

◆◆ INDIAN FICTION FOR YOUNG ADULTS ◆◆

# PREMCHAND



## STORIES FOR CHILDREN

*Compiler and Editor of Hindi Anthology*  
**Hari Krishna Devsare**

*Translation*

**Madhu Sharma**

**Illustrations : Partha Sengupta**

The present anthology prepared by Hari Krishna Devsare in original Hindi, brings together some of the most popular stories of Premchand written for children and young readers – the stories which have enthralled the generations of readers. In the Preface to the present anthology, the compiler has noted that Premchand believed that 'A child should primarily be given such education that he can protect himself on his own in life. Children should have so much of good sense that they can see the pros and cons of every action with the intuitive eyes of their mind.' Through these stories one may say that Premchand tried to awaken the spirit of leadership, courage, independent thinking, self expression and protection of the self, among children. Some stories in this collection, like *Gulli Danda*, *Kajaki*, *Nadan Dost* and so on, are the instinctive expressions of a child's mind apart from showcasing the natural actions and sports of children, and their habits.

**MADHU SHARMA** is an accomplished translator from Hindi to English.

**M M THAKUR** is a literary scholar and recipient of Sahitya Akademi Translation Prize.

**PARTHA SENGUPTA** is a senior illustrator, who has profusely illustrated books for children and young adults.

STORIES FOR CHILDREN  
BY  
PREMCHAND



*Nehru Bal Pustakalaya*

# Stories for Children by Premchand

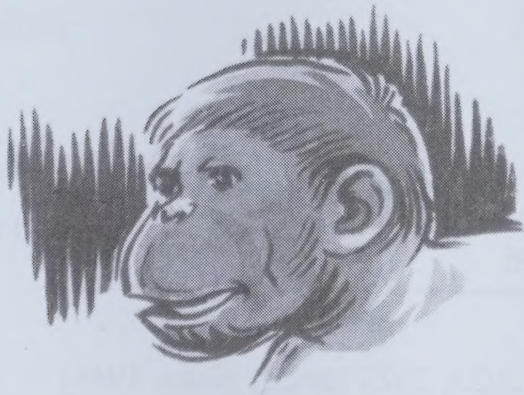
*Compiler and Editor of Hindi Anthology*

HARI KRISHNA DEVSARE

*Translation* : MADHU SHARMA

*English Translation Edited by* : M M THAKUR

*Illustrations* : PARTHA SENGUPTA



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## Preface

Premchand was among those great novelists of Hindi, who especially wrote for children along with creating an extensive world of stories for grown-ups. On one hand, the struggle for independence was at its peak during that time and the sentiment of patriotism was being awakened in every child. On the other, the powerful influence of the English language and culture had spread to such an extent that Indian society was caught in a strange situation. The question of our feelings for the *swadeshi* movement, and protection of our culture and civilization imbibed from our ethical values and tradition, stood on one hand, and an awakening amongst Indians becoming aware of scientific progress and new modern research in the world, stood on the other.

Opposition to the powerful influence of Western culture and strong support of *swadeshi* or self sufficiency had become slogans of the independence movement. The impact of Mahatma Gandhi, khadi and the burning of foreign made clothes were all hot topics of discussion in those days. The conflict of the values of India and those of Western nations had become a peculiar problem for Indian society. All magazines like 'Bal Sakha,' 'Vanar' and so on which were being published for children had adopted a middle path. They were giving such compositions to the children to read, which made the children aware and well-informed about their times in addition to safeguarding their basic values. Several senior poets and writers of Hindi were also making literary compositions for children at that particular time. Besides giving them the message of patriotism, *swadeshi* and Indian ethical values, they were introducing them to scientific knowledge and the new world. Even the literary works which Premchand wrote for children in those days, succeeded in awakening the sense of leadership, courage, independent views, self-expression and protection of the self.

Before we discuss the stories which Premchand specifically wrote for children, it is necessary to know what Premchand thought about children during that particular time. That very thought of Premchand is reflected in his short stories for children. In the year 1930 Premchand had written an editorial entitled 'Bachon Ko Swadheen Banao' for the magazine 'Hans'. He had written about his contemporary viewpoint on children in this article.

He wrote, 'A child should primarily be given such education that he can protect himself on his own in life. Children should have so much of good sense that they can see the pros and cons of every action with the intuitive eyes of their mind.'

Though Premchand wanted to see obedient and disciplined children in families yet he did not approve of parents having the remote control of a child in their hands, like a dictator. He believed that neither there is any development of children managed by the remote control of parents, nor are they ever able to succeed in life. The original ideas of children ought to be given respect and they should be given the freedom to achieve something in life.

Based on this school of thought, Premchand composed stories for children. There are those stories in one of his books, 'Jungle Ki Kahaniyan,' which he had penned for children, in particular. Three stories have been taken from that book for this compilation. 'Kutte Ki Kahani,' another long but touching story had also specially been written for children.

The rest of the stories in the compilation are those which selectively feature in 'Mansarovar,' a collection of Premchand's short stories. The main reason of taking them for this compilation is that they have had a certain bonding with children for years together. Several generations have grown up reading these stories in text-books and elsewhere, in childhood, and they have left an indelible impression on our minds even today. We will have to accept the truth that most of the young readers came to know of Premchand and remembered him through reading his stories in their text-books.

Those who were interested in reading, read his literary compositions later on when they grew up. Those are the same stories in this compilation through which Premchand has given a message to readers of the importance of values and social relationships linked with humaneness, justice, morality, good social conduct and behaviour, besides human sensitivities inherent in several

generations of children. Simultaneously 'Do Bailon Ki Katha' and 'Kutte Ki Kahani' are those stories in which animals have been given a voice. Presenting them as human characters, there is a conscious effort to awaken sensitivity and sympathy in the minds of child readers for the kingdom of animals.

Some stories like 'Gulli Danda,' 'Kajaki,' 'Nadan Dost' and so on, are the instinctive expressions of a child's mind apart from showcasing the natural actions and sports of children, and their habits. Child literature is fiction which is read and is appreciated by children and which they readily make their own. In this case neither do they see whether the writer is grown-up or young nor for which age group of readers the stories have been written. Several classic works of the world, whose writers had written them for adult readers, have gone on to become classic works of World Children Literature today. This is so true of Premchand's selected stories which several generations of children have read for years together and grown up and they are fondly lodged in people's memories even today. Those stories have therefore become classic compositions of Indian Children Literature and that is why it is befitting to include them in this compilation.

Premchand's style was very simple and could be easily understood. Even an ordinary reader of Hindi can relish their flavour. Nonetheless, wherever it was felt that the child reader of today cannot understand the meaning of some words, they have been explained in footnotes.

We hope that the vast multitude of Indian children will become well-acquainted with Premchand's stories for children through the medium of this book. The National Book Trust of India must be applauded for this commendable effort.

Hari Krishna Devsare



## MITTHU THE MONKEY

You would have seen many *tamashas* of monkeys, how the monkey mimics in so many ways at the command of a *madari*. You must have observed his mischievous pranks. You would have also seen him lifting clothes from houses and fleeing. But today we are going to narrate a story which will let you know that monkeys can also make friends with boys.

A few days ago, a circus company had come to Lucknow. The company had a lion, a bear, a cheetah and many other animals of different kinds. Besides them, there was a monkey named Mitthu. Hordes of boys would come there everyday to have a look at these animals. They were most fond of Mitthu, out of the lot. Gopal was one of those boys. He would come every single day and quietly sit near Mitthu for hours at a stretch. He had no great affection for the lion, bear, cheetah and other animals. Without fail, Gopal would get gram, peas and bananas for Mitthu from home and feed him. Mitthu had also become so close to him that he would not eat a bite till he was led by him. Both of them became the best of friends this way.

One fine day Gopal learnt that the circus company was travelling to another town. He was very distressed to hear this.

Weeping, he came to his mother and begged, "*Amma*, give me an *atthani*, so that I can go and buy Mitthu. One never knows where he may go off to! How am I going to see him if that happens? Even he is surely going to cry when he does not see me around."

His mother explained to him, "Son ! A monkey is not attached to anyone. He is known to be full of mischief. If Mitthu comes here, he is certainly going to bite everyone and we will have to hear complaints for no reason."

But his mother's advice had no effect on Gopal and he began crying inconsolably. Eventually his mother was compelled to take out an *atthani* and give it to him.



Gopal was overjoyed to get the *atthani*. He rubbed it thoroughly with soil and gave it a brilliant sheen. Soon after, he left to buy Mitthu. However, Mitthu was nowhere to be seen. Sadness weighed him down—had Mitthu run off somewhere?

Showing the *atthani* to the circus-master, Gopal asked, “So, Sahib! Will you sell Mitthu to me?”

The master had seen him pet, pamper and make Mitthu play everyday. Laughing, he joked “I will gift Mitthu to you when I come back this time.”

Disappointed, Gopal came away and began looking for Mitthu all around the place. He became so engrossed in looking for him that he was totally unaware of what was going on. Gopal did not have the slightest inkling that he had come so very near to the cheetah’s cage. The cheetah was quietly lying down inside. Seeing Gopal so close to the cage, he took out his paw and tried to catch hold of him. However, as Gopal was looking the other way, he did not have the faintest idea that the cheetah’s sharp paw had reached dangerously close to his hand! It was just about to pounce upon his hand and pull it, when Mitthu came out of the blue and jumped onto his paw. He began biting it with his sharp teeth. That was when the cheetah took out his other paw and wounded him in such a way that Mitthu fell right there and began shrieking at the top of his voice.

Seeing Mitthu’s miserable plight, Gopal also began to sob. Hearing them both crying, people ran to the site and found Mitthu lying unconscious whereas Gopal was crying hysterically. Mitthu’s wound was washed at once and ointment was applied. He regained consciousness in a short while.

He looked at Gopal with affection as if he were saying, “Why are you sobbing? I am fine now.”

Mitthu’s wound continued to be dressed and bandaged for many days and eventually he was absolutely fit. Without fail, Gopal would come every single day and feed him *rotis*.

Finally the fateful day when the company was to leave arrived. Gopal was very sad on that particular day.

Standing close to Mitthu’s cage he was looking at him with eyes filled with tears when the master came to him and asked, “If you get to own Mitthu, what would you do with him?”

Instantly Gopal replied, “I will take him with me, merrily play along with him, make him eat from my *thali*, what else!”

The master responded, "Very well! I sell him to you without taking the *atthani*."

It seemed as if Gopal had been gifted a kingdom. He picked up Mitthu in his lap but Mitthu jumped down and began walking right behind him. Both of them arrived home, dancing and leaping with joy.



## THE MAD ELEPHANT

Moti the elephant was Raja Sahib's personal mount. Generally speaking, he was very simple and sensible but would lose his temper at times and then he was not himself. He would not care about anything in that state and not even respond to the command of the *mahout*. Once in this state he attacked and killed his *mahout* in a fit of madness. When Raja Sahib came to hear this news he was furious. Moti's position was snatched away, he was sacked from being Raja Sahib's special mount.

Now he had to carry logs like a coolie, was loaded with stones, and was shackled with thick chains under the peepul tree in the evening. The fodder given to elephants was stopped. Dried twigs were thrown before him and he would quell pangs of hunger just by chewing on them. He would become very restless whenever he compared this plight of his with his earlier state. Once the most beloved elephant of the Raja, he was just an ordinary labourer today. Thinking of this state of affairs he would trumpet at the top of his voice and fly into a rage. Eventually one day, he became so furious that he broke off the iron shackles and ran into the jungle.

There was a river a little way off. First of all, Moti went to the river and bathed to his heart's content. Thereafter, he walked into the jungle. At this end, Raja Sahib's men ran to catch him but no one would dare to go near him, out of fear. The beast of the jungle went straight into the jungle.

Moti began to look out for his friends after reaching the jungle. When he moved a bit further ahead, the elephants noticed a rope tied around his throat and broken chains dangling from his legs. They shunned him and did not even ask what was the matter. Maybe they were implying that he had been a slave, and a disloyal one now, so there was no place for him in this jungle. Moti stood stock still and kept staring till they disappeared from sight. Soon after, one does not know what occurred to him that he ran towards the palace.



He was still on the way when he saw Raja Sahib come riding with *shikaris*. He hid at once under the cover of a big rock. The sun was blazing, so Raja Sahib got off his horse to take some rest. All of a sudden, Moti got up from behind the rock and trumpeting loudly, charged towards Raja Sahib. Alarmed, Raja Sahib fled and rushed into a small hut. Moti also reached the spot, a little later. He had seen Raja Sahib run inside. He brought down the thatched roof top with his trunk and trampling it with his feet, crushed it to pieces.

Raja Sahib was petrified with fear inside the hut. He could see no ray of hope for saving his life.

When Raja Sahib could not think of any way out, he eventually climbed onto the back wall, putting his life at stake. Jumping onto the other side, he fled to save his life. All this time, Moti stood at the door of the hut trampling the thatched roof and thinking of how to bring the wall down. At last he pushed the wall hard enough and brought it down. How could the mud wall possibly bear the powerful shove of an elephant gone mad. But when he did not find Raja Sahib inside, Moti knocked down the other walls as well and headed back towards the jungle.

Reaching home, Raja Sahib proclaimed by beat of the drum that a reward of one thousand rupees would be given to the person who captured and brought Moti alive. Greedy to win the cash reward, several people went into the jungle to capture Moti, but none of them came back alive.

Moti's *mahout* had a son named Murli. He was merely eight to nine years old at the time. So Raja Sahib would give him and his mother a small sum for their food and clothing, out of kindness. Though Murli was just a young boy, he was very daring and brave. He mustered courage and prepared himself to capture Moti. However, his mother tried her best to dissuade him and people tried to stop him, but he did not pay heed to any one of them and ventured into the jungle.

Alertly, he began looking around the jungle. Eventually he found Moti, his head lowered, walking towards that very tree where he was. It seemed from his gait that Moti's temper had cooled down.

As soon as Moti came and stood under the tree, Murli fondly called to him from the top of the tree, "Moti!"

Moti recognised this voice. He stopped right there and lifting his head, began to look upwards. Seeing Murli, he could easily identify

him. It was the same boy whom he would pick up with his trunk and seat him on his head!

With the thought, as though repenting "I was the one who killed his father," Moti felt sorry for the young boy. He began waving his trunk in joy.

Murli could make out what Moti was feeling. He climbed down the tree and began patting his trunk. Soon after, he signalled that Moti should sit down. But Moti would not do so. Instead, lifting Murli, Moti seated him on his head, just as he used to do earlier and trudged towards the royal palace.

Taking Moti along when Murli reached the main entrance of the palace, everyone bit their nails in astonishment. Even so, no one could muster enough courage to go up to Moti.

Shouting at the top of his voice, Murli explained, "Do not be scared. Moti has become absolutely tame and he is not going to harm anyone in any way."

Apprehensive, Raja Sahib also managed to appear before Moti. He was astounded to see that the wild elephant had become docile like a cow now.

Besides a thousand rupees to Murli, Raja Sahib went on to make him his special *mahout*. Moti became his most favourite elephant once again.



## THE BOY AND THE LION

Children, you may not have seen one but you must have certainly heard of a lion. Probably you would have seen his picture and also read about his traits. A lion generally lives in jungles and on low wetlands along the banks of a river. Sometimes he prowls into villages, lying near jungles and decamps, taking away humans and animals. At times he attacks those animals who go to graze in the jungles and devours them.

A few days ago, the son of a cowherd had taken cows and oxen into the jungle. Leaving them in the jungle, he went to catch fish by the side of a spring by himself. The boy gathered his cattle when it was going to be evening, but found that one cow was missing. Running about, he frantically searched all over the place, but the cow was nowhere to be found. The poor fellow was very upset and was sure that the master would not spare his life. He reasoned that it was not the right time to look for the cow because the cattle would walk off in different directions again if he did so. Therefore, taking them along, he returned home. Tying them up in the barn, he ventured out in search of the cow without saying a word to anyone. Just look at the courage of the small boy! It was getting dark, an eerie silence pervaded the environs, the desolate jungle sounded fearsome and the howling of jackals could be heard. However, he continued undaunted to stride ahead, deep into the jungle.

The boy looked around for the cow for some time but felt scared when darkness set in. The young boy showed incredible courage in a situation where most grown-ups would have been terrified. But where should he go? He climbed up a tree when he could think of nothing else and firmly resolved to pass the night there. The boy was determined not to go back home without the lost cow. In fact, he was totally exhausted by the day's events so he quickly went off to sleep. Sleep never looks for a *charpoy* and bedding.

Suddenly, the tree began to shake so wildly that he was jolted out of sleep and just about managed to save himself from falling down. Who could be shaking the tree, he wondered. Rubbing his eyes when he looked down, every fibre of his being stood up in horror. A lion stood under the tree and was staring at him with greedy eyes. The boy was petrified with fear. Desperately, he clung onto the branch with both his hands. His sleep vanished at once.

Several hours passed by, but the lion refused to budge from there. He would roar, again and again and leaping up, try to catch hold of the boy. At times he would come so dangerously close that the boy would scream with terror.

Somehow or the other, the night passed and morning dawned. The boy was somewhat hopeful that the lion would spare him and leave. But the lion did not have the faintest inclination to do so. Throughout the day he kept prowling under that very tree. Seeing his prey right in front how could he think of going elsewhere. The boy's body had stiffened because of continuously sitting on the tree and he was famished with hunger. However, the lion simply refused to budge an inch. There was a small spring at some distance. At times the lion would gaze towards that side. The boy assumed that the lion was thirsty. He saw a ray of hope. The moment the lion would go for a drink of water, the boy would also sneak off from there. Finally the lion crawled towards that side. The boy was still reflecting on how to climb down the tree when the lion came back after quenching his thirst. Probably he had also understood the boy's intentions. He roared so loudly and leapt up so high the instant he came back, that the boy's hands and feet went numb, as if he were falling down. His hands and feet were digging hard into his stomach, in fear. Somehow that day also dragged by with great difficulty. As the night set in, the lion's hunger also gradually peaked. Most probably he was fuming because his prey was right in front of him and he had been virtually starving for the last two days. Would he be fasting today as well, he wondered. Staring at the little boy, he passed the long night.

The third day dawned. The boy's vision became blurred as he was literally exhausted with extreme hunger. It had become very tough even to stay seated on the branch. At times he wished that the lion would pounce on him and devour him.



Folding his hands, the boy made an entreaty to the Almighty, "God, are you not going to have mercy on me?"

The lion was feeling fatigued too. He had become dispirited after having sat for so long. He wanted somehow to get his prey. The boy glanced all around so that he could sight someone but no one could be spotted. That was when he began howling loudly. But who would listen to his crying in that wilderness.

At last a plan occurred to him. The boy climbed onto the topmost point of the branch and opening his *dhoti* made it flutter in the wind, hoping that some *shikari* would spot it. Suddenly he jumped with joy. All his hunger and weakness vanished instantly. Some men standing near that spring were looking at the signal flapping in the wind. Probably they were wondering how a flag could be put up on a tree in the dense jungle. One, two, three, four, the boy went on counting the men.

The land above the boy's perch was a bit low. It struck him that even if they spotted him how would they ever come to know that a lion who had been starving for the past three days, was crouching below. If he did not forewarn them, the spiteful lion would certainly gobble any one of them. Worried, he began shouting at the top of his voice. The men stopped on hearing him and holding up their rifles began staring at him.

The boy yelled, "Watch out! Be on guard! There is a lion lurking under this tree."

As soon as they heard him the men became watchful. Quickly loading their rifles, they began to move ahead vigilantly.

The lion did not have the faintest inkling of what was going on behind his back. He was simply looking for an opportunity to pounce upon his prey. He was startled to hear footsteps suddenly and saw all the four men under cover of a mound. Thereafter, he was overjoyed as his heartfelt wish had been granted. How can one have patience when one is feeling ravenous. He roared so loudly that the entire jungle trembled, then mightily sprang towards those men. But they were already well prepared. *Dann ! Dann ! Dann ! Dann !* All four of them fired bullets at the same time. There was a loud noise. Birds flew up from the trees in terror. Soon after, the boy looked down and saw the lion slumped on the ground. The lion leapt up one last time and then collapsed. He did not even move an inch after that.

The boy's joy knew no bounds! There was not the slightest sign

of hunger or thirst in him. When he quickly climbed down the tree, he saw his master standing right in front. Crying uncontrollably, he fell at his feet. The master lifted him up at once and hugged him in affection.

Astounded, he asked, "Were you perched on this tree for the last three days?"

The boy replied simply, "Yes! How could I possibly get down? The lion lay crouching down below."

The master said, "All this time we thought that some lion had killed and devoured you. All four of us have been frantically searching for you for the past three days. You did not even inform us and ventured out on your own."

"I was scared since the cow had been lost," said the boy.

The master scolded him gently, "Hey, you must be crazy! In fact, the cow had come back on its own that very day."

The boy had a hearty laugh even though he was so exhausted because of hunger and thirst.



## THEFT

O Childhood! I cannot forget my fond memories of you. That dilapidated thatched house; that bedding made of straw; those barebodies, roaming barefoot in the fields; climbing on to mango trees, all these incidents are vividly flashing before my eyes. At that time we were so delighted to wear *desi* leather shoes whereas now we are not happy even with our fabulous boots. The way we relished warm raw mango juice then, the flavour is not there even when we sip gulab syrup now; the delicious taste of *chabena* or parched grain is not to be found even in grapes and *kheer mohan*.

I used to go to the next village to one Maulvi Sahib's house along with Haldhar, my cousin, to study. I was eight and Haldhar (who is now no more) was two years older. Early in the morning, both of us would eat leftover *rotis* and set out, carrying *chabena* for the afternoon. And then we had the whole day to ourselves. In any case, there was no attendance register at Maulvi Sahib's place nor did we have to pay a fine for being absent. So what did we have to be afraid of! At times we would watch the drill of sepoy's standing in front of the *thana*, sometimes roaming behind *madaris* who would make monkeys or bears dance, we would pass the entire day. At other times, we would set out towards the railway station and watch the arrival and departure of trains. Probably even the time-table did not have as much information about the schedule of trains as we did. A money-lender of the city had begun laying a garden along the way we passed and a well was being dug there. That too was an amusing spectacle for us. The gardener would make us sit in his hut with great affection. We would force him to let us do his chores.

Taking a bucket, we would water saplings at some spot, dig up the soil of flower-beds with a trowel elsewhere and prune creepers where it was needed. Doing those tasks was such fun! The gardener was an expert in child psychology. He would make us work but

he would make it seem as if he was doing us a great favour. The amount of work he did in the whole day would be done by us in an hour at the most. The gardener is not there now, but the garden is lush with growth. I long to hug those trees and weep when I walk past that garden now.

I feel like telling them, "Dears, you have forgotten me, but I haven't; your memory is still fresh in my heart—as freshly green as are your leaves. You are all living examples of selfless love."

At times we would be absent for weeks together, but would make excuses to Maulvi Sahib and his frown lines would smooth out. If I had the same power of imagination today, I would have ended up writing such a novel that people would be astonished. However, in my present state I can think of a story only after racking my brains. Anyway, our Maulvi Sahib was a tailor by profession, but teaching was his hobby. We two brothers would really rave about Maulvi Sahib's qualities to the *kurmis* and potters of our village. You could say that we were a sort of travelling agents for Maulvi Sahib. Our joy knew no bounds when Maulvi Sahib would get some work done with our help! We would take some or the other special gift for Maulvi Sahib on days when we could not think of any excuse for our absence. At times we would pluck a *seer* and a half of pods, or five to ten sugarcanes; or we would take some lush green ears of wheat or barley. Maulvi Sahib was pacified the instant he saw those gifts. When these crops were not ready for harvesting, we would think of some other plan to save ourselves from being punished. Maulvi Sahib happened to be fond of birds. The cages of *shama*, a bulbul, a magpie robin and the crested lark would keep hanging in the *pathshala*. Whether we learnt the lesson or not, the birds would certainly learn it by heart. In fact, they would study along with us. We were very enthusiastic about grinding chickpeas to make gram flour for the birds. Maulvi Sahib would instruct all the boys to catch moths and get them. For these birds as they were fond of moths, in particular. Luckily our misfortune would rub off on the moths at times. By sacrificing them, we were able to please the fearsome form of Maulvi Sahib.

One day when both of us went to the pond to wash our faces, Haldhar showed some whitish thing he was clutching in his fist. When I sprang forward to open his fist, I found a one rupee note.

Taken aback, I asked, "Where did you get this rupee?"



Haldhar replied, "Amma had stashed it away on the ledge. I made the *charpoy* stand upright and took it out."

The house did not have any chest or almirah, so generally money was safely put away on a high ledge. *Chachaji* had sold the crop of Indian hemp the day before. The money had been kept aside for giving to the *zamindar*. I don't know how Haldhar came to know of this. When all the people at home got busy in their routine work, he made his *charpoy* stand erect and climbing on to it, stole the one-rupee note.

We had never even touched a rupee till that time. Till date, we vividly remember the waves of joy and fear which had tugged our heart on seeing that rupee note. Maulvi Sahib would get just twelves *annas* from our house. Chacha would go himself to pay the money at the end of the month. Who can possibly guess how proud we were to have the rupee. But the fear of getting a thrashing if found was an impediment to our joy. The stashed rupees were not innumerable, for sure. The theft was bound to be discovered. Not me, but Haldhar had already tasted Chacha's fury, in person. Otherwise, there was not a simpler man than him in this world. If Chacha had not taken on the burden of protecting him, some petty shopkeeper could have sold him in the *bazar*. But he would not be mindful of anything when he flew into a rage. Others apart, even *Chachi* was very scared of facing his fury. Both of us reflected over these very points for some time and finally decided that we should not let go of the wealth we had chanced upon. For one thing, no one was actually going to suspect us and in case someone did, we would deny everything point blank. What would we do by taking a rupee, we would argue. If we had taken thought, this firm decision would have changed and that terrifying scene which was enacted later on would not have taken place. However, we did not have the ability of coolly thinking over the matter at that point.

Washing our hands and face, the two of us came home. Scared, we stepped inside reluctantly. In case the matter reached a pass and we were searched, only God could save us. But thankfully everyone was engrossed in their chores, no one spoke to us. We did not eat the morning snack, nor did we pack *chabena* along, just pressing the books in our armpits, we took the path to the *madrassa*.

It was the rainy season and the sky was overcast with clouds. We were merrily walking towards the *maktab*. Probably we would not

have been so delighted even on getting ministership of the Council today. We would make thousands of plans and build thousands of castles in the air. The two of us were very fortunate to have got this chance and would probably never get such an opportunity in our life. That was why we wanted to spend the rupee sparingly so that it could last for maximum number of days. Although one could get very good quality sweets for five annas a seer in those days and probably we would have been full with only half a *seer*, it struck us that if we ate sweets the rupee would vanish today itself. We ought to be eating some cheap foods which we would relish, which would fill our bellies and still save some money. Finally we spotted guavas and both of us agreed to buy them. We were soon loaded with guavas bought worth two *paise*.

When Haldhar put the rupee note in the hands of the fruitseller, she looked suspiciously and asked, “*Lala*, from where did you get the rupee? I hope you haven’t stolen it?”

We were ready with an answer. The two of us had already read a couple of books, if not more. Knowledge had begun to have some effect on us.

I replied promptly, “We had to give Maulvi Sahib’s fees. There weren’t any loose *paise* in the house, so Chachaji gave us a rupee note.”

This answer dispelled any doubts the fruitseller might have had. Soon after, both of us sat on a small bridge and ate guavas to our heart’s content. But where should we take the fifteen and a half annas? It was not such a tough job to hide a rupee note but where could the pile of coins be hidden? Neither was there so much room around our waists nor was there any in our pockets. Keeping the coins on us was like proclaiming the theft by beat of the drum. After a lot of deliberation, it was decided that twelve annas must be given to Maulvi Sahib and the remaining three and a half annas should be spent lavishly on sweets. Having taken this decision we reached the *maktab*. Today we had gone after being absent for several days.

Furious, Maulvi Sahib asked, “Where were the two of you for the past so many days?”

I replied, “Maulvi Sahib, there has been a tragedy in the house.”

While giving this explanation, I kept the twelve annas before him. What grudge could he possibly harbour after that? He was on cloud nine the instant he got the money. Many days were still left for the month to be over.

The payment was made after repeated reminders, once the new month began. It was not unnatural for him to be so pleased on getting the money so fast this time.

We looked at the other boys haughtily as if we were saying, "We are the ones who pay the fees in advance whereas you all do not make the payment even on being reminded."

We were still reading the lesson when we came to know that it was the *mela* of the *talab* today and school would be over in the afternoon itself. Maulvi Sahib would be going to the mela to make his *bulbuls* fight. Hearing this news, our joy knew no bounds. We had already deposited twelve annas in the bank; it was decided that we would see the mela in the three and a half annas which still remained with us. We would thoroughly enjoy the delights. The two of us would relish the *rewadis*, splurge on *golgappas*, take a ride on the swing and reach home by evening. However, Maulvi Sahib had kept a strict condition that all the boys would recite their respective lessons before school was over. Whoever was not able to recite his lesson would not be given leave. As a result, it so happened that I got permission to leave, but Haldhar could not. Several other boys had also recited their lessons and all of them set out to see the mela. I also went along with them. Since the coins were with me, I did not wait to take Haldhar with me. It had been decided that he would come to the mela the instant he was free, and both of us would see the mela together. I had given my word that I would not spend a paisa till he came; but how was I to know that misfortune had something else in store for us!

It had been more than an hour since I had reached the mela, but there was no sign of Haldhar. Had Maulvi Sahib not given him permission to leave as yet, or had he lost the way? I kept looking at the path with strained and eager eyes. It was not so enjoyable to see the mela alone. Had his theft been exposed, had Chachaji caught hold of Haldhar and taken him home? This apprehension was nagging me. Eventually I ate some *rewadis* when it was evening and keeping Haldhar's share of money in my pocket, trudged back home. It struck me on the way to go via the *maktab*. Maybe Haldhar would be there, but dead silence reigned there. But of course, I found a boy playing.

He burst out laughing the moment he saw me and taunted, "Go home buddy and see what a beating you get. Your Chacha had come.

Thrashing Haldhar, he has taken him home. I say, he gave him such a smart blow with his fist that *Miya* Haldhar fell flat on his face. He dragged him from that spot. You had paid the Maulvi Sahib; your Chacha took that back as well. Think of some solid excuse right now or else you will be beaten ruthlessly."

I was scared out of my wits and the blood coursing through my veins dried up. What I was suspecting had exactly happened. My feet seemed to weigh a maund each. It was difficult to take each step towards the house. I vowed to propitiate as many gods and goddesses I remembered by offering *laddus* to some, *pede* to others and *batase* to yet others. On coming close to the village, I meditated upon the village deity because His wish reigns supreme in our area.

I did all this but my heart-beat rose as the house came nearer. The dark dense clouds of fear overpowered me. It seemed as if the heavens themselves would fall. I could see people leaving their respective tasks and running home. Even cows lifted their tails and merrily pranced homewards. Flocks of birds joyously flew towards their nests. But I continued to trudge slowly along as if my feet had no energy. I wished I would get high fever or hurt myself somewhere. But if wishes were horses beggars would ride. Death does not strike us by our calling for it. So what indeed can we say about sickness! Nothing untoward happened and even though I walked so slowly, the house finally stood in front. What would happen now? A dense tamarind tree stood at our entrance door. I hid under its cover so that I would secretly sneak in as it grew a bit darker and go and crouch under the *charpoy* in *Amma's* room. When everyone would go off to sleep, I would narrate the entire story to *Amma*. She never beat me. She would melt even more when I would pretend to weep a bit before her. Who would bother to ask about the episode once the night had passed. By the time morning dawned, everyone's anger would have cooled down. If these ambitious plans had been fulfilled, I would have undoubtedly been saved without any stigma. However, the Creator had ordained something else for me. One boy spotted me and ran straight into the house, repeating my name. There was not a ray of hope left for me now. Rendered helpless as I stepped into the house, I shrieked suddenly; I was just like a dog who has been beaten ruthlessly yelps in fear on seeing someone advance towards him.

*Pitaji* was sitting in the *baithak*. These days his health had somewhat declined. Taking leave, he had come home. One cannot

clearly say what was his ailment but he would eat *moong dal* and pouring something from a bottle into a glass tumbler, he would drink it in the evening. Probably it was some medicine prescribed by an experienced *hakim*. All medicines have a foul smell and a bitter taste. This medicine was also distinctly bitter, but I wonder why *Pitaji* would take great pleasure in sipping this concoction. Whichever medicinal syrup we drink, we shut our eyes and gulp it down in one go, but probably this medicine works only when it is sipped. Two to three and sometimes four to five other patients from the village would gather around *Pitaji* and drink the mixture for hours together. They would get up to have food with great difficulty. Even at this time they were drinking the syrup. The circle of patients had assembled together.

The instant he saw me, *Pitaji* glared at me and asked, "Where were you till now?"

I meekly whispered, "Well, nowhere in particular."

"You are picking up the habit of stealing, now ! Did you take the rupee or not, answer me?" he thundered in anger.

I became speechless. A naked sword loomed in front of me, even words were also scared of being spoken.

*Pitaji* scolded me at the top of his voice and asked, "Why don't you speak up? Have you stolen the rupee or not?"

I put my life at stake and replied, "Where did..."

*Pitaji* assumed a fearsome form before I could complete my sentence. Gritting his teeth in fury, he got up instantly and raising his hand, advanced towards me. I shrieked loudly and began crying. I screamed in such a way that *Pitaji* was also scared and hesitated. His hand remained raised in the air. Probably he understood that if this was my plight right now, I could lose my life if I was slapped. The moment I saw that my clever scheme had worked, I cried at the top of my voice. In the meantime, a couple of men from his circle caught hold of *Pitaji* and made a sign to me to run away! Children become even more restive in such an situation and get beaten for no sane reason. I acted intelligently.

However, the scene inside was far more terrifying. In fact my blood froze with fear. Both of Haldhar's hands were tied to a pillar. His entire body was covered with dust and he was still sobbing. Sulking, probably he had rolled over the entire courtyard. It seemed as if the whole courtyard was filled with his streaming tears. *Chachu*

was scolding Haldhar while *Amma* sat grinding spices. *Chachi* was the one who spotted me first of all.

She said, "There! He has also come. Why, I ask! Did you take the rupee or did he?"

I answered fearlessly, "Haldhar did."

*Amma* intervened, "If he was the one who stole it, why didn't you come home and tell someone!"

Now it was really difficult to save myself without telling lies. I believe it is pardonable to lie when one's life is in danger. Haldhar was used to getting a beating; if he got another couple of blows, they were not going to harm him in any way. However, I had never been thrashed and would have virtually been killed by just a few fisticuffs.

Besides, Haldhar had tried to involve me for saving himself, otherwise why would *Chachi* ask me, "Did you take the rupee or did Haldhar?"

By any principle my telling lies was not laudable at this point, but it was certainly pardonable.

I replied promptly, "Haldhar had said he would definitely kill me if I told anyone."

*Amma*, "See, it turned out to be the same matter! I used to say that the boy has no such habit; in fact he doesn't even touch money with his hands, but everyone was busy making a fool of me."

Haldhar butt in, "When did I say that I will beat you if you disclose the matter?"

I replied, "Well, right there by the side of the pond!"

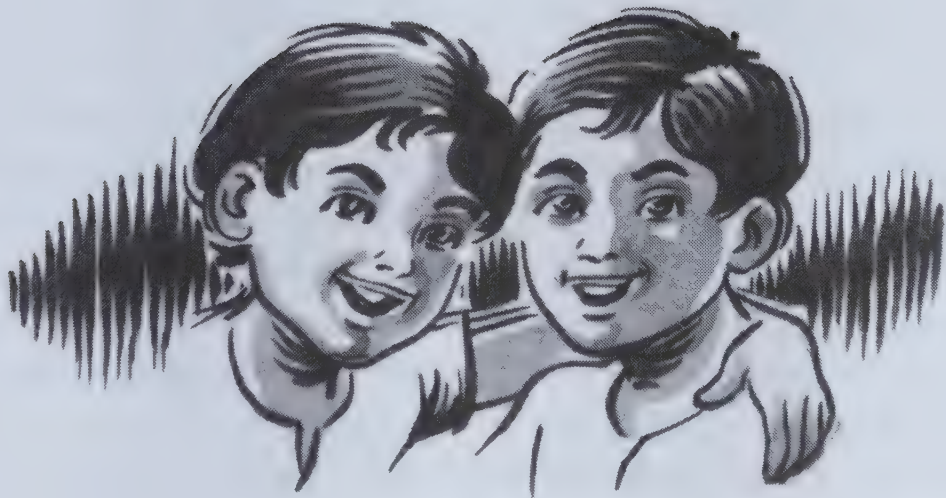
Haldhar: "*Amma*, it is an absolute lie."

*Chachi*: "It is not a lie but the truth. You'll always be deemed a liar and the rest of the world truthful. You have been exposed now. If your father was working in the city and earning money, he would have been considered honourable and you trustworthy. But you are the one who is a liar as of now. He who was fortunate had a gala time. In your fate it is ordained that you will be kicked and spurned."

Saying so, *Chachi* untied Haldhar and holding his hand took him inside. In my opinion *Amma* had reversed the situation by her affectionate criticism; or else one never knows how much the poor fellow would have been thrashed.

I sat next to *Amma* and only sang the song of my innocence. My simple-hearted mother used to consider me to be Truth incarnate. She implicitly believed that the entire fault was Haldhar's. A moment

later taking *gurh-chabena* I stepped out of the small dingy room. At the same time Haldhar came out, eating *chiuda*. Both of us strode out simultaneously and began narrating our personal experiences. My tale was joyous and his was sad. The end result, however, was one and the same for both of us: a snack of *gurh-and-chabena*.



# KAJAKI

## One

Kajaki is a person not to be erased from my childhood memories. Forty years have passed by; the image of Kajaki is dancing before my eyes up until now. I used to live with my father in a *tahsil* of Azamgarh in those days. Kajaki was so very jovial, really brave and extremely lively. He would bring the sack of mail every evening, stay over for the whole night and taking the mail, leave in the morning. Again in the evening, he would bring mail from the other end. I would anxiously wait for his arrival all day. As soon as it was four o'clock, I would eagerly come and stand on the roadside. And in a short while, Kajaki could be seen coming as he ran from a distance, ringing tiny bells of the small spear resting on his shoulder. He was a tall, well - built young man of dark complexion. His body had been so well-cast in the mould that even a skilled sculptor could find no flaw in it. His small trimmed moustache looked very becoming on his sturdy frame. Seeing me he would run faster, his bells would jingle even louder and my heart would beat faster with joy. Extremely delighted, I would race ahead too and Kajaki's shoulder would become my throne in a split second. That place was the heaven of my desires. Even the residents of heaven would probably not have that swinging joy which I found on Kajaki's broad shoulders. The world would appear insignificant in my eyes and when Kajaki would run, taking me along on his shoulders, it would seem as if I was riding a flying horse.

Kajaki would be soaked in sweat when he would reach the post office, but he was not in the habit of taking rest. Taking us along, he would set off for some open field, as soon as he had kept down the sack of mail. At times he would play with us, sing Bhojpuri folk-songs of separation sometimes, and tell us tales at other times. He

remembered hundreds of stories about robbery and dacoity, fighting, ghosts and spirits. Listening to these stories, I would be filled with joyous wonder. The robbers and dacoits of his stories were true warriors who would rob the rich and support the poor and needy. I would have great respect for them instead of contempt.

## Two

One day Kajaki was delayed with this sack of mail. The sun had set and he could not be seen. Somewhat lost in thought, I kept staring far into the distance by the road, but that familiar outline was not to be sighted. I would listen in rapt attention but the amusing '*jhun jhun*' sound of the jingle could not be heard. My hope was also dying along with the light.

When I would see someone approaching from that side, I would ask, "Is Kajaki coming?"

But either he would not pay heed or merely shake his head.

Suddenly I could hear the sound of *jhun-jhun*. In the darkness I could only see ghosts all around; so much so that sweets kept on the ledge in mother's room would become taboo for me once it was dark. But as soon as I heard this sound, I ran frantically towards it. Yes, of course, it was Kajaki. The instant I saw him, my restlessness turned into vexation. I began hitting him and then sulking, stood aloof on one side.

Laughing, Kajaki said, "If you hit me, I am not going to give you something which I have got along."

Mustering courage, I retorted, "Get lost, don't. I am not going to take it, for sure."

Kajaki replied, "If I show you right now, you will run and pick it up in your arms."

Softening, I said, "Okay, let me have a look."

Kajaki said, "Then come and sit on my shoulder and let me run. There has been a great delay today. *Babuji* is going to be furious."

Stubbornly, I insisted, "First show me what you have got."

I triumphed. If Kajaki was not scared about being late and he could wait for even one more minute, probably things would have turned out differently. He showed me something which he held close to his chest with one hand; it had a long snout and two eyes which shone brightly.



I ran and took him from Kajaki's lap! It was a fawn. Ah! Who can possibly measure the joy I felt? Since then I have passed tough examinations, got a high rank and also become a 'Rai Bahadur' but I could never get that joy ever again. Taking the young deer in my arms, enjoying his soft tender touch, I ran homewards. I was not even bothered about why it had taken Kajaki so long to arrive.

Excited, I asked, "Kajaki, where did you find him?"

Kajaki replied, "*Bhaiya!* There is a small jungle, a bit further away from here. There are many deer living in it. I really wished to find a small fawn so that I could gift it to you. Today I spotted this young deer with the herd. When I ran towards the herd, all of them fled. This fawn also ran, but I did not stop chasing him. In fact, the other deer fled far away, but this fawn was left behind. I managed to catch hold of him and that is why I was so late."

Chatting in this fashion, we reached the post-office. *Babuji* did not see me or the young deer, he just glared at Kajaki.

Enraged, he fumed, "How come you took so long today? You have come with the sack of letters at this unearthly hour. What am I to do with it now? The mail has already left. Explain where have you been loitering around for so long?"

Kajaki could not utter a word.

*Babuji* said, "Probably you do not want to do the job now. In fact, you become casual when you are well-fed. When you will starve, your eyes will open up to reality."

Kajaki stood still in absolute silence.

*Babuji's* fury increased and he thundered, "Well! Keep the sack down and go back home. You have got the mail now. Hmm! How are you going to lose out? You can work as a labourer wherever you want to. It is me who is going to be held responsible and me from whom an explanation is going to be demanded."

Tearfully Kajaki promised, "Sarkar, I am never going to be late from now on."

*Babuji* probed, "Give me an answer as to why were you late today."

Kajaki had no answer. It was so astonishing that I was also speechless with fear. *Babuji* was very hot-tempered by nature. He had to work hard and that is why he would lose his temper over every small thing. In fact, I would never dare to face him. He would never be affectionate towards me. Only twice he would come home, for an hour each time, to have meals. He would be working at his desk

for the rest of the day. Repeatedly he had requested the officers for an assistant, but it had had no effect. So much so that *Babuji* would stay in office even on a holiday. Only *Amma* could pacify him but how could she possibly come to the office. Poor *Kajaki* was dismissed before my eyes, as I looked on helplessly. His *ballam*, *chapras* and *safa* were snatched away and the irrevocable *Nadiri* command of leaving the post office was given. Oh! How I wished at that point of time that I had the golden Lanka which I could give *Kajaki* and show my father that his sacking him had not harmed *Kajaki* in any way. *Kajaki* was as proud of his metal badge as any warrior would be proud of his sword. When he began opening the metal badge, his hands were trembling and tears were streaming down his cheeks. And the root cause of all this turmoil was that tender object that was so peacefully snuggled in my lap as if he was in his mother's lap. Slowly I tiptoed behind *Kajaki* when he made a move.

Reaching the entrance of my house, *Kajaki* said, "*Bhaiya*, go home now. It is evening."

Standing quietly, I was controlling the gush of my tears with all my strength.

*Kajaki* assured me again, "*Bhaiya*, I am not going away anywhere, for sure. I will come and make you sit on my shoulders, dandle you in my arms once again. If *Babuji* has taken away my job, will he not allow me to do even this much? *Bhaiya*, I will not leave you and go to any other place! Go and tell *Amma* that *Kajaki* is leaving and ask her to forgive any shortcomings on his part."

I ran and went home but instead of telling anyone, I sobbed hysterically.

*Amma* stepped out of the kitchen and asked in concern, "What happened, son? Did someone hit you! Has *Babuji* said something? Okay, just wait and see! I will question him the instant he comes home. He is busy beating my son whenever he gets a chance. Be quiet, son. You must never go up to him now."

I managed to speak with great difficulty and said, "*Kajaki*..."

*Amma* assumed that *Kajaki* had hit me; she said, "Is that so! Let *Kajaki* come and you will see I will get him sacked on the spot. Being a mere postal messenger, he has the guts to hit my darling son. Goodness! I will get the turban, spear and everything else taken away."

I clarified quickly, "No, *Kajaki* has not beaten me. *Babuji* has

dismissed him and has snatched his turban, spear and even taken away his metal badge."

*Amma*: "This is something terribly wrong. The poor man would be so particularly careful about his duty, then why did he sack him?"

I answered, "He happened to be late today."

Saying so, I put down the fawn from my lap. There was no fear of his running away in the house. *Amma* had not cast her eyes on him till now. Seeing him frolic about, she was startled, all of a sudden. She sprang forward and caught hold of my hand so that this fearsome living being should not bite me! While on one hand, I was on seeing sobbing hysterically and alarmed on seeing *Amma*, I burst out laughing.

*Amma*: "I say! This is a deer's young one! Where did you get her?"

I narrated the entire history and its dreadful end-result from beginning to end, "*Amma*, he would run with such speed that if it had been anyone else except Kajaki he could not have caught him. *San-san*, the fawn would dart ahead like the wind. Kajaki ran behind him for five to six hours and only then managed to get him somehow. *Amma*, no one in this whole world can run as speedily as Kajaki does. He was delayed for this very reason. That is why *Babuji* dismissed him—metal badge, turban, spear, were all snatched away. What is the poor man going to do now? He will die of hunger."

*Amma* asked, "Where is Kajaki. Just go and get him, please."

I replied, "He was standing right outside. He had said, "Ask *Amma* to forgive any lapses on my part.""

*Ammaji* was considering my narrative to be a laughing matter until that moment. Probably she thought that *Babuji* would have scolded Kajaki, but on hearing the last sentence she was fearful about his actually being dismissed.

Stepping out, she called, "Kajaki! Kajaki!" but he was nowhere to be seen.

I ate my food; children do not willingly give up eating particularly when *rabri* is served. However as I lay down, I kept thinking late into the night; I would give one lakh rupees to Kajaki if I had money and ask him never to talk to *Babuji* again. The poor fellow would starve to death! Let me see whether he comes tomorrow. What would he do by coming now? But he had said he would. I will make him eat with me, come tomorrow.

Building castles in the air in this fashion, I fell asleep.

### Three

The next day I was busy looking after the needs of the fawn and entertaining him all day. First, the ceremony of naming him was performed. He was named 'Munnu'. Soon after, I introduced him to all my fellow-students and playmates. In just a day he became so fond of me that he began running behind me. I gave him an important place in my life in such a short while. I resolved to give him a separate room in my huge mansion which was to be built in the future; and even made arrangements for his *charpoy* and a phaeton for his outing and so on.

But I dumped everything as soon as it was evening and went and stood by the roadside to see if Kajaki was coming. I very well knew that Kajaki had been sacked; now there was no need for him to come here. But still I don't know why I hoped he would come. All of a sudden, it struck me that Kajaki would be starving. Instantly I came home. *Amma* was lighting the lamps. Secretly, I took out the flour in a basket and wrapped it in my hands. Making a track of flour spilling from the basket, I ran. I had just gone and stood by the road when Kajaki could be seen coming. He had the spear, the metal badge was fastened on his waist and even a turban was tied around his head. The bag of mail was also tied to the spear. I ran and clung to his waist.

Amazed, I said, "Kajaki! Where did you get the metal badge and wooden spear?"

Kajaki picked me up and seated me on his shoulder, "*Bhaiya*, of what use was that metal badge? It was a badge of slavery whereas this badge stands for old joys. Earlier I was a government servant and now I am your attendant."

While saying these words his eyes noticed the basket which was kept there. He asked, "What sort of flour is this, *Bhaiya*?"

Embarrassed, I said, "In fact, I have got it just for you. You must be hungry? What would you have eaten today?"

Actually, I could not see his eyes since I was sitting on his shoulder. But of course I could make out from his hoarse voice that there was a lump in his throat as if he was about to cry.

Kajaki said, "*Bhaiya*, am I going to eat plain *rotis*. Is there nothing else like, lentils, salt or *ghee*."

I was very ashamed of my mistake. It was so true! How would the poor fellow eat just *rotis*? Somehow I had managed to get away with the flour (I did not know yet that my theft had been caught. The track made by the spilling flour had given me away.) How would I get three things at a time? *Amma* would never give them if I asked her. She would make me cry for hours for every single *paisa*. Why would she agree to give so many things? All of a sudden I remembered something. I had stashed several *annas* and paise in my cloth satchel of books. I would really enjoy collecting money and keeping it aside. I do not have any inkling why that habit has changed now. If I had retained the same trait, probably I would not be merrily wallowing in such extreme poverty. In fact, *Babuji* would never be loving towards me but would give me lots of money; probably he considered this the easiest way of avoiding me because he was so busy working. There was the fear of my crying or throwing a tantrum if he refused. He would evade this obstacle from a distance. *Amma's* nature was the exact opposite. She had no fear of my crying and sulking hindering any work of hers. All day a person can hear sobbing while lying down idly whereas a loud sound can break one's concentration if one is calculating. In fact, *Amma* loved me a lot, but she would frown disapprovingly the moment she heard the mention of money.

I did not have books. But of course, there was a cloth satchel in which I had folded a few post office forms and kept them in book form. I seriously thought, wouldn't that much money be enough for lentils, salt and *ghee*? In fact, my hand could not hold them.

I said, determined: "Okay, put me down so that I can get the lentils and salt. But aren't you going to come every day?"

Kajaki, "Why not, *Bhaiya*! if you are going to give me food to eat."

I said, "I am going to do so everyday."

Kajaki assured me, "In that case, I am coming every single day."

I got down, ran and brought my entire wealth. If I had the *Kohinoor* I would not hesitate in gifting it to Kajaki at that moment, for calling him every day.

Astonished, Kajaki asked, "*Bhaiya*, from where did you get this money?"

I replied with pride, "Well, it belongs only to me."

Kajaki: "Your *Amma* is going to beat you and say Kajaki would

have coaxed you to get it. *Bhaiya*, buy sweets with this money and keep it in an earthen pot. I am not going to starve to death. I have two hands, I can work. How can I possibly die of hunger?"

I tried to convince him in many ways that the money was mine, but Kajaki did not take the paise. Seating me on his shoulders, he took me around for quite a while, sang songs and left after dropping me home. He put down the basket of flour also at my entrance.

I had just stepped into the house when scolding me, *Amma* asked, "Oh you thief! Where did you take the flour? You are learning to steal now? Tell me, whom have you given the flour to or else I will skin you alive."

I was dead scared. *Amma* would become a lioness when she was furious.

I replied, "In fact, I did not give it to anyone."

*Amma* went on, "You did not take out the flour. Just look how much flour is scattered all over the courtyard."

I stood quietly. No matter how much she threatened me, coaxed me, but I would not speak a word. Scared of the impending danger, I was terrified so much that I could not muster enough courage to say, "Why are you getting angry. In fact, the flour is kept by the door."

Neither was it possible for me to go and get it as if the energy to act had simply vanished; it seemed as if my feet were not capable of moving.

Suddenly, Kajaki called out, "*Bahuji*, the flour is kept at the door. *Bhaiya* had taken it for giving it to me."

Hearing this, *Amma* instantly headed towards the door. She would not do *purdah* with Kajaki. I do not know whether she spoke to Kajaki or not, but *Amma* came inside the house with just the basket in hand. Soon after, she went into the small dingy room, took out something from the trunk and went towards the door. I saw that her fist was closed. I couldn't just keep standing there now.

So I also walked behind *Amma*. At the door, she called out for Kajaki several times, but he had already left.

Bravely I offered, "*Amma*, should I go and find him?"

Closing the door, *Amma* said, "Where will you go in the dark? He was standing here right now. I asked him to stay put; I will be back shortly. He is very shy by nature! I do not know where he slipped off in that short while. He simply refused to take the flour. Forcibly I tied it in his *angocha*. I feel very sorry for the poor fellow.

You never know whether he has anything to eat in his house or not. I had got money so that I could give it to him, but I do not know where he has disappeared."

I could muster courage now. I told her the entire story of my theft. The kind of effect parents can have on children by behaving as sensible children with them, they cannot have by behaving as elders.

*Amma* said, "Why didn't you ask my permission? Wouldn't I have given some flour to Kajaki?"

I did not answer. And thought in my heart, "At this moment you are having mercy on Kajaki and can give whatever you want to. But in case I asked you for it, you would have run to beat me. But of course, I was delighted to think that Kajaki would not die of hunger now. Every day *Amma* would give him food to eat and making me sit on his shoulder, he would take me for an outing.

The next day I kept playing with Munnu all day. In the evening I went and stood by the road. But darkness set in and there was no sign of Kajaki. Lamps were lit and silence reigned on the desolate road, but Kajaki did not come.

Weeping, I came home.

"Son, why are you crying?" asked *Ammaji*. "Has Kajaki not come?"

I wept even louder. *Amma* hugged me. It seemed that her voice had also choked with emotion.

She said, "Stop crying, Son. I will send some postal messenger tomorrow and summon Kajaki."

I was still crying when I went to sleep.

The instant I opened my eyes in the morning I told *Amma*, "Call for Kajaki."

*Amma* replied, "Son, the man has gone ! Kajaki must be coming."

Delighted, I began to play. I knew very well that *Amma* definitely did whatever she promised. She had sent a messenger in the morning itself. When I entered the house at 10 o'clock along with Munnu, I came to know that Kajaki was not to be found in his house. He had not even gone home at night. Having no inkling of where he had gone, his wife was crying. She feared that he had run away somewhere.

No one can measure how tender are the hearts of children. They do not have words to express their feelings. They do not even know what is making them distressed, which thorn is rankling in their heart, why do they cry over and over again, why they are dejected

and sulking, why they do not enjoy playing? My state was exactly the same. Listless, I would enter the house at times, go out sometimes and reach the road at other times. My eyes were searching for Kajaki. Where had he gone? Could he have run off somewhere?

Lost in thought, I was standing by the road in the evening. Suddenly I spotted Kajaki in a lane. Yes of course, it was Kajaki. Shouting, I ran towards him, but he was nowhere in the lane. I do not know where he had vanished. I searched from one end of the road to the other, but not a trace of Kajaki could be found anywhere.

I went home and told *Amma* of this incident. I could sense she was very worried on hearing of this incident.

Thereafter, Kajaki could not be seen for a couple of days. Now, even I had begun to forget him gradually.

Ten to twelve more days passed. It was noon. *Babuji* was having his meal. I was tying metal anklets, having small bells, around Munnu's ankles. A woman came with her face covered by a veil and stood in the courtyard. Her clothes were filthy and torn, but she was beautiful and fair-complexioned.

She asked me, "Where is *Babuji*, *Bhaiya*?"

Going up to her and looking at her face, I questioned, "Who are you? What do you sell?"

"I do not sell anything. I have got these lotus seeds for you. Aren't you very fond of lotus seeds, *Bhaiya*?" she said.

Eagerly seeing that small bundle hanging from her hands, I asked, "Where did you get them? Let me have a look."

"Your postal messenger has sent it, *Bhaiya*," she said.

Jumping with joy, I asked, "Has Kajaki sent them?"

Nodding her head, the woman said yes and began opening the small bundle. Meanwhile, *Amma* also stepped out of the kitchen. The woman touched *Amma's* feet.

*Amma* asked, "Are you Kajaki's wife?"

The woman bowed her head.

*Amma*, "What is Kajaki doing these days?"

Weeping, the woman revealed, "*Babuji*, he is unwell ever since he went from your house, taking the flour. He keeps harping upon *Bhaiya*, *Bhaiya*. His heart just dwells in *Bhaiya* all the time. Waking up with a start, he exclaims '*Bhaiya! Bhaiya!*' again and again and runs towards the door. *Babuji*, I do not know what has come over him! One day he didn't speak a word to me and set out from the house.

Hiding in a lane, he kept looking at *Bhaiya* secretly and when *Bhaiya* spotted him, he ran away. He feels a sense of shame in coming to you."

I said, "Yes-yes! *Ammaji*. This is what I had told you that day!"  
*Amma*, "Is there some food in the house?"

The woman, "Yes of course, *Bahuji*. With your blessings, there is no shortage of food. He woke up today morning and headed towards the pond. I kept telling him not to go out as he would catch a cold, but he refused to listen. His feet began trembling because of weakness but entering the pond he plucked lotus seeds and got them. Then he instructed me, "Take them along and give them to *Bhaiya*. He is very fond of lotus seeds. Ask about his health and well-being when you take leave."

I had taken out the lotus seeds from the small bundle and was busy sampling them. Glaring at me, *Amma* tried her best to stop me, but how could I be so patient.

*Amma* said, "Tell *Kajaki* everything is going well."

I piped in, "Besides, tell *Kajaki* that *Bhaiya* has called for him. And of course, he is never going to talk to him if he doesn't come."

*Babuji* had eaten his meal and come out.

Wiping his face and hands with the towel, he said, "Tell him, moreover, that *Sahib* has reinstated you. Go fast or else some other man will be appointed to the post."

The woman lifted the cloth in which she had got the lotus seeds and left. *Amma* kept on calling her, but she did not stop. Probably *Amma* wanted to give her flour, lentils, rice and other such basic materials needed to cook food.

*Amma* asked, "Has he really been reinstated?"

*Babuji*: "Of course! Am I summoning him in vain? I had given a report for his reinstatement on the fifth day itself."

*Amma*: "You have done a good deed."

*Babuji*: "Actually, this is the cure for his ailment."

#### Four

When I got up early in the morning I was amazed to see *Kajaki* trudging along with the help of a stick. He had become very frail and it seemed he had aged. It seemed as though a luxuriant tree

had shrivelled and been reduced to a stump. I ran towards him and clung to his waist. Kajaki kissed my cheeks and tried to seat me on his shoulders by lifting me, but I could not be lifted. Then he stood with his hands and knees resting on the ground like an animal. I mounted his back and set off for the post-office. Overjoyed at that point in time, I was unable to contain myself for joy and probably Kajaki was even happier than I was.

*Babuji* said, "You have been reinstated, Kajaki. Do not ever be late from now on."

Weeping, Kajaki fell at *Babuji's* feet. But probably I was not destined to enjoy it. When Munnu was found, I had to give up Kajaki; when Kajaki came back I had to let go Munnu. And he left me in such a way that I am sad about his departure till date. Munnu would only eat from my plate. He would not eat a bite until I sat down for my meals. Munnu was very fond of boiled rice, but he would not be satisfied till a lot of *ghee* had been added to it. He would sleep with me and wake up when I did. He had such a liking for cleanliness that he would go to a *maidan* outside the house, to defecate. He had an aversion for dogs and would not let dogs step into the house. As soon as he spotted a dog, he would leave his meals and run, chasing the dog out of the house.

Leaving Kajaki in the post office when I went to have my meal, Munnu also came and sat with me. He had eaten just a couple of mouthfuls when quite a huge shaggy dog was seen in the courtyard.

The instant Munnu saw him, he ran. A dog becomes timid as a mouse when he goes to another house. The shaggy dog fled when he saw Munnu charging at him. Munnu should have come back now but that dog was *Yama's* messenger for him. Munnu was not satisfied even with driving him out of the house. He made him run in the *maidan* outside the house as well. Probably Munnu forgot that he did not rule this place. He had reached the zone where the shaggy dog had as much control as he had. Chasing dogs repeatedly, Munnu had perhaps become proud of his strength. He did not understand that fear of the house's master would back him in the house. As soon as the shaggy dog entered the *maidan*, he pounced on Munnu and strangled him. Not even a whimper came out of poor Munnu's mouth. I ran when the neighbours shouted out loud. And I found Munnu lying down dead. There was not a sign of the shaggy dog anywhere.

# GULLI DANDA

## One

Whether our British friends agree or not, I would say that *Gulli Danda* is the king of all sports. When I see boys playing *Gulli Danda* even now, I am thrilled and want to join them. Neither does one need a lawn, nor a court, nor a net, nor a cricket bat. Cut the branch of any tree merrily, make a *gulli* out of it and start playing the game even if there are just two of you.

The biggest drawback of European sports is that their equipment is expensive. Unless one spends a hundred rupees at least, the players cannot be motivated to join the game. We have *Gulli Danda* here which is so much fun without anything being spent, but we are becoming so crazy for foreign goods that we have lost interest in all our things. Every year, each boy is charged a fee of three to four rupees in our schools just for sports. It does not occur to anyone that they should make them play Indian sports without spending a penny. British sports are for the wealthy. Why do you saddle poor boys with this addiction? Agreed, there is the fear of one's eye bursting open with the *gulli*, but then isn't there the fear of one's head splitting open, the spleen cracking or one's leg getting fractured with cricket? If the scar made on our forehead by a *gulli* is visible till date, then there are many such friends of ours, who have exchanged the cricket bat for crutches. It is a matter of one's own personal taste. I particularly like *Gulli Danda* more than all other games, it is the most pleasant of all my sweet childhood memories.

That leaving the house early in the morning, that climbing the tree and cutting its twigs and sculpting *gullis* and *dandas* from them, that enthusiasm, that intense longing, those gatherings of players, that striking and fielding, that fighting and quarrelling, that simple nature which did not have the slightest discrimination between the



rich and the poor, the touchables and untouchables; in which there was just no room for the rich showing off their arrogance and whims, will be forgotten only when... when the occupants of the house are getting angry, sitting in the eating area, father is impulsively venting his anger on the *rotis*, *Amma's* reach is just up to the door, but my dark future is rocking like a broken boat in her point of view; and here I am merrily engrossed in striking; neither am I mindful of eating nor bathing. Though the *gulli* is so small, yet it is loaded with the joy of all *tamashas* and the sweetness of all the sweets in this world.

There was a boy named Gaya amongst my playmates. He must have been about two to three years older to me. Frail, tall, with long thin monkey-like fingers, having the nimbleness of monkeys and the very same trait of getting easily enraged. The *gulli* may be of any kind, he would pounce on it just as a lizard pounces upon an insect. I do not know where he lived, what he ate, what he did, whether he had parents or not; but he was certainly the champion of our Gulli Club. Whichever side he played for, that team was bound to win! On seeing him come from a distance, all of us would run to welcome him and make him a member of our team.

One day, just the two of us, Gaya and me, were playing. He was striking and I was fielding. It is quite strange that we can merrily spend the whole day striking but even a minute of fielding can be irksome. I made all the moves including some foul ones which seemed forgivable on such an occasion to put an end to my fielding, but Gaya would not leave hold of me until I had got him out.

Continuous entreaties to wriggle out of fielding had no effect and I fled homewards.

Gaya ran and caught hold of me. Hitting me with the *danda*, he said, "Let me complete my turn and then go. You were striking very bravely. Why are you running away when it is your turn to field?"

I said, "If you strike all day, do you expect me to go on fielding?"

Gaya: "Yes of course, you will have to field the whole day."

I retorted, "Shouldn't I go home to have food or a drink of water?"

Gaya: "No, you cannot go anywhere without giving me my turn."

"Am I your slave?"

"Yes, you are."

"I am going home. Let's see how you stop me."

"How can you go home? Is this some kind of a joke? I have given you your turn and now I am going to take mine for sure."

"Is that so? Give me back the guava I gave you to eat yesterday."

"It's gone."

"Take it out then. Why did you eat my guava?"

"I ate the guava when you gave it to me. I never asked you for it."

"I am not going to give you your turn till you give me back my guava."

I thought justice was on my side. After all, I must have made Gaya eat the guava with some self-interest in mind. Who treats anyone well without any personal motive so much so that even alms are given for the sake of some selfish reason. What right had Gaya to take the turn from me when he had eaten the guava? People get away with murder by paying a bribe whereas he was going to digest my guava just like that. The guavas were five for a paisa which even Gaya's father could not dream of eating. This was absolute injustice.

Pulling me towards himself, Gaya said, "I do not give a damn about the guava. Give me my turn and then leave."

I had the justice on my side while he was hell-bent on being unjust. I wanted to free my hand and flee. He just refused to let me off! I abused him, he answered back with a harsher invective and did not merely abuse me but delivered a resounding slap as well. I bit him with my teeth and then he hit me with a stick on my back. I began howling. Gaya could not confront this weapon of mine. Instantly, I wiped my tears, forgot about the wound on being hit by the *danda* and laughing merrily, went home! The fact that I was the son of a *thanedar*, who had got a beating at the hands of an ordinary poor boy, made me feel insulted even then. But I did not complain to anyone in the house.

## Two

Soon after, my father was transferred to another town. I was so excited that I would be seeing a new world that I was not at all sorry about leaving my playmates. *Pitaji* was upset because this was a place for those who had a good income. *Amma* was also distressed as all the commodities were cheap where we had lived and she shared family-like affection with women of the *mohalla*. But I could not contain myself for joy. I was boasting to the boys that one does not

have such houses there. There are tall imposing houses there that they seem to be scraping the sky. If ever a master hits students in English schools there, he is sent to jail. The wide eyes and astonished expressions of my friends revealed how I had risen so high in their esteem. Children have the ability to transform lies into truth. How can we elders who are experts in turning truth into lies, possibly understand this? Those poor fellows were having such a sense of rivalry with me. They seemed to be saying: Go *Bhai*, you are so very fortunate; whereas we have to live and die in this very village for sure.

Twenty years went by and I took a degree in engineering. Going on an official tour to the district, I reached the same small town and stayed in the dak bungalow. Such sweet childhood memories tugged at my heart as soon as I saw the place that I picked up my walking stick and set out to take a stroll around the small town. Like some thirsty traveller, my eyes were longing to see those old haunts where we used to play sports in childhood. But there was nothing else which I was familiar with apart from the name. Brick houses stood where there had been a mass of ruins earlier. There was a beautiful garden in place of the old banyan tree. The entire look of the place had changed completely. If I did not know the name and position of the place, I could not even have recognised it. Everlasting memories amassed from childhood were impatient to embrace those old friends of theirs, but the world had changed.

I wanted to cling to that earth and cry, "You seem to have forgotten me. As for me, I still want to see that same form of yours."

All of a sudden, I saw a couple of boys playing *Gulli Danda* in an open space. For a second, I completely forgot myself. I forgot that I was a high-ranking officer with a Sahib's pomp and show, commanding prestige and authority.

I went and asked a boy, "I say, son ! Does a man by the name of Gaya live here?"

One of the boys wrapped up the *Gulli Danda* and answered timidly, "Which Gaya? Gaya, the *dalit*."

Casually, I said, "Yes, yes, the same one. At least there is a man by the name of Gaya. He might be the one."

"Yes! In fact, there is."

"Can you go and get him, please."

The boy ran and could be seen bringing along a five-foot-tall giant along with him, in a second. I could recognise him from a

distance. I wanted to jump excitedly and throw my arms around him, but some thought gave me a pause.

"Tell me, Gaya," I said. "Do you recognise me?"

Gaya bowed his head and did *salaam* to me. "Yes *malik*! Why wouldn't I recognize you. I hope you have been doing well?"

"Very well. Tell me about yourself."

"I am the Deputy Sahib's groom, Sarkar."

"Where are Matai, Mohan and Durga? Is there any news of them?"

"Matai died whereas both Durga and Mohan have become postmen. "What about you, Sarkar?"

"I am the District Engineer now."

"You were always very intelligent, Sarkar."

"Do you still play *Gulli Danda*?"

Gaya looked at me with astonished eyes, "How can I play *Gulli Danda*, Sarkar. I get no free time from earning a living, now."

"Come, you and I will play today. You strike and I will field. I owe you a turn of striking. You must take it today."

Gaya agreed to play with me. He was a poor labourer whereas I was a senior officer. How could we be equals! The poor fellow was embarrassed. I was feeling no less awkward, not because I was going to play with Gaya, but I feared that this sport would become a spectacle for the people of the town and a big crowd would gather. We would not feel the same joy with the crowd watching us, but it was not possible to refrain from playing the game. Finally, it was decided that both of us would go far from the *basti* and play in a secluded spot. Who would watch us there? We would enjoy playing and thoroughly relish that favourite sport of our childhood.

I took Gaya with me to the dak bungalow. Soon after, we sat in a car and drove down to the open field. We took a small ax along with us. I had assumed a serious expression, but Gaya was thinking this to be a joke. There was no sign of eagerness or delight on his face, even then. Probably he was preoccupied with the difference in status which had cropped up between us.

"Did you ever remember me all these years, Gaya?" I asked. "Tell me the truth."

Self-conscious, Gaya replied, "How am I worthy of remembering you, Sarkar. I was destined to play for a few days with you, otherwise where would I have featured in your life."

“But I thought of you regularly,” I admitted somewhat sadly. “Do you remember that *danda* with which you had given me a resounding blow?”

As though repentant, Gaya said, “That was boyhood, Sarkar. Do not remind me of it.”

“Goodness! That is the sweetest memory of my childhood days. I do not find the joy which was there in your *danda* either in respectability, honour, or wealth. There was something so affectionate in it that my mind keeps remembering its sweetness to this day.”

We had come about three miles out of town in the meantime. It was quiet and peaceful all around. Bhimtal sprawled to its west for miles, where we would sometimes go to pick lotus flowers; and bunching them together put them on our ears. The *Jeth* summer evening was sinking in yellow rays of the evening sun. I leapt, climbed onto a tree and cut a twig off. A *Gulli Danda* was quickly sculpted out of it. The game started. Keeping the *gulli* on a small hole, I hit it, making it leap into the air. The *gulli* flew past Gaya. He threw his hand as if he was about to catch a fish, but the *gulli* fell behind him. This was the very same Gaya in whose hands the *gulli* seemed to come and sit on its own. It could land anywhere, to the right or left, the *gulli* would somehow reach the palms of his hands, for sure. As if he had cast a spell on the *gulli* by the chanting of a *mantra*. All of them, a new *Gulli*, an old *Gulli*, a small *Gulli*, a big *Gulli*, a pointed *Gulli*, a smoothed *Gulli*, would be drawn to him. As if his hands had some magnet which would attract the *gullis*.

However, it appeared that the *gulli* did not have the same affection for him today. Then I began striking. I resorted to all sorts of tricks, making up for the lack of experience by dishonesty. Even on missing the target, I was free to use the *danda* for striking although by the rule it should have been Gaya's turn to strike. When an ineffective strike would fall on the *gulli* and it would fall down at a short distance, I would quickly go and get it myself; and hit the *gulli* again with the *danda*. Gaya was watching this foul play, but he did not say a word, as if he had forgotten all those rules and regulations. He had been so perfect at hitting the mark. The *gulli* would dart from his hand and hit the *danda* with a clang. Its aim was to flash forth from his hand and dash into the *danda*; but somehow the *gulli* would just not hit the *danda* today. It would rush to the right at times, to the left sometimes, to the front at other times and sometimes behind.

After striking for half an hour, the *gulli* came and hit the *danda*, once.

I cheated, "The *gulli* did not hit the *danda*; it went past really close but did not hit."

Surprisingly, Gaya did not retaliate in any way, "Probably it would not have hit the *danda*."

"If it had hit the *danda*, I wouldn't cheat, would I?"

"No *Bhaiya*! Why would you cheat."

I would never dared to get away with such fraud in childhood. This very same Gaya would have climbed on to my back by now, but how easily I was deceiving him today. He was such a fool ! He had forgotten everything.

All of a sudden, the *gulli* hit the *danda* again and as loudly as if a pistol had been shot. In front of this, I could not muster courage to resort to any sort of deceit, but why shouldn't I try saying that all this was not true. In fact, what was the harm? It would be wonderful if he agreed, or else I would just have to field a couple of times. Making an excuse of the dark, I would quickly release myself from this predicament. Why would I bother to come and give my turn of fielding thereafter?

Thrilled at the thought of winning, Gaya was enthused, "It has hit! It has hit! With a twang."

Pretending to be puzzled I said, "Did you see it hit the *danda*? I did not."

"Sarkar, it has hit with a twang."

"And what if it has dashed against a brick?"

I am myself surprised how this sentence was uttered by me at that point. It was just like saying that the day was night. Both of us had seen the *gulli* forcefully hit the *danda* but Gaya accepted my statement.

"Yes, it must have hit some brick. There would not have been such a loud sound if it had hit the *danda*."

I began striking once again, but pitied Gaya's simplicity after having cheated so obviously. That was why when the *gulli* hit the *danda* a third time I generously decided to let him strike.

Gaya suggested, "*Bhaiya*, it has grown dark now. Let us keep the game for tomorrow."

I thought there would be a lot of time tomorrow and you never know how long he might make me field. Therefore it would be better to settle the matter right now.

“No, no! There is plenty of light yet. You must take your turn.”

“We won’t be able to see the *gulli*.”

“It does not matter.” I answered.

Gaya began striking, but he was totally lacking in practice now. Twice he tried to hit the *gulli*, but failed both times. He lost his turn to strike in less than a minute.

I demonstrated my generosity, “Play another turn of striking. You got out in the very first round.”

“No, *Bhaiya*! It is dark now.”

“You have lost practice. Don’t you ever play?”

“When can I get the time to play, *Bhaiya*.”

Both of us went and sat in the car. We reached our destination by the time the lamps were lit.

While leaving, Gaya said, “There will be a match of *gulli danda* here tomorrow. All the old players will be playing. Will you also come? I will call for the players only when you have free time.”

I said the evening would be fine and went to see the match the next day. The teams had ten men each and several of them turned out to be friends of my boyhood. Most of them were youngsters whom I could not recognize. The game began. Sitting in the car, I began watching the show. I was astonished to see Gaya’s game and his old skill today.

When he would strike the *gulli*, it seemed to reach the sky. Yesterday’s reservation that hesitation and that dejection were missing today. The childish talent of boyhood had matured now. The *gulli* would fly in the air on being struck by his *danda* and land at least two hundred yards away on the ground. If he had made me field like this yesterday, I would have been reduced to tears, for sure.

One of the young boys amongst the fielders cheated! According to him, he had sprung forward and caught the *gulli*, whereas the *gulli* had touched the ground and then flown into the air, according to Gaya. Both of them reached the stage of challenging each other on this issue. The young boy yielded. He was scared to see Gaya’s flushed face. There would certainly have been a brawl if he had not given in.

I was not playing, but in this sport which the others were playing, I felt the joyous abandon of boyhood when forgetting everything else, we would be engrossed in the game with delight.

I knew now that Gaya had not played with me yesterday, but just pretended to do so. He thought I was a person who ought to be pitied. I cheated and was dishonest, but he was not offended at all. Because he was not playing, but making me play, he was indulging me, allowing me to win. He did not want to make mincemeat out of me by making me field. He remembered that I was an officer now. This officialdom stood between us like a wall. I could get his regard and respect now, but not his companionship. I was of the same category as he in boyhood, but had become just an object of pity for him on achieving this high rank. He did not consider me to be a match for him. Gaya, the dalit, had become great whereas I, the District Engineer, had grown small.



## A TALE OF TWO OXEN

### One

A donkey is considered the most stupid of animals. When we want to call some person a fool of the first order, we call him a donkey. Whether a donkey is actually foolish, or his simplicity and tolerance have given him this title cannot be ascertained. A cow gores us with her horns, a cow which has given birth to a calf, unintentionally assumes the form of a lioness. Even the dog is a very modest animal, but he gets angry at times. But one has never seen or heard of a donkey getting enraged. You may beat him as much as you want to, you may put bad rotten grass in front of him, but you will never see even a shade of discontent on his face. He may frolic a couple of times in the month of *Baisakh* but we have never seen him happy. A permanent sadness overcasts his face all the time. We have never seen him change in any state whether there is joy or sorrow, loss or gain. All the virtues of *rishis* and *munis* have peaked in the donkey, but man considers him to be a fool. One has never seen such disrespect of good qualities anywhere else. Perhaps simplicity does not befit this mundane world.

However, the donkey has another younger brother who is less stupid than he is and that is the ox. We use the phrase '*bachiye ke tau*' (the calf's uncle) meaning a dolt in a sense somewhat similar to the word 'donkey.' Some people might say that oxen are foremost amongs fools, but this is not our view. An ox gores at times and occasionally we get to see obstinate oxen as well. He expresses his dissatisfaction in several other ways. Therefore, its position is lower than a donkey's.

Heera and Moti were the names of the vegetable farmer Jhuri's two oxen. Both of them were of upcountry breed, diligent in their work and tall in stature. Having lived together for so many days,



they had developed a sort of brotherly bond. They would exchange ideas in a mute language while sitting face to face or by the side of each other. We cannot say how one would understand what the other was thinking. There was certainly some mysterious power in them, which humans who claim to be the best of living beings, are deprived of. The two of them would express their love by licking and sniffing each other. At times, both would lock their horns not for quarrelling, but for fun's sake. With a feeling of kinship, just as friends end up slapping and pummeling each other as soon as there is closeness between them. Without this, friendship remains somewhat flimsy and superficial, which one cannot have much trust in. When both these oxen were yoked to the plough or cart and walked ahead swinging their necks, each one of them tried that the maximum load should fall on his neck at that time. After the day's work, when both of them were untied in the afternoon or evening, they would repeatedly lick and nuzzle each other to ease their fatigue. Both of them would get up together when the manger had been loaded with oilseed cakes and straw, put their muzzles in the trough together and sit down side by side. If one of them withdrew his mouth, the other would do the same.

By chance, Jhuri sent the pair to his father-in-law's house once. How were they to know why they were being sent off. They assumed that their master had sold them. Who knows whether they liked or disliked being sold off like this, but Gaya, Jhuri's brother-in-law, was totally exhausted when he undertook the tough task of taking the pair home. They would run right and left when he would goad them from behind, they would pull backwards when he tugged them from the front by their ropes. If he hit them, they would lower their horns and snort in protest.

If God had given them the power of speech, they would have asked Jhuri, "Why are you turning us poor wretches out? We have not fallen short of serving you in any way. If working as hard as we did was not enough for the job, we were willing to die in your service. We never complained about the fodder which you gave us to eat. Submissively we ate whatever you offered us. Why then did you sell us off to this tyrant?"

Both the oxen reached their new home by evening. They had been hungry all day, but when they were taken to the manger, neither of them put his mouth in it because their hearts were heavy. What

they had considered as their home had been taken away from them today. They found the new house, the new village and new people to be strange and unfamiliar.

Glancing at each other out of the corner of their eyes, both of them had a silent consultation and lay down. When everyone in the village fell asleep, they forcibly broke the ropes fastened around their necks and headed homewards. The ropes which tethered them were so strong, no one could imagine that some oxen could break them but both of them had become doubly powerful at this point. The ropes had snapped with one violent jolt each.

Early in the morning, when Jhuri woke up from sleep, he saw both the oxen standing at the trough. Half of the broken tethers dangling around their necks, their legs covered with mud up to the knees and resentful love gleaming in their eyes.

On seeing the oxen home, Jhuri was overjoyed with affection. He ran and hugged them. That scene of a loving embrace and kiss was very touching.

Boys of the household and the village gathered and began welcoming the oxen by clapping their hands in joy. This incident was significant even though it was not unprecedented in the history of the village. The assemblage of children decided that both the heroic animals should be given a ceremonial welcome. Someone ran and got *rotis* from his house. Others brought raw sugar, bran and straw for them.

One of the boys cried, "Nobody else has such oxen!"

Another boy seconded him, "Just imagine, both of them walked home by themselves from so far away!"

A third piped in, "They must have been humans in their previous lifetime. They are not ordinary oxen."

No one had the courage to contradict this statement.

When Jhuri's wife saw the oxen at the gate, she was furious. "Such ungrateful wretches, They did not work at my father's place for a single day and fled."

Jhuri could not hear this accusation against his oxen, "Why are they ungrateful? They must not have been given fodder and grain, so what could they do?"

"Enough! Only you know how to feed oxen whereas others make them survive just on water," his wife said haughtily.

Jhuri teased her, "Why would they run away if they had been given fodder?"

His wife took offence, "They ran because those people do not pamper and spoil them the way fools like you do. If they feed the oxen, they make them work really hard. These two love to shirk work, so they ran away. We'll see where they get bran and oilcakes now. I am not going to give them anything except dry straw, whether they eat or starve."

That is exactly what happened. The hired hand was given strict instructions that the oxen should only be given dry straw to eat.

When they put their mouths in the trough, everything seemed insipid. There was no flavour. What should they eat? They stared at the door with eyes full of hope.

Jhuri told the hired hand, "Why don't you add some oilcakes, you wretch!"

"The *malkin* will surely kill me."

"Add it secretly."

"No *dada* ! You also will take her side, afterwards."

## Two

Jhuri's brother-in-law came again the next day and took the oxen back with him. This time he yoked both of them to a cart.

Moti tried to throw the cart into a ditch a couple of times, but Hira held him back. He was more tolerant of the two.

Reaching home by the evening, Gaya tethered both of them with thick ropes and punished them for yesterday's mischief. Again he put the same dry straw before them while he fed his own oxen with oilseed cakes, coarsely ground grain, everything.

Never before had both the oxen been insulted so much. Jhuri would not strike them even with a stick covered with flowers. Both of them would race like the wind when he urged them on with his clacking tongue whereas here they were beaten. Besides the pain of being flogged and insulted, they had to put up with dry straw.

They did not so much as raise their eyes towards the trough.

Gaya yoked them to the plough the next day, but it seemed both of them had sworn not to lift their feet. He got exhausted beating them, but not a foot would they lift. Once when the heartless fellow

delivered cruel blows on Hira's nose with his cane, Moti could no longer control his anger. He ran away with the plough at such speed that the plough, rope, yoke of two bars and strap all broke into pieces and were ruined. Had the oxen not had thick ropes around their necks, it would have been impossible to catch either of them.

Hira said in a mute language, "Trying to run away is useless."

Moti answered, "He almost killed you today."

"We are going to be thrashed this time."

"So what! We were born as oxen, so how long can we escape being beaten."

"Gaya is running towards us with two men. Both of them have *lathis* in their hands."

Moti fumed, "I can teach them a lesson if you say so. Here he comes charging at us with a *lathi*."

Hira pacified him, "No *Bhai* ! Just stand still."

Moti: "If he hits me I am going to knock down a couple of them."

Hira: "No! That would be going against the *dharma* of our community."

Moti stood stiffly, protesting in his heart. Gaya reached the spot and catching hold of both of them, took them to the house. It was fortunate that he did not beat them at that time, or else Moti would have also struck back. Gaya and his accomplices understood on seeing his angry expression that it would be best to put off the matter.

The same dry straw was brought before both of them today. The two oxen stood silently. People of the house began eating their meal. Right then, a small little girl holding two *rotis* stepped out of the house and putting one each in the mouths of Hira and Moti, ran back. How could a *roti* each satisfy their hunger, but it seemed as if the hunger in their hearts had been quelled. A good soul lived here too. The girl was Bhairo's daughter and her mother had passed away. Her step-mother would keep beating her and that was why she had developed a sort of kinship with these oxen who were ill-treated.

Both of them were forced to slog the entire day and were beaten when they rebelled. They were tethered to the stall every evening and the same little girl would feed them two *rotis* in the night. The boon of this loving gesture had such power that they did not become weak even with just a few mouthfuls of dry straw. But revolt seethed in their eyes and every pore of their being.

One day Moti said, "Hira, I cannot bear this any longer."

Hira: "What do you want to do?"

Moti: "I will lift a couple of them on my horns and hurl them down."

Hira: "But do you know that the sweet girl who feeds us is the daughter of the man who is the master of this house. The poor thing will be orphaned."

Moti: "In that case, shouldn't I throw down the mistress of this house. She is the one who beats that girl."

Hira: "But you forget that we are forbidden to attack a woman with our horns."

Moti: "You just do not let us break loose in any way. How about breaking these ropes and running away?"

Hira: "Yes, I agree. But how are we going to break such thick ropes."

Moti: "There is a way out. Chew the ropes a bit first. Then they should break with one strong tug."

At night, when the little girl had fed them with *rotis* and gone, both of them began chewing the ropes. But the thick rope would not come into their mouths. The poor fellows tugged over and over again but the ropes did not give way.

All of a sudden, the door of the house opened and that same girl stepped out. Both the oxen lowered their heads and began licking her hand lovingly. Their tails stood up with joy.

She caressed their foreheads and said, "I am about to untie your ropes. Run away quietly, or else the people here will kill you. I heard them discussing today that rings should be put through your noses."

She untethered them, but both Hira and Moti stood still.

Moti asked in his language, "Why don't we make a move."

Hira replied, "We could, but this orphan will be tortured tomorrow. Everyone is going to suspect her alone."

All of a sudden, the little girl shouted, "Both the oxen which belonged to *phupha* are running away. Oh *dada* ! Run quickly, they are both fleeing."

Hurriedly Gaya rushed out of the house and ran to catch the oxen. Both ran. He chased them. They ran even faster. Gaya shouted for help and then turned back to get some men from the village. Both the friends got a chance to escape. They ran straight on, so much so that they had no idea where they were heading. There was no sign of the familiar path by which they had come here. On the way they

crossed new villages. Then they both stood by the side of a field and began thinking as to what should be done.

Hira said, "We have lost the way, it seems."

Moti: "You ran recklessly. We should have knocked Gaya dead, right there."

Hira: "What would the world say if we had done that? He may abandon his *dharma*, but why should we give up ours?"

Both of them were famished with hunger. A crop of peas stood in the field. They began grazing. They would stop at intervals to check if someone was coming.

When their stomachs were full they frisked about merrily, enjoying their freedom. Both of them burped at first. Then they locked their horns in a fake battle and began pushing each other. Moti pushed Hira back by several steps so that he fell into a ditch. That was when the usually calm Hira was enraged. He got up carefully and then grappled with Moti once again. When Moti saw the playful battle turning real, he stepped aside.

### Three

Oh! What is this, snorting angrily, a bull could be seen coming in their direction. Yes it was a bull, for sure. He came and stood menacingly in front of them. Both the friends were in a dilemma. The bull was huge just like an elephant. To fight with him meant death for certain. But it seemed they could not save their lives even if they did not grapple with him as he was charging straight at them. How terrifying he was to look at!

Moti said in a mute language, "We are trapped. Will we be able to save our lives? Think of some way out."

Worried, Hira said, "The bull is bloated with arrogance and is not going to listen to any entreaty of ours."

Moti: "Why shouldn't we run away then?"

Hira: "It would be cowardly to do so."

Moti: "In that case you stay put here and face the consequences. I am sneaking away quietly."

Hira: "And what if he goes after you?"

Moti: "Well then, think of some solution fast."

Hira: "I feel that we both must attack him jointly. I'll chase him

from the front and you chase him from the back. He will flee for his life when he is doubly attacked. If he pounces on me, you thrust your horns into his stomach from the side. Our life is at risk, but we have no other choice."

Putting their lives at stake, both of them leapt at the bull. The bull was not experienced in fighting united enemies either. He was used to wrestling with just one opponent at a time. As soon as he pounced on Hira, Moti charged at him from the rear. When the bull turned to confront Moti, Hira chased him from the back. The bull wanted to knock them down, one by one, but the two of them were champions too.

They would not give him a chance. Once the enraged bull charged at Hira to kill him, but he was gored in the stomach by Moti who charged at him from the side. Infuriated, when the bull turned around to face Moti, Hira thrust his horns into the bull's other side. Finally, the poor bull was wounded and took to his heels. Both the friends chased him a long distance. So much so that the bull collapsed out of exhaustion. That was when both of them spared him. Intoxicated by their triumph, both the friends strutted along.

In his sign language, Moti said, "I really wanted to finish off that horrid fellow."

Hira scolded him, "We should not gore the enemy when he is down."

Moti: "All that is hypocrisy. An enemy must be hit so hard that he can never get up again."

Hira: "Think of how we are going to reach home now."

Moti: "Let us eat something first and then think about it."

The field of peas lay in front of them. Moti barged into it. Hira kept stopping him, but he paid no heed. Moti had just had a couple of mouthfuls when two men ran at them with *lathis*, and surrounded the two friends. Hira was at the field's boundary-mound, so he escaped. Whereas Moti was in an irrigated field, so his hooves began sinking into the wet mud. He could not run and was caught. When Hira saw that his friend was in danger, he came back. If they were to be trapped, then both of them would be trapped together. The watchmen caught hold of Hira too. Early next morning, the two friends were locked up in a cattle pound.

## Four

For the first time in their lives, both the friends had to face a situation where they did not get even a shred of fodder to eat the entire day. They just could not understand what sort of a man their new master was. Even Gaya had been less cruel than he was. There were several buffaloes, goats, horses and donkeys here. But there was no fodder in front of any of them while all of them lay like corpses on the ground. Some of them had become so weak that they could not even stand. Both the friends spent the whole day staring fixedly at the gate, but no one could be seen bringing the fodder. In desperation, both of them began licking the saline clay of the wall, but how could their hunger be appeased by this.

When they did not get any food even at night, revolt blazed in Hira's heart.

He told Moti: "I cannot bear this any longer, Moti."

Disheartened, with his head hanging down, Moti said, "I feel as if I am about to die."

Hira: "*Bhai*, don't lose heart so fast! We must find a way to escape from here."

Moti: "Come! Let us bring the wall down the wall."

Hira, "I do not have the strength to do anything now."

Moti: "Is this the strength you used to brag about?"

Hira: "All my conceit has vanished."

The wall of the cattle pound was weak since it was made of raw bricks. Hira was strong, for sure. He gored his pointed horns into the wall. A chunk of the clay came out when he pushed hard. This encouraged him further. He rammed at the wall with his horns again and again and bits of clay began falling down with each blow.

Carrying a lantern in his hand, the *chowkidar* of the cattle pound came in to check the attendance of the animals at that very moment. Seeing Hira's rebelliousness, he landed several blows on him with his *lathi* and tethered him with a thick rope.

Lying famished on the ground, Moti said, "After all, you were just beaten up, what did you get?"

Hira: "At least I made good use of all the strength I had."

Moti: "What is the point of using force if you are tethered even more firmly?"

Hira: "However much I may be bound, I am going to continue using my strength."

Moti: "You will have to wash your hands of your life eventually."

Hira: "I do not care. One has to die even otherwise. Just think of how many lives would have been saved if the wall had given way. So many of our friends are locked up here. Nobody has any energy left in their bodies. All of them will die if they continue to be in the same plight for another couple of days."

Moti: "Yes, that is certainly true. All right then! I will push with all my might too."

Moti also rammed his horns at the same spot in the wall. Some of the clay fell and he became bolder then. That was when he thrust his horns into the wall and pushed so hard as if he was fighting a rival. Finally, the wall fell about one foot from the top, roughly after two hours of pushing hard. When Moti pushed a second time with redoubled energy, half the wall fell down.

The wall had just to fall for all the animals who were lying down half-dead, to become alert. The three mares galloped and ran away. Soon after the goats escaped. Even the buffaloes slipped away after them, but the donkeys stood exactly where they were.

Hira asked, "Why don't both of you run away?"

One of the donkeys said, "What if we are caught once again?"

Hira: "So what is the harm. You have a chance to escape right now."

Donkeys: "We are scared. We will continue to languish here."

More than half the night had passed. Both the donkeys were still standing and thinking whether they should escape or not. Moti was busy breaking his friend's rope.

When Moti gave up, Hira urged, "You leave and let me remain here. We might meet somewhere in the future."

His eyes filling with tears, Moti said, "Hira, you consider me to be so selfish? You and I have been together for so long. Should we separate and abandon you just because you are in dire distress today?"

Hira said, "You will get a terrible beating if you stay on. People will figure out that this is your mischief."

Moti said with pride, "How does it matter even if I am beaten for the same offence for which you were bound by the neck? At least we have been able to save the lives of nine to ten living beings. All of them will bless us, for sure."

Saying so, Moti repeatedly hit the donkeys with his horns and pushed them out of the enclosure. Then he came and slept beside his friend.

There is no need to write about the panic which broke loose amongst the *munshi*, *chowkidar* and other workers as soon as the next day dawned. It is enough to say that Moti was beaten mercilessly, he was also tethered with a thick rope.

### Five

Both the friends lay there helplessly, tied down for a week. Nobody put even a shred of fodder in front of them. Yes, they were given water once a day and this was why they survived. Both of them had become so weak that they could hardly stand up. They were reduced to mere skin and bones.

One day a kettledrum began to be sounded in front of the enclosure and fifty to sixty people gathered there by the afternoon. Soon after, both the friends were taken out and scrutinised. People would come, look them over and go back without any interest. Who would want to buy such half-dead oxen?

All of a sudden, a bearded man with red eyes and a very cruel facial expression came. Jabbing his finger into their buttocks, he began bargaining with the *munshi*. Seeing his face, the hearts of both the friends intuitively trembled in fear. They had no doubt about who he was and why he was testing them by feeling their buttocks. Both of them looked at each other with frightened eyes and hung their heads.

Hira said, "We ran from Gaya's house for nothing. We are doomed and will not be able to save our lives now."

Moti replied with lack of faith, "People say that God has mercy on everyone. Why doesn't He have pity on us?"

Hira: "Whether we live or die, it's the same for God. Anyway, it is nice that we will stay with Him for some days. God rescued us once in the form of that girl. Won't He save us now?"

Moti: "Just wait and watch! This man is surely going to butcher us with his knife."

Hira: "Why worry then? Our flesh, hide, horns and bones will all be put to use in some way or the other."

After being auctioned off, both the friends went along with the bearded man. Every fibre of their bodies was trembling in fear. The poor oxen could not even lift their hooves but fear made them scramble along at a fast pace because he would deliver heavy blows on them with his wooden stick if they slowed down even a bit.

On the way they saw a herd of cows and oxen grazing in a luxuriant green field. All the animals were so happy, well-fed and spirited. Some of them were frisking about and others sat calmly chewing the cud.

How happy was their way of life, but how selfish were they all! No one was bothered about how sad two of their friends were on being sold to a butcher.

Suddenly this seemed like a familiar path to Hira and Moti. Yes, of course! Gaya had taken them by this very path. They came across the same fields, the same gardens and the same villages on the way. Their pace began to increase every moment. All their exhaustion and weakness seemed to vanish. Ah, guess what! They had reached their own pasture. It was the same well. It was at this very well that they used to drive the leather bag for drawing water.

Moti said, "We are approaching our home."

Hira exclaimed, "Thank God for His kindness."

Moti: "I am going to run homewards now."

Hira: "Will he let you go?"

Moti: "I am going to knock him down if he stops me."

Hira: "No, don't do that. Let us run towards our stable. We are not going any further from there."

Wildly excited, both of them frolicked like calves and ran towards the house saying, that is our stall. Both of them ran towards their stall and stood there. The bearded man came running after them.

Jhuri was sitting at his house door and basking in the sun. He ran as soon as he saw the oxen and hugged them, one after the other. Tears of joy streamed down the eyes of the two friends. One of them began licking Jhuri's hand in a great burst of affection.

The butcher went and caught hold of the tethers tied around the oxen's necks.

Jhuri asserted, "They are my oxen."

The bearded man: "How can they be yours? I have just bought them from an auction at the cattle pound."

Jhuri: "Well, I think you have stolen and got them. You better

leave quietly. They are my oxen. They can be sold only if I sell them. Who has the right to auction my oxen?"

The bearded man: "Should I go and lodge a report against you at the *thana*?"

Jhuri: "They are my oxen. The fact that they are standing at my door is proof enough."

Enraged, the bearded man moved ahead to forcibly catch hold of the oxen and take them away. Moti threatened him with his horns at that very moment. The bearded man moved back. Moti chased him.

The butcher ran for his life. Moti frantically ran after him in hot pursuit. He stopped only after stepping out of the village boundary, but kept looking at the butcher. Standing safely at a distance, the bearded man was threatening him, abusing him and pelting stones. Moti stood blocking his way like a triumphant warrior. The villagers were watching this *tamasha* and having a hearty laugh. When the butcher gave up eventually and went his way, only then Moti came back strutting home.

Hira said, "I was afraid that you might end up killing him in anger."

Moti: "If he had caught hold of me, I would not have spared his life."

Hira: "He won't come back now."

Moti: "If he does, I am going to teach him a lesson. Let us see how he dares to take us."

Hira: "What if he gets us shot by a bullet?"

Moti: "I would die rather than be of any use to him."

Hira: "No one thinks that our lives are precious."

Moti: "That is because we are so simple and gullible."

A little later, the troughs were filled with oil-cakes, straw, bran and grain. Both the friends began to eat happily. Jhuri stood by and lovingly stroked Hira and Moti. Scores of village boys were excitedly watching the spectacle. A sort of enthusiasm seemed to pervade the entire village.

Right then the *malkin* came and lovingly kissed the foreheads of Hira and Moti.

## PANCH PARMESHWAR

### One

Jumman Sheikh and Algu Chowdhury were the best of friends. They would do farming in partnership. Some of their business dealings were also joint. Each of them had implicit trust in the other. When Jumman had gone on *Hajj* he had entrusted his house to Algu. And whenever Algu had to travel, he would ask Jumman to take care of his house. Neither did they eat together at the same table nor was there any connection of religion. They were simply likeminded. And that indeed is the root *mantra* of friendship.

This friendship was born when both of them were still young boys. And Jumrati, Jumman's respected father, used to teach them. Algu had truly served his *guru*. He had scrubbed many plates and washed many cups. At this place Jumrati's *hookah* could not take rest for even a moment. For, every *chillum* would free Algu from his books, for half an hour.

Algu's father was a man of the old school of thought. He believed more in serving and pleasing the guru rather than in formal education. He used to say that knowledge cannot be acquired only by studying; whatever happens is by the guru's blessings. One needs the grace of guruji. Just in case Jumrati Sheikh's blessings and company were not fruitful, Algu would have the assurance that he had left nothing undone, as far as possible, while studying. How could Algu study when he was not destined to do so?

Jumrat Sheikh, however, did not believe in blessings himself. He had more faith in his logical thinking. Jumman was worshipped in the neighbouring villages because of the power of his reasoning.

Even the court clerk could not find fault with the mortgage deeds written by him. The area's postman, the constable and the *tahsil* peon would all long to win his favour. While Algu was respected because

of his wealth, Jumman Sheikh was held in high esteem by everyone because of his invaluable education.

## Two

Jumman Sheikh had an old *Khala*, an aunt. She owned some property but had no close relatives. Jumman had made many false promises to look after her and had her property transferred in his name. The aunt was treated respectfully and with due hospitality until the will was registered. She was offered many delicious dishes to eat. She was showered with *halwas* and *pulao*. But the stamp of registry seemed to have put a seal on this hospitality as well. Kariman, Jumman's wife, began to serve some spicy hot *salan* of bitter words along with the *rotis*. Jumman also became callous towards her. Poor *Khalajan* had to listen to such taunts everyday now.

Kariman would say, "I wonder how long the old woman is going to live. She thinks she has bought us by merely giving a few *bighas* of barren land! She just cannot swallow *rotis* without seasoned lentils. We could have bought the entire village with the amount of money we are having to spend on her!"

*Khalajan* heard the insulting remarks for some time and bore them, but when it became unbearable, she complained to Jumman. He thought that it was best not to interfere in the management of the lady of the house, who controlled the house affairs. Somehow they managed to live with each other for some more time in misery.

Eventually, *Khala* told Jumman one day, "*Beta!* I will not be able to carry on living with you. You give me an allowance and I will cook and eat separately on my own"

Shamelessly, Jumman retorted, "Does money grow on trees here?"

*Khala* said meekly, "Do I also need some bare food to exist or not?"

Solemnly, Jumman replied, "At that time, we had never thought that you would never die."

*Khala* grew angry and threatened to assemble a panchayat.

Jumman laughed just as a *shikari* smirks on seeing a deer heading towards a trap.

He said, "Yes, you ought to assemble the panchayat. The matter



must be settled. I myself do not like this bickering, day in and day out."

Jumman did not have the slightest doubt as to who would win the case in the panchayat. Who in the neighbouring villages was not obliged to him for the favours they had received? Who could dare to become his enemy? Who had the power to confront him? Angels from the sky were certainly not going to come down to form the panchayat.

### Three

Thereafter, with a walking stick in her hand, old *Khala* kept running from pillar to post in the neighbouring villages, for several days. Her back was bent till it had become almost like a bow. It was tough for her to walk every step. However, as the problem had cropped up, a conclusion had to be reached.

There was hardly an honourable person in front of whom the old woman would not have shed tears of grief. Some of them would hum and haw superficially and evade the matter.

Others reviled the times for this injustice and remarked, "You are on the verge of death. You could die any of these days, tomorrow would be a fresh start, but your lust for more does not accept this fact. What do you want now? Eat food and take the name of Allah. What do you want with farming now."

There were also some gentlemen who got a good chance to ridicule her. A bent back, a toothless face, unkempt hair; why wouldn't they laugh when such features marked her appearance? There were very few righteous and compassionate people who loved the needy, who would have carefully listened to the misery of the helpless woman and consoled her. After having wandered everywhere, the poor woman came to Algu Chowdhary.

Throwing down her walking stick, she stood for a few moments to catch her breath and said, "*Beta*, You must also come to the panchayat for a short while."

Algu: "What would you call me for? Men from many villages are coming, in any case."

*Khala*: "I have wept about my miserable situation in front of everyone. Whether they come or not is up to them now."

Algu: "I will come if you say so, but will not speak a word in the panchayat."

*Khala*: "Why *beta*?"

*Algu*: "What can I say now? It's my wish. Jumman is an old friend of mine. I cannot spoil my relations with him."

*Khala*: "*Beta*! You won't speak the truth for fear of getting estranged from him?"

We are unaware when we are robbed of the entire wealth of our dormant *dharma* but come to our senses on being challenged. No one can triumph over us then. *Algu* could not give any answer to this question. But these words, "You won't speak the truth for fear of getting estranged from him?" kept echoing in his heart.

#### Four

A few days later, the panchayat assembled under a tree one evening. Sheikh Jumman had made seating arrangements beforehand for those who were expected and provided *paan*, *elaichi*, *hookah-tambaku* etc., for them. Yes, he himself was sitting a bit away from *Algu Chowdhury*. When someone would come to the panchayat, he would welcome him quietly with a *salaam*. As the sun set and the panchayat of chirping birds sat on trees, the panchayat began here too. Every finger length of the ground on the floor was packed with people but most of them were spectators. Only those who had to settle some score with Jumman had come. Fire was smouldering in a corner. The barber was filling *chillum* after *chillum*. It was difficult to decide whether more smoke rose from the smouldering cow-dung cakes or from puffs of the *chillum*. Boys were running here and there. Some of them would abuse each other and some would cry. There was commotion all around. Assuming this gathering to be a feast, the village dogs had collected in hordes.

When the honourable *panchs* sat down, old *Khala* made an entreaty, "*Pancho* ! It has been three years now since I transferred all my assets in the name of my nephew. Jumman had agreed to look after me as long as I lived. You all must be knowing this fact. I somehow managed to pass a year with him in misery. However, I cannot bear it, day in and day out, now. Neither am I given enough food to fill my stomach nor clothes to cover my body. I am a forlorn widow, alone in this world. I cannot go to court. Who else should I talk to about my plight except you all? I will take the path which you people decide on.

“Slap me on my face if you see some fault in me. If Jumman is at fault ask him, why does he want to bear the consequences of ill treating an old woman? I will willingly accept the *panch*'s command, with due respect.”

Many debtors of Ramdhan Mishra had been persuaded by Jumman to come and work in his village.

Ramdhan spoke, “Miya Jumman! Who do you appoint as the *panchs*? Decide this right now. Afterwards you will have to abide by whatever the *panchs* decide.”

Jumman saw that most people who were present would not support him out of enmity.

Jumman retorted in anger, “The order of the *panchs* is Allah's command. *Khalajan* can appoint whomsoever she wants. I have no objection.”

*Khala* screamed, “Oh, slave of Allah! Why don't you reveal the name of the *panchs*. Let me also know something.”

Jumman fumed, “Do not force me to open my mouth at this point. Appoint whosoever you want as a *panch* to the best of your ability.”

*Khalajan* understood Jumman's implication.

She replied, “Beta! Be afraid of God! What are you talking about? The *panchs* are neither anyone's friends nor enemies. Let it be if you do not trust anyone in this assembly. But you do hold Algu Chowdhury in high esteem, don't you? Well, I appoint him as the *sarpanch*.”

Jumman Sheikh swelled with joy, but hid his feelings, “Let it be Chowdhury. Algu and Ramdhan Mishra are the same for me.”

Algu did not want to be involved in this mess.

He tried to avoid the situation, “*Khala*! You very well know that I have a close friendship with Jumman.’

*Khala* spoke in a grave tone, “Beta! No one sells one's integrity for the sake of friendship. God resides in the heart of a *panch*. The words which the mouths of *panchs* are spoken by God.’

Algu Choudhury became the *sarpanch*. Ramdhan Mishra and Jumman's other enemies cursed the old woman in their minds for making this foolish choice.

Algu Choudhury said, “Jumman Sheikh! You and I are old friends! You helped me when need arose and I also served you in whichever way I could. But you and old *Khala* are equal in the eyes

of the panchayat. Make an appeal, say whatever you to have to say to the *panchs*."

Jumman was fully confident that he would win the case now and was sure that Algu was pretending to be impartial.

So he made his appeal calmly, "*Pancho*, it has been three years since *Khalajan* had bequeathed her property in my name. In return, I had agreed to provide her with food and clothing as long as she lived. God is witness to the fact that I have not troubled her in any way. I regard her as my own mother and attending to her needs is my duty. But what can I do if there is some discord between the women of the household, off and on? *Khalajan* wants that I should give her a monthly allowance, separately. The size of the property is not hidden from the *Panchs*. I do not get so much income from it that I can pay her expenses. Moreover, there is no mention of monthly expenses in the gift deed. Otherwise, I would not have got into this mess on any account. This is all I have to say. The *Panchs* can pronounce whatever judgement they want to."

Algu Choudhury would have to deal frequently with legal matters. Therefore, he was no less than a seasoned lawyer. He began cross-questioning Jumman. Every question would fall like a hammer's blow on Jumman's heart. Ramdhan Mishra was fascinated by these impartial questions. Jumman was amazed as to what had happened to Algu. Just a moment ago, Algu had been talking so candidly to him. Such a transformation had taken place in this short while that Algu was hell bent on uprooting him. You never know, Algu may be getting even with him for some old grudge? Will such a long friendship of theirs not be of any use to him?

Jumman Sheikh was pondering over this maze when Algu pronounced the verdict, "Jumman Sheikh! The *Panchs* have examined this case carefully. They feel it is ethical that *Khalajan* should be given a monthly allowance for her maintenance. We are sure that there is definitely enough income from *Khala's* property that her monthly expenditure can be paid for. And so, this is our decision. If Jumman does not agree to pay a reasonable amount of money to her, the gift deed would be considered annulled."

## Five

The moment Jumman heard this verdict of the panchayat, he was in a state of shock. When one's friend behaves like an enemy and causes pain, what can we call this act except duplicity of this age? The one whom Jumman had trusted completely, deceived him in time of need. True and false friends are tested on such occasions. Such is the friendship of *Kaliyuga*. Would there have been such a spate of disasters in the country if such malicious and deceitful people did not exist? Cholera, plague and other diseases were actually punishments inflicted for such wicked deeds.

However, Ramdhan Mishra and other *Panchs* were raving about the righteous judgement of Algu Choudhury from the core of their hearts. They would say—this is actually a true panchyat! Algu adjudicated unerringly by discerning the truth from lies like separating milk from water. Friendship has its own standing, but upholding *dharma* is of utmost importance. The whole earth is held in by place of such truthful people. Or else it would have perished by going into *rasatal*, the lowest of the seven hells, long ago.

This judgement shook the very foundation of Algu and Jumman's friendship. They would not be seen talking to each other now. Such an old tree of friendship could not bear even a slight gust of truth. Actually speaking, their friendship was standing on sandy soil.

They began to behave more courteously with each other now. They began to welcome each other in a more formal fashion. They continued to be on good terms but in the same way as a shield and sword are.

Throughout the day, Jumman kept feeling terribly uneasy because of what he thought of as the crookedness of his friend. He was thirsting every moment for an opportunity to take revenge.

## Six

It takes very long to accomplish good deeds, but this is not the case with bad deeds. Jumman got a chance to take revenge soon. Last year Algu Choudhury had bought a very good pair of oxen from Batesar. Of upcountry origin, they were good-looking and had big stately horns. People from neighbouring villages kept coming for

months together to look at them. But by an act of fate, one of this pair of oxen died, a month after Jumman's panchayat.

Jumman taunted his friend, "This is a punishment for being deceitful. A human being may well be patient, but God watches everything, whether it is good or bad."

Algu suspected that Jumman had poisoned the bull. The Choudharain, Algu's wife, also blamed Jumman for this accident.

She said, "Jumman has got something done."

One day, it so happened that Choudharain and Kariman had a heated argument on this subject. Both the ladies bombarded each other with piercing allegations. They talked through sarcastic remarks, insinuations, maxims, comparisons and so on.

Somehow Jumman managed to restore peace. Scolding his wife Kariman, he explained things to her. He even took her away from the battlefield. At the other end, Algu Chowdhury undertook to pacify Choudharain with his logical reasoning.

Of what use was the single ox now? Algu tried very hard to find his counterpart, but could not find one. After discussion it was finally decided that the ox should be sold. There was one Samjhu Sahu in the village, who would drive an *ikka*. He would load *gur* and *ghee* from the village and take it to the *mandi*. On the way back he would load the vehicle with oil and salt from the wholesale market and sell them in the village. Samjhu was captivated by this ox. He thought that he could easily make three such trips of cartloads if he owned it while it was so very tough to take even one load these days. He scrutinised the ox, made him run with his cart, got him tested to check if he had any disease, haggled the price and actually bought it and tied him at his door. Samjhu promised to pay the full price in a month's time. Chowdhury was also in dire need of funds, so he did not bother about the loss.

As soon as Samjhu Sahu brought the new bullock home, he got busy in making him slog endlessly. He began making three to four trips to the market and back in a day. Neither did Samjhu Sahu care about the fodder nor water, but was only bothered about the trips. Taking him to the wholesale market, Samjhu would put some dry straw in front of him. The poor animal had not even caught his breath when he was yoked yet again. He had led a contented life at Algu Choudhary's house. Every six months he would be yoked to a four-wheeled covered bullock-cart for carrying passengers. Skipping and

gambolling, he would race ahead for miles together. *Bailram* got a set amount of fodder, clean water, split arhar dal and oil cakes along with straw to eat. In addition to this, he would get to taste the flavour of *ghee* also at times. One person would rub and clean him with a curry comb, wipe him and stroke him every morning and evening. While on the one hand was that ease and comfort, on the other was this gruelling work round the clock! He was sort of crushed with fatigue in just a month's time. His blood would curdle with fear the instant he saw the *ikka's* yoke. The ox had been reduced to a skeleton but he was steel-tempered and would not tolerate a beating.

One day Sahu loaded the cart with double the weight, in the fourth trip. The beast was exhausted from the entire day's work and just could not lift his hooves. Samjhu began cracking whips on him. That was enough for the ox to laboriously move ahead. He ran for a short distance and that was it. He just wanted to catch his breath for a short while; but Sahu was worried about reaching home fast. So, he cracked several whips on him ruthlessly. Once again, the ox made a tremendous effort to move.

But his strength deserted him this time round. He collapsed on the ground in a way that he could never get up again. Sahu beat him thoroughly, caught his leg and pulled him, rammed a stick into his bored nostril, but can a dead animal ever get up. That was when Sahu had some doubt. He inspected the bullock closely, untied him from the yoke, and began contemplating how the cart would reach home. He shouted and screamed at the top of his voice, but a road in the countryside shuts down just as children's eyes do as soon evening sets in. Not a soul could be seen. There was also no village nearby.

He flogged the dead bullock with more whips in anger and began cursing, "Ill-fated wretch! If you had to die you should have done so on reaching home. The wretch died right in the middle of the path! Who would pull the cart now?"

Sahu fretted and fumed in this fashion. He had sold several sacks of *gur* and many canisters of *ghee*, so about two to two hundred and fifty rupees were tied around his waist. Apart from this, there were several sacks of salt on the cart; thus he could not leave the cart and go away. Helpless, the poor man lay down on the cart itself. He firmly resolved to keep a vigil all night. He puffed his *chillum*, sang a song and then smoked the hookah. In this way Sahu banished sleep till midnight. To the best of his knowledge, Sahu kept awake but as soon as dawn broke and he passed his hand over his waist, the pouch

of money was missing! Flustered, when he looked around, several barrels of oil were also gone. He began beating his head in regret and was beside himself in grief. Bewailing his sad lot, he somehow reached home early in the morning.

When his wife heard of this bad news, she cried first and then began abusing Algu Choudhury, "The rogue gave us such an unlucky ox that our lifelong earnings are gone."

Several months had passed since this incident. When Algu would ask for the price of his bullock, both Sahu and his wife would pounce upon him like enraged dogs.

They would blurt out thoughtlessly, "Goodness! Here we have been robbed of our lifelong earnings, everything is ruined, and there he is harping about his money. He had given us a sluggish bullock and on top of it he has the nerve to ask for its price! Algu cheated us, gave us a worthless bullock and thought that we were really stupid! We too are children of a *baniya*. Go and wash your face in the ditch first and then talk of money. If are not reconciled, then untie our bullock and take him home. Yoke him to plough your fields for two months instead of one. Why ask for money?"

There was no dearth of people who harboured ill-will against Choudhury.

They would also gather on such occasions and support Sahu. Hearing such abusive language, Choudhary would come back disappointed, but it was not easy to wash his hands of one hundred and fifty rupees. Once, he also lost his temper. Sahu became furious and went home to find a *lathi*. Now His wife entered the battlefield. A volley of questions and answers managed to reach the stage of a physical brawl. Suhain went into the house and shut the door. Hearing the commotion, the good simple people of the village gathered at the site. They explained things to both of them. Consoling Sahu, they took him out of the house. They advised nothing would come out of this wrangling. Algu and Sahuji must have a sitting of the panchayat and accept whatever is decided. Sahu agreed to this suggestion. Algu also gave his approval.

## Seven

Preparations began to be made for the assembling of the panchayat. Both the sides began making their groups. Thereafter, the panchayat

sat under that same tree on the third day. Crows had assembled a panchayat in the fields. Did they have a right to the pods of peas or not, was the topic of dispute. They thought it was necessary for them to show their displeasure at the call of the watchman, until this question was solved. The question being discussed amongst the flock of parrots sitting on the tree's branches was what right did human beings have to call anyone shameless when they themselves had no inhibitions in deceiving their respective friends.

When the panchayat sat down, Ramdhan Mishra said, "Why delay now? The *Panchs* should be chosen. Say Choudhury! Whom all do you appoint as the *Panchs*?"

Meekly Algu said, "Even Samjhu Sahu can select them."

Samjhu stood up and thundered, "Jumman Sheikh from my side."

The moment he heard Jumman Sheikh's name, Algu Choudhury's heart began to pound with fear. It seemed as if someone had given him a resounding slap, all of a sudden.

Ramdhan was Algu's friend. He grasped the situation and asked, "Why Choudhary! I hope you have no objection."

Disappointed, Choudhary said, "No! What objection could I have."

Awareness of our responsibilities is said to reform us of our narrow-mindedness.

When we lose the path and are astray, then this knowledge becomes our trustworthy guide, showing us the correct path.

A youth is so self-willed in the prime of his life. His parents are so concerned about him all the time. They think of him as a stigma on the family honour. However, as soon as the burden of his family falls on his head, the same frenzied confused youth becomes so quiet and calm in a short span of time. This is the fruit of becoming aware of one's responsibility.

A sense of his responsibility took over Jumman Sheikh as soon as he accepted the position of a *sarpanch*. He thought that he was on the supreme seat of righteousness and justice. Whatever he would utter now would be like a word of the gods and under no circumstances should his personal prejudices impact it. It would not be correct for him to deflect even an inch from the truth.

Soon after, the *Panchs* began cross-examining both the sides. Both the groups kept supporting their side for some time. All of them

agreed unanimously that Samjhu should pay the price of the bullock. But two gentlemen wanted some rebate to be given to Samjhu as he had suffered a loss as the bullock had died. Contrary to this, two civilised gentlemen wanted to penalise Samjhu in addition to his paying the price so that no one dared to treat animals with such cruelty ever again.

Finally, Jumman pronounced the judgement, "Algu Choudhury and Samjhu Sahu! The *Panchs* have seriously thought about your case. It is for Samjhu to pay full price for the bullock. The animal had no disease when he had bought it. If the sum of money had been given at that point in time, then Samjhu would not have insisted on going back on his word. The bullock died only because he was made to slog very hard and no proper arrangement was made for his fodder."

Ramdhan Mishra intervened, "Samjhu has killed the bullock on purpose. Therefore, he must be penalised."

Jumman replied, "That is another question. The Panchayat is not concerned with it in any way."

Jhagdu Sahu suggested, "Some concession should be made to Samjhu."

Jumman clarified, "This depends on Algu Chowdhury's wish. It would be his goodness if he decides to give some rebate."

Algu Choudhury was unable to contain himself for joy. He stood up and shouted loudly, "*Panch Parmeshwar* ki jai ! Victory to the Panch who is the Supreme Lord"

Everyone present admired Jumman's sagacious judgement, "This is called justice! It is not the work of an ordinary human being. The Supreme Lord resides in *panchs*. This is the outcome of His glory, for sure. Who can dare to belie the truth in front of the *Panchs*?"

Jumman came to Algu after a short while and hugging him warmly, said, "*Bhaiya!* Ever since you had assembled a panchayat for me, I had become your deadly enemy. But I learnt today that neither is one anyone's friend nor enemy when he takes the seat as a *Panch*. He can think of nothing else except justice. Today, I have begun to believe that God speaks through *Panchs* as the voice of their conscience."

Algu began weeping. His streaming tears washed away the filth of both their hearts. The creeper of friendship which had withered away grew lush-green once again.

## THE INNOCENT FRIENDS

### One

A bird had laid eggs just above the cornice in Keshav's house. Keshav and his sister Shyama would both look intently at the bird flying to and fro. Rubbing their eyes, the two of them would come and stand in front of the cornice first thing in the morning, and see both the father sparrow and the mother sparrow sitting there. One doesn't know what immense pleasure both the children would get just looking at them, they would not even remember to relish their milk and *jalebis*. All sorts of questions would arise in their minds. How big would the eggs be? What colour would they be? How many of them would there be? What would they be eating? How would the chicks be hatched from them? How would their feet come out? What is their nest like? But there was no one around to answer their questions. Neither did Amma have any time to spare from her household chores nor *Babuji* from his books. Both the children would comfort each other, answering each other's queries.

Shyama would ask, "Tell me *Bhaiya*! Will the chicks fly away *phurr*, as soon as they come out of the eggs?"

With the pride of a scholar, Keshav would reply, "No, silly! First their wings will grow. How will the poor things fly without wings?"

Shyama: "What would the poor bird feed her young ones?"

Keshav could not give an answer to this tricky question.

A couple of days passed by in this fashion. The children's curiosity increased with every passing day. They would become impatient to see the eggs. Both of them had estimated that the chicks would certainly be hatched from the eggs by now.

The question of what the chicks would feed on, weighed on the children's minds. From where would the poor sparrow find so much grain to feed her brood of young ones?



Squeaking with hunger, the poor chicks would starve to death, for sure.

Considering this problem made both of them anxious. The siblings decided to scatter some grain on the cornice.

Delighted, Shyama asked, "Then the birds will not have to fly elsewhere in search of food, isn't it?"

Keshav: "No! Why would they go then?"

"I say, *Bhaiya!* Wouldn't the chicks be feeling the sun's heat up there?" asked Shyama out of concern.

Keshava had not thought of this problem until then, "They would certainly be facing this hardship. The poor chicks would be tortured by thirst up there. There is even no shade above them."

Finally, it was decided that a makeshift roof of cloth should be erected above the nest. The proposal of keeping a bowl of water and some grains of rice was also approved.

Both the children earnestly got down to work. Evading her mother's eyes, Shyama quietly went and got some grains of rice from the clay pot. Keshav secretly emptied the oil from the stone bowl onto the ground. Scrubbing the bowl thoroughly, he filled it with water.

Where was the cloth for the awning going to come from? Moreover, how would the cloth stay up without the support of sticks and how would the sticks stay erect?

Keshav was caught in this dilemma for a long time. Eventually he resolved this problem as well.

He told Shyama, "Go and get the basket in which we throw garbage and make sure *Amma* does not notice it."

Shyama, "But it is torn at the centre. Won't the sun penetrate through it?"

Irritated, Keshav said, "Bring the basket first. I will think of some means to close the hole."

Shyama ran and got the basket. Keshav stuffed some paper in the hole and then, propping it against the branch of a nearby tree, said "Look! Now I am going to make the shade of the basket fall on the nest. How will the sun filter through then?"

How clever was her brother, Shyama thought with admiration.

## Two

It was a summer month. *Babuji* had gone to office. Having put both the children to sleep in the room, *Amma* had lain down to rest herself. But how could the children possibly feel sleepy today? They lay down with eyes shut for *Amma's* sake, waiting with bated breath for the right moment.

As soon as they came to know that *Amma* was fast asleep, the two of them got up quietly and gently opening the door's latch, crept out stealthily. Preparations for safeguarding the eggs began to be made. Keshav went and got a stool from the room, but when it was not high enough to reach the cornice, he went and got a smaller stool to keep under it. Gingerly he climbed onto the stool.

Shyama was holding the stool with both her hands. As the four legs of the stool were not even, it wobbled and tipped slightly on whichever side the pressure increased. Only Keshav knew the dread which assailed him at that moment.

He held onto the cornice with both his hands and scolded Shyama under his breath, "Hold the stool firmly or else I am going to get down and give you a nice spanking."

However, poor Shyama's heart was focused on the cornice. Time and again, her attention would veer in that direction with her hands slackening their grip on the stool.

The instant Keshav kept his hands on the cornice, both the birds flew away. Keshav saw some twigs scattered on the cornice and three eggs lying on them. The nest wasn't like the ones he had seen on trees.

Shyama asked from down below, "*Bhaiya*, how many chicks are there?"

Keshav, "There are three eggs and the chicks haven't hatched yet."

Shyama, "Kindly show me, *Bhaiya*. How big are they?"

Keshav, "I will. But first get some rags so that I can lay them underneath the eggs. The poor eggs are lying on twigs and bits of straw."

Shyama went running and brought a piece of cloth she had torn from an old saree. Keshav bent down and took the cloth from her. He made a cushioned seat by folding it a number of times. Laying the cushion on the twigs, he gently placed the three eggs on it.

Shayma pleaded once again, "*Bhaiya*, let me also see them."

Keshav, "I will. But please hand me the basket first so that I can shade them from the top."

Shyama gave him the basket from below and said, "You get down now. I also want to have a look."

Propping the basket against a branch, Keshav said, Go and get the grain and bowl of water. I will show you, once I get down."

Shyama went and got the grains of rice and bowl of water. Keshav kept both the things under the basket and gingerly got down from the stool.

Shyama begged once again, "*Bhaiya*, help me get onto the stool now so that I can have a look."

Keshav, "You will fall down."

Shyama, "I won't, *Bhaiya*. You hold the stool."

Keshav, "Nothing doing! *Amma* will virtually make a *chutney* of me in case you fall down. She will accuse me of helping you climb up. Why do you want to see them? The eggs are very comfortable now. When they will hatch, we will look after the chicks."

Both the birds would approach the cornice repeatedly only to fly away without sitting on it. Keshav assumed that the birds were scared of them and thus not sitting on the cornice. He took away the stool and kept it in the room and placed the small four-legged stool where it belonged.

Shyama's eyes were filled with tears, "You haven't shown the eggs to me. I am going to complain to *Amma*."

Keshav, "I am warning you beforehand that I will spank you if you tell *Amma*?"

Shyama, "Then why didn't you show me."

Keshav, "What if you had fallen down and broken your head."

Shyama, "Big deal! How does it matter! You just wait and watch! I am going to tell her."

Right then, the door of the small room opened and Ma came out. Shielding her eyes from the glaring sun, she asked, "When did both of you step out. Who opened the latch of the door? How many times have I told you not to go out in the afternoon?"

Keshav had unlatched the door, but Shyama did not disclose this to Ma. She was scared that *Bhaiya* would get a beating. Keshav was trembling with fear that Shyama might spill the beans. He didn't trust her because he had not shown her the eggs. Whether Shyama

was quiet because she loved her brother or because she was a party to this wrongdoing cannot be ascertained. Probably it was both.

Scolding them, Ma took both of them back into the room. She latched the door and began fanning them slowly. It was only two o'clock in the afternoon. The hot wind of summer was blowing outside. Soon after, both the children went off to sleep.

### Three

Shyama woke up at four o'clock with a start. The doors were wide open. She came running to the cornice and looked upwards.

The basket was nowhere to be seen. She looked down by chance and running back to the room, shouted loudly, "*Bhaiya*, the eggs have fallen down and the chicks have flown away."

Alarmed, Keshav got up. On rushing out he saw that all the three eggs lay smashed on the floor. A slimy whitish yellow liquid was oozing out of them. The bowl of water also lay broken on one side.

His face turned pale. He began looking at the ground with terrified eyes.

Shyama asked, "*Bhaiya!* Where have the chick flown off to?"

"The eggs have broken," Keshav said sadly.

Shyama, "And where have the chicks gone?"

"Where do you think!" replied Keshav irritably. "Can't you see that a whitish liquid has leaked out of the eggs? In a couple of days it would have turned into chicks."

Holding a stick in her hand, Ma asked, "What are you two doing out there in the sun?"

Shyama said, "*Amma*, the birds' eggs are lying broken."

Ma came and seeing the broken shells, she fumed, "You two must have tinkered with the eggs."

Shyama didn't have any pity on her brother now. Probably he had put the eggs back carelessly and that was why they had rolled down. He ought to be punished for this.

She said spitefully, "*Amma*, he had fiddled with the eggs."

Ma asked Keshav, "Oh! Did you?"

Keshav stood timidly, without uttering a word.

Ma, "How did you manage to reach there?"

Shyama, "*Amma*, he placed a stool on the small stool and climbed up."

“Weren’t you holding the stool,” Keshav retaliated.

Shyama, “You were the one who asked me to.”

Ma, “Keshav, you are a grown-up boy. Don’t you know that birds’ eggs get tainted when we touch them? And then the birds do not hatch them any more.”

“*Amma*, so the birds have dropped the eggs themselves?” Shyama asked fearfully.

Ma said, “What else could they do? Keshav will be held responsible for committing this sin. Oh my God! The scoundrel has taken three lives.”

Making a tearful face, Keshav explained, “*Amma*, I had merely kept the eggs on the cushion.”

His remark made Ma laugh. But Keshav was repentant about his mistake for several days to come. In fervently trying to protect the eggs, he had ruined them completely. He would start crying at times when he remembered this incident.

As for the two birds, they were never to be seen there again.



## MY ELDER BROTHER

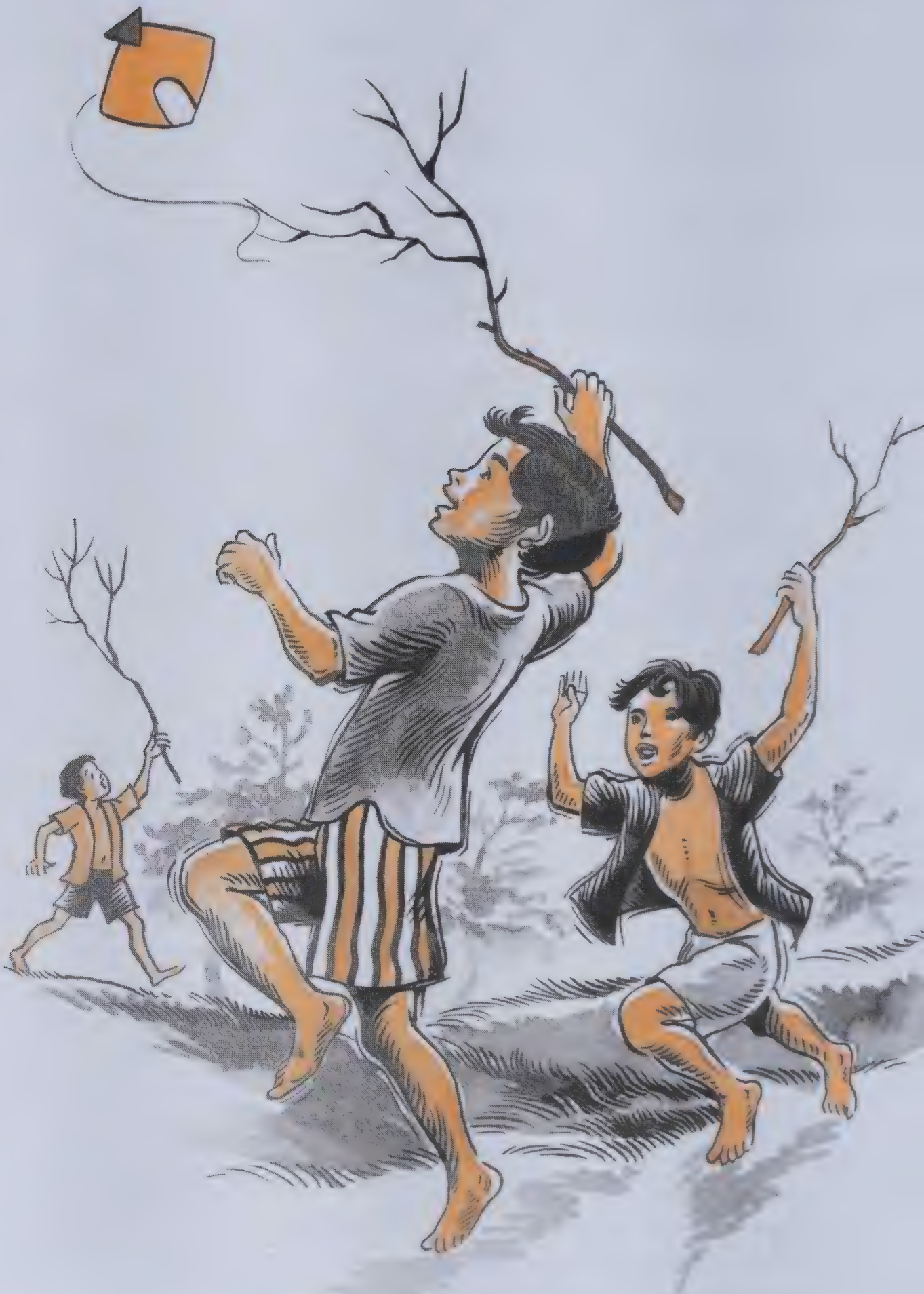
### One

My brother was five years elder to me, but only three classes ahead. He started going to school at the same age as I did, but he did not like to do things in haste in an important matter like education. He wanted to lay a very strong foundation so that a magnificent palace could be built over it later on. He did one year's work in two years' time. At times it would take him even three years. How could the house be sturdy if the basic foundation was not firm?

I was younger and he was older: I was nine years old and he was fourteen. He had every right, by virtue of his birth, to keep a watch over me and reprimand me. As for me, courtesy demanded that I look upon his orders as law.

He was very studious by nature and always kept sitting with an open book in front of him. Sometimes he would idly scribble pictures of birds, dogs and cats on his notebooks or along the margins of his books, probably to give some rest to his brain. At times he would write a name, a word or a sentence, many times over. Sometimes he would copy a couplet in his beautiful handwriting, over and over again. At other times, he would pattern word formations which had neither any meaning nor any coordination. For example, I once saw a sentence structure in his notebook, which read— "special, Amina, between brothers, in fact, two brothers, Radhey Shyam, honourable Radhey Shyam, within an hour..." and a man's face was drawn after this. I tried very hard to make some sense of this riddle but failed and did not have the courage to ask him. He was in class nine and I was in the fifth. It would be presumptuous of me to think that I could understand his compositions.

I was least interested in studies. It was a colossal task for me to sit with a book for even an hour. I would run out of the hostel and



onto the field as soon as I got a chance. Sometimes I would play with marbles, at other times I would make paper butterflies and make them fly. And I would be on cloud nine if I chanced to come upon a friend. Sometimes we would scramble up the wall of the compound and jump down, at times we would climb onto the gate and swing it back and forth as if we were enjoying a car ride. But the moment I came back into the room and saw that fearsome form of Bhai Sahib, I would be scared to death!

His first question would invariably be, "Where were you?" Always this same question was asked and always in the same tone. Silence was my only answer to this question. I have no idea why I couldn't simply say that I was playing outside for a while. My silence appeared to be an admission of guilt.

Bhai Sahib had no other choice other than greeting me with words mixed with affection and indignation, "If this is how you are going to study English, you will be doing it all your life and yet not be able to learn a single word. Learning English is no laughing matter which every other person can do it, otherwise every Tom, Dick and Harry would have become scholars of English. One has to study hard, poring over books day and night, undergo terrible strain and only then can one learn it. And how much do we learn, nothing but a smattering. Even great scholars cannot write chaste English, leave alone speak it. And I must say you are such a fool that you do not learn a lesson even by looking at me. You see with your own eyes how hard I work. And if you don't, it is the fault of your intellect and your eyes. So many *melas* and *tamashas* are held here. Have you ever seen me attend any of them? We have cricket and hockey matches every other day, but I am not to be seen anywhere near them. I am studying all the time. Even then I spend two to three years in each class. How then can you hope to pass fooling around all the time? It takes me two to three years to just pass a class, you will keep rotting in the same class throughout your life! If you are bent upon wasting your life in this manner, better go home and enjoy playing *gulli-dandaa*. Why do you want to waste your father's hard-earned money?"

I would invariably burst into tears on hearing this spurning rebuke. What answer could I give? I had committed an offence, but who could stand reproof? Bhai Sahib was an expert in the art of giving advice. He would make such sarcastic remarks and talk of such apt

sayings that I would be heart-broken and lose confidence in myself.

I did not have the energy for a strenuous work like studying. Disheartened, I would think at times, "Why don't I go home? Why should I ruin my life attempting to do something which is beyond my ability?"

I was willing to remain a fool, but could not possibly work so hard! Such thoughts would make me dizzy, but the clouds of despair would lift after an hour or two and I would resolve to study with concentration in the future. A time-table would be made in a jiffy. How could I start without planning and making a proper scheme in advance? My passion for games would totally disappear in the time-table. Its schedule was, "Wake up early in the morning, sit down to study at six after a wash and breakfast. English from six to eight, Arithmetic from eight to nine, History from nine to nine-thirty, followed by lunch and then school. Half an hour's rest after returning from school at three-thirty, Geography from four to five, Grammar from five to six followed by a stroll for half an hour in front of the hostel. English Composition from six-thirty to seven. Then translation from eight to nine after dinner, Hindi from nine to ten, other subjects from ten to eleven and sleep thereafter.

However, it is one thing to make a time-table and quite another to follow it. Violating its rules would start from the very first day. The comforting greenery of the open fields, the gentle puffs of breeze, the lively bounce of a football game, the dodging of *kabaddi*, plus the speed and agility of volley ball would draw me irresistibly. Without my knowing it I forgot everything else once I reached there. I would not remember that killer time-table and those books which almost ruined my eyes, and Bhai Sahib would get a chance to advise and preach to me. I ran from his very shadow and tried to avoid him, entering the room softly so that he would not have an inkling of my presence. I almost died of fright the instant he raised his eyes and looked at me. It seemed as if a naked sword was poised over my head at all times. Even so, I could not give up games and sport in spite of the severe scolding and rebukes, just as a man caught between death and disaster is still bound by attachment and desire.

## Two

The annual examinations were held. Bhai Sahib failed and I passed, standing first in my class. The gap between him and me was reduced to two years now.

I felt like taking Bhai Sahib to task, "Where did all your austere penance get you? Look at me! I played around merrily and still managed to stand first in class." But he was so depressed and sad that I sincerely sympathised with him and the very thought of rubbing salt into his wounds seemed shameful. Yes, I became a bit proud and my self-respect also increased. I was no longer in awe of Bhai Sahib as I had been earlier on. I began taking part in games and sports.

I had resolved that if he preached to me ever again I would bluntly say, "What have you achieved by tirelessly killing yourself whereas I kept playing and still stood first."

Even though I did not have the courage to voice this boastful remark, it was clearly evident from my behaviour that Bhai Sahib no longer had the same terrifying hold over me.

Bhai Sahib understood this, his commonsense was very sharp. One day, when I had devoted the entire morning to *gulli-danda* and came back sharp at mealtime, Bhai Sahib pounced upon me, armed with a sword, as it were, "I can see that you have become conceited because you stood first in class and passed. But *Bhaijan* ! What is your standing when the pride of even the greatest of people has been humbled? You must have surely read of Ravana's plight in history. What lesson have you learnt from his character? Or did you casually browse through it? Simply passing an examination is no big deal, but the evolution of our intellect is what matters. You must understand the meaning of whatever you read. Ravana was the lord of the earth. Such kings are known as *chakravarty*. The British Empire has expanded a lot these days, but we cannot call it *chakravarty*. Several nations of the world refuse to acknowledge the supremacy of the British and are absolutely independent. But Ravana was a *chakravarty raja* and all the kings of the world would pay tribute to him. The greatest of gods were like his slaves. The gods of fire and water were also his servants, but what was his end? His pride wiped out every trace of him and his race, not even a single soul was left to give him a drop of water. Whatever evil deeds a man may do, he should not put on airs and become arrogant. The moment

he becomes proud, he fails to win happiness in this material world and the world which comes next. You must have also read of what happened to Satan. He became proud of the fact that there was no truer and greater devotee of God than he was! Finally, he was hurled from heaven into hell. Once, an emperor of Rome had also become proud. He died begging for alms.

“If your head has turned with passing just one class, then you are sure to do well in the future! You better understand that you have not passed because of hard work but due to sheer good luck. But this sort of thing happens only once and not again and again. Sometimes one makes a hit while playing *gulli-danda* by chance but that does not make one a successful player. One whose shots never miss their mark is successful. Don't go by my failure too. You will have to sweat laboriously when you come to my class and have to battle with subjects like Algebra and Geometry and History of England. It is not easy to remember the names of kings. There have been as many as eight Henrys. Do you think it is easy to remember which particular event took place in which Henry's reign? Write Henry VIII instead of Henry VII and you lose all the marks! All gone! You will not even get a zero, not even a zero! Have you ever thought of that! There have been dozens of Jameses, dozens of Williams and scores of Charleses! The brain reels and one feels dizzy just thinking of them. The unfortunate British could not even find names. They went on affixing Second, Third, Fourth and Fifth behind a single name. I would have suggested millions of names if they had asked me. As for Geometry, God help us! If you happen to write ABC instead of ACB, all your marks are cut. No one dares to ask these heartless invigilators what, after all, is the difference between ABC and ACB and why do they slaughter candidates for such trivial reasons. How does it matter whether one eats dal, rice and roti or rice, dal and roti. But how are these examiners concerned with anything apart from what is written in books? They want the boys to learn every letter by heart. And such learning by rote has been given the name of education. After all, what is the use of learning things which make no sense? 'If you drop a perpendicular on this line, the base will be twice the perpendicular.' What is the use of this, one may ask? How do I care whether it becomes double, or four times the size or remains just half; but if you want to pass the examination you will have to learn all this nonsense.

“You are asked to write an essay on ‘Punctuality,’ which should be no fewer than four pages. Now all that you can do is open the notebook in front of you, take the pen in your hand and curse them. Who doesn’t know that being punctual is a very good habit? It brings discipline into a man’s life. Others begin to have regard for him and his business prospers. But how can one possibly write four pages on a small topic like that? What is the need of writing four pages on a subject which can be explained in a single sentence. I would call this an absurdity. We are not saving time by this exercise, but rather misusing it by cramming a thing uselessly or for no reason. We want a man to quickly say whatever he has to say and be off. But no. It is compulsory for you to paint four pages, no matter what you write. And mind you, the pages are also the size of proper fullscape sheets. Isn’t this a tyranny? It is ironical that we are told to write briefly. Write a brief essay on ‘Punctuality,’ which should not be less than four pages. Fine! Writing briefly means four pages, otherwise we would be asked to write a hundred to two hundred pages. It is like running fast and slow at the same time. Isn’t it contradictory? Even a child can understand a little thing like this but these teachers do not have even this much sense. On top of that, they claim to be teachers. When you come to my class, *Lala*, you will have to work hard and achieve little and then you will come to know what is what. You are walking on cloud nine just because you have topped in your class. Therefore, listen to my advice. I may have failed thousands of times, but I am older than you and have more experience of worldly matters than you do. Take note and remember what I say or else you will repent.”

It was almost time for school, or else God knows when this lengthy sermon would have ended. Food seemed tasteless to me today. When I was being scolded in this manner on passing the class, perhaps I would have been killed if I had failed. I was terrified of the fearful picture which Bhai Sahib had painted of studies in his class. It is surprising that I did not leave school and run back home; but in spite of such warnings I remained just as disinterested in books. I never lost an opportunity to play games. I studied as well, but very little, just enough, to complete my daily task so that I was not disgraced in class. The self-confidence I had acquired vanished again and I began to lead the life of a thief, once more.

### Three

The annual examinations were held again, and as chance would have it, I passed and Bhai Sahib failed once more. I did not work very hard, but somehow managed to stand first in class. I was myself surprised. Bhai Sahib had put in tremendous hard work. He had learnt every single word of the course, working till ten in the night from four in the afternoon, and from six to nine thirty before going to school. He looked drained of energy because of the laborious effort he had put in, but still the poor fellow failed. I felt sorry for him. He burst into tears when the results were announced and I too began crying. The joy of my passing with flying colours was reduced to half. Probably if I had also failed, Bhai Sahib would not have been so sad. But who can avert what is destined?

The gap of just one class remained between Bhai Sahib and me now. A wicked thought sprang up in my mind: if Bhai Sahib failed another year I would be his equal. On which basis would he put me to shame then? But I forcefully thrust out this vile thought from my heart, "After all, he scolds me for my own good. I definitely detest it at that time, but perhaps it is the effect of his preaching that I pass again and again and that too with such good grades"

Bhai Sahib had mellowed down a lot by now. Several times, even on getting a chance to scold me, he acted very patiently. Probably he had begun to understand on his own that he did not have the right to scold me now, and even if he did, it was to a very small extent. I became even more self-willed and began to take undue advantage of his tolerance. I had this conviction that I would pass whether I studied or not. I was very fortunate: luck was on my side. Thus I stopped studying whatever little I used to because of being scared of Bhai Sahib. I had developed a new interest in flying kites and now all my time was spent in kite-flying. Even then I used to respect Bhai Sahib and flew kites in secret so that he could not see me. Preparing the *manjha*, tying the *kanna*, planning for kite tournaments and other related problems were all solved in secrecy. I did not want Bhai Sahib to suspect that my respect and regard for him had gone down.

One day, at some distance from the hostel, I was running frantically in the evening to loot a drifting kite. My eyes were looking towards the sky and my heart lay with this traveller gliding through the sky, heading slowly towards decline, as if some soul had stepped

out of heaven and was restlessly coming to inhabit a new world. Armed with sticks and bamboos, a whole army of children was running towards the kite to welcome it. Nobody was aware of what was going on around them. It seemed that all of them were soaring in the sky along with the kite, where everything is smooth and there are neither motor cars, nor trams or trains.

All of a sudden I bumped into Bhai Sahib who was probably returning from the market.

He caught hold of my hands then and there and spoke furiously, "Aren't you ashamed of running with these street urchins and chasing a kite which is worth a *dhela*. You have no consideration for the fact that you are no longer in a junior class, but have been promoted to the eighth standard and are just one class below me. After all, a person must have some regard for his position. There was a time when people would become *\*naib tehsildars* on passing class eight. I know of several *middlechis* who are first class deputy magistrates or superintendents. Many of them who have passed class eight are our leaders and editors of our newspapers. Great scholars work as their subordinates. And you, having come to the same class, you are running after a kite with the street urchins! I am distressed by this stupidity of yours. You are no doubt intelligent, but what use is this intelligence if it destroys one's self-respect? You must be thinking that I am just one class below Bhai Sahib and now he has no right to say anything to me. But you are sadly mistaken. I am five years older to you and even if you come to my class today—if this is the attitude of examiners, then undoubtedly you will become my class-mate next year and perhaps be ahead of me after a year. But even God cannot erase out the five years difference which lies between you and me, leave alone you. I am five years older to you and shall always remain so! You cannot match the experience which I have of life and this world even if you become an M.A. and D.Phil and a D.Litt. One does not understand things by reading books but by seeing the world. Our mother has not passed a single class and probably even our father has not gone beyond class five or six. But they will always have the right to guide and correct us even if we imbibe all the knowledge available in this world. Not only because they are our parents but because they have and will continue to have more experience of the world than we do. They may not know what sort of government America has, or how many times Henry

VIII married, or how many planets there are in the sky. But there are thousands of things which they know better than you and I do. God forbid if I were to fall ill today, you would get cold feet. You would not be able to think of anything except sending a telegram to *Dada*. But if father was in your place he would not send a telegram to anyone, or get nervous or panic. He would diagnose the illness himself first and then go on to treat it. If he did not succeed, he would call a doctor. Anyway, illness is a big thing. The two of us do not even know how to manage our monthly allowance so that it lasts for the whole month. Whatever father sends us, we finish by the twentieth or twenty-second and then we become paupers. We have to stop snacks and start avoiding the washerman and barber. But managing in half the amount of what you and I are spending today, father has lived a large portion of his life with honour and a good name. He has raised a family of nine members. Look at our Headmaster Sahib. Isn't he an M.A. And that too not an M.A. from here but an M.A. from Oxford. He gets a thousand rupees, but who manages his household? His old mother. Headmaster Sahib's degree proved to be of no use in this matter. He used to manage the household himself earlier on, but the money was never enough to meet the expenses. He incurred debts. Ever since his mother took the management in her own hands, it seems the goddess Lakshmi has come into the house. So, Bhaijaan, root out this vanity from your mind that you have come close to me and are independent now. You will not go astray as long as I am there to keep a watch over you. If you do not obey me, I can even make use of this (showing a slap). I know that my words seem like poison to you..."

I felt humbled by this new attitude of his. I truly became aware of my smallness and a great regard for Bhai Sahib arose within me.

With tears in my eyes, I said, "Definitely not! What you are saying is absolutely true and you have every right to say it."

Bhai Sahib hugged me and said, "I am not forbidding you to fly kites. Even I long to fly them but what to do. How can I safeguard you if I go astray myself? This duty has also fallen to my lot."

By chance a kite drifted over our heads at that very moment. Its string was trailing and a horde of boys were running behind it. Bhai Sahib was tall, for sure. He leapt up, caught the string and ran recklessly towards the hostel. I ran after him.

## A DOG'S TALE

### One

Children! You must have heard many stories about heroes and kings, but would seldom have heard the story of a dog's life. Actually, what interesting incident in a dog's life is worth telling. Neither does he fight with gods, nor does he venture to the land of fairies, or win great battles. So, I am afraid that you might ignore my story and discard it. However, I assure you that many things which may not have occurred even in the lives of eminent people have happened in my life. That is why I am sitting down today to narrate my tale. Do not reject this story of mine the way you spurn dogs. You will find many valuable truths here and one should quickly imbibe them wherever they are found.

My eyes and ears were closed when I was born. Therefore, it cannot be said whether there was much fanfare and rejoicing with songs being sung and music being played or not. I could not hear anything. But of course, the bedding I was lying down on was soft like cotton and I did not feel cold at all. I assumed that I had been born in some wealthy noble family but when my eyes opened, I saw that I lay clinging to the chest of my Mother, amidst the ashes of an oven. We were four brothers. Three of them were reddish brown whereas I was black in colour. Moreover, I was the smallest and weakest of the lot.

Our Mother would seldom stay with us. She had to run here and there in search of food. She would keep awake the whole night and guard the village. No stranger could dare to step into the village! Seeing dogs of another village, she would drive them away from afar only. Whenever a bull would barge into some field, she would chase him to a great distance. Nevertheless, no one would give her anything to eat even when she did so much.

The poor thing would burn with pangs of hunger. On top of that, her concern for us would torment her. That was why she would sometimes enter houses stealthily and flee with whatever foodstuff she came across when hunger tortured her. People would run to hit her as soon as they spotted her and shut the doors of their houses on her.

It was bitterly cold one day. Dark clouds overcast the sky and a chilly wind began to blow. Two of our brother's could not bear the cold and died. Only two of us remained now. Mother wept bitterly but what could she do? In spite of that, the villagers did not have any mercy on her. For the first time I saw how self-centred and heartless human beings are.

One day some festive occasion was being celebrated in the village. There was a *brahman bhoj* in the house of a *baniya*. Hundreds of people had gathered. *Pooris* were being made. Mother would go there again and again but ran back on being rebuked. No one would think of throwing a scrap to her. Nothing would fall short on their giving a morsel, but who could possibly make them understand this? Leaf-plates were laid out in the courtyard when all the dishes were ready. People went and sat on their respective seats and food began to be served. Mother reached there at that very moment. We two brothers were also with her. A man shooed us away at the door itself, but Mother did not run away. She began wagging her tail and sat down right there. When that man went inside for some work, Mother also entered the hallway stealthily. On spotting her there was such an instant uproar of *dhat dhat* from all sides to drive her away that she was alarmed. A couple of men ran after her with sticks. If Mother had found a way out, she would have done so but people holding sticks were standing there. That was why she walked between the men seated in the courtyard and came out through the opening of the drain.

But just look at the spectacle: the people who were about to eat also stood up as soon as mother stepped out. Do you know why? The food had become impure because mother had passed through there. They thought about what should be done. The poor *baniya* burst out crying. Some people asked what was wrong? The bitch surely did not put her mouth into the leaf-plates; how can the food be defiled by just touching? However, those who were of very noble descent felt that the bitch's passing through the centre was enough to



pollute the feast. Ultimately, these people of noble lineage had their way and the entire food was distributed amongst the poor. Mother ate to her heart's content that day. She had not been so delighted in her life ever before.

But my poor Mother was not destined to be happy. She had just lain down after eating the meal when the *baniya* arrived, holding a stick in his hand and began thrashing her. Mother did not get a chance to flee. She began yelping at the top of her voice. Hearing her wail even a stony heart would have melted, but that heartless man did not have any mercy. Disgusted, I was fretting within. If things were under my control I would have taught *Baniya Ram* a lesson for this merciless flogging. But what could a little puppy like me possibly do!

And so, some people gathered on hearing this wail and began telling the *baniya*, "Bhai, let it be! Hunger can make even human beings lose their mental balance, but she is just an animal! How does she know who is gaining and who is losing! What has happened is irreversible now. What will you get out of beating her?"

This reasoning convinced the *baniya* and Mother was saved from more thrashing.

That very evening, a wayfarer came and stayed in the village. He lit a fire with some cowdung cakes. Putting lentils in an earthen pot for cooking, he began kneading the flour. Having kneaded the flour, he took down the earthen pot from the fire and went to get water from the well in front. The kneaded flour was kept on a leaf-plate. Wandering about, Mother reached there in the meantime. She probably assumed that the flour did not have any owner, she began eating it. *Dhat, dhat*, the traveller began shooing her off from the well itself but Mother did not notice him even then. The poor fellow put his hand on his forehead and began bewailing his fate. He had been starving for the past three days and this divine play added to his woes.

A couple of people explained, "*Bhai*, you have incurred a loss of just four to six *annas*, whereas she polluted food worth thousands of rupees some time ago."

The traveller mourned, "How was I to know that the wretch was on the look out for a chance to pounce on the food? "

The old Choudhary calmed him down, "It seems that your meal today was destined for her. There is a saying—*Shah ki muhar aane-aane par, God ki muhar dane dane par* or 'The Shah's head is stamped

on every anna coin, God's face is stamped on every grain of food.' Cook again and eat your meal."

The poor traveller set up the cooking area once more and began cooking his meal. The Choudhary kept sitting there.

The traveller asked, "Baba, I could not understand the meaning of that saying. Kindly explain it to me."

The Choudhary explained, "A dervish used to repeat this saying, '*Shah ki muhar aane-aane par, God ki muhar dane dane par* or "The Shah's head is stamped on every anna coin, but God's face is stamped on every grain of food' and go about begging for alms at everyone's door.

"A self-indulgent, wealthy gentleman asked him once, '*Sain*, I cannot understand how is it possible for grains to be stamped.'

"The dervish explained, 'Son! Only that person whom God wants to feed can get that grain of food, nobody else can get it under any account. You can test this belief whenever you want.'

"The gentleman said, 'Okay then! I will test this saying right now. Moreover, I will be your slave for life if it turns out to be true.'

"The affluent gentleman took a grain of millet in his hand and said, 'Watch, I am going to put it in my mouth. If God's face is stamped on it, let Him give it to someone else.'

"Saying so, he threw the millet in his mouth but the grain fell on the ground instead. Soon enough, a bird swooped down and took it away.

"The gentleman was taken aback. In short, you must remember that neither does anybody feed anyone nor does anybody eat anyone's food. God is the One who feeds all of us."

## Two

When we two brothers grew up a bit, boys began to play with us. I was very good-looking. A pandit's son caught me and took me home. The son of a tambourine-player caught hold of my brother and took him away. I began to be brought up in Panditji's house and my brother at the tambourine-player's. He was called Jakiya and I was known as Kallu.

It was winter. When all the boys would gather in the sun, they would pick us up in their laps and kiss us.

Someone would say, "He is our child." Another would say, "He is our *Munna*."

Yet another would lift one of us with one ear and ask, "Look boys! Is he a thief or honest?"

I wouldn't whine until my ears ached, so everyone would say, "Throw him down fast, he is a thief."

But I yelped when my ears pained and then saying, "Honest, honest," everyone would burst out laughing.

Generally, this amusing game was played hundreds of times. Some boy would pick up our forelegs and rave, "My Munna walks with two legs." Our legs start aching if we are made to walk in this manner.

But what could we do? Sometimes boys of different ages would make small children sit on my back and fondly say, "My *Lallu* is sitting on an elephant. "Why on earth would I take the load of those children." When I would start yelping in pain, my life would be saved from that ordeal. In fact, some of the boys would tie a cord around my neck and make me run. How could I possibly run as speedily as them? But they would drag me along in their obsession because of which my whole body would start aching. But poor me did not have any supporter there! Sometimes boys would throw me in the ditch nearby and watch the spectacle of my swimming.

When I would start floundering about in the water to come out, the boys would laugh and make fun of me, "Watch, how Kallu swims!"

I would be almost drowning at that point in time. Moving my legs frantically, I would reach the edge of the ditch somehow and start shivering from the intense cold.

When my body would warm up a bit on basking in the sun, some mischievous imp would cry out, "It is my turn, this time round."

I was terrified as soon as I heard this, but where could I run off to? Someone would dump me in the water again. How can I express how furious I would be at that time? I would wish repeatedly that if someone plunges these rascals in water, they would know what a torment it was. Neither of us was happy amongst the two of us but Jakiya's condition was better than mine. I would get simple frugal meals at Panditji's place. Therefore, I had to knock at other people's doors for food.

The tambourine-player was fond of meat. Meat would be cooked in his house every single day and thus Jakiya would get enough food. He did not need to go to anyone else's house. With

each passing day, he became strong and healthy, partly due to his carefree nature and partly because of the nutritious diet. Fed up with hunger, I would reach the tambourine-player's door, hoping to get something. I would think Jakiya is my blood relation after all, if I beseech and request him, he will certainly give me something. Besides, he would not lose anything. I did not want to take a share of his meal, but just wanted his left-overs. However, the instant he saw my shadow, he growled so angrily and pounced on me as if I were his enemy. I could not confront him because he was stronger than I was. He would bite me a lot and throwing me down, scratch me with his paws. When I would yelp loudly and draw in my tail, only then my life would be spared somehow.

As soon as I would get up and want to run away, the tambourine-player would shout out aloud, "The Pandit's cowardly dog. There he goes! Off he flees!"

I would be very disgusted at this remark. Then I would go and attack Jakiya.

Seeing my vigour, the onlookers would rave, "Splendid Kallu! Wonderful! Well done!"

My temper would flare up at this remark, and I would fight with greater strength, but would have to flee eventually. Then everyone would clap their hands in glee and laugh at me. When my rage would cool down, I found that I was smeared with blood all over. It would take months for the open wounds to heal. I would feel like dashing Jakiya down as soon as the wounds were healed, erasing Panditji's disgrace. But I would pull back on seeing my pitiable state.

One day, I pounced on Jakiya, putting my life at stake. Even he began fighting me in a fit of rage. By chance, Panditji reached that spot.

The moment he arrived, others remarked, "Kallu is a cowardly dog and can never dare to face Jakiya."

I saw that Panditji's face had turned pale at this. That was when I resolved whether I remain alive or not I will defeat Jakiya, for certain. I fought with such spirited courage and made use of such stratagems that the childlike Jakiya was reduced to complete helplessness and beaten severely.

The spectators began encouraging me, "*Bhai*, Kallu has done wonders today! It is true that everyone's chest swells with pride on seeing their master. Jakiya would defeat him every day looking at

the tambourine-player. Today looking at Panditji, Kallu has got the better of him.”

I clearly saw that Panditji's face had become radiant with delight at that moment, as if I had saved his honour. Now he increased my diet a little. At the other end, the tambourine-player began to pay more attention to Jakiya.

One day it so happened that Mother reached the entrance of the tambourine-player. Jakiya was present there at that time. Seeing Mother's frail and pitiable condition, the tambourine-player threw a scrap of food at her. As soon as Mother moved ahead to pick up the scrap, Jakiya barged in and pounced upon Mother. By chance, I also reached that spot. And then what? Shrinking from Jakiya, Mother clashed with me.

Actually, I did not want to strike her, but she began to attack me with all her might. I wanted to laugh my heart out at that point. To be at the mercy of one's stomach is so amazing! One forgets who are one's blood relations and who are strangers for these pangs of hunger. Otherwise, why would my real mother and my real brother become my enemies? This is true of us animals. Only God knows about human beings.

### Three

There used to be a lot of grain in Panditji's house. The house was *kutchra* and rats had comfortably made it their base. The householders were thoroughly harassed by the rats wreaking havoc. They wanted to put up rat-traps so that the rats could be destroyed completely. But Panditji would evade the matter saying that rats are the mount of Ganesha and one should not trouble them. Besides, how much of grain could they eat? He firmly believed that by the grace of Lord Ganesha the stored grain damaged by rats, would increase four-fold at the time of harvest. That was why when he saw someone putting up a rat trap, he would rebuke him severely, again and again.

Panditji was very renowned amongst the people and had made a great mark for himself.

Whenever they used to talk of devotion to the gods, Panditji's name was the first to be mentioned. "He is such a good man that even incurring so much loss, he does not kill rats! Others are ready to take the lives even human beings."

Panditji firmly stuck to his vow as long as the rats merely ate the grain. But when they began to attack clothing, he was unnerved and forced to take action. Some winter clothes had been kept in boxes and some on ropes or bamboo poles. No one was bothered about them in summers. When the clothes were taken out to be aired in the sun during the rainy season, it was found that all of them had been nibbled. The rats had even nibbled at the wooden *sandook*. Panditji's eyes became bloodshot with anger. The rats had made thousands of holes in every single belonging. Two to two hundred and fifty rupees had gone down the drain. Now Panditji resolved that come what may, he would rest only after he had completely destroyed the rats. That very day, he brought a pet cat and got a couple of rat-traps. And then what? Rats began to be trapped every day. I too got some cause for amusement. Although I had become a total vegetarian because I had to survive on a particular type of diet. I did not have a taste for meat, but really enjoyed hunting the rats. And since this was our family trait, why wouldn't I have a great time?

The instant Panditji opened a rat trap, he would call out, "Kallu-Kallu." And I would dart there like an arrow from wherever I was. It was worth seeing the way I would toy with the rats, at that point. I would kill the rats, over and over again but did not eat them.

But my brother Jakiya would eat flesh everyday. Sometimes he would take part in the hunt and even Mother would reach there at times. She was well-fed during those days. And then she even began blessing us from deep within. Probably she had begun remembering her late children. In case they were alive, they would have really attended to her needs. If Bhai Sahib wished he would devour a couple of rats, but I swear by the name of Baba Kalbhairav that I wouldn't even sniff the rats, much less eat them.

We did not have the slightest mercy in taking the lives of rats at that time. It did not strike us that they are living beings too. Now when I look back, it seems that the children who would trouble us for fun's sake were not being heartless. One does not pay attention to such things while it amuses us. Panditji would be delighted when we would kill hundreds of rats in a matter of minutes.

## Four

All youngsters and elders of the village would bathe in the same ditch in which the boys repeatedly threw me and played with me. The ditch was very deep and that was why it would be full of water throughout the year. Even through raw, its water was clean.

Panditji's wife would warn her young son everyday, "Be careful! Don't ever go towards that ditch, or else you will drown."

Generally, all the parents would caution their children in this manner, but when would the boys ever listen? Avoiding the eyes of their parents, they would slip away, reach the ditch, and play all sorts of games. Someone would throw a chip of stone into the water, another would aim at the frogs, some mature boys would jump into the water and practise swimming.

Who can stop what is destined? Once, some boys of the village were swimming in the ditch. Panditji's small son also reached the spot. Initially, he just kept playing at the edge, but it struck him that he should also swim a bit. He had just moved ahead when his feet slipped and he began to drown.

All the boys were alarmed and began to scream, "The boy is drowning! The boy is drowning!"

But no one could muster enough courage to take him out. If some grown-up had been there, he would have dared to make an effort. Generally speaking, everyone is scared of saving a person who is drowning. The one who is drowning latches on to the saviour in such a way that both of them begin to sink.

A very skilled person is needed for this exercise. This is exactly what happened there. By chance Panditji's elder son was there to have a bath. He jumped in instantly when he saw his brother drowning. But the younger boy caught hold of the elder one in such a manner that both of them began to drown. Thereafter, the boys began to shout even louder.

The news at once created an uproar in the whole village, "Ramu and Shyamu are both drowning. Come, let us take them out or else not even one of them will survive!"

Men and women thronged at the ditch, in a matter of minutes. But all of them hesitated to jump into the water.

I also reached there in the meantime, and could grasp the situation immediately. Quickly I darted into the water like an arrow.

Both the boys had almost drowned and only some strands of their hair were visible. I caught hold of their hair with my teeth and pulled them to the edge in the wink of an eye. People were stunned to see this courageous feat of mine. Panditji had gone out for some work at the time. By chance he also showed up and seeing the crowd, he could assess the entire situation in a moment. Then he picked me up and hugged me. People had pumped out the water from the boys' stomachs before Panditji had arrived and they had recovered from the accident.

Now I began to be praised immensely all over the village, "This dog is some god from his previous birth; he must have committed some mistake and thus had to be born as a dog."

Someone would say, "No, he is an incarnation of Bhairavnath. It is certainly the wish of the gods to bless whomsoever they are pleased with."

From that day onwards, Panditji began loving me even more than his own life. Now I did not have to knock the door of someone else for food.

Jakiya was also present there. Just look at his stupidity, he was barking *bhaun bhaun* in a very harsh tone when I had taken out the boys and was coming out. Some people pelted stones at this act of his and made him run away. That was right too! Where at one end people were trying to save the lives of these boys, at the other end he was barking pointlessly! The tambourine-player was irritated on seeing this horrible deed of his. Why wouldn't he be so? He had hoped that his dog would surely make a name for himself. He had not fallen short in feeding him the best of meals, but there people were driving Jakiya away by shouting *dur dur*. I have no idea why the tambourine-player became particularly fond of me since that very day. He would pick me up wherever he spotted me and would lovingly stroke my neck for hours together. I wanted to thank him for that loving gesture, but what could I do apart from wagging my tail? Now his attention was gradually deflecting away from Jakiya. I did not want to be hostile towards my brother, but Jakiya became my mortal enemy. He would invariably grapple with me wherever he spotted me. He was strong indeed and I had to accept defeat.

## Five

Whatever Panditji would get now, he would keep a share for me just like he did for his sons. I would also accompany Panditji all the time and would be very dejected when he would go out for some work. On his return, I would constantly wag my tail and dance joyously. Probably he would also be exhilarated by this act of mine because I could see a radiant gleam of delight on his face.

One day a shepherd's sheep barged into Panditji's field of peas. When Panditji saw this, he scolded him. A few days later, the shepherd played the same malicious prank. This time round, Panditji gave him a couple of smart slaps after rebuking him severely. I assumed that the shepherd would not dare to make such a blunder again, but he made his sheep stealthily enter Panditji's fields after a couple of days. Panditji was furious. He flung the shepherd down on the ground and kicked him. I also flew into a rage and bit and scratched him a number of times.

Somehow the shepherd left that day, but he was on the lookout for me from the very next day. He would bite his lips in vexation when he saw me with Panditji. I knew that he would certainly attack me, the moment he found me alone. That was why I would not leave Panditji's company even by mistake.

The shepherd's sheep would never forcibly enter Panditji's fields now while the shepherd was hell bent on taking revenge.

Listen to what happened one day. Panditji's crop of sugar-cane was very good. The villagers would often say that this year Panditji would have a bumper crop and beat everyone.

The shepherd thought, "Let me set this field on fire and I will get even with him."

Indeed, he reached the field exactly at midnight. The wretch did not know that I would keep watch over the crop. The instant he thought of fleeing after setting fire, I sprang and caught hold of his foot. Startled, he fell down.

And why wouldn't he? How bold are thieves, anyway! The crook tried his level best to escape, but did not succeed. Luckily, the field was just a bit far from the village. When the flames rose suddenly, the village folk quickly raced to the site. On seeing me holding on to the shepherd's foot, they could make out that he had done this wicked deed. Whoever came would first beat the shepherd

and then go on to douse the fire. That crook was given such a sound thrashing that he was on the verge of dying. Even then, the people were not satisfied. It was decided that he should be taken to the *thana* but Panditji let him go without taking any action.

People said, "Man can do nothing until God wills otherwise."

There is a saying:

'*jako rakhe saiyan maar na sakhain koi*', that is, If God wants to save somebody, nobody can kill him.

The villagers were very astonished at this behaviour of Panditji's. Under these circumstances, no one would set the shepherd free without full punishment being meted out to him. I think that if the shepherd had been caught after all the sugar-cane crop had been burnt, Panditji would not have left him alive, but in this case, he had to show that he was merciful so why wouldn't he forgive him!

Ever since that day, Panditji began to love me even more. I became renowned all over the village. But that fiend in human shape was constantly scheming about how to put an end to me. Night and day, the shepherd would pointedly be on the look out for me, but by God's grace he could not do the slightest harm to me.

Finally, the shepherd contrived a plan. He began pampering Jakiya by feeding him well. The tambourine-player had almost turned out Jakiya from his house earlier, and would offer a scrap of food to him like other stray dogs, at times. It so happened once that a policeman had come to Jakiya's door while patrolling the area at night. Jakiya had bitten him severely at that time. The police man had really harassed the tambourine-player. Ever since that incident the tambourine-player had begun hating Jakiya. He had developed such an aversion that he did not want Jakiya to even linger at his door. However, on account of the affection they had shared for so long, he had to give him something or the other.

Jakiya was definitely very strong, but he had no inkling of what was good and evil, right and wrong. He would strike up an inopportune song whenever he wanted. The only quality he had was that he was very powerful. A dog from any other village could not dare to venture there! Jackals in particular were terrified the instant they spotted him. Deer and large antelopes who would completely ruin the fields earlier, did not dare to enter the village.

Once, a monkey played great havoc in the village. He would snatch *rotis* from the hands of children, accost women on the way

and not leave them without snatching whatever they had on them. It had become very difficult for people to walk around. The monkey had made the life of the village impossible. Jakiya gave him a shaking and tore at him in such a way that the wretch did not show his face ever again.

But of course, the shepherd began feeding Jakiya so that he could take revenge on me. Jakiya was also a thorough scoundrel. How can one who is used to having meat and fish possibly be satisfied with plain simple *sattu*? Avoiding the eyes of the shepherd, he would steal the sheep. One day, the shepherd tied Jakiya and thrashed him thoroughly for this act of his. Jakiya left his place. Now he did not belong to anyone. He was known as the tambourine-player's dog, but Jakiya had no connection whatsoever with him.

The shepherd resolved that come what may, he would kill me, whether he lived or died. Risking his life one day, the wretch managed to attack me. It so happened that Panditji was praying in the temple and I sat on the floor, taking a nap. Closing his eyes, Panditji was meditating on Lord Shiva. With all his might, the shepherd delivered a blow on my back with a *lathi*! I shrieked aloud in pain. I was not at all aware of where I was. On gaining consciousness, I found myself in an animal hospital. Recovering in a few days, I came back from the hospital, but my back had become very weak. Whenever the easterly winds would blow, I would be whining in pain. Later on, I came to know from Panditji that he had left his prayers on hearing my shriek. He had rushed out and found that the shepherd wanted to strike a second blow. Panditji ran fast and catching hold of him, flogged him thoroughly with his *lathi*. Thereafter, Panditji had him committed for trial and sentenced. Only a person who has been to jail can gauge the cruel treatment that was meted out to him thereafter. I would listen to these episodes when Panditji would narrate them to his friends and began feeling very proud of Panditji ever since. I firmly believed that I would not face any kind of hardship as long as Panditji was around. At times, I would repent that I was not born a human.

My Mother's condition was deteriorating day by day. Hunger, anxiety and beating had combined to make her insane. She would keep lying down idly as though a mass of ruins. Once when I went to look her up, she pounced upon me speedily so that I wouldn't escape and she could bite me hard.

People stopped coming in that direction. By chance, the shepherd had been released that very day after serving his sentence in jail. Unexpectedly, Mother confronted him on the way and even though he tried his best to save himself, she bit him ferociously. There was so much poison in Mother's bite that the shepherd died after just a couple of days. It is wrong to rejoice at someone's death even if he is one's arch enemy, but I began to jump in joy. I was delighted at the shepherd's death because I had no enemy now.

Nevertheless, the news that the police shot down Mother, two or three days after this incident, made me cry as much as this happiness had made me laugh. I was grieved for several days. Indeed, who in this world would not deeply mourn the loss of his mother?

Apart from Jakiya, no blood relation of mine was alive now. That was when I would think at times—let us see how we two meet our end. Although I was content with the nourishing diet I was being given and Jakiya was unhappy, yet the only satisfaction was that at least I had someone I could call a brother. Even his fortune would turn for the better sometime! Earlier he had enjoyed good times whereas I had gone through tough times. Now I was having good times and he was suffering. Nobody's fortune remains the same all the time.

I would not be irritated whenever Jakiya would come to Panditji's door for food. He was scared that I might take revenge, but I would move away from there so that he could eat in peace. Occasionally, when I would get food in abundance, I would keep it in my mouth and take it to Jakiya. Apparently, he would seem pleased, but was constantly envious of me in his heart.

## Six

Once on a dark stormy night, all the people in Panditji's house had gone to visit relatives somewhere. Only Panditji and I were there in the house. Panditji was snoring and sound asleep, but how could I possibly doze off? I kept going round the house repeatedly. The thieves assumed that there was dead silence today. They had made the domestic help leak secrets of the house to them. On hearing footsteps, I went to the backyard and saw that a door was open and some shady men were standing there. Looking around with watchful eyes, they were talking softly. I could not hear their talk because I

was a bit far away from that spot. In a short while, I saw someone pilfering *thali-lota*, *sandook* and so on and handing them over to the men outside. I could instantly grasp the situation now and began barking at the top of my voice.

At this the thieves began pelting stones at me, but I was not bothered. How could I possibly see my master's house being burgled? Running swiftly, I went to Panditji on the verandah and began pulling his sheet with my teeth. He kicked me a couple of times for this act of mine, but I refused to draw back. I tugged the sheet again and began barking loudly. That was when Panditji woke up. How was I to explain to him that his house was being robbed? I would go to the backside again and again and bark at the top of my voice on coming back to him. My intention was that he should come to the backyard, see that his house was being burgled and try to save it. Seeing my vigilance, the thieves could not muster enough courage to decamp with the loot. I stood in their way. Secondly, there was just some time left for the morning to dawn, so they kept throwing all the goods in the nearby ditch. Maybe their intention was to take all the possessions and flee with them on the following night. In fact, who would think of entering the ditch and searching for the stolen stuff.

I would repeatedly get angry over Panditji's good sense having abandoned him today. Why was he not understanding my gesture? The only consolation was that the stuff had not yet been taken away. Eventually, a plan struck me. Panditji's *lathi* was kept under the bed. I picked it up with my mouth and advanced towards the backside. Now Panditji understood what I was trying to say. Taking the *lathi*, he quickly reached the backyard and saw that the thieves were decamping with the stuff.

"Thieves! Thieves!" was all that he could utter in shock.

As soon as people heard the word thief, voices screaming 'Catch them! Catch them!... We are coming! We are coming!' could be heard from all sides.

In a matter of moments, wielding *lathis* all the villagers gathered at the spot, but the thieves could not be caught.

Now we were worried about what the thieves had run off with. Panditji was certainly not stable and seemed to have lost his wits. On coming to his senses, when he peeped into the house, he saw that everything was gone. It seemed as if lightning had struck him.

People took care of Panditji and began to console him, “*Bhaiya*, don't be so dejected! Wealth is all trash. Why worry about its loss?”

However, Panditji kept sighing and lamenting the loss. No one would even bother to look at me. Running, I would repeatedly go to the ditch and bark at the top of my voice. Then I would come back and keeping my face on Panditji's feet, wag my tail, but he would invariably pull back his legs. It did not matter if he did but he would even kick me in anger. But I kept at my work without fail. For how long would someone not understand what I was trying to say?

There were all sorts of people. Some of them were consoling Panditji whereas some were making fun.

They were saying, “That is why it has been said that some donation should certainly be made from one's income. Those people who want to grab everything themselves have to go through this misery.”

The *patwari* advised, “Inform the police, Panditji. Perhaps we can get some clue!”

Choudhary intervened, “I must say! The pretence of the police is terrible. They come and suck something out of you, for certain. I have filed hundreds of reports all my life, but stolen goods could never be found.”

Panditji toughened his heart and agreed, “Yes Choudhary, you are right. How can an object which has been stolen by fate ever be found again?”

Such talks were going on at that end and my task was at the other.

Seeing me in action, some people said, “Look! The dog has become confused along with Panditji. Panditji is calm because he is sensible, but this stupid dog has become insane.

Hearing these remarks, I would laugh at them. Were these people senseless or I? I had been making signs for hours, but no one was able to figure out what I was trying to indicate, even then they would call themselves sensible. What should I say? If I had been a human, I would have shown them.

All of a sudden, a plan struck me. Tearing through the crowd, I jumped into the water and going deep down,, reached the bottom and came up with a small metal bowl in my mouth. Everyone understood what I was trying to convey when I did so. And then what? Several men dived into the water and all the stuff was found in a short while.

Panditji was so delighted that he picked me up again and again and hugged me. Everyone would rave that it was very rare to find such intelligence in a dog. He must have been some learned scholar in his previous life and has been born a dog to atone for some sins of his.

One gentleman said, "In olden times, animals used to talk like humans and could even understand what they spoke."

At this, Choudhary remarked, " *Bhai*, what you are saying is absolutely true! It is written in the 'Ramayana' that a dog had once narrated his tale to Lord Ramchandra.

One day the *darbar* of Lord Ramchandra was being held. The rich and poor, the great and small were openly talking about their personal experiences. A dog reached the spot in the meantime and folding his paws stood in front.

"Lord Ramchandra asked, 'What is it that you want to say?'

"The dog said, 'Worshipful Lord ! Today is the last day of my life. That is why I need to make your subjects understand some facts about my experiences in front of you so that they can be saved from many evils in their respective lives.'

All the people were astonished to hear these wise words of the dog. Absolute silence prevailed in the royal court.

"Lord Ramchandra said, 'These thoughts of yours are worth admiring. If all begin giving such knowledgeable sermons, they can be of great help to mankind. First of all, tell us, how do you know you are going to die today itself?'

"The dog replied, ' Maharaj, I did not want to disclose this, but since you have asked me, I will have to tell you the reason. I firmly believe that one enjoys or suffers in this life according to one's previous deeds. Kindly summon the Brahman's son named Guna and ask him why he beat me with a *lathi* for no fault of mine. If I have your permission, can I sit down and talk now because my back is virtually broken and I cannot keep standing. Such a severe blow has been delivered that it seems my life is going to come to an end today itself.'

"The sepoys went and caught the boy who was guilty of this offence and presented him in the *darbar*. When he was asked why he had beaten the dog, he folded his hands and said, 'O, Friend of the poor! I was walking on the way and this dog was sitting right in the middle of the path. I asked him to move away many times, but he did not budge. Becoming furious because of his defiance, I delivered a smart blow on his back.'

“Lord Ramchandra asked, “If this dog was sitting in the way, why didn't you go ahead from the side?”

“Worshipful Lord! I have made this blunder.”

“And even if you did fly into a rage, why did you hit him so hard that his back is almost broken?”

“- Maharaj, I admit I have committed this offence. O Lord, mete out whatever punishment you think proper to me!”

“Lord Ramchandra asked the dog, ‘What punishment do you want to give him?’

“The dog answered, ‘The punishment which justice administers ought to be given to him.’

- “We leave the verdict to you.”

“The dog: ‘Then he should be made to sit on an elephant and sent home. Thereafter he should be made a *mahant* of the city's royal temple.’

- ‘Hearing this all the people were nonplussed. Was this a punishment or a reward? Even Lord Ramchandra could not understand this mystery. He said, ‘What is this? You are giving this reward to someone who has behaved with you in this atrocious manner?’

- ‘Worshipful Lord! Do not think this to be a reward. It is a dreadful punishment. If this son of a *Brahman* was of virtuous conduct, he would have become a god. But he will be born as a dog on becoming a *mahant*.’

“Why so?”

“This is exactly what I have gone through. I have come to narrate this very tale. I was born into a brahman family in my previous life. My father was also the *mahant* of a temple. Thakurji would be decked beautifully on the day when some honourable wealthy person was to visit the temple, but the day when no one was scheduled to come, even the door of the temple would not be opened. Once, one such wealthy gentleman came to see Thakurji. My father had made all sorts of sweets and offered *bhoga* to Thakurji. I was crying when he came home while Mother was heating milk and rice. On seeing him, I instantly threw a tantrum that I would have milk and rice only from his hands. My father was very fond of me. Quickly he picked me up in his lap and began feeding me. He had just done Thakurji's *puja* and come, therefore his nails had *ghee* smeared on them. Melting due to the hot milk, the *ghee* mixed with the rice and milk. How was I

to know that I would be so severely punished on just a little ghee blending with the rice and milk? On growing up, I read the Vedas and taught them, had *yagyas* done and devoutly followed religious obligations. However, when I reached Yama, the god of death, he said that firstly I was the son of a hypocritical *mahant*, secondly I had eaten the food which the mahant had earned and thirdly I had tasted the ghee which had been served to Thakurji and made it impure. Therefore I should be born as a dog. I wept hysterically, but no one paid heed to me. I am the same dog. Therefore you all can well understand whether I have meted out punishment or a reward.'

"Having narrated his story, the dog fainted and collapsed, never to get up again."

Morning had dawned and everyone left for their respective houses. Hearing the story of that dog, I felt very sorry about my plight. There used to be an era once where justice was meted out to even animals whereas animals' lives simply have no value in our time. At the same time, I had this satisfaction that I was certainly much better off than such a deceitful *mahant*.

Ever since that day, Panditji became even more fond of me. He would start raving about me when he met somebody: "He is not a dog, but my child from my previous lifetime."

## Seven

During those days, several wild boars invaded our village. They wreaked havoc which created uproar in the entire village. They would not spare whichever field they barged into without ruining it completely. Who had courage to face them? The path would close for passersby, right from the evening. Putting my life at stake, I strongly wished to pounce upon them once, but my back had not yet recovered. How could I possibly clash with those fearsome creatures? I was helpless. But of course, Jakiya was plump and well-fed. If he mustered courage, he could certainly kill a few of them, but he was a coward of the first order. The instant he saw their faces, Jakiya would run miles away. And when he figured out that the boars would not be able to come to where he stood, he would bark at the top of his voice. The biggest regret was that there were hundreds of men in the village, but no one had the courage to challenge them. All of

them would become brave like lions when it came to killing dogs, but were timid like cats when they had to face the boars.

Eventually, people went and complained in the *thana*. The seniormost official of the *thana* was an excellent *shikari*. When he got the news, he brought several sniffer dogs one day and arrived in the village. All the village folk gathered to see the spectacle. Taking me along, Panditji also went. His son was ready to accompany us, but Pandit ji refused to take him along.

He reasoned, "Are sweets being distributed there that you will go and take them? Your life cannot be saved if you confront the boars. I happen to be the village *mukhiya* and am strong. Why do you put your life in danger on purpose."

Hearing this, the boy was scared and then did not speak of joining us.

When I reached near the Sahib, first of all my gaze fell on those dogs which he had brought with him.

They were all sitting in a vehicle which people call a motorcar. Seeing those fortunate brothers of mine, I swelled with pride: There are even such beings in my species who sit along with a high ranking official in a motorcar! All of them were immaculately clean. While I had not bathed for the past so many years and my fur was teeming with thousands of ticks. I was unable to contain myself for joy on seeing my clan whereas foolish Jakiya barked *bhaun bhaun* on seeing them as if he had nothing else to do. The villagers would forbid him constantly, scold him and pelt stones at him, but he would not stop barking. One doesn't know what was going on in his mind. Did he not grasp even this much that they had not come to harm the village? If that had been the case, wouldn't the villagers have beaten them and made them run away? What else can we say except that it was his stupidity. I have noticed a big drawback in my species that they are ready to bite and pounce on each other the moment they see their kinsmen as if they are their deadly enemies. Sometimes I would be enraged on seeing my uncouth brethren, but would control my anger. I have seen animals who meet each other with affection, sleep together side by side and none of them has the slightest objection. I simply cannot figure out how this wickedness has crept into my species. I can perhaps say that we have picked up this vice from the human race. It is the usual practice among them that a brother fights with his brother, a father with his son and a brother with his

sister. Brothers go to the extent of slitting each other's throats, a son thirsts for his father's blood, a friend is violent to his friend and a servant deceives his master. We mostly serve human beings and stay with them. What is so astonishing if we have imbibed this evil trait from them? At least we have this quality that we are always ready to give our lives for our master. We are forever ready to shed blood for our master when he sweats because of hard work. Human beings do not have even this much loyalty. After all, these Sahib's dogs were also dogs. Why were they not barking? Why were they so civilized and earnest? Precisely because there was not much discord and discrimination amongst the people they stayed with. They all appeared like gods to me. There was such brilliance and nobility on their faces!

Sahib Bahadur reached that site which was the base of the wild boars along with his dogs. Once there, he blew the whistle and the dogs became alert. Their eyes began flashing, nostrils began pulsating and their chests puffed out, as if all of them were restless to get Sahib's nod. Their zeal could not be curbed now even if they wanted to do so.

Perhaps the boars had also figured out that all was not going well today. Not even one of them stepped out. When the villagers barged into the sugarcane fields and began making a noise, one of them came out. He was kind of alarmed on seeing this dense crowd. Probably he was looking for a chance to flee from any side. Suddenly the Sahib's dogs pounced upon him! The pig was killed before their very eyes as the villagers looked on.

Seeing this bravery of the dogs, people began applauding them, "Well done!"

Even I exclaimed instinctively, "Great job, brothers! You all are truly heroic!"

Now a strong desire arose in my heart. One must definitely die some day, so I thought of doing something spectacular today. What was so brave in dying while fighting amongst ourselves or being thrashed by men's thick batons! I will make a name for myself even if I have to die on the field of action! These dogs should also know that there is some hero in this village.

In the meantime, another pig could be seen coming outfront. The British dogs ran and I ran alongside them. Each one of them wanted

to be the first to reach the prey whereas I wanted to be the first to do so. The whole lot of us ran at great speed and somehow I was the first to strike the pig. All the rest of the dogs were left behind. If the pig had stubbornly stayed put, probably I would have had to run away, but he was alarmed on seeing us and fled straightaway. And then what! We began clawing him from the back. All of us clung to him in such a manner that we stopped only after killing him! People came to know now that I was spirited too. Sahib was pleased as well. He called me and patted my back. Panditji was standing near the Sahib and was delighted to see me being honoured.

Sahib asked, "Well! Whose dog is he?"

Folding his hands, Panditji replied, "Huzoor! He lives at my place."

Sahib: "Your dog is very brave."

Panditji: "Sarkar is very gracious to say so."

He had not been able to even complete the sentence when suddenly the third pig darted out and pounced on Sahib. Sahib got cold feet. If there had been a delay of even a second, the pig would have certainly killed him.

Though Sahib had a rifle in his hand, yet he was so alarmed that he could not fire it. I saw that the situation was critical. The other dogs were at a distance whereas I was standing there all by myself. Clashing with the pig meant risking my life, but it was essential to protect the Sahib's life. I pounced from the back and caught hold of the pig's leg. He just had to turn back when the Sahib recovered and fired the rifle. The pig fell down dead, but he had badly wounded me. Unconscious for hours, I did not know where I was. On gaining consciousness, I saw that I was lying on a cotton mattress and a couple of people were washing my wounds and attending to me.

## Eight

I began to get such sumptuous dishes to eat at the Sahib's bungalow, which I had not even imagined in my dreams. Earlier I would be fortunate to get a bone at times, but now I would get fresh meat to eat, twice a day. Sometimes I would get milk as well. The *khansamah* would scrub me with soap and give me a bath. Earlier I had not even heard of soap as it was not customary in Panditji's house to use soap.

Now when Sahib would say, "Apply soap and give Kallu a bath" the *khansamah* would take a small cake-like thing, and scrub my wet body with it.

At that time my body would be coated with white lather which looked exactly like milk's foam. Such fragrance would exude from it that I would be overjoyed. In the evening, Sahib would make me sit in his motorcar and take me for a ride to get a breath of fresh air. Mem Sahib would also accompany us. I did not know what they were discussing at that time, but hearing the name Kallu repeatedly, I could figure out that they were talking about me. At times Mem Sahib would pick me up in her lap and kiss my face. I cannot express how elated I was at that moment. I would wag my tail and cling to her neck. If she could have understood my dialect, she would have known that we are no less than humans in responding to affection.

Missing Panditji, I was troubled constantly for some days, but gradually forgot the past. Who remembers tough times when one is happy?

One fine day, when we were going for an outing in the evening, I saw poor Panditji come trudging. I remembered the past the instant I saw Panditji. Jumping from the motorcar and snuggling my face into his feet, I began wagging my tail. When Panditji affectionately stroked my head, I saw that his eyes were brimming with tears. There was dust settled on his face, his lips were chapped and his feet were smeared with maunds of dirt. His clothes had become soiled. I felt sorry for him.

Sahib asked, "Well Pandit! I hope you are fine?"

- "By Sarkar's grace, I am."

- "What do you want?"

- "Huzoor, I have come to see my Kallu. What shall I say, Sarkar! I have been miserable ever since he has come to you. I do not forget him even for a second. I cry invariably on seeing the empty place where he used to sit. Sarkar, he was the guardian of my house. Have mercy on me."

- "So what do you want?"

- "I just want that Sarkar should hand over Kallu to me now. God will bring about your well-being. Without him I will not be at peace anywhere."

- "Oh Pandit! You are being very deceitful. We cannot give this dog to you. Take some British dog instead of him."

I was in a great dilemma at that point. Seeing Panditji's affection I wished to go along with him, but was a bit hesitant on recollecting the comforts here.

When Sahib refused, Panditji was disappointed, "As Sarkar wishes. What will I do with a dog of British breed when Kallu is not there for me?" Saying so, Panditji began weeping.

I resolved at that time that I will go everyday to guard Panditji's house even while I was staying at the bungalow. What dearth was there of dogs here!

Sahib said, "*Ham janta hai ki tum is kuta ko bahut pyar karta hai and hum tumko deta, lekin hum bahut jald apne desh janevala hai. Haan, tum iska jo daam mango voh ham de sakta hai.*" or "I know that you love this dog a lot and I would have given him to you, but I am going back to my country very soon. But of course, I can pay whatever price you ask for him."

Panditji gave no answer to this offer. He saluted Sahib with a *salaam* and turned around to go back. All of a sudden he remembered something.

Coming back he said, "Sarkar! When are you going to return from England?"

Sahib, "*Theek nahin kah sakta, magar jab ham aayega to tumko itla dega*" or "I can't tell you the exact time. However, I will certainly inform you on return."

If Sahib had not talked of my going to England, I would have surely gone with Panditji. I could not bear to see his dejection. Panditji looked at me once with love-lorn eyes and walked off. I could not stop myself now. Memsahib's affection, a trip to England and sumptuous meals all seemed worthless in my eyes.

My heart said, "You are so ungrateful. You are abandoning the one who brought you up from childhood, who fed you in his lap even breaking Brahmin rules, who did not so much as scold you all for the sake of a luxurious life."

And then I did not bother about anything. I jumped from the verandah and began following Panditji. But I had not walked even twenty steps when the *khansamah* came and caught me, putting a leash around my neck. I was so furious that I leapt to bite the *khansamah*, but my neck had been leashed with an iron chain, so

what could I do? I began looking at Panditji helplessly. Panditji would also turn to look back repeatedly until he disappeared out of sight. I did not eat that day as the thought of Panditji tugged at my heartstrings, again and again.

## Nine

After staying here for some more days, Sahib left for his country with his Mem. They took me along as well. It will take very long if I stop to narrate what all I saw, where all we stopped and the various kinds of people we met on the way. We stayed on the ship for about a month. It was a huge tall house made of wood, which would keep floating on the water. I was scared initially when I boarded the ship. As far as the eye could see, the blue sky was visible above, the blue waters below and this wooden house drifting on it. It seemed exactly as if some kite was soaring in the sky. After a span of several days, we reached a country where men were wearing really long *kurtas* whereas the women were walking, wrapped in a white garment covering them from head to toe, with a veiled opening for the eyes. Sitting on the ship, I remembered Jakiya, over and over again. If he would also be with me on this ship, we would have journeyed in such comfort. One doesn't know what condition the poor thing would be in. But it's good that he was not there with me because he would not be able to sit here for even a second. Not a single person belonging to our village could be seen on the ship. All of them were like our Sahib.

Just listen to what happened one day. It was night and I was lying on the floor when suddenly I felt that someone was singing in the room. There was no one there. I woke up with a start and began looking around, but no one could be seen. I could not keep my mouth shut now and began barking loudly. Both Memsahib and Sahib woke up on hearing me bark and tried to quieten me. My suspicion was dispelled on seeing them. However, I still could not figure out who was singing.

Similarly, another incident took place once. In the evening there would be illumination in all the rooms on its own. A round sort of small box was installed in the wall, and there was a brass knob in that miniature box. Sometimes Sahib and at times Memsahib would touch that knob. And that was enough to make the room dazzle with light. I was astounded to see this feature. I would wonder if the place

would be illuminated in the same way if I touched the knob. If I was able to light up the room, how happy would all the people be! How was I going to reach upto the knob? It was at a great height. Finally, I devised a clever way of doing so. I dragged the chair with both my feet and took it near the wall. Standing on both arms of the chair, I tapped that knob with one foot. I just had to do so when it felt that a spark of fire had singed my foot and ran like a current through my entire body. I fell down from the chair and ran, yelping in pain. After a short while, when I calmed down, I began thinking that there was certainly some magic in that knob. If Sahib and Memsahib touched it, they would also be hurt in this manner. I resolved that come what may I would not let them do so. When it became dark and Sahib walked towards the knob, I stood in front of him. Again and again he would move me aside while I would repeatedly stop his way.

Eventually, catching hold of me, Sahib tied me and pressed the knob. There was instant light in the room and he was not hurt at all.

After several days, clouds gathered in the sky and a storm began to blow. The entire sky became red in a short while and the storm raged so strongly that the ocean waves leapt up by ten feet. Our ship was rocking up and down on the waves as some drunkard staggers as he walks ahead. The ship would toss and turn just as a drunkard totters and is about to fall at times, and we feared that it would topple over. All the people were running about in confused alarm. Lightning would flash so powerfully that it seemed it had fallen on our heads. It was a terrifying scene. Such a storm had raged in my life only once before. Thousands of animals had died because hundreds of houses had collapsed and uprooted trees could be found all over the place. But the tempest at sea was much more vehement than that storm. Suddenly, the lights went off on the ship which had been on a short while ago and darkness prevailed, just like a stormy night of *Savan* and *Bhadon*.

There was confused alarm all around. Some people were praying to God. Intimidated and huddled together, women stood with their children clinging on to their bosoms. I could clearly see their plight in that darkness. Some great calamity was going to strike us for sure.

All of a sudden, the ship collided into something and there was a fearsome sound. Soon after, it began submerging gradually. My Sahib and Mem were both hugging each other and weeping. I could

figure out now that the ship was sinking. The ocean would torment the ship and all these people would go under the ocean in some time. Probably the ocean was taking revenge for the ship's audacity.

In case the ship had ears, I would have said, "How conceited you had become about your triumph! And how your arrogance has been shattered now! Making so many people drown, you are going to sink in shame!"

My heart was grief-stricken for my Sahib and Memsahib. How could I save them? If I could make both of them sit on my back, I would do so and jump into the ocean! I would have reached somewhere at least. Wouldn't we find refuge on that mountain which had shattered the ship's arrogance? But I couldn't hold both of them and lift them up? I wanted to encourage my masters. I would go to them and whine *koon koon*, wag my tail, but in their alarmed state they could not understand what I was trying to say.

The ship was sinking every second. I was shattered on hearing the heart-rending screams and cries of the women and children. It was raining so heavily that it seemed that the ocean had mounted the sky and was showering hail on the ship. Oh God! What was this? The ship had sunk into the sea and I was drifting away in the water. My Sahib and Mem were nowhere to be seen. People were floating here and there. I cannot say how far I had drifted. Remembering Sahib and Mem, I felt like bursting into tears. I deliberated that if I happened to find them even now, I would try hard to save both of them.

At last God heard my entreaty. When lightning flashed, I saw a man and woman clinging to each other and drifting in one direction. I swam strenuously, reached close to them and saw that they were my Sahib and Memsahib. I do not know how much energy came into my body at that point in time! I had never been strong. I took Sahib's hand in my mouth and swam in the direction of the wind. I firmly resolved in my heart that I wouldn't abandon them as long as I was alive. Both Sahib and MemSahib were unconscious but still alive. Their bodies were warm. I invoked God's mercy for the day to dawn. One cannot say how long the night was! What could I figure out in that intense darkness? I was slapped by the waves like some leaf in a dust-storm. Sometimes, I was flung down below and at times up above. At times I was shoved ten arms in front by a rushing wave whereas the other rushing wave would push me fifty yards behind. Well, what could I possibly do while confronting this tempest? What

was my standing? Moreover, there was not much life left in this small frail body of mine. I was scared that I might drown myself.

That night turned out to be very daunting like a mountain. It seemed as if hiding its face, the sun was also lying helpless somewhere, out of fear. My body kept getting so weak that it seemed that I would not be able to survive now. If I had not been concerned about Sahib and Memsahib, I would have left myself at the mercy of the waves and the lashing waves would have swallowed me in a second. I was most scared of aquatic animals. Moreover, I was totally exhausted. Every moment it seemed that I would die now!

I cannot say how long this miserable state continued. It must have gone on for at least four to five hours. Eventually, the force of the wind began reducing. The lashing waves also eased out a bit and daylight dawned gradually. I mustered courage. Clouds had also begun clearing out a bit. I saw a herd of sheep at some distance. It was definitely some island. My heart began to leap with joy. I swam towards those sheep. Soon after, I saw that Sahib and Memsahib were tied in a silken sheet and that is why they had been clinging to each other till now. Suddenly I spotted a canoe. A couple of terrifying, dark-skinned men with fearsome faces were sitting on it. Their colour was dark as coal and their faces were painted with red war paint. They wore tall hats made of leaves on their heads and loin cloths made of animal hide around their waists. They had a spear each. I was frightened on seeing them and started barking even at that time. They sprang towards us the moment they spotted us and made all three of us sit in their canoe. I began to wither with fear, but what could I do? If I did not sit in the canoe, I would have drowned in an hour or so and died; because there was no strength left in my limbs. I stood at one corner of the canoe and began shivering with cold. Nevertheless, I kept wagging my tail so that all of them would not kill me with spears. I had not seen such dark terrifying men anywhere. Those people made us sit in the canoe and rowed it towards a cluster of trees. Humans must be living there, I thought.

The canoe reached there in about an hour. There was a high mountain on the shore. Trees growing on top of it were visible. The boat stopped at a spot at the foot of the mountain. They tied the boat to a tree and taking Sahib and Memsahib off the boat, brought them on to the ground. On seeing them, several women having similar faces came out and all of them began shouting with joy. Thereafter, Sahib and Memsahib were lifted and taken towards the village.

Several huts had been made on a clearing at some height. This was their village. Hundreds of men surrounded me the instant we reached there, and holding the shoulders of Mem and Sahib they began shaking them. Someone would press their nose, another would ride on their chests and trample it with his knees. I crouched down in fear and could not muster the courage to growl. Were all of them beating Sahib and Mem by any chance? However, after being shaken and jolted for about half an hour, both of them became conscious. Their eyes opened and they could move their hands and legs, but could not get up yet. I could not contain my happiness now. Coming to them, I began barking slowly. Those dark men started singing and dancing. I do not know why they were so delighted. Their dance was so clumsy and I was highly amused to see them jump and leap in joy.

But I could not be happy for long. As soon as Sahib and MemSahib began talking, those dark-skinned men imprisoned them in a small dingy room. If they had to confine them, why didn't they let them both drown in the ocean? The three of us had not even seen a crumb of food for the past few days. My stomach was rumbling with hunger. Poor Sahib and Memsahib were also famished. Would these people give them something to eat and drink or keep them shut in the dingy room and kill them? There was no dearth of food for me there. Pieces of meat were strewn all over the place and a heap of bones was piled up. Aborigines eat only flesh. I did not see any crop fields there. Seeing a piece of meat lying under a tree, I craved to eat it but then it struck me that Sahib and Memsahib would be starving long. If I had a full meal it would be mean on my part.

The day passed slowly. It was not very hot here. I sat under a tree in front of the same hut where the Sahibs were imprisoned and kept watching how these people treated them, whether they gave them something to eat or not. Afternoon came and then it was evening, but the hut did not open even once. Two men were constantly sitting at the door of the hut as if they were guarding it. Gradually the night came on, but the jail did not open. Now I firmly resolved in my heart that howsoever it may be, I would definitely go into this hut once. There was meat kept in all the huts. Quietly I sneaked into one of them, picked up a fairly big chunk of meat and got it. These aborigines did not cook the meat in a pan on the stove; they roasted it on fire. I took a big roasted leg, came out and hid it amidst the leaves. Soon after, I began thinking how to enter

the Sahibs' hut? Both the *yamdoots* or horrid guards were still sitting there. Unless these people moved or went off to sleep, it was tough for me to step in. Besides, how would I open the door? A fairly big stone stood posited at the mouth of the door. How would I be able to move that stone aside?

Anxious, I kept sitting and thinking about how to go ahead. My entire body was totally exhausted. My eyes would close repeatedly, but I would wake up with a start, in just a second. About half the night passed in this manner. The jackals howled in the second watch of the night. Slowly and stealthily, I crept to the hut's door. Both the horrid guards lay flat on the ground there itself. Their noses were sounding loudly. If someone heard their snoring from a distance, it would seem as if two cats were fighting with each other. Putting my life at stake, I began shifting that stone. It was a big boulder. However much force I would use with my paws, it would not even budge an inch from its place. On the one hand, I was scared that if there was a slight sound, both these horrid guards would wake up and probably not spare my life. I wondered how these two would manage to move aside such a huge and heavy boulder. I had been trying to lift it upto now. Now it struck me that if I pushed it lengthwise, it might budge. As soon I used all my strength, the boulder shifted a bit to the front. And that was enough for me to know the system on which it worked. By pushing several times, the boulder moved from the door. There was such a device installed on its left that it could not shift towards the right or left; but could move in a straight direction. As soon as the stone budged, I opened the door slowly. I went and got the chunk of meat and reached inside the hut. Thereafter, I saw that the Sahib and Mem were lying breathless on the floor. Licking their feet, I woke them up. Alarmed, they both got up and ran to a corner in fear. When I whined, they figured out it was Kallu. The two of them hugged me and patting my head, showered affection on me. I put the piece of meat in Sahib's hand. The instant they smelt its aroma, the Sahibs began eating it. I cannot say how delighted I was at that point. Both of them kept eating ravenously and fondling me simultaneously. They passed on the leftover piece to me after they had had their fill. I ate the meat there itself. Where would the water come from now? Though I did not have the habit of drinking water after food, but human beings definitely have some water while eating food. I remembered this fact at the time.

I stepped out and began searching for water. No other hut had a door apart from the hut where they had been confined. The huts were open and people slept at their doors. I managed to enter a hut and began searching for a utensil to hold water. There were no earthenware vessels or pails for carrying milk. Water had been stored in skulls of big animals. People would take out water in small skulls and drink them. I also filled a small skull with water and clenching it in my teeth, reached the Sahibs. The instant both of them saw water they pounced on it and drank it in one go. Again I took the skull, filled it with water and brought it back. In this way, by shuttling back and forth, my masters' thirst was quenched. After feeding and giving water to both of them, I stepped out slowly. Shutting the door, I shifted the boulder and posited it in the same way as it had been kept earlier. If I wanted, I could have got out my masters in the same way, but where would I go? Where would I keep wandering, lost in a foreign land at night? If these dark-skinned natives captured us again, they would rest only after taking our lives. That was why I felt it was better for them to stay put here until I found the path to escape after scrutinising this region thoroughly.

This became my daily regime. The entire day, I would closely scout all over the place. At night I would feed the Sahibs and go off to sleep. No one could guess what I was up to. I had never thieved till this point of time, but I did not consider this theft to be a sin. If I had not resorted to this measure, Sahib and Mem would have died of hunger for sure.

I could not figure out why these dark-skinned people had imprisoned the Sahibs in this fashion. Probably they thought that we had come to arrest them. Or they would have assumed that someone would surely come looking for us. And then they would extort valuable things from them, but from their behaviour it seemed that they thought Sahib and Mem were gods. That particular hut was the temple of gods because all of them would go to dance in front of the hut, early in the morning. Perhaps this was their mode of worship. Probably they had assumed that gods did not eat and drink.

## Ten

We stayed in that native land for about a month. The aborigines never took the Sahibs out of the hut. What could they possibly talk to them

about? Maybe all of them thought that if they took out these gods, they would inflict some suffering on that region. They considered the gods to be some fearsome beings who would not bring about any gain apart from causing damage.

I thoroughly examined that native land during the one month. The sea stood on one side of the region. There was a huge mountain on its western side on which snow had frozen. A rocky plain lay to its south where nothing except an expanse of grass could be seen for miles. Where would we go even if we fled from here? This thought would trouble me all the time. The aborigines would regularly keep going back and forth to the shore of the ocean that was why there was the fear of being captured if we went there! It was very tough to climb up the high mountain and then who knows what lay on the other side? It also seemed virtually impossible to reach the other side of the mountain. The path to escape lay towards the wide plain. Probably after running for fifty to hundred miles, we would find another native land whose natives would not be as wild as these people. This is exactly what I decided to do.

It happened to be extremely cold that day. Thick fog had settled all around. Both the guards outside the Sahibs' hut were sleeping in their huts due to the bitter cold. The field of action was clear. I thought of not letting this opportunity slip from my hands. Maybe I would not get such a good chance again. I shifted the stone when all the people had gone off to sleep. Opening the door of the hut, I signalled to Sahib and Mem that they should step out. The Sahibs had begun understanding my gestures very well. Both of them stood up and rushed out at once. I kept walking in front of them. I had stashed food for two days and given it to Sahib beforehand. So there was no need to be anxious about this. The only worry was that not finding the three of us here, the aborigines might pursue us. Therefore, we must cover as much distance as was humanly possible at night. It was pitch dark all around. I raced ahead without any fear but the Sahibs were having great difficulty in doing so. Moreover, Memsahib would sit down at short intervals, and would get up only after a lot of persuasion on the Sahib's part.

Once Memsahib flared up and snapped, "How long are we going to trudge in this manner, after all?"

- "As long as we can."

- "Why don't we stop here and move on in the morning."

Sahib reasoned, "And What if we are arrested in the morning?"

Mem did not give an answer to this. Wearily, she walked ahead but kept fuming, "Our imprisonment was far better than this ordeal. At least we were confined in comfort. I don't know in which jungle you have caged me by getting me here; one can easily die of thirst. There is no sign of any dwelling."

We must have trudged ahead for half an hour when an uproar of many people could be heard from behind. It seemed as if hundreds of men were coming running. I figured out that the secret of our flight had been revealed and those natives were coming to capture us.

Sahib told the Mem, "It seems they are the same rascals. We people are going to be caught."

- "Yes, yes, it seems so!"

- "Poor Kallu managed to get us upto this place. If we are fated for bad luck, then what can he do?"

- "Let us run. We can probably get some refuge somewhere."

Both of them ran. The same Memsahib for whom walking each step had been an ordeal, began running. There is so much power in one's resolve! The biggest advantage was that some light could be seen in the east. The day would dawn in a short while and at least we could come to know where we were heading. However, we kept running ahead, alongside each other.

Another half an hour passed by in this manner. The dawn had begun to break now. The path could be seen clearly, but the men chasing us had reached very close. Their loud screams could be heard distinctly. If the ground had been even, probably we could have seen them as well. I ran thinking how we would safeguard ourselves if all of them came and caught us.

All of a sudden, I spotted a deep cave. I thought that if we hide in this cave and cover its mouth with weeds, probably our lives might be saved from those dark-skinned men. If we escaped, one never knows how far we would advance in the entire day and if we were caught we would rot in the same dingy room.

Thinking in this manner, I entered the cave. Both Sahib and Mem understood my intention. The two of them also stepped into the cave after me. However they were both scared that there might be a lion or cheetah lurking inside. I was leading. And I must have gone just a bit ahead when two lamp like objects could be seen glowing in that darkness. I shrieked loudly and moved

back. A lion was actually sitting in front. What should I do now? Neither could I move in ahead nor backwards, it seemed as if I had lost my senses. I merely kept standing there like a stone idol. Both Sahib and Mem became unconscious and collapsed. In fact, I kept standing, but the two of them seemed petrified with fear. I came back to my senses and my fear diminished gradually. Soon enough, I went and sniffed both of them. They had not died and were alive still. I thought about how to act now. We had barely escaped from one adversity when this new problem had cropped up. But what was this? The lion had not so much as budged from his seat, leave alone leaping and pouncing on us. He was staring at me, quietly. I saw something in his eyes which made my fear vanish gradually. Reluctantly, I moved ahead another step, but still the lion did not move from his place. The sound of slow moaning fell in my ears and I understood that the lion was ailing. The lion uttered a low mournful groan when I went closer and lifted up his right front foot. It was swollen badly. I figured out now that this creature was sitting silently for this very reason. He would wag his tail repeatedly, keep yawning and whining to attract our attention. A thorn would have pricked his paw, for certain. But how could I take it out? Here too, the teeth were exactly like a lion's. Initially it struck me that he can definitely not do anything and I should let him keep lying down here. I was scared that his mood might change as soon as I took out the thorn and he might devour all three of us in one go. But then I was compassionate. We creatures never forgot anyone's obligation. Even he was a living being who belonged to our community.

Thinking in this manner, I began looking forward to the Sahibs regaining consciousness. Eventually, their eyes opened in a short while. They mustered some courage on seeing me sitting next to the lion. The two of them did not flee from there. Seeing Sahib and Memsahib, the lion began wagging his tail and lifting his swollen paw, again and again. Even the Sahib figured out that the lion was lame. Soon after, Sahib shook the Mem several times. When the Mem gained consciousness, both of them kept talking between themselves for a while. Then the Sahib went near the lion, picked up his paw and took out the thorn gently. The lion's pain reduced gradually. He kept his head on Sahib's feet and began wagging his tail.

All of a sudden, cries of men could be heard outside. I figured

out that the aborigines chasing us had arrived and went and stood at the entrance. I would not let anyone come here even if I had to die! I had just reached the door of the cave when ten to twelve men wielding long spears, with red war paint smeared on their faces, came and confronted me. The group began clapping their hands in joy, the instant they saw me. They must be pleased that they had got us now and where we could possibly escape to. A couple of men tried to barge into the cave. What chance did I stand in front of that spear and shield! I merely stood barking.

O! Was the sky falling in on us! Or were two mountains colliding with each other? There was such a loud roar that the whole cave shook. It was the lion roaring. The instant he saw natives at the entrance, he leapt mightily and reached the opening. Do not ask about the utter chaos which broke loose amongst those scoundrels. Abandoning their spears and shields, falling on top of each other, they fled. However the lion sprang on one of them and devoured him right in front of us. I had goose flesh because of fear and Memsahib shut her eyes. I felt that we should run away from here somehow. How could we rely on this fearsome beast? You never know when his mood would change and he would make mincemeat of us.

Controlling my emotions, I kept sitting there for about an hour. When I came out and saw that not even one of those men was to be seen, I made a sign to Sahib to move on. Scared, Sahib and Memsahib stepped out of the cave and then walked on. With lowered head, the lion was docilely walking in front of us, as if he was a cow. Nonetheless, I wished that this creature would have mercy on us now and let us go our way.

We had reached a jungle by the time it was evening. It was such a dense jungle that we couldn't see anything. The three of us just kept walking behind the lion. All of a sudden the lion heard footsteps and stood still. Then he pricked up his ears and began growling slowly. Suddenly a lion confronted us. I was benumbed with fear whereas Sahib and Mem crouched down, under cover of a tree. But that monster had seen us. Roaring loudly, he advanced towards Sahib when our lion leapt and attacked him. Both of them were strung together in combat. We were mortally afraid. If he killed our lion friend, our well being would be at stake. I could have fled if I wanted to, but how could I abandon Sahib and Mem and run away? The trees were so straight and dense that it was tough to climb

them. We were praying in our hearts that our lion should triumph. At times that lion would overpower this one and sometimes this one would overpower that lion; they would fight with paws at times and with teeth at other times. Both of them would stand up while battling with their paws. Blood was streaming from their faces and bodies, both their eyes were blazing, both were roaring and we were watching this fight with bated breath. Eventually, our friend won after an hour long combat. He made the other lion fall flat on his back and tore open his stomach with his paw. All three of us were dancing with joy, but our lion friend had also been beaten to pulp. His entire body was wounded. He collapsed right there. Even we passed the night at that site. I could not get anything to eat. Sahib and Mem had eaten some fruit on the way, but what did I have to do with fruits? I wanted game to hunt and it was difficult to hunt in the dark. I was just left fasting.

Next day, we reached the shore. But what a pity! I was on the look out for some game by the ocean's side when our lion friend who was sitting under cover of a boulder, began groaning in pain slowly. When I went and saw him, his eyes had become glazed. In a short while he died there itself. He had been badly wounded in yesterday's combat. I kept sitting on his corpse and crying for a very long time. Sahib and Mem were also grief-stricken. But we soon forgot about that grief due to the joy of reaching the shore.

I was still hunting for game when suddenly the sound of something rattling fell into my ears. I had never heard such a sound before. Certainly, I had heard a rail chugging along-*bhak-bhak-bhak-bhak* and had heard the sound of a motorcar. This sound was different from them all, as if some water-mill was going round and round. As soon as Sahib and Mem heard the sound they looked up at the sky. Even I looked up and saw some huge hawk-like object. Sahib took off his cap and tossed it up in the air. Both Sahib and Mem clapped their hands and danced in joy. I had no inkling of what was going on and why they were so happy, But what was this? That bird soaring in the sky began descending. O! What a huge bird it was! I had never before seen a bird with such a colossal body. I had seen an ostrich in a museum, but even that bird seemed just a small pigeon in front of this huge one. It came down slowly as we looked on and two men got down from it. Later on, I came to know that this was a kind of conveyance which takes people on board and flies in the air. Both

the men shook hands with our Sahib and Mem, talked a bit and then went and sat in the same vehicle. In a second, Sahib picked me up in his lap and kissing my face, made me sit in the same vehicle. Soon after, Mem and Sahib also came and sat down. Indeed, I was terror-stricken. Would we be flying up in the air? In case this conveyance broke down in the near future, people would not even be able to find our bones or ribs. However, Sahib was repeatedly patting my head and emboldening me. Soon after, all four of them began eating food, sitting at the table. They gave me a piece of meat too. I was so engrossed in eating it that all my fear gradually vanished. The sound was so deafening that my heart had begun beating. Many a time the vehicle swerved in such a way that I felt it wanted to turn turtle. And I began screaming. But it steadied after a while. We stayed for one full night and day in that very vehicle. At times it would soar so high that it seemed it would bang straight into the stars. Both Sahib and Mem were sleeping, but sleep was nowhere near me! I was constantly chanting 'God-God' so that the danger could be averted somehow.

Next day a fierce storm raged, early in the morning. This machine began whirling like a boat caught in a whirlpool. The lightning would thunder so loudly that it seemed it had fallen on our heads. Its flash was so bright that our eyes would blink with its glare. The machine would turn over and swerve to the right at times and sometimes to the left. Occasionally its wings would stop and it seemed as if it was going down at great speed. All the four people were alarmed and chanting God's name whereas Memsahib had kept a handkerchief on her eyes and was crying. Even I was no less apprehensive, but was moved to laughter by Memsahib's weeping. Tell me, would the storm settle down by her weeping? That time was to brave the dangers by strengthening our heart and not for crying. But who would explain this to her?

Finally, the violent dust-storm passed away in an hour and the machine began to fly straight. By the time it was afternoon, it landed on a large open field where flags had been planted and several other similar machines were stationed. Taking me in his lap, Sahib got me down and we left after sitting in a motorcar. I saw that we were heading towards the Sahib's bungalow now. Many of my friends could be seen wandering about on the old roads. I longed to go to them, hug them, ask them about their well being and narrate the tale of my journey, but the car kept racing ahead. We reached the bungalow in a moment.

I had not been able to sleep yet when the servant came and began giving me a bath. Soon after he put a silken collar around my neck and getting me to Sahib's drawing room, made me sit on a sofa. Memsahib got my meal in a plate and began feeding me with her own hands. What can I say about the immense pride I felt at that point! I wished that my kinsmen would come and see this episode and be proud of me. I had not become extraordinary all of a sudden. I was the same Kallu even today—the same weakling, feeble Kallu. But I never failed to do my duties, never let truth slip from my hands, was always loyal in friendship and never forgot a favour done unto me. When need arose, I fearlessly faced dangers by putting my life at stake. I was even willing to give up my life for what I considered a genuine cause. It is the blessing of good fortune that I am being given such immense respect and affection today because of these very deeds.

The next day, I saw that a curtain had been hung at the room's door and a *chaprasi* had been made to sit there. Influential people of the city were coming to see me and showering flowers on me. Polished gentlemen wearing coats and trousers, elegant ladies decked in gowns and hats, affluent merchants and businessmen, women of prestigious houses, boys of schools and colleges, *sepoys* of the armed forces, would all come, adulate me and rave about my feats. Some would offer flowers, others would prostrate before me whereas some would fold hands in front of me. Perhaps everyone assumed that I was some god who had come in this form for the salvation of this world. The British gentlemen could not understand what this meant, but were definitely assuming that I was some extraordinary, miraculous living being. Several women touched my feet. I was amused at their stupidity. It was amazing to see that there were such foolish people amongst human beings as well.

This amusing play went on all day long. In the evening I ran towards the site where I was born. However, as soon as I reached close to it, a circle of my brothers pounced upon me. Probably the ill-fated wretches were thinking that I had come to snatch their bones. They did not know that I was not the same Kallu now and people worshipped me. Pressing my tail between my legs, showing my teeth and wrinkling my nose, I begged them to spare my life; but those ruthless creatures did not have the slightest mercy on me. It seemed as if I had not known them so long. I had merely come to

tell them about my joys and sorrows and give them some advice. And I was getting this reward in return!

Exactly at that time, Panditji, my old master, came along, taking the support of his walking stick. A new energy charged my body as soon as I saw him. Racing, I ran to him and began wagging my tail. Panditji recognised me the instant he saw me. Soon enough, he blessed me by putting his hand on mine.

Looking pleased, he said, "So, you have become a very great sage now! There are rare reviews about you in the newspapers. How did you manage to get caught up among these fools?"

Soon after, raising his stick, he threatened these rascals who were ready to pounce on me till now. But as soon as they saw the stick, the entire lot ran for their lives like mice. I trailed right behind Panditji. Roaming around the areas where I had sported in my youth, I went to Panditji's house. I was remembering Mother and Jakiya, over and over again. All this honour and respect was meaningless without them.

I was about to reach Panditji's house when the *Panditayin* ran and folded her hands before me. The news of my arrival spread in the neighbourhood in a short while. And then what! People thronged to see me. Besides, many of them offered money and sweets to me. When I observed that the crowd was swelling, I set off from there and went straight to my bungalow.

Ever since, I have been to several shows and been the guest of many *rajās*. I have heard that I am worth one lakh rupees, but Sahib does not want me to part with him, at any cost. They are becoming even more particular about attending to my needs with each passing day. Two men take me for a stroll every morning and evening; I am bathed every single day, and very tasty and nutritious food is given to me. I am not allowed to go anywhere alone.

But this respectful treatment and regard have become very burdensome. The great honour bestowed on me is no less than imprisonment for me. My heart keeps longing for that freedom when I would roam around in joyous abandon. I wonder how a man becomes an ascetic and enjoys the free service rendered to him! As far as I am concerned, the joy I get in serving others I do not get in being served. Not even a hundredth part.

## A WINTER NIGHT

### One

Halku came in and told his wife, "The landlord has come. Go get the money which you had kept aside. Let me give it to him so that I can save my neck somehow."

Munni was sweeping the floor with a broom. Turning back, she retorted, "There are only three rupees. Where will the blanket come from if you give them away? How will you pass the cold chilly nights of *Paush* and *Magh* in the fields? Tell him we will pay when the crops are ready for harvesting, not now."

Halku stood in a state of uncertainty for a moment. The month of *Paush* was close at hand and he could not sleep without a blanket in the fields at night, under any circumstances. But the landlord wouldn't be put off, he would threaten and hurl abuses at him. Thinking that they were going to have a dreadful time this winter but it would pass, for certain, Halku took his massive frame (which belied his name Halku, meaning slender) and came to his wife.

Coaxing her, he said, "Come on, give the money to me. At least I will save my neck somehow. I will figure out some other plan to get the blanket."

Munni moved away. Glaring at him, she scoffed, "You will certainly be able to resort to some other plan! Let me just hear which other recourse you are going to take? Is someone going to donate the blanket to you? I wonder how much of *lagaan* is left that we are simply not able to pay it off. I say, why don't you give up tenant farming? We toil tirelessly, pay the arrears which are due when the crop is harvested, and that's it. Have we have been born only to pay off debts? You must work as a paid labourer to eke out a living. Let us give up such farming. I won't give you the money, I won't!"

Dejected, Halku asked, "In that case, I will have to put up with abuses?"

Flaring up in sudden anger, Munni shot back, "Why will he abuse you, does he rule the place?"

However, the instant she said this, her scowl faded. The bitter truth underlying Halku's sentence seemed to be glaring at her like a fearsome creature.

She went and took out the money from a niche in the wall. She handed them over to Halku.

Soon after, Munni suggested, "You chuck up tenant farming from now on. At least, we will be able to eat in peace when we work as paid labourers. There wouldn't be someone demanding taxes from us. What an excellent way of farming! Slog hard and earn money. Throw the returns in farming and pay taxes on top of it!"

Halku took the money and trudged out as if he was going to take out his heart and give it away. He had collected three rupees for the blanket by putting aside every *paisa* from his work as a tenant farmer. They were being taken away today. The burden of poverty weighed on his mind with every step he took.

## Two

The dark night of Paush! Even the stars in the sky appeared to be shivering with the cold. At the edge of his field, Halku sat on a small bamboo cot under a shelter of sugarcane leaves. With his old burlap sheet wrapped around him, Halku was shivering. Under the cot, Halku's devoted dog Jabara had tucked his muzzle into his belly, and was whining with the cold. Neither of them was able to sleep.

Curled up by tightly drawing his knees close to his chin, Halku said, "Why Jabara! are you feeling cold? Didn't I tell you to lie down on the paddy straw at home. Then why did you come out here? Suffer the cold now. What can I do? You supposed I was coming out here to eat *halwa poori* and that is why you came running ahead of me. Bewail your fate now."

Jabara wagged his tail as he lay there and lowering his *koon-koon*, yawned once and became quiet. Probably his dog-intelligence had told him that his master was not able to sleep because of his whimpering.



Halku took out his hand and stroking Jabara's cold back urged, "Don't come with me from tomorrow or else you will freeze to death. God knows from where this wretched westerly wind is bringing icy blasts. Let me get up and fill another *chillum* to pass the night somehow! I have already smoked eight chillums. This is the fun of farming! Whereas there are some fortunate people sleeping so snugly that if the cold passes by them it will flee, being alarmed by their warmth. They have thick padded mattresses, quilts, blankets. The cold dare not confront them. It is the beauty of good fortune! We are the ones who slog while others enjoy its fruits to the fullest!"

Halku got up, took out some embers from a pit and filled his *chillum*. Jabara also got up.

Smoking the *chillum*, Halku offered, "Will you smoke the *chillum*. It is not as if the cold goes away, but one's mind is diverted a bit."

Jabara looked at him with eyes brimming with affection.

"Put up with the bitter cold today. I will spread some straw here from tomorrow onwards. You sit snuggled in it and then you won't feel the cold."

Jabara kept his front paws on Halku's knees and got his muzzle close to Halku's mouth. Halku could feel his warm breath.

Halku lay down again after smoking the *chillum* and made up his mind that come what may, he would sleep this time round. But his heart began to tremble in just a moment. He would toss and turn on one side and then on the other; but the severe cold seemed to squeeze his chest like some fiend.

When he could not bear the cold any longer, he lifted up Jabara slowly and patting his head, made him sleep in his lap. A strange foul stink was coming from the dog's body, but snuggling him in his lap, Halku experienced a joy which he had not felt for months together. Probably Jabara was thinking that paradise is right here, and there was not even a trace of aversion for the dog in Halku's pure soul. Halku would have hugged some close friend or brother with the same readiness and affection. He was not hurt by his poverty which had made him reach this miserable state. No, this unique friendship seemed to have opened all doors of Halku's soul and every speck of it was sparkling with light,

All of a sudden, Jabara sensed the movement of some animal.

This special closeness had produced a new energy in him for whom the cold whiffs of air were insignificant. He got up at once and stepping out of the shelter of cane leaves, began barking. Several times, Halku made a kissing sound and lovingly coaxed him to come back, but he did not do so. Running frantically all around the field, he kept barking. Even if Jabara came to Halku for a second, he would quickly dash back again. Duty was bouncing in his heart like a cherished desire.

### Three

Another hour passed by. The night fanned up the cold with blasts of wind. Halku sat up. Tucking in both knees into his chest, he snuggled his head in them but the cold was just as biting. It seemed as if all his blood had frozen and ice was flowing in his arteries instead of blood. He leaned back and looked up at the sky to see how much of the night was left. The *saptarishis* had not risen even half way into the sky. The morning would dawn only when they would come up in the sky. More than a three-hour period of the night remained now.

About a stone's throw away from Halku's field, there was a mango grove. Autumn had set in. A heap of leaves, shed from trees, was piled up in the grove. Halku thought of going and gathering the fallen leaves. He could warm himself after setting them on fire. If anyone saw him gathering leaves so late at night, they would assume that Halku was a ghost. You never know, an animal could be lurking there, but he could not bear to sit any longer now.

Halku uprooted some stalks from the nearby *arhar* field and made a broom out of them. He took a smouldering dried cowdung cake in his hand and headed towards the grove. When Jabara saw him coming, he ran to him and began wagging his tail.

Halku said, "Jabaru, it is just not possible to stand the cold any longer! Come, let us go and warm ourselves by gathering fallen leaves in the grove and making a fire. After warming up a bit, we will come back and sleep. The night is still far from over."

Jabara barked softly and expressed his assent, trotting towards the grove in front of Halku.

It was pitch dark in the grove. The heartless gust of wind blew, trampling over fallen leaves in the darkness. Drops of dew were trickling down from the trees.

All of a sudden, a whiff of fresh air blew, bringing the fragrance of henna flowers.

Halku exclaimed, "Jabaru, such a pleasant smell is coming! Can your also sniff some fragrance?"

Jabara had found a bone lying on the ground, somewhere and was busy chewing it.

Halku kept the fire from smouldering cowdung-cake on the ground and began gathering the leaves. A heap of leaves was made in a short while. Halku's hands were freezing and his bare feet were becoming numb with cold. He was engrossed in making a mountain out of those fallen leaves. He would burn the cold to ashes in this very fire, lit in the open.

The fire was kindled in a short while. Its flames would touch the leaves of the tree above and dart away. In that flickering light, it seemed that the huge trees of the grove were carrying the imponderable darkness on their heads. The firelight appeared to quiver and toss like a boat in that ocean of infinite darkness.

Halku was sitting in front of the open fire and warming his hands. In a short while, he took off his burlap sheet and tucking it under his arm, stretched out both his legs. It seemed as if he was challenging the cold to do whatever it wanted. Triumphant over the immense power of winter, he could not conceal the pride of being victorious.

He asked Jabara, "Why Jabara! You are not feeling cold now, are you!"

Barking softly *koon koon*, Jabara seemed to say, "How can I feel cold now?"

"This plan didn't strike us earlier, or else why would we have suffered such bitter cold."

Jabara wagged his tail.

"Welcome! Let us jump over this open fire and cross it. Let us see who can make it. Buddy, I am not going to nurse you in case you get burnt."

Jabara looked at that blazing fire with timid eyes.

Halku: "Do not tell this to Munni tomorrow, or else she will quarrel with me."

Saying so, Halku leapt and cleanly crossed over the open fire. The flames singed his feet slightly but that did not matter. Jabara took a round of the fire, and came and stood next to Halku.

Halku urged, "Come on, this is not what I want. Jump over the fire and come here.

Then he jumped and came on this side of the open fire.

#### Four

The leaves had been burnt. Darkness was towering over the grove. There were a few embers under the ash, which would flare up a bit when a gust of wind came, but would shut their eyes back again, in a second.

Halku wrapped the burlap sheet around himself again and began humming a song as he sat near the hot ash. His body had been warmed, but laziness made him lethargic as the growing cold spread.

Jabara barked loudly and ran towards the field. It appeared to Halku that a herd of animals had barged into his field. Probably it was a herd of nilgai. Sounds of their leaping and running clearly fell into his ears. Then it seemed as if they were grazing in the field. *Char-char*, sounds of their nibbling could be heard.

He assured himself, "No, so long as Jabara is there, no animal can intrude into the field. He would literally rip apart the creature for sure. I must be hallucinating. Where? Nothing can be heard now. How could I have been so mistaken!"

He called out loudly, "Jabara! Jabara!"

Jabara kept barking and did not come to him.

Then again Halku heard the sound of munching in his field. He couldn't have been mistaken this time round. Halku could not think of moving from where he sat, so snugly warmed up. It seemed unbearable to go to the field in this freezing cold to chase away animals. He did not budge an inch.

Halku called out at the top of his voice, "Stay off! Keep off! Stay off!"

Jabara began barking again. The animals were grazing on the field where the crop was ready for harvest. It was such a bountiful harvest, but these wretched animals were wreaking havoc.

Halku got up with a firm resolve and walked a couple of steps, but suddenly he felt such a cold piercing blast of wind, like a scorpion's sting that he came back and sat next to the dying fire. Stirring up the ash, he warmed his cold body.

Jabara was barking at the top of his voice, the nilgai were busy devastating the field and Halku was sitting peacefully by the warm ash. Laziness had tightly bound him down, like ropes from all sides.

He covered himself with the sheet and slept on the warm ground next to the ash. When he woke up from sleep in the morning, sunshine had spread all around.

Munni was taunting him, "Are you going to sleep all day? You came out here and had a great time while the entire field was being ravaged there."

Halku got up and asked, "Have you just come from the field?"

Munni wailed, "Oh! The whole field has been ruined. In fact, does anyone sleep like this! What did you get out of setting up a shelter here from where you could watch the crops?"

Halku made an excuse, "I nearly died. somehow managed to pass the night and you are just concerned about your crop. I cannot describe the severe stomachache I suffered since last night."

Thereafter, both of them came to the boundary of the field. They saw that the entire field had been trampled upon and Jabara was lying flat on his back under the small shelter as if he were dead.

Both of them were seeing the devastated state of the field. Sadness cast a shadow over Munni's face but Halku was pleased.

Greatly worried, Munni said, "Now we'll have to work as paid labourers to pay land-revenue to the landlord."

Looking pleased, Halku replied, "At least I won't have to sleep nights out here in the cold."

## THE SALT INSPECTOR

### One

When the new department of salt was set up with a ban on making salt, a natural mineral gifted by God, people began trading in it stealthily. Several types of fraud and sharp practices commenced. Someone would get his work done by bribes, and someone else by unfair means. Officials had a great time of it. Abandoning the unanimously honoured post of registrarship, people would be rather guards in the department. Even lawyers would long to get the position of its *daroga* or Inspector. This was the time when people considered British education and Christian teachings to be one and the same thing. Persian was predominant. Reading love tales and poems on the *shringar rasa*, those who were proficient in Persian used to get appointed to topmost posts. After completing the poignant tale of Zuleikha, the love tale of Shirin and Farhad, the battle of Nal and Neel, and understanding matters which were more important than the discovery of America, Munshi Vanshidhar also stepped out in search of employment. His father was a man of experience.

He began persuading him to look for a lucrative position "Son! You are seeing the misery in the house. We are burdened by loads of debt. We have girls who are growing up fast like weeds. And I am getting old like a tree on the cliff; you never know when I may go down! Now you are the master and representative of the house. Do not pay attention to your position in service. Indeed, this is the shrine of a *peer* or Muslim saint. One should keep an eye on religious offerings and the *chadar*. Find work which has some additional income. Monthly wages are just like the full moon which is seen one day but eventually vanishes as it wanes. Extra income is like a flowing spring which quenches our thirst forever. Salary is paid by



man, it does not grow. Additional income is granted by God, that is why it brings abundance. You are learned yourself and there is no need to explain things to you. There is dire necessity of good sense in this matter. Look at the person, look at his requirement, look at the occasion and then do whatever you think proper. There are many advantages in being tough with a man whose self-interest is at stake. However, it is a bit difficult to take control over a person who is disinterested. Take these facts in your outlook: This is what I have earned in my lifetime."

Vanshidhar's father blessed him after giving this advice. Vanshidhar was an obedient son. He carefully listened to these facts and then set out. Steadfastness was his friend, good sense was a guide showing him the path, and independence was his companion in this wide world. However, he had set out with a good omen, so he was appointed to the distinguished rank of an Inspector as soon as he reached. The salary was good and there was no limit to the additional income which could be earned on the side. The old *munshi*, his father, was unable to contain himself for joy when he learnt the good news. His creditors softened a bit whereas sharp pangs of envy rose in the hearts of neighbours.

## Two

It was a winter night. The *sepoys* and *chowkidars* of salt were all drunk. It had not been more than six months since Munshi Vanshidhar had come here. But he had charmed the officers with his expertise at work and excellent behaviour in this short time span. The officers began to trust him. River Yamuna used to flow about a mile to the east of the Salt office and a pontoon bridge had been made on it. The Inspector was sleeping peacefully with the door closed. When he woke up suddenly, the rumbling sound of bullock carts plying and the clamour of boatmen could be heard instead of the gushing river. He got up. Why were carts crossing over to the other side so late at night? There was certainly something fishy going on. Logical reasoning confirmed his suspicion. He put on his uniform, kept the pistol in his pocket and galloping on his horse, reached the bridge in an instant. He saw a long queue of bullock carts crossing over to the other side of the bridge.

Scolding the cartmen, he fumed, "Whose carts are these?"

Dead silence reigned for some time. The men whispered amongst themselves.

Then the man in front revealed, "They belong to Pandit Alopudin."

"Which Pandit Alopudin!"

"Of Datagang!"

Munshi Vanshidhar was astonished. Pandit Alopudin was the leading *zamindar* of this region. He would trade in lakhs of rupees. Right from subordinates to the superiors, who was not indebted to him here. His business was also very large and Pandit Alopudin was a shrewd operator. British officials would come to play *shikar* in his area and be his guests. This routine would continue all the year round.

Munshi asked, "Where will the carts go to?"

"Kanpur," was the answer he got.

However, pin-drop silence reigned on asking what the bullock carts were carrying. The Inspector became all the more suspicious.

Waiting for an answer for some time, he asked loudly, "Why have you become dumb? I ask what is loaded in these carts?"

When he got no answer even this time round, he brought his horse next to a bullock cart and felt the sack. His doubt was dispelled. They were lumps of salt.

### Three

Half asleep, Pandit Alopudin could be seen approaching, mounted on his decorated chariot. All of a sudden, several alarmed cartmen came and woke him up.

Pandit Alopudin had implicit faith in Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth. He used to say Lakshmi reigns even over the realm of heaven, what to talk of the material world. This statement of his matched reality. Actually speaking, justice and ethics are all toys in the hands of Lakshmi. She makes them dance to her tunes.

Still lying down, Pandit Alopudin said arrogantly, "Go back, I am coming."

Saying so, he prepared betel and ate it at leisure.

Thereafter, wrapping a shawl, he came to the, Inspector and said, "God bless you, *Babuji* ! Tell me, what grave offence have I committed that the carts have been stopped. You must look with favour on us brahmans."

Vanshidhar spoke curtly, "It is by order of the Government."

Laughing, Pandit Alopudin answered, "Neither do we know of any government order nor the government. In fact, you are the sarkar for us. You and I are family. Can I ever be an outsider for you? Pointlessly, you took the trouble to come. It is impossible that we go through here and do not make an offering to the deity reigning over the *ghat* here. In fact, I was coming myself to attend to your needs."

Playing the magical flute of affluence had no effect on Vanshidhar who was freshly enthused with honesty.

He shouted in rage, "I am not one of those dishonest wretches who go about selling their honour for *cowries*. You are under arrest here and now. You will be committed for trial under due process. Enough! I do not have spare time for any extra talk. Jamadar Badlu Singh! I order you, take him into custody."

Pandit Alopudin was astounded. There was panic and commotion amongst the cartmen. Probably it was the first occasion in Panditji's life that he had heard such stern words. Badlu Singh moved ahead but intimidated, could not muster enough courage to seize his hand. Pandit Alopudin had never seen *dharma* scorning wealth so openly. He assumed that the Inspector was a wilful boy who had not yet been caught by the snares of this illusory world. He was hesitant to take a bribe because of being youthful and inexperienced.

With extreme humility, Alopudin said, "Babu Sahib, do not do take this step, or else I will be ruined. My reputation will be sullied. What will you gain by disgracing me? I am certainly not distant from you in any way."

Vanshidhar was curt, "I do not want to hear such things."

The support which Alopudin had thought was a rock, seemed to be slipping from under his feet. Self-respect and wealth plus pomp, suffered a severe blow.

But he still had full faith in the multiple power of wealth. Alopudin told his solicitor, "Lalaji, present notes worth one thousand rupees to Babu Sahib. He is behaving like a starving lion at this point in time."

Infuriated, Vanshidhar fumed, "Not only a thousand but even one lakh rupees cannot make me deviate from the true path."

Alopudin was very irritated at this senseless stubbornness of *dharma* and renunciation which was rare even among deities. Now a battle ensued between both the powers. Wealth leapt up again and again and began attacking. The situation reached a state where

the offer rose from one to five, from five to ten, from ten to fifteen, and from fifteen to twenty thousand. Nevertheless, dharma stood alone with unearthly heroism, resolute and unshaken like a daunting mountain, in front of this huge army of temptations.

In despair, Alopidin said, "I do not have the courage to offer more than this. You have the right to take further action."

Vanshidhar shouted for his Jamadar. Abusing the Inspector in his heart, Badlu Singh advanced towards Pandit Alopidin. Alarmed, Panditji moved back a few steps.

He begged with extreme humility, "Babu Sahib! Have mercy on me for God's sake. I am willing to settle the matter at twenty-five thousand."

Vanshidhar: "It is impossible."

Alopidin: "At thirty thousand?"

Vanshidhar: "It is not possible under any circumstances."

Alopidin: "Not even at forty thousand."

Vanshidhar: "Not only forty thousand, it is impossible to settle the matter even at forty lakhs. Badlu Singh! Take this man into custody right now. I am not willing to hear a word more at present."

*Dharma* trampled Wealth under its feet. Alopidin saw a robust man carrying handcuffs and striding towards him. He began looking all around with a dejected look. Soon after, he fainted and fell down unconscious.

#### Four

The world was sleeping but the voice of the mundane world was awake. In fact, one could notice that children and elders were all talking about this incident next morning. Whoever one looked at, could be seen commenting extensively on this conduct of Pandit Alopidin. He was being showered with blame and harsh criticism. It seemed as if all the sins of sinners had been effaced from the mundane world. Those who were selling water in the name of milk, authorities filling the ledger of daily accounts with fake figures, *Babus* travelling by trains without tickets, affluent merchants and money-lenders making forged documents, the whole lot of them were nodding and deriding the matter like gods. The next day, when Pandit Alopidin, the accused, was walking by the side of the

constable, wearing handcuffs, his heart filled with remorse and trouble, his head bent down in shame, towards the court, there was commotion in the entire city. Eyes would perhaps never have been so eagerly engaged in fairs. Due to the thronging crowds, the roofs and walls could not be distinguished from each other.

But one just had to wait till he reached the court. Pandit Alopudin was the lion of this unfathomable forest. The authorities were his devotees, staff members attended to his needs, lawyers and solicitors obeyed his orders, and the orderlies, *chaprasis* and *chowkidars* were his slaves, free of cost. People ran to him from all sides, the instant they saw him. All those present were taken aback. Not because Alopudin had done this deed, but they wondered how he had fallen into the clutches of the law. Why did a man who had wealth which could achieve the impossible and who had incomparable gift of the gab, come into the grip of the law. Every person was sympathising with him. Readily, an army of lawyers was readied for defence. A war broke out between *dharma* and wealth in the battlefield of justice. Vanshidhar was standing still in absolute silence. Neither did he have any strength apart from truth, nor any weapon besides clarity in speech. There were witnesses, but they were wavering because of greed.

So much so that Munshi Vanshidhar could feel that justice was also a bit estranged from him. This was the royal court of justice but its employees were intoxicated by partiality. But what is the connection between justice and partiality? One cannot even imagine that justice will be meted out where there is favouritism. The lawsuit soon came to an end.

The deputy magistrate wrote in his verdict: 'The proofs given against Pandit Alopudin are baseless and deceptive. He is a man of high standing. It is unimaginable that he would have taken such a bold step for a bit of gain. Although Munshi Vanshidhar, the salt Inspector, is not much at fault; but it is a matter of great regret that due to his wilful nature and thoughtlessness, an honourable person had to bear such inconvenience. We are pleased that the Inspector is vigilant and alert in his work, but the increased loyalty of going to court for salt has polluted his discernment and good sense. He must be careful in the future.'

The lawyers leapt with joy on hearing this verdict. Smiling, Pandit Alopudin came out. His own people and friends distributed

money in joyous abandon. The ocean of generosity gushed forth. Its waves went to the extent of shaking the court's foundation. When Vanshidhar stepped out, he was showered with sarcastic remarks from all sides. The *chaprasis* bowed and saluted him. But ever cutting comment and every single gesture was inciting his flaming pride at this point. If he had succeeded in the law-suit, he would probably not have walked in this arrogant fashion. He had had a deplorable unusual experience of the material world today. Justice and erudition, great impressive titles, long flowing beards, loose cloaks, not even one of them was worthy of true respect.

Vanshidhar had taken on enmity with wealth and he had to pay its price. Hardly a week would have passed when the order of his suspension from work arrived. He was punished for being devoted to his duty. Heart-broken, tormented by sorrow and grief, the poor man headed homewards. In fact, the old munshi, his father, was grumbling already that he had explained things to this boy when he was leaving, but he didn't pay attention to anything he had said. He does whatever pleases him whereas we must hear the demands of people, sit as pious devotees in old age and get just the wages, without perquisites! He had also done a job and did not hold any great position. However, he worked brazenly (taking bribes) without reserve whereas he is hell bent on becoming an honest officer. It may be pitch dark (due to paucity of funds) at home but he will certainly light a lamp in the mosque of his workplace. I regret such mentality! All his studies were a total waste!

Just a few days later, when Munshi Vanshidhar reached home in a miserable state and his old father heard the news, he began lamenting, "I wish to break your head and mine."

He kept wringing his hands in regret. He gave some harsh comments in anger and if Vanshidhar had not moved away from there, his fury would have assumed a fearsome form for certain. Vanshidhar's old mother was also distressed that her desire to go on pilgrimage to Jagannath and Rameshwar was ruined whereas his wife would not speak to him directly for many days at a stretch.

A weak passed by in this manner. It was evening. The old Munshi was sitting and chanting the beads of Ram Naam. That was when a decorated chariot came and stopped at his entrance. It had green and pink curtains, a pair of upcountry breed oxen, with blue strings tied around their necks, and horns studded with brass. Several

servants carrying *lathis* on their shoulders were accompanying the chariot. Munshiji ran forward to receive the guest. He saw it was Pandit Alopidin. He prostrated before him and greeted him respectfully.

The old Munshi began flattering him, "We have been favoured by great good fortune that you have chosen to visit us. You are our revered deity. Which side of my face should I show to you because it has been blackened by disgrace? But what can I do as my son is an unfortunate son, or else why would I have to hide my face from you? May God keep us childless, but not give us such a son."

Alopidin intervened, "No, Bhai Sahib! Do not say so."

Astonished, Munshiji replied, "What else should I call such a son?"

Alopidin said in a tone loaded with parental affection, "Enhancing their family honour and the glory of their ancestors, how many righteous men are there in this world who can offer everything of theirs to *dharma*?"

Pandit Alopidin told Vanshidhar, "Darogaji, do not consider this to be flattery. There was no need for me to take such pains to flatter you. That night you had taken me into custody with your power. But today I have come into your custody of my own accord. I have seen thousands of affluent and rich gentlemen, I have had to deal with thousands of high-ranking officials, but if anyone could defeat me it was you. I saw to it that all of them became enslaved to me and my wealth. Permit me to make a humble request to you."

When Vanshidhar saw Alopidin coming, he got up and received him respectfully but with self-respect. He assumed that this gentleman had come to put him to shame and to provoke him. Vanshidhar did not try to beg for forgiveness, but his father's fawning seemed intolerable to him. However, when he heard Pandit Alopidin's words the suspicion lurking in his heart was allayed. He looked at him with a fleeting glance. Virtuousness was apparent on Pandit Alopidin's face. Now Pride bowed its head before Shame.

Embarrassed, Vanshidhar said, "It is your nobleness that you are saying such a thing. Kindly forgive whatever impertinence there has been on my part. I was bound by the fetters of *dharma* otherwise I am truly your humble servant. Whatever you order will be readily complied. I'll do whatever you say."

Alopidin said modestly, "You did not agree to my request on the banks of the river, but you will have to accept it today."

Vanshidhar responded, "What am I worth! Nevertheless, there will be no lapse on my part in whichever way I can serve you."

Alopidin took out a stamped document.

Placing it before Vanshidhar he said, "Kindly accept this post and put your signature here. I am a *Brahman* and am not going to move from your door till you comply with my request."

When Munshi Vanshidhar read the document his eyes filled with tears with gratefulness. Pandit Alopidin had appointed him as the permanent manager of his entire estate. Apart from six thousand yearly salary, he was to be given daily expenses over and above, a horse to ride, a bungalow to stay in, and servants free of cost.

He spoke in a tremulous voice, "Panditji, I cannot praise your large-heartedness. But I am not worthy of such a high position."

Laughing, Alopidin responded, "I am in need of an incompetent person at the moment."

Vanshidhar said seriously, "Actually speaking, I am your humble servant. It is a matter of great good fortune to be able to serve a noble person like you. But neither am I knowledgeable nor intelligent, nor do I have the temperament which can make up for these shortcomings. A very proficient and experienced person is needed for this great task."

Alopidin took out a pen from the pen-holder and putting it in Vanshidhar's hand insisted, "Neither do I wish nor am I eager for erudition or learning, nor experience, nor proficiency, nor expertise at work. I am well acquainted with the importance of all these qualities. Good fortune and opportunity have now given me that gem in front of whom the gleam of capability and erudition appear dull in comparison. Do not give it a thought, take this pen and sign the document. I pray to God that he makes you forever remain the same rigid, headstrong, harsh but righteous Inspector whom I met on the banks of the river!"

Vanshidhar's eyes filled with tears. He could not contain the sense of obligation he felt. Once again, he looked at Pandit Alopidin with adoration and reverence and signed the document with trembling hands.

Delighted, Alopidin hugged him affectionately.



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### **Munshi Premchand**

*(31 July 1880 - 8 October 1936)*

is considered to be one of the greatest modern Indian writers. He was a novelist, short story writer, and dramatist who penned over a dozen novels, hundreds of short stories, and numerous essays. A teacher by profession, he began his literary career as a major novelist and short story writer in Urdu. Soon he switched over to Hindi and established himself as a pioneering novelist with significant nationalist and realist outlook. The plight of women, and the people of the lower strata formed an integral aspect of his stories. His writings also showed a remarkable understanding of the psychology of children and young adults of his time, which the present collection of the stories depict. A true patriot, he quit his government job as a part of the non-cooperation movement called by Mahatma Gandhi even though he had a growing family to feed. He was eventually elected as the first President of the Progressive Writers' Association in Lucknow.

### **HARI KRISHNA DEVSARE**

*(9 March 1938 - 14 November 2013)*

The compiler of this collection was a Hindi writer, known for his work in the field of children's literature. He received the first Vatsalya Award, instituted by Padma Binani Foundation, for his contribution to children's literature. In the year 2011, he was honoured with Life Time Contribution Award in the field of Children's Literature by Sahitya Akademi, the Indian Academy of Letters.

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