

THEY say, in our parts, that, at the solemn moment of death, even when death is sudden, every man sees the whole of his past underneath his skull.

Old Bapu fancied, as he walked along towards the Gurgaon bazaar that his end had come. And, as though by the power of this suggestion, the various worlds rose behind his head, way back in the distance of time, rather like balls of heat wrapped in mist, projections of the omnipotent Sun that shone overhead, veiled and blurred by the haze of memory...

The city was still a mile away, and the flesh of his feet burnt where it touched the new, hot, metalled road through the holes in the shoes. And the sweat poured down across the furrows on his face, specially through the two sharp channels which stretched from the nose towards the chin, like rivulets flooding a fallow field.

...A bluish simmer flickered across his vision of the houses ahead.

As though compelled by the discomfort of slogging on foot and the weakness in his joints after the seven miles tread from Shikohpur, he felt his body evaporating, and his soul in the state of that lightness which disclosed the saga of his past life, going round and round in his cranium. And as he felt near enough to exhaustion and death, and yet did not want to die ('May Ishwar banish such a thought from my head,' he prayed), the agitation of his nerves produced the aberration of a phantasma, like the red stars over a toothache...

'I am not old,' he said to himself in the silent colloquy of his soul with his body. 'The boys call me "old Bapu" because I am older than them ... The caste Hindu urchins have no respect for the untouchable elders anyhow. And their fathers want to throw everyone of us into the garbage pit to use as manure for better harvests... But I do not want to die... Hey Ishwar!'

The saga of his life forced itself into his head, in spite of his protests, in several minute details, bits of memories entangled with the awkward drone of heat overhead, drumming into his ears.

He was a child, sitting by the revolving spinning wheel of his mother, disturbing the iron needle, because she would not get up and give him the stale bread and pickle... Little specks of wool arose from the cotton in her hand, soft as the sighs which she uttered in despair at his mischief—or was it because there was no roti in the basket inside?... And then she awoke from the trance of her eyes, rivetted on the thread of the *takla* and said: 'Acha, wait, tiny, I will go and borrow some food for you from the mother of Ram Dutt...' And while she was gone, he played about with the spinning wheel, against her strict injunctions, a rat gnawing in his belly...

Lighter than air, his body proceeded on the way to Gurgaon bazaar, flitting into a cloud of unknowing. He walked almost with his eyes closed, seeing himself as a small boy singing a song, against the counterpoint of the wheel of well, as he drove the bullocks round and round... And the big boys came and pulled his slight frame from the seat and began to take a ride on the shaft. And, as he sought, with his tiny hands, to grip them, they thrust him away and threw him into the well, where he shrieked in panic, holding on to the chain of earthen vessels, while they all ran away, and he slowly climbed up, exhausted and dying...

Drifting from that early death into life, he felt he could ward off the present feeling of weakness in his limbs, and, perhaps, he would be lucky, with at least half a day's work.

'Stay with me son; when you go from me I shall die!' he heard his mother's words beckon from the mythical memories of adolescence. 'Your father went soon after you were born, and you will have no one after I am gone...' And he recalled that in his eagerness to work in the fields, and to become a tall man and not remain the small creature he was, he had gone away that afternoon, and then he had come home to find his mother dead... His spirit tried to fly away from the ugly thought of his coarse little body, and in spite of a violent cough, which he excited in his throat, even as he spat on the dust a globule of phlegm, the soul held the vision of his mother's dead face, eyes dilated and the teeth showing in the terrible darkness of their hut...

'May Ishwar keep her soul in heaven!' he prayed. And as though by magic, his treason was forgotten in the next few footsteps...

But even as he mopped the sweat off his face with the forepaws of his right hand, the scales seemed to lift from his eyes, and his soul was face to face with the forepaws of his right hand, and then with a monster, the Uncle Dandu Ram, who shouted: 'I am tired of you! Good for nothing scoundrel! Everyone is tired of you! Inauspicious bastard! You

cannot plough the fields well! Nor can you look after the cattle! Go and eat dung elsewhere—there is no food for you in my house.’

The bushes on the roadside exuded the same smell in the parched heat, which had come from the clumps of grass amid the mounds and hollows of Shikohpur where he had wandered, half crazy with hunger and the beatings which the boys gave him, like birds of prey falling upon a weaker member of the flock... the cruelty of it! And the laceration of abuse and bitter words! And Dandu had taken his half bigha of land, saying, ‘You are an idiot, incapable of looking after it!’

The lava-mist of heat pressed down over his eyes and half shut them through the glare. The mood of his soul became more and more seraphic, accepting the vision of the crusts of black bread and lentils which he loved so much, after the work when he was engaged as field labourer by some prosperous Hindu farmer of the upper caste.

Only the anxiety of not getting work today began to gnaw into his being as the houses of Gurgaon loomed up fifty hands away.

A man mounted on a bicycle brushed past him from ahead, his bell tinkling furiously. And Bapu realised that he must be careful in town if he wanted to escape death...

The city was a labyrinth of jagged shops, tall houses and rutted roads. And waves of men coursed along the edges of the streets, receding, returning towards the hawkers, who sat with condiments and fruits and vegetables before them.

The broken asphalt attracted him. He had worked on roadmaking, fetching stones and breaking them. So much cement was put down on certain roads that they never broke. But here, the contractors were paid, to make pavements hard, and to fill the ruts every season, for after every rainy season the ruts appeared.

That was the work he had come to ask for.

Suddenly, he turned in the direction of Model Town where the Sikh contractor, Ram Singh, lived.

In his heart there was an old cry of fear at the potential temper of this man, which had always cowed him down. His glance fell at his fingertips which had been blunted through hammering stones. The congealed flesh of corns at the ends of the fingers gave the effect of toughness and he felt strong to see them, knowing that he was capable of the hardest work... Distant, more distant, seemed to grow the contractor's house with the courtyard, even though he had entered Model Town, but his feet marched more briskly.

Sardar Ram Singh was sitting on a charpai under the neem tree, the bun of his hair a little loose from sleep.

Bapu joined his hands and stood looking at the god.

"Aoji Bapu!" the contractor said surlily, breaking the edge of his taciturnity.

The vibration of each part of Ram Singh's face made Bapu's soul shudder, and he could not speak.

'Oh speak—What do you want?' Ram Singh asked, fanning himself all the while with a hand fan.

The voice surged up in Bapu even as he breathed deeply to sigh. But the sound would not come out.

Ram Singh stared at him for a prolonged moment.

Bapu made a sign with his hands and opened his mouth to say: 'Work'. 'Ohe *ja ja*, oldie! you can't work with that frame of yours!... Doing half work for full pay!... Besides the rains have not yet abated. Don't be deceived by this sunshine... The big rains have yet to come!'

A low and horrible sound was in Bapu's belly, and he felt that his throat was being strangled by the serpent of sweat that flowed down to his neck from the face. His lips twitched, and the tone of the contractor's words sounded like the news of doom in his ears. 'How old are you?' Ram Singh asked eyeing him with seemingly cynical indifference.

'The earthquake in Kangra—when it came, I was born!'

The contractor was startled. He smiled, and surveying Bapu's frame said: 'About fifty years ago, but you look seventy. Life in our country is ebbing away. The workmen seem to have no strength left. Look at you, two-legged donkey that you are! One of your legs seems to be shrivelled, while the feeble one seems to be waiting to drag it on... All of us have become lame and go hopping, tottering and falling, wishing for the Sarkar to carry us forward. Comic and undignified and shameless!...'

'No land, no harvests!' Bapu said desperately. 'And...' And he stretched out his hand.

'Acha, take this and go,' the contractor ground the words and looked away. 'Let me rest. Take this...' He took a nickel piece and threw it at Bapu.

The labourer bent his eyes over his hands, joined them in supplication and gratitude and still stood.

'Ja, don't stand on my head!' Ram Singh shouted. 'The work on the roads will begin when the rains are over!'

Bapu was more frightened of his agony of frustration than of the contractor's words. He controlled the tears in his eyes and slid away on ambling feet.

The prolonged burbling of a beetle from the slime in a drain stirred a feeling of terrible self-pity in him. He wanted to drink some water to



avoid breaking down. And, seeing a lone pan-biri stall, tucked away between the walls of two different houses, a little further away, he headed towards it.

His eyes were almost closed. His lips twitched against his will. And he was like a somnambulist, walking blindly towards some unknown goal. The fact that he had a nickel piece in his hands warded off the feeling of death that had preoccupied him on the approach towards Gurgaon. Now, he only felt the precariousness of the dim future, in which his good or bad deeds would rotate in the inexorable rhythm of work and no work.

'Pani !' he said to the shopkeeper, joining his hands, first in greeting, then unfolding them as a cup.

The pan-biri wallah eyed him suspiciously, then relaxed in the face of the sun's merciless stare, and began to pour water into the stranger's cupped hands from a brass jug.

Bapu drank and belched his fill. Then he caressed his face with his moist hands and touched his eyes with the water on his fingertips. The cool touch of liquid seemed to revive him.

And as though from some instinct for seeking re-assurance, he looked into the mottled mirror that hung down from the pan-biri shop. He had not looked at himself in such a glass for years. He saw that his face was shrivelled up, lined with the wrinkles which had been sharpened by hard work in his youth, and many small lines criss-crossed the corners of his eyes, his forehead, his jowl and neck. And a greyish pallor covered the visage, more than the abject anxiety to please the contractor, rather like the colour of death which he had apprehended as he had walked along the road. The shock of the old face disturbed him and he turned away from the mirror. 'About seventy years!' Ram Singh said. So he turned towards the mirror again.

'Oh ja, ja, ahead', said the pan-biri wallah. 'Don't break my glass by showing it your ugly old face!'

Old Bapu ambled along ahead, hoping to buy four annas worth of corn to sustain himself in the illusion of youth.