

NAIYER MASUD

## Nosh Daru

### I

AT THE VERY END of the straight lane, on the left, was a courtyard. The *takht* lying in a corner of this yard seemed no longer in use. Sun and rain had long played upon it, loosening its joints till its legs all bent in the same direction. Still, it could be used.

At the far end from this *takht* the only tree in the courtyard stood festooned with chandelier-sprays of yellow blossoms and plump black seed pods. The skirt of the tree was matted first with a coarse layer of dry yellow petals, and then a sprinkling of fresh ones; on these lay scattered some frayed seed pods.

Near the tree trunk was the door to the entrance hall, ajar. The doors of the room above the hall seemed closed. On the slender parapet of the roof a few tired branches were leaning, as though pausing briefly for a rest. A hawk hovering in the sky veered down and in a flash landed on the parapet; it shuffled its outspread wings, changed its mind, wafted up, and disappeared in the sky.

From the other side two hands rose slowly. Crooked fingers groped the uneven bricks on the parapet, clutched them frantically and held on. A weary old man raised his head between the hands and rested his chin on the parapet; for a long time he tried to peer beyond the branches, then turned his face upwards, extended a hand, and pulled a cluster of flowers slowly towards himself—bending, he put his nose to them and sniffed the flowers; his eyes closed and his nostrils flared slightly. He let go of the cluster and moved the branches back and forth; a plump pod came into his hand; with eyes closed he sniffed the pod once, and then once again, now drawing his breath more emphatically. In sniffing at it a third time he breathed in so violently that his nostrils were almost pinched shut.

“Amaltas,” he told himself, and let the pod go.

The hall door opened and a middle-aged man emerged carrying a canvas shopping bag. He had just stepped out the door when there came a woman's voice asking something; turning, he came towards the inner door.

"What are you saying?" he asked loudly.

The woman inside started to say something; he listened silently for a while and then said, "Yes, yes, I'll ask everything, let me at least meet him."

And then turning once again he moved towards the outer door, but hardly had he taken a couple of steps when the shopping bag got caught in something. Muttering, he stopped.

A bike stood leaning against the left wall; both of its tires had flattened and were cracked in several places; the inner tubes were poking out slightly and were covered in a film of dust; one pedal was improvised with wood, and only a thin iron rod remained in place of the other. A dirty towel was wrapped around the seat. On both the handles hung faded burlap sacks filled with hay. Some spokes in the front wheel had come off the rim and were poking out; it was one of these that hooked the man's shopping bag. He tugged a few times at the bag, and then, bending down, pinched the spoke and unhooked the bag from it. Turning towards the outer door he stopped yet again—a small air-pump, tied to the bike frame with a string, had come loose with his tugs and was dangling down. When he bent down to straighten it, it came off in his hand. He blocked the nozzle with the tip of one finger and with the other hand he pumped the handle a few times, then chucked it out the door. The rusted pump landed on the ground yellowed by the petals and seemed but another of the Amaltas seed pods.

Stepping out the door the man entered the courtyard, and from there the long, straight lane. He walked some hundred steps, turned into the right lane, and then into the left. In just a little while he was standing on the eastern end of the main street. Looking both ways he crossed the avenue and stepped onto the wide sidewalk at its western end. Ahead lay a stepped lane, through which he descended into yet another street. He now entered the open-air market on both sides of a plaza. Beyond the flower-sellers' stalls he turned left into a lane where a few kids were playing marbles. He asked one of them, "Son, is there a water-pump around here somewhere?"

"It doesn't work," the boy answered, pointing to the plaza, "but the tap over there must have water in it."

“And where’s the pump that doesn’t work?”

The boy gestured with his arms, pointing out the direction, and then added, “But it’s not working.”

Just then he spotted one of his friends cheating at the game and got busy dealing with him. The man entered the alley pointed out by the boy, and passing through several narrow lanes, finally reached the one with the defunct hand-pump. Here he saw the door of the front room of the third house slightly ajar. By the entrance hall a man, roughly the same age as he, sat on a high wooden stool, reading a newspaper. Hearing his footsteps the man raised his eyes.

“Excuse me, *bhai sahib*,” the newcomer asked hesitantly, “Kishan Chand Attar’s pharmacy, is it anywhere—?”

“This is it,” the seated man answered him before he could complete his sentence. “The store’s right here, but now ... of course we also keep patented Western drugs.”

The newcomer glanced about the room; except for a few bottles and packages arranged carefully about the shelves of the built-in cupboards, the room seemed strangely empty.

“I just had to find out something about Kishan Chand Ji.”

“Yes, yes, what is it?”

The newcomer was about to say something, but once again he cast his glance about the room, and this time he also saw, leaning against the door, a square signboard with the insignia of a red cross, and below it the words: KISHAN CHAND & SONS, ENGLISH PHARMACY.

“And you’re his...?” he was again at the point of asking something.

“I’m his grandson.”

The newcomer seemed relieved but looked a little anxious before asking the next question. The shopkeeper was looking at him expectantly. The newcomer said haltingly, “Well, I just wanted to find out if he’s still ...” and then, changing his mind he said, “I’ve come from Yaqub Attar’s house; I’m his son. You may’ve heard of him?”

The pharmacist seemed a little more interested.

“Yaqub Attar Sahib? Yes, of course; he was my Baba’s guru. I mean, Baba had learnt the apothecary’s trade from him. You’re Yaqub Sahib’s son? Well, then you’re one of us.”

Standing up he shook hands with the newcomer; he folded up the newspaper, stowed it away under the stool, and bringing another small stool from the room, said, “He used to come to Baba all the time—I can even remember him a little ... and *your* full name?”

“I’m Yusuf.”

"I'm Lal Chand. Here, please sit. I'm really glad to meet you."

But Yusuf seemed uninterested in formalities; glancing at his watch he said, "Lal Chand Ji, I'm in a bit of a ... I just wanted to find out if ... well, it seems crude to just ask point-blank."

"No, no, certainly not."

"Lal Chand Ji, is Kishan Chand Ji still around?"

"Yes, by grace of *Bhagvan*, he's still alive."

Yusuf sat down on the other stool.

"And does he meet people?"

"Meeting? Well, that's a bit of a problem—he's got very weak; he's past eighty-six."

"Does he move about on his own?"

"Ye-es, a bit here and there ... I mean he takes care of his own needs."

"I need him for something really urgent, Lal Chand Ji," Yusuf said. "Actually, I had to ask him something which goes back some thirty years."

"But you know, he doesn't remember much, he's also begun to loose his memory of late," Lal Chand said, and then repeated, "he's past eighty-six."

"Still ..."

"And then there's another thing," Lal Chand spoke and then fell silent.

"Yes?"

"If anyone wants to meet him he refuses. He doesn't even meet relatives, keeps loosing his patience with them all."

"I see, but if he is told that his *Ustad* wants to meet him, maybe then he won't refuse."

"Well, then he will rush over; even now he sometimes pesters us to take him to his *Ustad*."

"Lal Chand Ji, his *Ustad* ..."

Suddenly Lal Chand put his finger to his lips and gestured to him to be quiet, and then stood up. A short and extremely thin man wrapped only in a dirty *dhoti* was stepping out of the hall. Holding incense sticks in outstretched hands he advanced towards the room like a child walking gingerly with a burning candle in his hands. Without paying the slightest attention to the two standing men he entered the room; a few wisps of fragrant smoke coiled in the air outside the room and then dissolved. The old man had reached a corner of the room where he could no longer be seen by the two men outside.

“Baba,” Lal Chand whispered to Yusuf a few seconds later.

Before Yusuf could say anything the old man emerged from the room. Stopping for a moment, he stroked his cheeks with his palms, threw a shallow glance at the two standing men, turned, and with slow steps retreated into the hall.

Both men were standing stock still. Finally, Lal Chand sat down on the stool and signaled to Yusuf to do the same.

“He’s got really old,” Yusuf remarked as he sat.

“He’s past eighty-six,” Lal Chand reminded Yusuf, and then asked, “How old must Yaqub Dada be now?”

“He’s still around,” Yusuf said. “He’s just turned ninety-six.”

Lal Chand was about to say something when he changed his mind and asked, “What did you have to find out from Baba?”

“Several things; actually, very old things. Let’s see if he remembers them.”

“Well, he does sometimes talk of the past; but it seems to blur together—he mixes things up.”

“Still, Lal Chand Ji, I have to see him.”

“All right, I’ll try. I’ll mention it to him the first chance I get, and he may agree when I mention Yaqub Dada.”

“Then I’ll come and check back with you in a couple of days,” Yusuf said, glancing at his watch, and stood up.

“Oh, sit, have some tea.”

“No, no, please, I’ll come again, it’s getting late for the office.”

He was just about to raise his hand in a *salaam* and turn around when the old *attar* emerged from the hall yet again and came straight towards Lal Chand.

“Hey Lallua,” without glancing at Yusuf he addressed Lal Chand, “This wouldn’t be our *Ustad*’s son, would he?”

“Yes Baba, he *is* Yaqub Dada’s son—Yusuf Sahib.”

“That’s just what I’ve been telling myself. Seeing his eyes it came to me that they’re *Ustad*’s eyes.”

Then turning, he stared at Yusuf. With a little bow Yusuf greeted him, and said, “Kishan Chacha, my father speaks of you all the time.”

“And why shouldn’t he talk of me, his Kishna? If not me then should he remember this oaf Lallua?”

Lal Chand squirmed like a child, and began to giggle. Yusuf said, “So, Chacha, come by our place sometime.”

“I’ve asked so many times, but this scoundrel won’t take me.”

“I’ll come and get you,” Yusuf said. “When will you come?”

“Lallua, some *pan* and *sharbat* for our friend?”

“Not now Chacha, the next time,” Yusuf interrupted, “No, no, I’m not just being formal; but tell me, when are you coming to our place?”

But the old man seemed not to hear him. He was talking to himself: “The first showers of the monsoon would begin and the *Ustad* ... O Kishna! get the bike! pack the bags! ... And then for days at a stretch he would comb river beds, ponds, lakes, woods, even weed patches, leaving nothing out. He would fill entire bags with just rain bugs and ... and then upon returning would sort it all out.... Kishna, here, get to know this resin ... and tell me what type of pollen this is ... and, hey Kishna, if one can’t tell one thing apart from the other blindfolded then one really can’t claim to be an *attar*.... Then, *Ustad*, I don’t think I can.... Yes, you *can* son, you can; just keep at it, and you’ll develop an eye—now that’s it.”

The old man stopped to catch his breath. Yusuf cleared his throat and wanted to say something, but Lal Chand silenced him with a gesture.

“And my! What an eye he had,” the old man resumed speaking. “You could come and show him formulas a hundred years old... *Ustad*, I don’t get this *ma’jun* formula.... *Ustad* would look it over, sniff it, taste it and there it was ... ‘Write this down’ ... and he would spell out the entire formula at one go—dozens of ingredients in their exact proportions. There were these *hakeems* from old families who hid their family recipes even from their own sons; how they used to sweat at the mere mention of *Ustad’s* name! Before they prescribed a drug they would make the patient swear: Now look, not even a speck of this should reach Yaqub. And our *Ustad*, what can one say! He was something else—thought it a sin to steal others’ formulas. If by chance a special formula belonging to some old family fell into his hands, he would turn away from it: No, that is wrong. But yes, if a family should begin to squander the tradition, or come to an end, then there was no holding back; but even then, he would just prepare the formula and shelve it away. At the most he might give out a dose or two of it to a patient, but he wouldn’t dream of taking any money for it. When *Hakeem Nabba Sahib’s* line came to an end, his formula ‘Panja-e Ta’us’ died along with him. Our *Ustad* found a pin-head’s worth of it lying about somewhere; and in the blink of an eye, my friend, that formula was ready. He also gave me a small jar of it. I said, ‘*Ustad*, this is no mere ointment, it’s a miracle, an absolute miracle; write it down.’ But no, he shrank from the mere suggestion: Kishna, it doesn’t belong to us. And then there was this other formula, the Nosh Daru, developed by the family of the dark Kirmanis ...”

"Nosh Daru!" Yusuf broke in. He didn't notice that Lal Chand was making desperate signs for him to keep quiet.

"Kishan Chacha, will you be able to recognize Nosh Daru?"

The old man stopped dead in his tracks.

Yusuf waited a few seconds for his answer, and then said limply, "You were just talking about Nosh Daru, Kishan Chacha."

"Nosh Daru?" the old man echoed glancing about himself.

"The one your *Ustad* had prepared."

"*My Ustad? I myself am the Ustad,*" the old man muttered faintly, looked towards Lal Chand and said, "Lallua, I'd just come out to say that today I'll eat some *makko*-berry *bhujija*." He turned, and disappeared into the hall.

Both men stared long after him.

At last Lal Chand drew in a long breath and said, "Outrageous, to break him off while he's talking."

"I shouldn't have; what can I say, Lal Chand Ji? Actually, I couldn't hold myself back when I heard him say 'Nosh Daru.' "

"Nosh Daru," Lal Chand repeated, squinting for a while and then dejectedly shaking his head, "I never heard that name from Baba. He often talks of Panja-e Ta'us; he even had it; stashed it away somewhere and then forgot about it. Even now he begins searching for it at times. But this is the first time he's mentioned the Nosh Daru formula, and it's also the first time he's talked on and on like this. Perhaps hearing his *Ustad's* name ..."

"Listen, Lal Chand Ji, the two of them have to meet. Who knows how much they will remember, once the master and student meet. And maybe in the meeting Nosh Daru also—" breaking off he glanced at his watch. "Let me tell you the whole story; you're not busy, are you?"

"I sit here all day long," Lal Chand answered, "It's you who ..."

"Well no, its too late for the office anyway; I'll have to file an absence report."

"Well, then, go on."

For a few long moments Yusuf was silent, lost in thought. Then he began to speak: "Father left his profession as an *attar* thirty-two years ago. The truth is, he had begun to falter in recognizing drugs. One day a young *hakeem* came to our pharmacy and created a big scene, saying, 'What do you mean by showing off your know-how by embellishing my prescriptions?' Abba said, 'It isn't a matter of showing off; it's just that one medicine inadvertently got added to the wrong prescription.' The *hakeem* pounced back: 'If wrong drugs keep getting added like this, God

protect my patients. What happens to *me* if a patient up and dies?’ Abba said nothing. Even after that *hakeem* had done with his scene and left, he still said nothing. When at long last he did speak it was to say that this *hakeem sahib*’s father used to come to him to check up the exact proportions of the formulas in his prescriptions. The very next day he packed up the store. For a few days he held on to the drugs, extracts and other stuff; but one day he went out and sold everything off to other *attars*. Whatever was left over he handed out with his own hands, going around on his bike. His *takht* used to be inside the house, he had it carried and laid out in the open; for a few days he said nothing to anyone. Then he seemed to return to his old self. In the mornings he would go out for a walk, and then for the rest of the day he would turn the pages of the old *hikmat* books. And so, the years passed. Then one day he went out for a walk, but came back half-way through, saying, ‘My legs aren’t quite working.’ That night he didn’t sleep a wink. The next day he called me very early, handed me a small jar, and said, ‘Hold on to this very carefully, it has my Nosh Daru in it. I’m loosing my senses, and even my limbs are beginning to give out. Nosh Daru will cure it all; it’s an old, old royal formula.’ I said, ‘In that case, start it right away.’ ‘No, no,’ he said, ‘its work begins when all other cures have failed; before that it actually harms one; you keep it hidden and in the meantime I will try other drugs. Only when you see me becoming totally useless must you begin the treatment, not a moment before.’ He then snatched the jar from my hands, and raising it to his mouth whispered something to it which I couldn’t hear ...”

“So, did you also see that concoction,” asked Lal Chand. “What type was it?”

“Something like honey,” Yusuf answered. “Pungent, with a touch of saffron to it. Anyhow, I took the jar from him and put it away in a trunk full of old clothes; it’s been years since this happened. Now he’s reached the point where he doesn’t grasp anything. His vision’s almost completely gone, he can hear very little, nor can he walk; although once a day he drags himself to the very edge of the roof and somehow manages to stand up for a while, clutching the parapet. Then he slumps over right there. This little bit of exertion drains him so much that he can’t move for half a day.”

“In other words, it’s time for Nosh Daru,” Lal Chand said.

“That’s just what I’m getting at, Lal Chand Ji,” Yusuf answered. “I’d long since forgotten about it and he’d been taking Western medicine. One day he poured out the medicine all over the floor and kept repeating all day long that no cure works, nothing works. It was then that I



remembered Nosh Daru. But he hadn't mentioned the dosage to me—or maybe he had, and it was I who didn't remember. Anyway, I took out the jar, went up to him and said, 'This is Nosh Daru, you'd had me hide it away.' But he didn't remember a thing. I suggested, 'Take it, it will help.' He took the jar from me, opened it, drew it up to his eyes, and looked it over; then he sniffed it deeply and, loosing his temper, shrieked, 'This is poison, sheer poison!' I was startled out of my skin. I took the jar back from him and stashed it away again; but from that day he's got it into his head that I want to do him in. He keeps calling my wife and whispering to her, 'Go—go ask Yusuf what have I ever done to him?' And from that day he wouldn't even take a glass of water from me—just ate what she served him. Now these last couple days he's begun refusing even that. And so, it suddenly occurred to me that if Kishan Chacha.... Perhaps Kishan Chacha can help out in all this."

"Father's condition is also like that," Lal Chand said. "But you've got the right idea, Yusuf Bhai; the two *have* to meet."

"So when shall I come?"

"No, no. You don't have to run around; I'll talk father into coming out to your place, in just a day or two. Are evenings the best time?"

"Yes, any evening, or any holiday. But, Lal Chand Bhai, don't take long."

"Don't worry, I myself am worried about it."

"Now, the address."

"I know the address. I sometimes go over there; I've a friend out that way."

Yusuf got up; Lal Chand shook hands with him and then watched him walk away down the alley. Then he drew in a long breath, picked up the small stool, put it back in the room, picked up the newspaper lying on the floor, and sat down on the stool.

3

Grayish water flowed out of the entrance hall door and spread out slowly in the courtyard. Lal Chand tapped lightly on the door. It opened, and Yusuf leaned out the door; he was carrying a dripping broom and wearing only a *tahmad* around his waist.

"Lal Chand Ji! Come in, come in."

"I just found out when I came out here; I'm really sorry. When ...?"

"The day I came by your place, the very next day, sometime at

night,” Yusuf answered, opening the door fully. “Come in, come all the way in; I’ll bring out the chairs.”

“No, no, don’t trouble yourself, I won’t sit now,” Lal Chand said. “The thing is, Baba’s also with me.”

“Kishan Chacha? He’s come? Where is he?”

“He’s out there, resting on the *takht*.”

Yusuf began to come out the door, but Lal Chand stopped him.

“No, Yusuf Sahib, better if you don’t show yourself; because while coming here he forgot that I was bringing him here to meet his *Ustad*. Once he sees you.... He’s sitting there peacefully.”

“You’re right,” Yusuf admitted softly.

“But that matter of—I mean the Nosh Daru...”

“Lal Chand Ji,” Yusuf said, “Finally he did remember Nosh Daru. That evening he called me and had me sit down next to him; he kept on talking to me—and very lovingly. I was convinced that he had come around to trusting me again. Then he suddenly said, ‘Yusuf, so much time has passed and you’ve never given me my Nosh Daru.’ I ran to get the jar and handed it to him. He opened and sniffed it, and then softly he repeated that same thing: ‘It’s poison, sheer poison.’ But now he wasn’t at all angry. He returned the jar to me and said, ‘Yusuf, *now* what will you give me?’ And then he fell silent. His condition was pretty bad, and that same night ... When I went and looked in on him that morning, it seemed as if he were asleep ...” The words caught in Yusuf’s throat.

“I’m really sorry,” Lal Chand said.

For a while both remained silent, and then Yusuf said, “And as for Kishan Chacha...?”

“I’m taking him back,” Lal Chand said, “Today he began fussing over his clothes quite early in the morning. He’d lain them out last night. He was ecstatic that he was going to his *Ustad*’s. And now, let’s see what he does when he finds out. All right then. I know I should’ve stayed a bit, but ...”

“No, no, it’s fine, you take him back,” Yusuf said, wiped his hands on his *tahmad* and shook hands with Lal Chand.

“If I can ever be of any help,” Lal Chand said. “Either I or Baba ...”

“Certainly,” Yusuf said.

From the hall he watched Lal Chand cross over to the other end of the courtyard.

The old *attar* seated on the *takht* was hidden from Yusuf’s view by the retreating Lal Chand; even so, Yusuf could glimpse the sleeve of his dazzlingly white *kurta*, carefully creased, and one corner of his starched,

double-peaked cap. Lal Chand said something to him and then bent down to help him up.

The hall door slowly swung shut, and then from behind it came the sound of a broom on a wet floor. □

—*Translated by Shantanu Phukan*