us on the tour. I, for one, did not want them to come, but Helen probably enjoys the swarm of lovers. We were all putting up in the same hotel and we were all Helen’s guests. When we arrived at the station, there were hundreds of men present to welcome us. There were several women too, but I wondered why Helen objected to their presence. She avoids their company—in fact, she keeps away even from the shadow of beautiful women, though she has no reason to be jealous of any woman. Even if it is acknowledged that she has not exhausted all the beauty in the world, she has several qualities that make her so attractive that even a fairy cannot compete against her. The



shapeliness of a nose or the highness of a forehead is not the end of everything. The beauty of interests, the charm of conversation and the lustre of style also count. God alone knows if she had love in her heart or not, but she remained unmatched in the expression of love. Even rakes like us, who are experts at the art of flirting and throwing tantrums, stand beaten by her. In the evening, we went out for a sortie to New Delhi. It is a captivating place, with open roads, beautiful landscaping and pleasurable abodes. The government has spent unflinchingly and unnecessarily on constructing this city. This amount could have been spent on the betterment of the people, but what can be done when people are more impressed with show than with any programme meant for their uplift. They could have used this money to open some schools or repair the roads or for agricultural research, but even today, people love ostentation and the glory of wealth more than any creative work. The image of the emperor which has seeped deep into the public will not fade away for many centuries to come. Display and ostentation is must for an emperor. It is important for him to spend money freely. A thrifty or miserly emperor cannot be popular even if he spends every single paisa for the subjects' benefit. The English are experts in psychology, but why only the English? Every emperor who has acquired his empire through the power of muscle and mind is, by nature, an expert in psychology. Anyway, I have said all this just like that. I suspect that our team will remain a dream only. We have already started quarrelling. Brijendra opposes me at every step. If I say cheese, he will annoyingly react with chalk, and Helen too loves him. What sweet visions had I been harbouring for my life, but this Brijendra, this selfish betrayer Brijendra, is hell-bent on ruining my life. We both cannot be dear to Helen; that is decided. One of us will have to quit the field.

### *7 February*

Thank God our efforts in Delhi were successful. Three new players joined our team—Zaafar, Mehra and Arjun Singh. Seeing their abilities has relieved me of the fear of Australian players. All the three are bowlers. Zaafar bowls at the target, Mehra tests patience, and Arjun is very clever. All the three are firm in their spirit—sincere and untiring. To tell the truth, I would say that Arjun plays better than me. He has already been to England twice. He is familiar with the English lifestyle. and is first-rate at reading people's temperament. and is an icon

of culture and good conduct. The sheen has gone off Brijendra. Arjun now receives special care and it is difficult for me to vanquish Arjun. On the contrary, I fear that he will be an obstacle in my path.

*25 February*

Our team is complete. We got two players from Aligarh, three from Lahore, one from Ajmer, and we came to Bombay yesterday. In Ajmer, Lahore and Delhi, we took on the local teams and beat them spectacularly. We are playing Bombay's Hindu team today. Arjun is the best player in our team and Helen extends him such hospitality that I feel no jealousy at all. Such hospitality can be extended to a guest only. Why fear a guest? What is funny is that every man around thinks himself to be the receiver of Helen's favours and makes her serve his whims. If someone has a headache, it is Helen's duty to cheer him up, and even apply sandalwood paste to his forehead. Even so, everyone is so awestruck by her that no one dares to criticize anything that she does. Everyone is a slave to her wishes. On the one hand, she tolerates everybody's tantrums; on the other, she rules over them.

Several exquisitely beautiful women have gathered under the awning, but Helen's slaves dare not even glance at them with a smile. Everyone's heart feels the shadow of her awe as if she is present everywhere. Arjun had just cast a look at a maiden when Helen glared him at him so fiercely that the gallant's face was drained of all colour. Everyone believes that Helen is the mistress of his destiny and his life would be blighted if he displeases her. How can I speak of others, when it seems that I have sold myself into her hands. Now I feel that something inside me, which could earlier have fanned the flames of jealousy, has died. Now, if Helen speaks to anyone or talks to anyone lovingly, I do not get angry. It does strike a blow to my heart, but I prefer to express it by crying alone. I do not know where all my self-pride has vanished. In one moment, her disaffection could shatter my heart into pieces, and in another, only a fleeting, disinterested glance or a smile from her could tickle me. I do not know what power she possesses to rule over so many young brave hearts. Perhaps I could call it bravery or cunning or agility, but it is as if we are all puppets in her hands. None of us has any individuality or entity of our own. She has established her suzerainty over our hearts through her beauty, her wealth, and above all, through her ability to carry everyone along.

her ability to carry everyone along.

### *1 March*

Our match with the Australian team was played yesterday. There were not less than fifty thousand spectators. We beat them by a whole innings and were worshipped like deities. Each one of us poured our hearts and souls into the game, and we were all visibly beaming. As soon as the match ended, the people of the city threw a gala party for us. Perhaps such parties are not organized even in honour of a viceroy. I was overwhelmed with congratulations and praises. I brought down five players for forty-four runs. I myself was astonished by my terrific bowling. Surely, some otherworldly power was helping us. The beauty of Bombay was shining through the crowd with all its glory and glamour, and I am sure that few other cities in the world are as fortunate as Bombay as far as beauty is concerned. Helen, however, was the centre of attraction even in such a crowd. This tormentor is not just beautiful, but her speech and her style are sweet too. All the young men, each one more handsome and flirtatious than the other, were hovering around her like moths, and Helen was sporting with everyone's sentiments, exactly as she had played with ours. I have never seen a more handsome youth than the crown prince. His face exuded authority and awe. Who can know how many women have been tormented by his love? A magical aura of masculine charm spreads around him. Helen met him with the same unreservedness as she had met a thousand other young men. His handsomeness, his wealth, could not impress her at all. One wonders from where she has attained so much pride and self-esteem. She never falters, never gets awestruck, never bends towards anyone. She exhibits the same jollity, the same love, without any special favour to anyone. She flirts with everyone but with the glory of the same indifference.

By ten at night., when we returned to the hotel after a stroll in the city, everybody was dreaming of a new life ahead. Everybody's heart was beating fast in trepidation of future prospects. Hope and fear had sent a raging storm through everyone's heart, as if each one's life was to witness an event worth remembering. Nobody had an inkling of the next course of action. Everyone was dreaming of the future. A lunacy had come over everyone's mind. Everyone believed that Helen had special eyes for him, but they were also apprehensive that God forbid, if Helen betrayed him, he would prostrate his life at her feet. Returning alive from here was nothing short of destruction.

Returning alive from here was nothing short of destruction.

Around that time, Helen summoned me to her room. I arrived to see all the players gathered there. Helen was causing all eyes to dazzle with her shiny brocade sari. I felt peeved at her. Why bother me to attend this common gathering? I deserved special treatment. I tended to forget that each one of the men there probably thought he deserved special treatment.

Seating herself in a chair, Helen said, 'Friends, I cannot tell you how grateful I am to you and how great a wish of my life you have fulfilled. Does anyone of you remember Mr Ratanlal?'

Ratanlal! Can anyone ever forget him? He, who, for the first time, gave the Indian team the opportunity to demonstrate its calibre on English ground. He, who gave away lakhs for this, and he who committed suicide in England after losing hope over the repeated defeats of his team. Even now his face floats before our eyes.

Everyone replied, 'Very well! How long has it been, anyway?'

'I congratulate you today on this glorious achievement. God willing, we will tour England next year. You prepare yourself for that battle from this moment itself. It will be pleasurable if we do not lose any match over there and completely dominate the field. Friends, this alone is the ambition of my life. The effort that one makes to achieve a goal is what is called life. We succeed only where we work with complete courage. That aim should be our dream, our love, the pivot of our lives. No other desire, no other wish should stand like a wall between us and our goal. Forgive me, but you have not learnt to live for your goals. Cricket is just entertainment for you. You do not love it. We have hundreds of friends like this whose hearts and minds are at odds with each other, and they remain unsuccessful all their life. For you, I was a matter of bigger concern than cricket, which was just a means to please me. Nevertheless, you succeeded. The nation has thousands of young men like you who can work miracles if only they learn to live and die to achieve their goals. Go and realize that miracle. My beauty and my nights are not meant to become a plaything for lust. I consider it shameful to live for pleasing the eyes of young men and arouse pleasure in their hearts. The pursuit of life should have a much higher goal. A real life is one where we live for others and not for ourselves.'

We all listened to this with our heads bowed and kept fretting. Helen went out of the room and sat in her car. She had made preparations for her departure

beforehand. Even before we could come to ourselves and decipher the situation, she was gone.

We all kept combing the lanes, hotels and bungalows of Bombay for an entire week, but Helen was nowhere to be found. And the lingering regret is about that ideal of our lives which she placed before us, and which is far higher than we can hope to reach.

With Helen, all the passion and zeal of our lives left us too.

*Translated from the Hindi by Vikas Jain*

- <sup>1</sup> By Umashankar Joshi, himself a Jnanpith Award-winning Gujarati writer and then president of the Sahitya Akademi, in a speech delivered on 31 July 1980 at the FICCI Auditorium, New Delhi.
- <sup>2</sup> Namwar Singh, *Premchand aur Bharatiya Samaj* [in Hindi: Premchand and Indian Society] (New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan, 2010), p.113. (My translation) <sup>3</sup> See Amrit Rai, *Premchand: A Life*, tr. from the Hindi by Harish Trivedi (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1982).
- <sup>4</sup> Quoted in Rai, *Premchand*, p. 74.
- <sup>5</sup> Quoted in Rai, *Premchand*, p. 104. For a fuller discussion, see Harish Trivedi, 'The Urdu Premchand, the Hindi Premchand' (1984); reprinted in *Literary Culture and Translation: New Aspects of Comparative Literature*, eds. Dorothy M. Figueira and Chandra Mohan (New Delhi: Primus, 2017).
- <sup>6</sup> For dates and titles of Urdu and Hindi publications of Premchand I have throughout followed Kamal Kishore Goyanka, *Premchand ki Kahaniyon ka Kalkramaanusr Adhyayan* [in Hindi; Premchand's Short Stories: A Chronological Study], (Delhi: Nataraj Prakashan, 2012), pp. 108–94.
- <sup>7</sup> John Keats to Benjamin Bailey, 22 November 1817, [www.john-keats.com/briefe/221117.htm](http://www.john-keats.com/briefe/221117.htm), accessed 8 November 2017.
- <sup>8</sup> Premchand, 'Kahani-1' (The Short Story-1) and 'Upanyas' (The Novel), both in *Kuchh Vichar: Sahitya aur Bhasha Sambandhi* [in Hindi: Some Thoughts on Literature and Language] (Allahabad: Saraswati Press, 1973), pp. 38–50.
- <sup>9</sup> Edward Said, *On Late Style: Music and Literature against the Grain* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2006).
- <sup>10</sup> Both the stories are collected in Premchand, *Kafan* [in Hindi: The Shroud] (Allahabad: Hans Prakashan, 1973), pp. 32–47, 79–95.
- <sup>11</sup> M. Asaduddin, 'Premchand in English Translation: The Story of an "Afterlife"', in *Premchand in World Languages: Translation, Reception and Cinematic Representations*, ed. M. Asaduddin (New Delhi: Routledge, 2016), pp. 40–41.
- <sup>12</sup> Harish Trivedi, 'Premchand in English: One Translation, Two Originals', in *Premchand in World Languages*, ed. M. Asaduddin (New Delhi: Routledge, 2016), pp. 15–39.

- <sup>1</sup> Harish Trivedi, 'Premchand's Art, the Purpose of Literature, and the Urdu–Hindi Middle Ground', the Sixth Munshi Premchand Memorial Lecture delivered under the aegis of the Premchand Archive and Literary Centre, Jamia Millia Islamia, 26 August 2015 (New Delhi: Jamia Millia Islamia Premchand Archive and Literary Centre, 2016), p. 7.
- <sup>2</sup> The Urdu journals include *Zamana*, *Hamdard*, *Tahzeeb-e Niswaan*, *Kahkashan*, *Azad*, *Khateeb*, *Adeeb*, *Subh-e Ummeed*, *Baharistan*, *Shabab-e Urdu*, *Nuqqad*, and *Al-Nazeer*, among others. The Hindi journals include *Madhuri*, *Navnidhi*, *Saraswati*, *Bharatendu*, *Vishal Bharat*, *Mansarovar*, *Chand*, *Jagaran*, *Hans*, *Prema*, *Prabha*, *Swadesh*, *Srisharda*, *Luxmi*, *Maryada*, *Aaj*, *Veena*, *Matwala*, *Usha*, *Gyanshakti Patrika* and *Sahitya Samalochak*, among others.
- <sup>3</sup> In establishing chronology, I have benefited from the works of four Premchand scholars: Madan Gopal, Jafar Raza, Kamal Kishore Goyanka and Azimushshan Siddiqui. In addition, the *Zamana* archive at the Zakir Husain Library, Jamia Millia Islamia, was of great help. Unlike Tagore, who dated each of his manuscripts meticulously, Premchand was not very particular about either dating or preserving his manuscripts. In the absence of original manuscripts, it is very difficult to establish the date of first composition and the version—Hindi or Urdu—unless there is reliable corroborative evidence available, as it is with a story like 'Kafan'. What, however, can be established from different sources is the first date of publication, which does not accurately indicate the date of composition. Thus, the chronology that has been worked out for this anthology indicates the date of publication and the version, Hindi or Urdu, in which the story was first published.
- <sup>4</sup> 'Premchand ki Afsana Nigari', *Zamana*: Premchand Issue, February 1938; rpt. National Council for Promotion of Urdu (New Delhi, 2002), p. 173.
- <sup>5</sup> '... He was also one of those who almost always took up social and political issues as central themes in his novels, stories, and plays. He was extremely sensitive to the political and social movements of his times and considered literature to be a potent medium for carrying, critiquing and analyzing prevalent ideas.' Shashi Bhushan Upadhyay, 'Representing the Underdogs: Dalits in the Literature of Premchand', *Studies in History*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (Sage Publications, 2002).
- <sup>6</sup> 'In a letter, he told Nigam that sometimes he followed the style of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, and at others, that of Shams-ul-Ulema Azad Dehlavi. These days, Premchand added, "I have been reading the stories of Count Tolstoy, and I must admit that I have been deeply influenced by them."' Madan Gopal, *Munshi Premchand: A Literary Biography* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1964), p. 98.
- <sup>7</sup> Gordon C. Roadarmel, *The Gift of a Cow: A Translation of the Classic Novel* Godaan (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), p. vi.
- <sup>8</sup> Amrit Rai (ed.), *Vividh Prasang*, Vol. III (Allahabad, 1978), pp. 249–50.
- <sup>9</sup> Geetanjali Pandey deals with Premchand's complex response to women's status in his fiction and non-fiction in her article, 'How Equal? Women in Premchand's Writings', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 21, No. 50 (Delhi: 13 December 1986), pp. 2183–2187. For additional insights, see Charu Gupta, 'Portrayal of Women in Premchand's Stories: A Critique', *Social Scientist*, Vol. 19, No. 5/6 (May–June, 1991), pp. 88–113.
- <sup>10</sup> 'I am Chitra. No goddess to be worshipped/Nor yet the object of common pity/to be brushed aside like a moth with indifference/If you deign to keep me by your side/in the path of danger and daring/If you allow me to share the great duties/of your life/Then you will know my true self.' Sisir Kumar Das (ed), *English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2004), cited in Malashri Lal, *Tagore and the Feminine: A Journey in Translations* (New Delhi: Sage, 2015), 181.
- <sup>11</sup> 'Dhikkar' and 'Naagpooja'. In 'Family Break-up', 'Mistress of the House' and 'Subhagi' there is just the hint of a widow marriage at the end of the story.

- <sup>12</sup> Shailendra Kumar Singh, 'Premchand's Prose of Counter-Insurgency in Colonial North India', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 2016.
- <sup>13</sup> A trenchant critique of this idyll has been provided in postcolonial India by Srilal Shukla in his Hindi novel, *Raag Darbari* (1968).
- <sup>14</sup> First published in the Hindi journal *Pratap* (December 1925); reprinted in *India Today Sahitya Varshiki* (India Today Literary Annual, 1995).
- <sup>15</sup> Alok Rai and Mushtaq Ali (eds.), *Samaksh: Premchand ki Bees Urdu-Hindi Kahaniyon ka Samantar Paath* (op cit.) and Kamal Kishore Goyanka in *Premchand ki Hindi-Urdu Kahaniyaan*, second edition, (Delhi: Prabhat Prakashan, 2017) have drawn attention to this aspect by reading several stories in both the versions. However, this is still a work in progress. They have left out several stories from the ambit of discussions, as has been demonstrated in the Notes sections in the four volumes of this anthology. This anthology seeks to fill that gap. Now that the raw data has been made available, a new impetus in research in this area is expected.
- <sup>16</sup> Amrit Rai (ed.) (in Hindi: 'Prastutkarta' [Presenter], 'Gupt Dhan' [Hidden Treasure]; *Premchand* (Allahabad: Hans Prakashan, 1962), p. 6.
- <sup>17</sup> I am indebted to Harish Trivedi for this idea expressed in his essay, 'The Urdu Premchand, The Hindi Premchand', *The Jadavpur Journal of Comparative Literature* (1984), pp. 22–115.
- <sup>18</sup> Letter to Imtiaz Ali Taj, 25 December 1919.
- <sup>19</sup> The Hindi original is as follows: 'Aisa lagta hai ke kai baatein Hindi mein zyada swabhavik dhang se kahi ja sakti hai, aur koi Urdu mein. Is pratyaksh anubhav ki jad mein kya kya chhupa hua hai—itihaas, sanskritik-samajik purvagraha, sahityik parampara—ye shod ka vishay ho sakta hai.' Alok Rai and Mushtaq Ali (eds), *Samaksh: Premchand ki Bees Urdu-Hindi Kahaniyon ka Samantar Paath* (Allahabad: Hans Prakashan, 2002), p. ii.
- <sup>20</sup> The following table shows such changes in 'Hajj-e Akbar/Maha Teerth' ('The Greater Pilgrimage')

|                                                 | Hindi Version    | Urdu Version        |
|-------------------------------------------------|------------------|---------------------|
| Title of the story                              | Maha Teerth      | Hajj-e Akbar        |
| Husband                                         | Munshi Indramani | Munshi Sabir Husain |
| Wife                                            | Sukhada          | Shakira             |
| Child                                           | Rudramani        | Nasir               |
| Maidservant                                     | Kailasi          | Abbasi              |
| Place of pilgrimage the family intends to visit | Badrinath        | Hajj (to Mecca)     |
| Name for God                                    | Khuda, Allah     | Parmeshwar, Narayan |

Apart from Hajj-e Akbar, similar changes can also be seen in stories like 'The Call of Dawn' ('Shankhnaad') and 'The Correction' ('Pashu se Manushya').

- <sup>21</sup> The Hindi original is as follows: 'Adhdhyan hi ye bataayega ke kis parampara mein kaun si baat kahna zaroori samjha gaya, aur kaun ghair zaroori; kaun si baat kahi ja sakti thi, aur kaun si baat ankahi hi samajh li gayi. Us prarambhik daur mein ubharti mansikataon ke sanket in rupbhedaon mein luke chhipe



*hain, dekhe ja sakte hain.*' Alok Rai and Mushtaq Ali (eds.), *Samaksh: Premchand ki Bees Urdu–Hindi Kahaniyon ka Samantar Paath*, p. ii.

- <sup>22</sup> In a recent article in *Wasafiri*, Boyd Tonkin, former literary editor of the *Independent* and someone who has worked to give translation a place of honour in several international awards, reinforces this argument when he points out how translated works were profoundly transformative for him even though he did not know the original languages: 'I can recall the late teen-age and early twenties frenzy of excitement inspired by my discovery of writers such as Kafka and Proust, Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky. Except, of course, that what I discovered were the standard English translations they circulated by Penguin Classics and a couple of other publishers.' Boyd Tonkin, 'Labours of Love: Literary Translation Inside and Outside the Market Place', *Wasafiri*, Vol. 32, No. 1, (March 2017), p. 9.
- <sup>23</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'The Politics of Translation', in Lawrence Venuti (ed.), *The Translation Studies Reader*, second edition (New York & London: Routledge, 2002), p. 372.
- <sup>24</sup> The recent works of Amitav Ghosh (particularly his Ibis trilogy), Amitabha Bagchi, Chandrabhas Choudhury, Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar and others reveal how Indian words of cultural import and regional specificity have been normalized in the English that is being written in India, which embolden translators in English to be innovative and mould the English idiom to their own advantage.
- <sup>25</sup> 'Premchand in English: The Story of an "Afterlife"' in M. Asaduddin (ed.), *Premchand in World Languages: Translation, Reception and Cinematic Representations*, (New Delhi: Routledge, 2016).
- <sup>26</sup> Here, the case of Kamal Kishore Goyanka, a lifelong Premchand researcher who has written close to thirty books on different aspects of Premchand's life and art, is salutary. Goyanka unearthed a hitherto unavailable story in the Urdu version with the title 'Roo-e Siyaah' (Black Face), but he read it as 'Rooh-e Siyah' (Black Soul) and translated it in Hindi as 'Kalooshit Atma'. This story was first compiled in the collection, *Premchand ki Aprapya Kahaniyaan* (Delhi: Anil Prakashan, 2005), pp. 152–60. On the facing page the Urdu title page is given where the title 'Roo-e Siyah' is written in bold, clear Persian script. One cannot attribute this error to any other cause except for the inability to read the Persian script correctly. Now, how this error will impact the readers' response to the story and falsify the intent of the author is anybody's guess. This is not intended to undervalue the work of Goyanka, an assiduous researcher, but to underline the fact that we should spare no efforts to eliminate avoidable errors, understand our own inadequacy and seek help where it is needed. Many scholars, including Premchand's son Amrit Rai, have rendered the Urdu versions of Premchand's stories into Hindi, as indeed some have rendered some Hindi versions into Urdu. It will be a valid subject of research to examine how accurately these versions have been rendered.

<sup>1</sup> English word used in the original text.

<sup>1</sup> The original phrase is untranslatable: '*Kaun use paan ki tarah pherega?*' refers to the practice of rearranging and refreshing the betel leaves in a *paandaan* to keep them from spoiling.

# Notes

## The Game

First published in Urdu as 'Khel' in *Chandan* (April 1931). It was collected much later in *Kulliyat-e Premchand* 13 (2003). Not available in Urdu. It was transliterated from Urdu to Hindi in *Premchand ka Aprapya Sahitya* 1 (1988) with the same title.

## The Holi Gift

First published in Hindi as 'Holi ka Uphaar' in *Madhuri* (April 1931), and included in the collection *Kafan* (1937). Not available in Urdu. Transliterated from Hindi to Urdu for *Kulliyat-e Premchand* 13 (2003) under the same title.

## Inspiration

First published in Urdu with the title 'Tahreek' in *Khaak-e Parwaana* (2nd ed.). Available in *Kulliyat-e Premchand* 13 (2003). Later published in Hindi in *Vishal Bharat* (May 1931) with the title 'Perna', and included in *Mansarovar* 4 (1939).

## Love's Awakening

First published in Hindi with the title 'Prem ka Uday' in *Hans* (June 1931), and later collected in *Mansarovar* 4 (1939). In Urdu, it was published under the title 'Tulu-e Muhabbat' in *Chandan* (July 1931) and collected in the volume *Aakhiri Tohfa* (1934). Now available in *Kulliyat-e Premchand* 13 (2003).

## The Last Gift

First published in Urdu in *Chandan* (August 1931), and later included in the collection *Aakhiri Tohfa* (1934). Now available in *Kulliyat-e Premchand* 13 (2003). In Hindi, it is available in *Gupt Dhan* 1 (1962).

The following part in the Urdu story has been omitted in the Hindi version:

Confidentially, Amarnath said, 'You can quote your amount for stitching. I've to go somewhere tomorrow. If I don't get them by afternoon, it will be of no use to me.'

The tailor took half the fee in advance and promised to get it done by the next day. Satisfied, Amarnath moved towards Malti. His feet moved forward but his heart stayed back. *Wish that my plea gets accepted, that she may come for two hours and illuminate my desolate house. On seeing my empty hands, she will definitely turn her face away. She will not talk in a straightforward fashion. Let alone meeting. She's a heartless one. So should I come to Deviji and narrate my shameful story tomorrow?* The vibrant warmth of the innocent face was creating a commotion in his heart. Her eyes had depth. How truly determined! How warm! Yesterday, her simple words had been so provocative that Amarnath had felt ashamed of his self-centred life. Till now he had held a piece of glass to his chest assuming it to be a diamond. Today he knew what a diamond was. That piece of glass appeared inferior in front of the diamond. Her *chanchal chitwan* and her sweet manners, her illuminating charms and her enchanting ways were visible in their true colours

after the erosion of the outer polish, and it was creating enmity in Amarnath's heart. He was going towards Malti not to meet her but to snatch his heart from her hands. The beggar of love was feeling generous from within. He was surprised to know that he had been unaware all these days. The *tilism* that Malti had created out of years of deception and tied with cheating had been shattered to pieces today in a trice.

*Extract translated from the Urdu by Shailendra Kumar Singh and Shaheen Saba*

### **The Penalty**

First published in Hindi as 'Tawaan' in *Hans* (September 1931), and later included in *Mansarovar* 1 (1936). Not available in Urdu. Transcribed from Hindi to Urdu for *Kulliyat-e Premchand* 13 (2003).

### **The Second Marriage**

First published in Hindi as 'Doosri Shaadi' in *Chandan* (September 1931), and later included in *Mansarovar* 1 (1936). Not available in Urdu. Transliterated from Hindi to Urdu for *Kulliyat-e Premchand* 13 (2003).

### **The Mistress of the House**

First published in Hindi as 'Swamini' in *Vishal Bharat* (September 1931), and later included in *Mansarovar* 1 (1936). In Urdu, it was published under the same title in the collection *Vardaat* (1935). Now available in *Kulliyat-e Premchand* 13 (2003).

### **The Story of Two Bullocks**

First published in Hindi as 'Do Bailon ki Katha' in *Hans* (October 1931), and later included in *Mansarovar* 2 (1936). In Urdu, it was published in the collection *Aakhiri Tohfa* (1934) as 'Do Bail'. Now available in *Kulliyat-e Premchand* 13 (2003).

### **The Writer**

First published in Hindi as 'Lekhak' in *Hans* (November 1931), and later included in the collection *Kafan* (1937). In Urdu, it was published as 'Praveen' and collected in *Aakhiri Tohfa* (1934). Now available in *Kulliyat-e Premchand* 13 (2003) under the title 'Adeeb ki Izzat'.

### **The Co-wife**

First published in Hindi as 'Saut' in *Vishal Bharat* (December 1931), and later collected in *Gupt Dhan* 2 (1962). Not available in Urdu. Transliterated from Hindi to Urdu for *Kulliyat-e Premchand* 13 (2003).

### **The Funeral Feast**

First published in Hindi as 'Mritak Bhoj' in the collection *Prerna* (January 1932), and subsequently collected in *Mansarovar* 4 (1939). It was published in Urdu in the collection *Zaad-e Raah* (1936) as 'Zaad-e Raah'. Now available in *Kulliyat-e Premchand* 13 (2003).

Titled 'Zaad-e Raah' in Urdu and 'Mritak Bhoj' in Hindi, there are significant differences between the Urdu and the Hindi versions of 'The Funeral Feast'. Apart from an additional three or four lines found at the end of the Urdu version, the difference in the name of a character, the varying terms of address and a perceptible difference in the narrative at some points are also worth mentioning.

In the first part of the story, in the very first paragraph, the Urdu version mentions 'Mohan' as the younger child who is found crying, as opposed to 'Raja' of the Hindi version. A couple of paragraphs later,

in the Urdu version, Seth Ramnath is seen asking his son to buy a toy motorcar for himself along with his sister (cgu), while the Hindi version asks him to accompany his brother (HkkbZ).

In the second part of the story, the Urdu version records the amount owed to Kuberchand as thirty thousand rupees, which is reduced to twenty-one thousand in the Hindi version.

A similar discrepancy in the figures is noticed in the third part when Susheela's jewels are being valued by the Panch council. In the Urdu version, Durbaldas and Bheemchand bid for three thousand five hundred and three thousand rupees respectively, whereas in the Hindi version, it is three thousand and four thousand rupees respectively. The nature of transaction in both versions is also altered: whereas in the Urdu version, the person who quoted a higher amount is awarded the jewels, in the Hindi version, the person with the lower quote gets the jewels.

In the fifth part, a significant alteration in the narrative stands out. Landlord Jhabarmal accuses Susheela of not paying the rent on time: in the Urdu version he says, '... Had it been someone else (instead of me), you'd have quietly paid him the rent every month ...', while the Hindi version gives it a communal twist wherein he says, '... Had it been a Muslim ...' In the same part, a few extra lines are found in the Urdu version, to describe the old and decaying visage of Jhabarmal.

Another significant omission from the Urdu to the Hindi version is found in the sixth part of the story where Kuberchand refers to an upcoming expenditure of a thousand rupees for a sermon of the Bhagwat Katha—in order to deny the doctor's fees of sixteen rupees for Susheela's ailing son. The reference that heightens the hypocritical stance of the senior Panch is missing from the Hindi version.

In the eighth part, a minor alteration of a fifty-rupee note to a twenty-rupee note in the Urdu and Hindi versions respectively, changes the loss incurred by Jhabarmal when Revati tears the note into pieces while denying the alliance being offered.

The Urdu ending of the story carries the following additional lines:

The old woman said, '... These Panch be damned, they have finally snatched away my Darling's life!'

Mohan replied with innocent simplicity, 'Why did they wish to keep Jiya with them? And yes, why don't they look after me? Why don't they arrange for my education?'

The old woman embraced him and said lovingly, 'You are the apple of my eye, beta.'

### **The Story of My Life**

First published in Hindi as 'Jeevan Saar' in *Hans* (February 1932), and later collected in *Kafan* (1937). In Urdu, it was published in *Zamana* (special issue on Premchand, 1938). Now available in *Kulliyat-e Premchand* 13 (2003)

### **The Miracle**

First published in Hindi as 'Chamatkaar' in *Madhuri* (March 1932), and collected in *Mansarovar* 2 (1936). In Urdu, it was published in *Chandan* (August 1932), and later included in *Zaad-e Raah* (1936). Now available in *Kulliyat-e Premchand* 13 (2003).

### **A Wife's Testimony against Her Husband**

First published in Hindi as 'Gila' in *Hans* (April 1932), and later collected in *Mansarovar* 1 (1936). In Urdu, it was collected in *Vardaat* (1935) under the title 'Shikwa Shikayat'. Now available in *Kulliyat-e Premchand* 13 (2003).

### **The Vestal**

First publication date is unknown. It was published in Hindi in the collection *Prerna aur Anya Kahaniyaan* (February 1932), and later included in *Mansarovar* 4 (1939). It was published in Urdu as 'Sati' in *Chandan*

(May 1932), and later included in *Aakhiri Tohfa* (1934). Now available in *Kulliyat-e Premchand* 13 (2003).

### **The New Wife**

First published in Hindi as 'Naya Vivah' in *Saraswati* (May 1932), and later included in *Mansarovar* 2. In Urdu, it was published in the journal *Afsana* (Lahore), and included in the collection *Vardaat* (1935). Now available in *Kulliyat-e Premchand* 13 (2003).

There is quite a bit of difference between the Hindi and the Urdu versions. The following lines in the Hindi story have been omitted in the Urdu story:

... She (Leela) often reflected on this issue, but couldn't find any fault of her own. Now she looked after her husband much more than she did earlier. She always tried to lighten his burden of work, tried always to remain cheerful. She never did anything that was likely to cause displeasure to her husband.

As opposed to the above, there are about twenty sentences that have been added at different places in the Urdu version. In addition, the following lines are missing in the Hindi version:

... He (the friend who invited Sethji) didn't want anything from Sethji, didn't seek any favour from him. He had invited him to the musical soiree simply out of friendship. It was only proper that he accepted the invitation. Often, it becomes impossible to disengage oneself from domestic duties. Something or the other crops up every day. Somebody falls sick, a guest arrives, a puja is arranged on the day ... and so on and so forth. If one thinks that he would accept an invitation only when he is totally free of domestic entanglements, then he might as well wait till doomsday. Meanwhile, all his friendships will fall by the wayside.

... As soon as Lalaji reached home he reversed the hands of the clock. But he couldn't put the clock behind for more than an hour. He could bring the hand from two to one. Often the fast pace of the clock was blamed. Even so, he couldn't have passed off two in the morning as twelve in the afternoon.

... 'She didn't die, sahib! It's me who died with her. The lamp that had lit up my life has been extinguished. Now, to live more is to weep more. I am a man of no worth. It was my good fortune that I got her as my life partner. I was not even worthy of worshipping her.' Et cetera, et cetera.

### **The Ailing Sister**

Published in Hindi as 'Bimaar Behen' in *Kumar* (first issue, July 1932), and collected in *Premchand ka Aprapya Sahitya* 1 (1988). Not available in Urdu. Transliterated from Hindi to Urdu for *Kulliyat-e Premchand* 13 (2003).

### **Slander**

First published in Hindi as 'Kutsa' in *Jagaran* (Benares, July 1932), and later collected in *Mansarovar* 2 (1936). Not available in Urdu. Transliterated from Hindi to Urdu for *Kulliyat-e Premchand* 13 (2003).

### **Thakur's Well**

First published in Hindi as 'Thakur ka Kuan' in *Jagaran* (August 1932), and later collected in *Mansarovar* 1 (1936). Not available in Urdu. Transliterated from Hindi to Urdu for *Kulliyat-e Premchand* 13 (2003).

### **The Spectacle**

First published in Hindi as 'Jhanki' in *Jagaran* (August 1932), and later collected in *Mansarovar* 1 (1936). Not available in Urdu. Transliterated from Hindi to Urdu for *Kulliyat-e Premchand* 13 (2003).

### **Life Sentence**

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First published in Hindi as ‘Damul ka Qaidi’ in *Hans* (October–November 1932), and later collected in *Mansarovar* 2 (1936). It was published in Urdu in *Zaad-e Raah* (1936). Now available in *Kulliyaat-e Premchand* 13 (2003).

### **The Votary of Reminiscence**

First published in Urdu as ‘Wafa ka Devta’ in *Asmat* (1932), and later included in the collection *Doodh ki Qeemat* (1937). Now available in *Kulliyaat-e Premchand* 14 (2003). In Hindi, it was published in *Hans* (April 1935) as ‘Smriti ka Pujari’, and later compiled in *Mansarovar* 4 (1939).

### **Kusum**

First published in Urdu as ‘Kusum’ in *Asmat* (1932), and later included in the collection *Doodh ki Qeemat* (1937). Now available in *Kulliyaat-e Premchand* 14 (2003). In Hindi, it was published in *Chand* (October 1934) under the same title, and later collected in *Mansarovar* 2 (1936).

### **The Widow with Sons**

First published as ‘Betonwali Vidhva’ in Hindi in *Chand* (November 1932), and later included in *Mansarovar* 7 (1947). In Urdu, it was published in the collection *Zaad-e Raah* (1936) under the title ‘Badnaseeb Ma’. Now available in *Kulliyaat-e Premchand* 14 (2003).

### **The Coward**

First published in Hindi as ‘Kayar’ in *Vishal Bharat* (January 1933), and later included in *Mansarovar* 1 (1936). Not available in Urdu. Transliterated from Hindi to Urdu for *Kulliyaat-e Premchand* 14 (2003).

### **The Man Who Defied Fate**

First published in Hindi as ‘Rangeeley Babu’ in *Vishal Bharat* (January 1933), and included much later in *Premchand ka Aprapya Sahitya* 1 (1988). Not available in Urdu. Transliterated from Hindi to Urdu for *Kulliyaat-e Premchand* 14 (2003).

### **Neur**

First published in Hindi as ‘Neur’ in *Hans* (January 1933), and later in *Mansarovar* 2 (1936). In Urdu, it was published in *Zaad-e Raah* (1936). Now available in *Kulliyaat-e Premchand* 14 (2003).

### **Gilli-Danda**

First published in Hindi in *Hans* (February 1933), and later included in *Mansarovar* 1 (1936). In Urdu, it was published in the collection *Vardaat* (1935). Now available in Urdu in *Kulliyaat-e Premchand* 14 (2003).

Gilli-Danda or Gulli-Danda is a street game similar to American stickball, and is still played widely in the villages and small towns of South Asia. It is played with a bat made from a sturdy stick (the ‘danda’) and a much smaller peg-like piece of wood (the ‘gilli’). Similar to baseball or cricket, the striker attempts to hit the gilli with the danda such that it flies beyond the reach of the fielder(s). Having struck the gilli, the striker must run to a certain point and return, leaving the danda on the ground in the striker’s circle. If a fielder catches the gilli in the air, the striker is out. If the gilli hits the ground, a fielder must retrieve it and throw it at the danda. If the gilli hits the danda before the striker has completed his run, the striker is out. (Translator)



### **The Prostitute**

First published as ‘Vaishya’ in Hindi in *Chand* (February 1933), and later included in *Mansarovar* 2 (1936). Not available in Urdu. Transliterated from Hindi to Urdu for *Kulliyat-e Premchand* 14 (2003).

### **The Romantic Editor**

First published in Hindi as ‘Rasik Sampadak’ in *Jagaran* (March 1933), and later included in *Mansarovar* 1 (1936). Not available in Urdu. Transliterated from Hindi to Urdu for *Kulliyat-e Premchand* 14 (2003).

### **The Boy**

First published in Hindi as ‘Baalak’ in *Hans* (April 1933), and later included in *Mansarovar* 2 (1936). It was published in Urdu in *Vardaat* (1935) under the title ‘Masoom Bachcha’. Now available in Urdu in *Kulliyat-e Premchand* 14 (2003).

### **Renunciation**

First published in Hindi as ‘Vairagya’ in *Swadhinata* (1933), and later included in *Premchand ka Aprapya Sahitya* 1 (1988). Not available in Urdu. Transliterated from Hindi to Urdu for *Kulliyat-e Premchand* 14 (2003).

### **The Flame of Love**

First published in Urdu in *Asmat* (May 1933) with the title ‘Akseer’, and later included in *Doodh ki Qeemat* (1937). Now available in Urdu in *Kulliyat-e Premchand* 14 (2003). In Hindi, it was published in *Chand* (May 1933) under the title ‘Jyoti’, and later in *Mansarovar* 1 (1936).

### **The Prisoner**

First published in Hindi as ‘Qaidi’ in *Hans* (July, 1933), and later included in *Mansarovar* 2 (1936). Not available in Urdu. Transliterated from Hindi to Urdu for *Kulliyat-e Premchand* 14 (2003).

### **Idgah**

First published in Urdu as ‘Idgah’ in the anniversary edition of *Ismat* (1993), and later included in the volume *Doodh ki Qeemat* (1937). Now available in Urdu in *Kulliyat-e Premchand* 14 (2003). In Hindi, it was published in *Chand* (August 1933), and later in *Mansarovar* 1 (1936).

### **The Queen of Hearts**

First published in Hindi as ‘Dil ki Rani’ in *Chand* (November 1933), and later included in *Mansarovar* 1 (1936). Not available in Urdu. Transliterated from Hindi to Urdu for *Kulliyat-e Premchand* 14 (2003).

### **The Murderer**

First published in Urdu as ‘Qaatil’ in the collection *Aakhiri Tohfa* (1934). Now available in Urdu in *Kulliyat-e Premchand* 14 (2003). In Hindi, it was collected in *Gupt Dhan* 2 (1962).

There are structural dissimilarities between the Hindi and the Urdu versions. Paragraph divisions and section divisions vary in them. The following part is missing in the Urdu version:

... He behaved like a child who would clap when he would see a bear from a distance but shriek as the animal approached closer. Both looked at each other. They cried together.

Suddenly the mother felt very happy. She wiped Dharamvir's tears with the edge of her stole, and said, 'Let us run away from here, son!'

Dharamvir stood there anxious and lost. Mother continued, 'We need not disclose anything to anybody. Let us get out of here so that nobody gets to know about our departure. There are many other ways to serve the nation.'

Dharamvir spoke as if he had just got up, 'This is impossible, Mother! Duty is after all duty and it has to be carried out. Either you discharge it crying or with a smile on your lips. The only thing that frightens me is the outcome of this action. I may miss my mark and get arrested or even shot by my target's own bullet. But what will be, will be. Even if I die, I will live in people's memory.'

After a moment he said, 'I do not feel like eating anything right now, Mother! It's time to get ready. If you are not willing to accompany me, I will go alone.'

In a tone laced with obvious complaint, she said, 'I do not attach much value to my life, son! You are my life. I have lived my life looking at your face. Without you, it is all the same whether I live or die. I would rather prefer death to life.'

Dharamvir did not reply. Both got busy with their preparations. There was not much for her to do to get ready. She meditated for a while thinking of God, took her revolver and was all set to go.

Dharamvir had to make his diary entry for the day. As he sat down to write, a flood of emotions welled up in his heart. This flow, this unrestrained onrush of thoughts was a new experience to him. He felt as if a fountain had sprouted in his heart. The subject of this stream of thought was man as immortal and indestructible. It began with a heart-rending goodbye: *Adieu! O the charms of the world! Adieu! The blessings of life! O, sweet pangs of life, adieu! Countrymen! Pray for this wounded and wretched servant of the nation. Life is such a beautiful thing! The experience has taught me so. The same unfulfilled wishes, the spears of pain, the moments of disappointment that had turned life bitter—but now they seem all that one can treasure. The golden rays of the morning sun, the spellbinding breeze of evening, these streets and alleyways, these beautiful structures of houses—the eyes will not have a glimpse of them ever! Life is all about restraints and checks. Now every stronghold breaks one by one. Life cannot contain itself and falls apart. O, the freedom of my heart! Come! Let me bury you in the grave of hopelessness. I raise my hands in prayer to God that my countrymen prosper and my country flourishes. There is no regret. Who are we and what difference do we make to the world? But the garden will always have its bulbuls and will not be deserted. It's my request to you my brothers that when you sing your songs of freedom, do remember the name of this poor fellow in your prayers.*

Having closed his diary, he heaved a long sigh and stood up.

*Translated from the Hindi by Sarfaraz Ahmad*

## **The Wedding**

The details of first publication are unknown. It was published in Urdu as 'Baraat' in *Nijaat* (1933) and *Aakhiri Tohfa* (1934). Now available in Urdu in *Kulliyat-e Premchand* 14 (2003). In Hindi, it was published under the same title in *Premchand ka Aprapya Sahitya* 1 (1988).

## **If You Have No Woes, Buy a Goat!**

The details of first publication are unknown. It was published in Urdu in *Vardaat* (1935) as 'Gham Nadari Buzbakhar'. Now available in Urdu in *Kulliyat-e Premchand* 14 (2003). In Hindi, it was published in *Gupt Dhan* 2 (1962) under the title 'Koi Ghum Na Ho Tho Bakri Kharid Lo'.

## **The Goddess of Faithfulness**

The details of first publication are unknown. It was published in Urdu as ‘Wafa ki Devi’ in *Nijaat* (1933), and included in *Aakhiri Tohfa* (1934), and much later in *Kulliyat-e Premchand* 14 (2003). In Hindi, it was published in *Bhasha* (May–June, 2009), and transliterated from Urdu to Hindi for *Premchand: Kahani Rahanavali* 6 (2010).

### **Peace of Mind**

First published in Urdu as ‘Sakoon-e Qalb’ in *Asmat* (1934), and later included in *Doodh ki Qeemat* (1937). Now available in Urdu in *Kulliyat-e Premchand* 14 (2003). In Hindi, it was compiled in *Mansarovar* 1 (1936) under the title ‘Shanti’.

### **Intoxication**

First published in Urdu as ‘Nasha’ in *Rahnuma-e Ta’leem-i Hindi* (January 1934). Now available in Urdu in *Kulliyat-e Premchand* 14 (2003). In Hindi, it was published under the same title in *Chand* (February 1934), and later in *Mansarovar* 1 (1936).

### **A State of Mind**

First published in Hindi as ‘Manovritti’ in *Hans* (March 1934), and later included in *Mansarovar* 1 (1936). Not available in Urdu. Transliterated from Hindi to Urdu for *Kulliyat-e Premchand* 14 (2003).

### **The Secret**

First published in Hindi as ‘Jadoo’ in *Hans* (May 1934), and included in *Mansarovar* 2 (1936). Not available in Urdu. Transliterated from Hindi to Urdu for *Kulliyat-e Premchand* 14 (2003).

### **The Minister of the State**

First published in Hindi as ‘Riyasat ka Diwaan’ in *Hans* (May 1934), and included in *Mansarovar* 2 (1936). In Urdu, it was published in *Doodh ki Qeemat* (1937). Now available in Urdu in *Kulliyat-e Premchand* 14 (2003).

### **Pandit Moteram’s Diary**

Published in Hindi as ‘Pandit Moteram ki Diary’ in *Jagaran* (July 1934), and later included in the collection *Kafan* (1937). Not available in Urdu. Transliterated from Hindi to Urdu for *Kulliyat-e Premchand* 14 (2003).

### **The Price of Milk**

First published in Hindi as ‘Doodh ka Daam’ in *Hans* (July 1934), and included in *Mansarovar* 2 (1936). In Urdu, it was published in the collection *Doodh ki Qeemat* (1937) with the eponymous title. Now available in Urdu in *Kulliyat-e Premchand* 14 (2003).

The Hindi story is more incisive and critical than the Urdu story of the high-caste people and their dastardly treatment of the untouchables. The following passage which is a devastating indictment of the upper-caste prejudices against the lower castes is left out in the Urdu story:

The self-righteous people of the village were surprised at this tolerance shown by Babu Sahib. They thought that it was against the dharma that Mangal should have settled right in front of the house. It couldn’t have been fifty cubits. Indeed, if this sort of thing were to continue, one would think the end of all dharma to be at hand. We know that a Bhangi too is created by God. We should do no injustice to him. Who doesn’t

know that? God is called by the name of *Patitpawan*, redeemer of the lowly. However, social propriety is something that has to be taken into account. Now we feel embarrassed even to approach that gate. We know, of course, that he is the master of the village but this is something one finds disgusting.

### Undeserved Praise

First published in Hindi as 'Muft ka Yash' in *Hans* (August 1934), and later included in *Mansarovar* 2 (1936). In Urdu, it was published in *Vardaat* (1935) under the title 'Muft Karam Dashtan'. Now available in Urdu in *Kulliyaat-e Premchand* 14 (2003).

The following lines occur only in the Urdu version:

... To be a God is a thing to be proud of, but to be an ordinary human being is never a crime.

... Still I did not have the courage to admit that I did not go to the magistrate and had no role to play in the way things happened. I was not ready to let go the free glory that came my way.

The climax in the Urdu version which is damningly self-critical of the narrator is rather muted in the Hindi version.

### God's Share of Stale Rice

First published in Hindi as 'Baasi Bhaat mein Khuda ka Saajha' in *Hans* (October 1934), and later included in *Mansarovar* 2 (1936). In Urdu, it was published in *Zaad-e Raah* (1936) under the title 'Khuda ka Qahar'. Now available in Urdu in *Kulliyaat-e Premchand* 14 (2003).

### God's Own Police

First published in Hindi as 'Khudai Faujdar' in *Chand* (November 1934), and later included in *Mansarovar* 2 (1936). In Urdu, it was published in *Vardaat* (1935) under the title 'Insaaf ki Police'. It figures in *Kulliyaat-e Premchand* 14 (2003).

There is a slight difference between the Hindi and Urdu versions. The Hindi version has several lines added to different sections. The ending of the two versions are also different. The Urdu version ends with the following additional lines:

'I'll give you twenty-five thousand rupees happily. You told me that you were from the police to ensure justice. Don't do this injustice to me.'

Khan Sahib thrust his head out of the door and said, 'How I wish you had paid this twenty-five thousand rupees earlier. Now that time is over. We've put ourselves at great risks to lay our hands on this money. Just think, if you had the slightest doubt, we'd be in handcuffs at this moment and thrashed black and blue. Now go home peacefully. Here is three rupees with which you had come to this place. Try to acquire wealth again. We'll come again in five or ten years to deliver you from the entanglements of wealth.'

The car speeded up while the sethji kept on howling.

'Run, run, the dacoits have robbed me!'

His appeal for help was lost in the wilderness.

*Extract translated by the editor*

### My Elder Brother

First published in Hindi as 'Badey Bhai Sahib' in *Hans* (November 1934), and later included in *Mansarovar* 2 (1936). In Urdu, it was published in *Zaad-e Raah* (1936). Now available in *Kulliyaat-e Premchand* 14 (2003).

### **The Farce**

First published in Urdu as ‘Swang’ in *Jamia* (1935), and later compiled in *Vardaat* (1935). Now available in Urdu in *Kulliyaat-e Premchand* 14 (2003). In Hindi, it was compiled in *Gupt Dhan* 2 (1962).

### **Tulia**

First published as ‘Devi’ in *Chand* (April 1935), and later included in *Gupt Dhan* 2 (1962). In Urdu, it was compiled in *Kulliyaat-e Premchand* 14 (2003) under the title ‘Wafa ki Devi’.

### **The Rules of the House**

First published in Hindi as ‘Grih Neeti’ in *Chand* (August 1935), and later included in *Mansarovar* 2 (1936). In Urdu, it was compiled in *Doodh ki Qeemat* (1937) under the title ‘Zaawiya Nigaah’. Now available in Urdu in *Kulliyaat-e Premchand* 14 (2003).

### **The Curse of Life**

First published in Hindi as ‘Jeevan ka Shaap’ (June 1935), and later included in *Mansarovar* 2 (1936). In Urdu, it was part of *Zaad-e Raah* (1936) under the title ‘La’nat’. Now available in *Kulliyaat-e Premchand* 14 (2003).

### **Paying the Price**

The details of first publication are unknown. It was published in Hindi in the collection *Kafan* (1937). Not available in Urdu. Transliterated from Hindi to Urdu for *Kulliyaat-e Premchand* 14 (2003).

### **Splashed**

The details of first publication are unknown. It was published as ‘Motor ki Cheentein’ in *Mansarovar* 2 (1936). Not available in Urdu. Transliterated from Hindi to Urdu for *Kulliyaat-e Premchand* 14 (2003).

### **The Assassin’s Mother**

The details of first publication are unknown. It was published in Urdu as ‘Qatil ki Ma’ in *Vardaat* (1935). Now available in Urdu in *Kulliyaat-e Premchand* 14 (2003). In Hindi, it was published in *Aprapya Sahitya* 1 (1988).

### **Miss Padma**

The details of first publication are unknown. It was published in Hindi as ‘Miss Padma’ in *Mansarovar* 2 (1936). In Urdu, it was published in *Zaad-e Raah* (1936) under the same title. Now available in Urdu in *Kulliyaat-e Premchand* 14 (2003).

The versions of this story in Hindi and Urdu are widely different. The Hindi story is exactly half the length of the Urdu one. Further, the two stories are different in substance, plot, characters and endings. The Urdu story has a subplot that recounts the story of Miss Padma’s sister, Ratna, and their parents. In fact, there is a love triangle involving the two sisters and a man, Mr Jhilla. The Hindi story omits all this. As the two versions are substantially different from each other and this difference cannot be demonstrated by extracting lines and paragraphs, the entire Hindi story is presented below in English translation:

After tasting success as a lawyer, Miss Padma began experiencing a certain kind of emptiness in her life. She considered marriage an unnatural bond, and for that reason had decided to remain independent and

enjoy life. She had begun her practice as soon as she got her MA and law degrees. She was young, beautiful, soft-spoken and extremely talented. Nothing ever stood in her way. It wasn't too long before she even outperformed her young male colleagues. Her income too would, at times, be more than a thousand rupees per month. So now she could afford to take it easy without having to rack her brains on her cases. Most of her cases too were of a kind that she was already well versed in, which meant that not a lot of preparation was really necessary now. To some extent, she had even begun trusting her skills. She had mastered the tricks of her trade that guaranteed success with lawsuits. As a result, she had a great deal of leisure time on her hands, which she spent reading romances, going out on trips or to the movies and visiting friends. She strongly believed that an addiction of some sort was necessary to lead a happy life. This led her to take up gardening. She would order different kinds of seeds and enjoy watching them sprout, grow and bear fruits and flowers. And yet, she continued experiencing a certain kind of emptiness in her life.

It wasn't as if she was averse to men. Far from it! She had a long list of admirers. This list wouldn't have suffered on any account even if she had just been young and beautiful. But when youth and beauty join hands with riches, the flirtatious brigade can hardly resist. Padma wasn't opposed to casual romantic relationships. But what she really hated was the idea of being dependent on someone, or that marriage should become the be-all and end-all of life. Why shouldn't one enjoy oneself as long as one could remain free? She had no moralistic qualms about sensual pleasure since she merely considered it a bodily appetite. One could quite easily satiate this appetite through new admirers every time. And Padma would always be on the lookout for such admirers. A customer only buys what he likes in a shop. Padma too was somewhat like a customer. She had dozens of admirers—lawyers, professors, doctors and noblemen. But they were sybarites, every one of them—the carefree kind who are like bees that are only concerned with the nectar. There was no one whom she could trust. It was then that she realized that her heart yearned for something more than just sensual pleasure. What was that thing after all? It was nothing but complete self-devotion, and this she could never find.

Among her admirers there was a certain Mr Prasad, an immensely handsome and exceptionally learned man. He was a professor in a local college, and someone who also subscribed to the idea of having flings with no strings attached. Padma was infatuated with him and wanted to keep him attached and attracted to her, to own him completely. But Prasad wasn't one to fall into her clutches so easily.

One evening Padma was about to go for a walk when Prasad turned up. The walk had to be postponed because chatting was definitely more fun. Today Padma had decided to reveal her innermost feelings to Prasad. After giving it much thought, she finally felt like being honest about it.

She fixed her gaze on Prasad's intoxicating eyes and said, 'Why don't you move in with me?'

Prasad replied, with a wicked sense of humour, 'Because that would only mean that within two to four months, we won't even feel like talking to one another.'

'I'm sorry, I don't get your point.'

'The point is just what I'm saying.'

'But why would you say something like that?'

'I don't want to lose my independence and you don't like to part with it either. What's more, I'll be jealous when your admirers approach you, just as you will be when I'm surrounded by other women. All of this will only lead to animosity and discord, and you'll finally throw me out. It's your house after all. How can our friendship continue when this will certainly end up hurting me?'

The two of them were silent for quite some time. Prasad had explained the situation in such a clear, detached and blunt manner that there was nothing left to say.

Finally, it was Prasad who thought of a way out. He said, 'There's no way that we can live together unless we take an oath that from this day forward, I'm completely yours, and you are completely mine.'

'Will you ever take such an oath?'

'No, first you tell me.'

'Yes, I will.'

'Then so will I.'

'But except for this one thing, I'll be free to decide on every other matter.'  
 'And I too will be free except for this.'  
 'Agreed.'  
 'Agreed!'  
 'So when do we start?'  
 'Whenever you're ready.'  
 'Then why not tomorrow?'  
 'Deal! But if you don't fulfil the oath to the letter, what happens then?'  
 'And if you do the same?'  
 'Well, you can throw me out of the house, can't you? But how can I possibly punish you?'  
 'You can just give up on me; what else can you do?'  
 'Not at all, that won't satisfy me even one bit. I'd rather humiliate you if it comes to that or better still, would want to murder you.'  
 'You're a heartless one, aren't you, Prasad?'  
 'So long as we're independent, neither of us has the right to say anything to the other. But once we're bound by the oath, I won't be able to tolerate any kind of recklessness, nor will you. You have the means to punish me, but I have none. The law gives me no rights whatsoever. I can only enforce the oath through brute strength. And what else can I possibly do alone before all these servants of yours?'  
 'You always look at the dark side! When I submit myself to you, then this house, these servants and property, everything becomes yours. Both of us know that there can't be a more heinous social sin than envy. I can't say for sure whether you love me or not, but I'm ready to endure anything for your sake.'  
 'And do you say this with all your heart, Padma?'  
 'With all my heart, I do.'  
 'But I don't know why I can't bring myself to believe you.'  
 'But I believe you.'  
 'But I'm telling you, I'll stay in your house only as a master and not as a guest.'  
 'You won't just be the lord of the house but my master as well. And I shall be your mistress.'

Professor Prasad and Miss Padma were living together and were quite happy. The ideal that both of them had forged for themselves had almost become a reality. Prasad earned only two hundred rupees per month, but now he really didn't care even if he spent twice as much. Earlier, he would drink only on occasions, but now he would be tipsy all the time. Now he even had his own car and his own servants. He would go on ordering expensive items of all kinds, and Padma was more than happy to put up with these extravagances. But it wasn't a question of putting up with anything. No, she would take delight in dressing him in fine suits and setting him up in the most lavish style. Even the greatest of noblemen in the city might not be owning the kind of watch that Professor Prasad now wore. The more Padma gave in, the more he dominated her. Sometimes all of this would even seem insufferable for her, but for some unknown reason, she would always find herself under his thumb. She would get restless the moment she would see Prasad the least bit worried or sad. On top of it, Prasad never missed an opportunity to say sarcastic things to her. Padma's admirers from yesteryears even tried making her jealous. But she would forget everything the moment she found herself in Prasad's company. Prasad's dominance over her was complete, and he was well aware of it. He had studied her closely and he reigned supreme in her heart.

But just as in politics power tends to be abused, in love too one tends to take advantage of one's position. And the one who's weaker is made to pay. When Padma, who was otherwise so proud of herself, had now been reduced to being Prasad's whore, why would Prasad fail to profit from her weakness? He had just the answer for a woman like her and gradually strengthened his hold with skill, to the point that he even began coming home late at night. Whenever Padma wanted to go out with him, he would feign a headache. But as soon as she'd leave for a stroll, he would take out his car and make himself scarce.

Two years had passed and Padma was now expecting a baby. She had even gained weight which meant that she was no longer as youthful and charismatic as she had been before. She was like a chicken of the household that never makes a peep but that is the only thing that

nousenoid that can never be tastier than the neighbour's beans.

One day Prasad had dashed off when Padma returned home. She flared up. For some time now, she had been noticing a certain change in Prasad.

Today she had mustered her courage to give him a piece of her mind. The clock struck ten, then eleven, then midnight, and Padma kept waiting for him. The food had gone cold, and the servants had retired. She would get up every now and then, go to the door and look out into the street. Prasad returned around one. Though Padma had mustered her courage, she almost had a moment of weakness as soon as she went near him. Still she asked him, somewhat firmly, 'Where were you so late at night? Do you have any idea what time it is?'

In that instant, Prasad almost felt as if Padma was like the living image of ugliness. He had gone to the movies with a female student from his college. He replied, 'You should've slept by now. The kind of condition that you are in, you ought to get as much rest as possible.'

Padma grew braver and said, 'Don't worry about me. Just stick to the point.'

'Then you too shouldn't worry about me.'

'I can clearly tell that you're cheating on me.'

'Surely your eyesight must have improved somewhat!'

'For quite some time now, I've noticed a certain change in your temperament.'

'I haven't sold myself to you and can leave right now if you're really fed up with me.'

'Now, why on earth do you have to talk like that? It wasn't as if you had to give up anything when you moved in with me.'

'Give up anything? How dare you say that to me? I can see that you're in quite a mood today. You think you've left me helpless and dependent. But I'm ready to dump you right now. Right now, do you hear me?'

It seemed as though Padma's sense of courage had deserted her. Prasad was already packing his suitcase. She said, somewhat piteously, 'I haven't said anything for you to get so agitated. I was only asking about your whereabouts. Do I not even deserve to know this much? I never do anything against your wishes and yet you're always looking for reasons to scold me. Don't you feel even the slightest of pity for me? I think I should at least get a little sympathy from you. Because here I am, ready to do anything for you. And there you're, ready to turn away from me now that I find myself in this condition . . .'

Words choked up in her throat as she laid her head on the table and cried bitterly. Prasad's victory was complete.

Motherhood had become somewhat of a sore spot with Padma these days. She was constantly haunted by some unknown burden. Sometimes she would even tremble with fear and regret. Prasad's authoritarianism was getting worse by the day. Padma was simply at her wits' end. She was expecting the baby any day now and had stopped going to court. She would just sit alone at home the whole day. Prasad would return in the evening, have his tea and make himself scarce. He would then be back only by eleven or midnight. His whereabouts were no secret either. It was as if he hated the very sight of her—a pregnant body and a pale face, always worried, distrustful and grief-stricken! And yet, she never grew tired of trying to impress Prasad with her jewellery and make-up. But the more she tried, the more Prasad felt revolted by it. Excessive make-up and that too in her condition made her seem even uglier.

Padma was in the throes of labour and Prasad was nowhere to be found. The nurse and the lady doctor were attending to her, but Prasad's absence made her labour pangs all the more terrible. Seeing the child beside her, she felt a wave of happiness course through her body. But waking up to the realization that Prasad wasn't with her, she turned her face away from the child. It seemed as though worms had ruined a delicious fruit.

After spending five days in the maternity ward, Padma felt as if she was finally being released from a prison. She was like a naked sword, ready to strike. Being a mother, she experienced a strange sense of power within herself. She gave a cheque to her servant and sent him to the bank. She had to settle some bills related to her delivery. But he returned empty-handed.

Padma asked, 'Where's the money?'

He replied, 'The clerk told me that Prasad Babu had already withdrawn all of it.'



He replied, 'The clerk told me that Prasad Babu had already withdrawn all of it.'

Padma was shell-shocked. She had saved up twenty thousand rupees as though it was dearer than her own life. And all for this child! Alas! On leaving the maternity ward, she learnt that Prasad had gone off on a tour to England with a girl from his college. Incensed, she went into the house, picked up Prasad's photo, flung it to the floor and crushed it beneath her feet. She collected all his items in one place, put a match to it and forgot all about him.

A month went by. Padma stood at the gate of her bungalow, holding the child in her arms. Her anger had finally given way to grief and despair. Sometimes she felt sorry for the child, sometimes affection and sometimes plain hatred.

On the road she saw a European lady going along with her husband pushing a stroller with their child in it. She looked wistfully at the lucky couple and her eyes filled with tears.

*Translated from the Hindi by Shailendra Kumar Singh*

## **Radiance**

First published in Urdu as 'Roshni' in *Adabi Duniya* (November 1932), and later included in *Vardaat* (1935). Now available in Urdu in *Kulliyat-e Premchand* 14 (2003). In Hindi, it was included in *Premchand ka Aprapya Sahitya* 1 (1988).

## **Reality**

First published in Urdu as 'Haqeeqat' in *Adabi Duniya* (December 1935). Now available in Urdu in *Kulliyat-e Premchand* 14 (2003). In Hindi, it was published in *Hans* (February 1937) under the title 'Tathya' and then included in *Kafan* (1937).

## **Intoxicants, All**

The details of first publication date are unknown. It was published in Hindi as 'Ye Bhi Nasha, Woh Bhi Nasha' in *Kafan* (1937). This story is not available in Urdu, and was transliterated from Hindi to Urdu for the first time in 2003 for *Kulliyat-e Premchand* 14 (2003).

## **The Hallowed Feet of the Bridegroom**

First published in Hindi as 'Paipunji' in *Madhuri* (October 1935), and later included in *Gupt Dhan* 2 (1962). This is not available in Urdu, and was transliterated from Hindi to Urdu for *Kulliyat-e Premchand* 14 (2003).

## **The Lottery**

First published in Hindi in *Hans* (October 1935), and later included in *Mansarovar* 2 (1936). In Urdu, it was published in *Zaad-e Raah* (1936). Now available in Urdu in *Kulliyat-e Premchand* 14 (2003).

## **Two Sisters**

First published in Urdu as 'Do Bahnein' in *Asmat* (October 1935), and later included in *Doodh ki Qeemat* (1937). Now available in Urdu in *Kulliyat-e Premchand* 14 (2003). In Hindi, it was published in *Madhuri* (August 1936), and included in *Kafan* (1937).

## **My First Composition**

First published in Hindi as ‘Meri Pehli Rachna’ in *Hans* (December 1935), and later included in *Kafan* (1937). This story is not available in Urdu, and was transliterated from Hindi to Urdu for *Kulliyat-e Premchand* 14 (2003) under the same title.

### **The Shroud**

First published in Urdu as ‘Kafan’ in *Jamia* (December 1935). Now available in Urdu in *Kulliyat-e Premchand* 14 (2003). In Hindi, it was published in *Kafan* (1937).

### **The Holi Holiday**

The details of first publication are unknown. It was published in Urdu as ‘Holi ki Chhutti’ in *Zaad-e Raah* (1936). In Hindi, it was included in *Gupt Dhan* 2 (1962) under the same title.

### **The Mystery**

First published in Hindi as ‘Rahasya’ in *Hans* (September 1936), and included in *Kafan* (1937). This story is not available in Urdu, and was transliterated from Hindi to Urdu for *Kulliyat-e Premchand* 14 (2003).

### **Apples from Kashmir**

First published in Hindi as ‘Kashmiri Seb’ in *Hans* (October 1936), and included in *Kafan* (1937). This story is not available in Urdu, and was transliterated from Hindi to Urdu for *Kulliyat-e Premchand* 14 (2003).

### **An Incomplete Story**

The details of first publication are unknown. Originally published in Urdu, and then transliterated in Hindi for *Premchand ki Aprapya Kahaniyaan* (2004). Available in Urdu in *Kulliyat-e Premchand* 14 (2003).

### **A Cricket Match**

First published in Urdu in *Zamana* (July 1937). Now available in Urdu in *Kulliyat-e Premchand* 14 (2003). In Hindi, it was included in *Gupt Dhan* 2 (1962).

(Notes and translation of extracts, unless otherwise mentioned, are by the editor.)

# Glossary

|                    |                                                                                                                 |
|--------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>aanchal</i>     | end or corner of a sari                                                                                         |
| <i>aarti</i>       | part of the ceremony of worship when the sacred flame is circled round the holy image                           |
| <i>abeer/gulal</i> | liquid colour                                                                                                   |
| <i>adharma</i>     | opposite of dharma; anti-religion                                                                               |
| <i>aerund</i>      | castor plant                                                                                                    |
| Aghan              | winter month in the Indian calendar corresponding to November–December                                          |
| <i>ahir</i>        | cowherd                                                                                                         |
| <i>akhada</i>      | wrestling ring                                                                                                  |
| <i>amama</i>       | special big and heavy turban                                                                                    |
| <i>amavas</i>      | the night of the new moon                                                                                       |
| <i>angeethi</i>    | stove that works on coal                                                                                        |
| <i>angochha</i>    | shoulder cloth                                                                                                  |
| <i>angrakhan</i>   | buttoned-up coats and kurtas with delicate embroidery                                                           |
| Asarh              | farming month in the rainy season corresponding to June–July                                                    |
| Ashtami            | eighth day of the lunar fortnight                                                                               |
| Ashwin             | autumn month corresponding to September–October                                                                 |
| <i>atai</i>        | self-taught singer; tutor                                                                                       |
| <i>atal</i>        | inflexible; unchangeable                                                                                        |
| <i>aulya</i>       | protector, a person who has achieved sainthood                                                                  |
| <i>baari</i>       | maker of leaf plates                                                                                            |
| <i>bahli</i>       | two-wheeled covered cart pulled by oxen                                                                         |
| <i>bahu</i>        | daughter-in-law                                                                                                 |
| Baisakh            | first Indian month, corresponding to April–May                                                                  |
| <i>bal kaand</i>   | part of the Ramayana dealing with the boyhood of Lord Rama                                                      |
| <i>balushahi</i>   | sweetmeat                                                                                                       |
| <i>banjara</i>     | nomad                                                                                                           |
| <i>baraat</i>      | marriage party of the bridegroom, comprising family and friends                                                 |
| <i>baradari</i>    | a structure with twelve gateways                                                                                |
| <i>bara maasa</i>  | poetic form describing the feelings of a beloved separated from her lover through all twelve months of the year |
| Bargada            | deity                                                                                                           |
| <i>bhabhi</i>      | older brother's wife                                                                                            |
| <i>bhabhoot</i>    | sacred ash                                                                                                      |
| Bhadon             | rainy month corresponding to August–September                                                                   |
| Bhagat             | person who abstains from meat and alcohol                                                                       |

|                       |                                                                                                                                                |
|-----------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>biagat</i>         | person who abstains from meat and alcohol                                                                                                      |
| <i>biwi</i>           | wife                                                                                                                                           |
| <i>Brahmani</i>       | wife of a brahmin                                                                                                                              |
| <i>brahmbhoj</i>      | ritualistic feeding of Brahmins to get their blessings                                                                                         |
| <i>brata</i>          | religious practice to carry out certain obligations so one can achieve divine blessings for the fulfilment of one or several desires           |
| <i>chabutara</i>      | raised platform                                                                                                                                |
| <i>Chait</i>          | hot and dry month corresponding to March–April                                                                                                 |
| <i>Chamar</i>         | tanner, cobbler                                                                                                                                |
| <i>chamarin</i>       | tanner woman                                                                                                                                   |
| <i>charnamrita</i>    | literally, foot nectar; a mixture of milk, curd, ghee, sugar and honey, considered sacred, and used in the tending of idols and sacred objects |
| <i>chatty</i>         | container                                                                                                                                      |
| <i>Chaudhuri</i>      | high-caste person                                                                                                                              |
| <i>chaudhurain</i>    | wife of a chaudhuri                                                                                                                            |
| <i>chaugan</i>        | polo                                                                                                                                           |
| <i>chauki</i>         | wooden stool or plank; bench                                                                                                                   |
| <i>chaupai</i>        | quatrain                                                                                                                                       |
| <i>chaupal</i>        | village square; meeting place                                                                                                                  |
| <i>chautal</i>        | ‘four claps’, a particular style of singing                                                                                                    |
| <i>chela</i>          | disciple                                                                                                                                       |
| <i>chhakda</i>        | ramshackle cart                                                                                                                                |
| <i>chopad</i>         | a game                                                                                                                                         |
| <i>chulha</i>         | earthen oven                                                                                                                                   |
| <i>chunri</i>         | dupatta; stole                                                                                                                                 |
| <i>churan</i>         | digestive                                                                                                                                      |
| <i>dadra</i>          | form of musical composition                                                                                                                    |
| <i>Darbar-e Aam</i>   | court of public audience                                                                                                                       |
| <i>Darbar-e Khaas</i> | court of private audience                                                                                                                      |
| <i>daroga</i>         | police inspector or superintendent of tolls or of municipal or government departments                                                          |
| <i>dastarkhwan</i>    | cloth spread on the ground or a raised structure for laying out food                                                                           |
| <i>dhaam</i>          | pilgrimage site                                                                                                                                |
| <i>Dhanvantari</i>    | physician of the gods                                                                                                                          |
| <i>dharmatma</i>      | man of religion; spiritual guru                                                                                                                |
| <i>dharmayudh</i>     | holy war; crusade                                                                                                                              |
| <i>dholi</i>          | bundle of about two hundred paan leaves                                                                                                        |
| <i>Diwan-e Aam</i>    | hall of public audience                                                                                                                        |
| <i>Diwan-e Khaas</i>  | hall of private audience                                                                                                                       |
| <i>doli</i>           | palanquin, litter                                                                                                                              |
| <i>dom</i>            | cremation worker; scavenger                                                                                                                    |

|                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|---------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>domni</i>        | woman singer or dancer belonging to a caste that converted to Islam from the Hindu <i>dom</i> caste                                                                                                    |
| <i>dona</i>         | cup made of dried leaves                                                                                                                                                                               |
| Drupad              | also known as Yajnasena, the king of southern Panchal                                                                                                                                                  |
| Durga Path          | recitation of the holy book of Durga. Chanting her name is known to ward off evil spirits and ghosts                                                                                                   |
| Ekadashi            | eleventh day of the lunar fortnight; some pious Hindus observe a fast on that day                                                                                                                      |
| <i>gajra</i>        | flower garland worn by women on festive occasions                                                                                                                                                      |
| <i>garach</i>       | medicinal herb                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| <i>garib</i>        | poor                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| <i>gathborna</i>    | medicinal herb                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| <i>gauna</i>        | the ceremony of a wife being taken to her husband's home                                                                                                                                               |
| Gayatri Mantra      | A hymn of twenty-four syllables chanted in the name of Goddess Savitri or Durga                                                                                                                        |
| <i>ghunghat</i>     | veil                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| <i>gilli-danda</i>  | Indian tip-cat                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| <i>godaan</i>       | the Hindu practice of offering a cow to a Brahmin after the death of a family member. It was believed that by doing that the soul of the departed would find peace and go to heaven                    |
| <i>gopis</i>        | maidens of Vrindavan in love with Krishna                                                                                                                                                              |
| <i>griha praves</i> | house-warming                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| <i>gurumata</i>     | wife of a teacher, treated like a mother                                                                                                                                                               |
| <i>halvai</i>       | sweet vendor; confectioner                                                                                                                                                                             |
| Hanuman Chalisa     | forty verses in praise of Lord Hanuman                                                                                                                                                                 |
| <i>harira</i>       | concoction made from several ingredients such as ghee, jaggery, cumin, nuts, turmeric powder and dry ginger powder. It is part of the postnatal diet of a woman which provides her wholesome nutrition |
| <i>havan kund</i>   | sacred pit where sacrificial fires are lit                                                                                                                                                             |
| Ibn-e-Sina          | Avicenna, a Persian polymath                                                                                                                                                                           |
| <i>idgah</i>        | prayer ground where Muslims gather for the Eid congregation                                                                                                                                            |
| <i>ilaka</i>        | region; estate                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| <i>imarti</i>       | sweetmeat                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| <i>Ism-e Aazam</i>  | Muslim prayer to ward off evil                                                                                                                                                                         |
| <i>jagir</i>        | feudal land grant under the <i>jagirdari</i> system to officials during the Mughal period. Tenants were supposed to be under the servitude of the jagirdar                                             |
| <i>jagirdar</i>     | holder of a jagir                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| <i>janaab</i>       | sir                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| <i>janeyu</i>       | sacred thread worn from adolescence by Hindu males of the upper three community groups                                                                                                                 |
| Janmashtami         | festival that celebrates the birth of Krishna                                                                                                                                                          |
| <i>janwasa</i>      | temporary dwelling for a marriage party                                                                                                                                                                |
| Jauhar              | custom of collective self-immolation by Rajput women to save themselves from dishonour                                                                                                                 |
| Jeth, Jaishta       | second month of the Hindu calendar corresponding to May–June                                                                                                                                           |
| <i>Kashabi</i>      | community of merchant and money-lenders, members of the <i>Kashabi</i> community                                                                                                                       |

|             |                                                                                                                                                                        |
|-------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Kaacnni     | community of market gardeners, a member of the Kaacnni community                                                                                                       |
| kaans       | <i>Saccharum spontaneum</i> , a perennial grass growing up to three metres in height with spreading rhizomatous roots                                                  |
| kachcha     | raw                                                                                                                                                                    |
| kachnar     | a tree, also known as orchid tree, camel's foot tree and mountain ebony                                                                                                |
| Kahar       | member of Hindu sub-caste whose duties include carrying palanquins and drawing water                                                                                   |
| kaharin     | woman Kahar                                                                                                                                                            |
| kaka        | uncle; near-and-dear acquaintance                                                                                                                                      |
| Kaala Paani | lit. black water; Cellular Jail                                                                                                                                        |
| kamandal    | an oblong water pot made of a dry gourd, metal, wood or clay, usually with a handle and sometimes with a spout. Hindu ascetics often use it for storing drinking water |
| kanthi      | ornament like choker                                                                                                                                                   |
| kanyadaan   | ritual of giving away a daughter in marriage                                                                                                                           |
| karha       | bangle                                                                                                                                                                 |
| karhai      | pan                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Kayastha    | members of the scribe caste, traditionally known as keepers of public records and accounts, writers, and administrators of the state                                   |
| kesar       | saffron plant                                                                                                                                                          |
| khaddar     | homespun cloth, popularized by Mahatma Gandhi                                                                                                                          |
| khangar     | member of a semi-tribal community who earned livelihood by carpentry                                                                                                   |
| kharau      | clogs; wooden footwear                                                                                                                                                 |
| khasdaan    | portmanteau, betel dish or box with cover                                                                                                                              |
| khudkasht   | land cultivated by owner                                                                                                                                               |
| khus        | fragrant grass; khus coolers made of sweet-smelling herbs and hung like a screen or mat over windows and doors for the natural cooling of air used in India            |
| kolhu       | oil press drawn by bullocks                                                                                                                                            |
| kos         | length of approximately three miles                                                                                                                                    |
| Kshatriya   | warrior caste                                                                                                                                                          |
| kulvadhu    | housewife                                                                                                                                                              |
| kundan      | fine gold                                                                                                                                                              |
| Kunwar      | honorary title traditionally associated with feudal Rajputs, such as the son of a rana or thakur                                                                       |
| Kunwar      | month of Kartik in the Hindu calendar roughly corresponding to October–November                                                                                        |
| Kurmi       | Hindu agricultural caste in India                                                                                                                                      |
| lagaan      | rent payable or accruing on land                                                                                                                                       |
| lagan       | auspicious moment for performing a sacred task; horoscope                                                                                                              |
| lambardar   | village headman who collects revenue and acts as a link between the government and the people                                                                          |
| leela       | inscrutable ways of God                                                                                                                                                |
| lota        | small round metal pot                                                                                                                                                  |
| Maagh       | tenth month of the Hindu calendar roughly corresponding to January–February                                                                                            |
| maata       | mother; goddess                                                                                                                                                        |

|                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|--------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>mahtab</i>            | special kind of firecrackers                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| <i>makoh</i>             | <i>Solanum nigrum</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| <i>maktab</i>            | school                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <i>malida</i>            | sweets                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <i>malin</i>             | gardener's wife                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| <i>malkin</i>            | mistress                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| <i>mamu</i>              | maternal uncle (mother's brother)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| <i>mandap</i>            | temporary pavilion erected to conduct the marriage ceremony                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| <i>mansabdar</i>         | member of the imperial bureaucracy of the Mughal empire in India. The mansabdars governed the empire and commanded its armies in the emperor's name                                                                                                                                                           |
| <i>marsiya</i>           | an elegy                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| <i>maryada</i>           | honour                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <i>mauza</i>             | site, place or village                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <i>Meghdoot</i>          | variation of <i>Meghadutam</i> , a play by Kalidasa                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| <i>mehfil</i>            | lively assembly of people, get-together; musical soirée                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| <i>mirzai</i>            | jacket of coarse cloth                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <i>mem</i>               | white woman                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| <i>mistri</i>            | worker, generally a fitter                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| <i>moha</i>              | longing for worldly attachments                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| <i>mujra</i>             | nautch performance                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| <i>mukhtar</i>           | pleader                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| <i>mukhtar-e aam</i>     | representative who holds a general power of attorney of the zamindar                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| <i>mundan</i>            | tonsure                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| <i>munim</i>             | accountant                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| <i>munna</i>             | little darling, children are commonly addressed as 'munna' (for a boy) or 'munni' (for a girl)                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| <i>munna</i>             | precious gem found inside a snake. According to popular belief, a snake possessing the gem takes it out and goes sniffing around for food. On returning, it swallows the gem. Picking up the gem, which is a risky endeavour that might cost a person his life, will lead to being blessed with untold wealth |
| <i>nagin</i>             | female cobra                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| <i>nainsukh</i>          | fine muslin                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| <i>na-mehram</i>         | a stranger before whom a Muslim woman is forbidden to appear unveiled                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| <i>nazrana</i>           | offering                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| <i>neochchawar</i>       | ward off evil                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| <i>ojha</i>              | sorcerer                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| <i>ood</i>               | aloe wood; emits fragrance when it burns                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| <i>paanigrahan</i>       | marriage                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| <i>pakwaan</i>           | special kind of fried sweets prepared on festivals                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| <i>Panch Parameshwar</i> | long live the panchayat                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |

|                              |                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>ki jai</i>                |                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| <i>panditayin</i>            | female counterpart of a pandit; wife of a pandit                                                                                                                                             |
| <i>papiha</i>                | brain fever bird                                                                                                                                                                             |
| <i>pativrata</i>             | wife who attains spiritual status through devotion to her husband                                                                                                                            |
| <i>pattal</i>                | leaf plate                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| Parvez                       | emperor of Persia                                                                                                                                                                            |
| <i>pasi</i>                  | toddy extractors                                                                                                                                                                             |
| <i>patwari</i>               | village recorder                                                                                                                                                                             |
| <i>payis</i>                 | measure of land                                                                                                                                                                              |
| <i>peshkaar</i>              | officer in the court                                                                                                                                                                         |
| Phagun                       | eleventh month in the Hindu calendar roughly corresponding to February–March                                                                                                                 |
| <i>phulka</i>                | plain roti                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| <i>pind daan</i>             | religious ritual performed to bring salvation to the departed soul. Offering the ashes of the deceased into the Ganges and feeding the poor constitute essential components of this ceremony |
| <i>pitambar</i>              | lit., yellow garment; used as another name of the Hindu gods Krishna and Vishnu because of their yellow clothing                                                                             |
| <i>pitra-paksha</i>          | when rites are performed in honour of ancestors                                                                                                                                              |
| <i>pooranmasi</i>            | full moon                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Poos                         | winter month in the Hindu calendar corresponding to December–January                                                                                                                         |
| <i>prakriti</i>              | raw nature                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| <i>purohit</i>               | Hindu priest                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| <i>purush</i>                | man                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| <i>qurbani</i>               | ritual sacrifice of animals during Eid                                                                                                                                                       |
| <i>Raghubansa</i>            | a variation of <i>Raghubansam</i> , a play by Kalidasa                                                                                                                                       |
| Rathyatra                    | Hindu festival celebrating the life of Lord Rama                                                                                                                                             |
| <i>rukhsati</i>              | send-off of the bride from her parents' house to her husband's; bringing a wife to her husband's house when she hits puberty                                                                 |
| Safeda                       | variety of mango                                                                                                                                                                             |
| <i>samdhi</i>                | father of a son-in-law or daughter-in-law; fem: <i>samdhan</i>                                                                                                                               |
| <i>sandhya</i>               | ritual of worship and meditation performed three times a day by Hindus of the higher castes                                                                                                  |
| <i>sanjivani</i>             | lit. life-giving; the herb used to revive Lakshman when he fell unconscious in the Ramayana                                                                                                  |
| <i>sankranti</i>             | the day when the sun enters a new zodiac sign                                                                                                                                                |
| <i>sanyas</i>                | renunciation                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| <i>sanskar</i>               | good upbringing                                                                                                                                                                              |
| <i>sarai</i>                 | inn                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| Saraswati                    | the goddess of learning                                                                                                                                                                      |
| <i>sattu</i>                 | gram powder                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| Satyanarayan<br><i>katha</i> | religious ritual recounting the story of the acts of kindness of a particular deity, Satyanarayan, representing a form of Lord Vishnu                                                        |



|                      |                                                                                                   |
|----------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>satyug</i>        | the era of justice                                                                                |
| <i>saubhagyawati</i> | status of being married and having a husband                                                      |
| <i>saut</i>          | co-wife                                                                                           |
| <i>sejgarhi</i>      | wagon often used for carrying small children                                                      |
| <i>sendh</i>         | break-in                                                                                          |
| <i>ser</i>           | measure of weight, approximately one kilogram                                                     |
| <i>sethani</i>       | wife of a seth                                                                                    |
| <i>sewaiyaan</i>     | sweets; Indian vermicelli                                                                         |
| <i>shaligram</i>     | sacred stone representing Lord Vishnu                                                             |
| <i>shastras</i>      | Hindu holy books                                                                                  |
| <i>shehnai</i>       | musical instrument played during weddings and other occasions                                     |
| <i>shodashi(n)</i>   | a girl of sixteen years, funeral ritual                                                           |
| <i>shradh</i>        | in Hinduism, it is the ritual one performs to pay homage to ancestors, especially to dead parents |
| <i>shuddhi</i>       | purification; part of worship in Hinduism; also refers to conversion to Hinduism                  |
| <i>sipahi</i>        | soldier; constable                                                                                |
| <i>somwari</i>       | night of the new moon that falls on a Monday                                                      |
| <i>amavas</i>        |                                                                                                   |
| <i>suhaag</i>        | auspicious state of being married                                                                 |
| <i>surma</i>         | kohl                                                                                              |
| <i>swang</i>         | dramatic performance; jest, farce                                                                 |
| <i>taat</i>          | sackcloth                                                                                         |
| <i>tehsildar</i>     | administrative officer in charge of a tehsil, i.e., subdivision.                                  |
| <i>talukdar</i>      | holder of a taluk, i.e., land estate; zamindar                                                    |
| <i>tam-tam</i>       | one-horse carriage, meant to seat two people in front and two in the rear                         |
| <i>tanzeb</i>        | muslin                                                                                            |
| <i>tapasvini</i>     | female ascetic                                                                                    |
| <i>tapasya</i>       | asceticism                                                                                        |
| <i>tasmai</i>        | roasted vermicelli cooked in milk                                                                 |
| <i>Teej</i>          | festival where married women keep fasts for the long lives of their husbands                      |
| <i>thakurain</i>     | wife of a thakur                                                                                  |
| <i>tibbi</i>         | Greek system of medicine                                                                          |
| <i>Tiwari</i>        | sub-caste of Brahmins in north India                                                              |
| <i>udan khatola</i>  | flying saucer                                                                                     |
| <i>vakula</i>        | <i>Mimusops elengi</i> ; tree with rich foliage                                                   |
| <i>var raksha</i>    | engagement                                                                                        |
| <i>vilayat</i>       | the West; Europe                                                                                  |
| <i>wah-wah</i>       | bravo!                                                                                            |
| <i>yagyopobit</i>    | ritual pertaining to sacred thread                                                                |

## Acknowledgements

An extensive project that has gone on for more than a dozen years owes its completion to many. I thank all my colleagues and students in the Department of English, Jamia Millia Islamia, who participated enthusiastically in the project and were co-travellers with me in this long journey. Thanks are also due to Professor Sabiha A. Zaidi, director, Jamia's Premchand Archives and Literary Centre, who placed the entire holding of the archives at my disposal and lent me some very valuable books. Shazia Alvi and Umaima at Zakir Husain library, Jamia Millia Islamia, were particularly helpful in tracking rare journals, newspapers and manuscripts. I would also like to place on record my thanks to the staff members of the Sahitya Akademi library and the Nehru Memorial Museum library for their help. Moazzam Sheikh, librarian at San Francisco public library, gave me important information about the holdings of Urdu journals in Pakistan and the USA.

Among the experts associated with the project, I recall with gratitude the advice given me by Professor Alok Bhalla and Professor Malasri Lal. Several writers-in-residence at Jamia interacted with the translators and advised them. Some of them also translated a couple of Premchand stories at my request. I would like to specially mention Anjum Hasan, Robert Rosenberg, Farzana Doctor, Annie Zaidi, Lakshmi Holmström and Mini Krishnan. The editorial team at Penguin led by Ambar Sahil Chatterjee and consisting of Arpita, Paloma, Shreya and Shanuj is thanked for its patience, rigour and painstaking attention to detail. And finally, a big 'thank you' to my ardent foot soldiers—Shailendra, Sarfaraz, Kalyanee, Sarah and Naseeb—who helped me in reading the proofs most diligently and meeting the punishing deadline that Penguin Books had set for me.

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This digital edition published in 2017.

e-ISBN: 978-9-387-32653-8

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