

Consecutive Serial

How Much To Say?

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Imported Timepiece

That night I could not sleep well. At around midnight I woke up and looked towards the timepiece though it was dark. It was more than fifty years old. Its dial was dirty and misty and it was difficult to figure out the time from it at that hour. But I would not give up since I was well aware of every nook and corner of the timepiece. And why not, it was now a good three years that I had been observing time from it afresh. I could spot its hands even when it was quite dark.

I saw that it was only one O'clock in the night and it would take a lot more time till it would be five in the morning. But the sleep had gone away from my eyes. I had to pass time and what better way than to think about this masterpiece of a watch? It was brought from Amritsar by my grandpa some fifty years back. It was very attractive. It had three layers of covers on it and the alarm was so loud that the whole locality would startle when it was on. According to my father the time on this watch was accurate to the minute and would always tally with the radio.

Unfortunately about three years back there was a mishap with this timepiece. It fell from the shelf and stopped. No amount of winding would make it get activated. I took it to a watchmaker in the neighborhood. He examined it thoroughly from inside out, nodded his head and said, 'It is not possible to rectify it. It has a different mechanism in it.' I felt proud and thought, 'Indeed, how can it be repaired by a common watchmaker? It is no ordinary watch. It is an imported one as was stated on oath by our grand father.'

Although the watchmaker could not repair it, yet he was knowledgeable. He directed me to an expert who alone could repair it. I was grateful to him. I took along with me my friend Raja and we both rushed to a locality called 'Gurgari mohalla'. There I traced the house of the watchmaker. He was known as Master Razaq. He had no shop of his own and worked in his house itself. He was an expert no doubt. When we reached there and entered his room we were aghast. There were hundreds of different watches on the shelves in his room. Most of them were imported from Russia, Japan, Germany and other countries. Of course this was my guess. I thought a few were made in India too. Some were in order and ticking and some were out of order and silent. We saluted the master. He just glanced towards us and then again bent his head on the watch that he was in the process of repairing then. The owner of the watch too was in front of him. I thought in my mind, 'this shows that the man is in reality an expert. See how busy he is in his job and he has no time for any question answer.' After about an hour he lifted his head. The customer before him felt relieved that the job was done. But the master addressed him thus, 'Ama Lala! You will have to come back again tomorrow. I lost one of the hands of this watch yesterday and now I will have to fabricate a new one.' The customer was pale and said to me, 'Tell me what to do? This watch was brought by my father from Congo after the world war. It is made in America and it is not possible to get its original hand. I do not know whether the hand fabricated by Master Razaq will at all look nice. What a combination, American watch with a locally fabricated hand!' He took back the watch from the master and left the room in a huff.

Master Razaq must have been around fifty or fifty-two years of age. He threw an angular eye on me and said, 'See how the times have changed. Now tell me where shall I get him an American hand for his watch and fix that? Strange are the ways of people. If they purchase a watch from a trash seller, they will say that it has been brought for them by a relation from abroad or from Arab. Tell them is there dearth of good watches locally? By God, only yesterday Manzoor Ahmad got a new watch sent by his uncle from Karachi. What a watch it is? The sound of its ticking is a dove's music to the ears. Let me share a secret with you. Manzoor's uncle told me that the

Americans mark these very watches made in Karachi as 'Made in USA' and sell them like hot cakes. O Manzoor! The master wanted to call the boy but he did not show and he said in a low tone, 'He must have gone to show the new watch to his friends.' I had my self-interest to get my watch rectified and so I nodded my head in agreement to every word he said. I was apprehensive in my heart of hearts that he would speak some invectives about my watch too. While I was thinking all this I heard the master say, 'Now let me see what you have got to show.'

I took out the watch hesitantly from below my long robe and placed it before him. I held my breath not knowing what he was going to say. He picked up the watch and declared, 'Now this is what is called a genuine imported timepiece. No body can deny this fact. By God you are a lucky guy. Where can you get such stuff these days?' I was elated to hear these words of his and my face brightened with pride and pleasure. I told him, 'Sir, the timepiece fell off the shelf and stopped functioning.' He placed the timepiece on the floor. His face reddened and almost scolding me said, 'you should not have been so careless about such a valuable stuff. One should know how to preserve such things or else it is as good as having been thrown in a river.'

The master kept the timepiece aside and asked me, 'where do you reside?' I replied, 'Sir, I live at Bal Garden.' 'O.K; you may go home for now. You can gladly come on the day after tomorrow and your timepiece will be repaired and ready,' said he. I asked him how much would the repair cost and he replied that I should bring with me a five-rupee note. This he said without looking at me while he was busy opening the lid of another watch. I left for my home but all through the way I was thinking that he should not replace the genuine parts of the timepiece by locally made parts. But I was helpless. I had no control on the situation. That night I could hardly sleep because of this fear and apprehension.

I reached Master Razaq's home on the third day at about mid-day. He was having his lunch. He told me, 'Congratulations, my son! Your timepiece has been repaired. However, you will have to leave it with me up to Sunday. How can you come here time and again, I shall keep it ready and duly tested.' I was relieved and praised my intelligence that I should have brought this timepiece for repairs to such an expert hand. I thought that perhaps the hands of the timepiece must be intact or else he would have said something about those. I looked around but could not spot my watch anywhere. I was pale with apprehension but consoled myself. I presumed that he must be keeping the watches for test in another room.

On Sunday I reached his home rather early. A young boy was sitting by his side. He had a shining watch tied on his wrist. I guessed that he must be Manzoor Ahmed and this watch must be the one brought from Karachi. He had two brass tops in his hands, which he was rotating on the wooden writing board. Master Razaq took out my timepiece from out of a bag and placed it before me. He said, 'look how your watch is working nicely.' I looked at the watch. Its dial was dirty and smoky. My timepiece had a snow-white dial. I asked him, 'Sir, I think there is some jumble up. This cannot be my timepiece. That has a white dial on it.' He sighed and replied, 'no doubt, you are quite right. This Manzoor Ahmed is my favourite child, born of my second wife after a lot of prayers. He only removed the dial from your timepiece and made a flying toy of it. What could I say to him? Thank heavens I was able to locate a dial of the same size from an old timepiece, which I removed and fixed on this one. Otherwise this timepiece would have been rendered useless for want of a small item.' I took the timepiece in my hand with tearful eyes. The dial was not only dirty but worn out too. He allowed me a discount of one rupee for the dial and charged me only four rupees. As soon as I bade him good bye, he called me back and said, 'Dear, take this item with you as it is yours and I cannot keep it with me.' I was at a loss to figure out what item he was talking about. Before I could ask him, he slapped his son, and snatched the top-like items from his hands. He roared, 'Are these any toys that you should play with them? You wretched one, your father's value is hardly equal to the price of these items.' He handed over these tops to me and said, 'See my child! God knows, I never keep any one else's belongings with me. When I dismantled this

timepiece and then reassembled it, I could not figure out where these two top-like parts were fitted. So these belong to you and you please take them along. In future if the timepiece stops bring it to me along with these spares and I shall see if I can find the place where they need to be fitted. But let me tell you, the timepiece is genuinely imported. Even after breaking it down to the last part, it is still working and showing time correctly. You cannot find like of it these days.

With a broken heart I left the place. The two top-like spares I kept hiding lest somebody at home sees them. The master proved his worth and workmanship. Even after three years of repair by him, the timepiece is working all right and showing time accurately.

I looked to the timepiece once more. It was three in the morning but I was to get up at five O'clock. I made an attempt to go to sleep again and in no time was fast asleep.



The Treasure

Once again the face of that mendicant was before my eyes. Frightening looks, tall stature, big eyes, ear rings hanging from the lobes of his ears, white turban, a snake-like muffler round his neck and a rosary of black beads in his hand. Whether he was a real mendicant or a fraud, I could not figure out. A shiver ran down my spine. His gruff and fearful voice resounded in my mind, 'Not much time is left for you. Do as I said to you. You should get the treasure within two days. Rest all you know.'

I looked around. No one was there, either in my front or at my back. It was the shadow of this very Fakir that I used to perceive in front of me for the last four days. I mustered courage and mulled over what he had said. 'Why after all am I agitated? What did he say? Whatever he said was in my interests, to help me.' I pondered over his words once again. Four days back he had met me just outside the crematorium. He had said, 'You have a long life to live but all your work is pending. How will you manage and what all can you accomplish? If you like, I will do you a favour. Within six days you must reach the mountaintop of Pakhlan early at the dawn. There you will find the biggest birch tree. Underneath it is hidden a treasure. It is guarded by a cobra but on seeing you it will go away. You have to carry the treasure on your back and bring it to me. We will share it half and half. I shall wait for you on the other side of the river. The job is arduous and so you should not go there alone. Take one more person along, for, the treasure is quite heavy. You have nothing to lose. You will get wealth enough to sustain your seven generations. Now it is up to you to decide. But remember, if you do the job within six days well and good, or else I will have to look for someone else to execute it.'

I was delighted to know of the treasure but the warning that it was going to be arduous was rather frightening. I was greatly in debt and thought that it would take my entire lifetime to repay that. When I would be able to marry and have a family of my own was baffling. Thinking of the looks of the Fakir would make me tremble but the thought of a treasure would put life in me and my eyes would brighten. I decided to start my journey to fetch the treasure tonight itself.

The destination was far away. I packed about ten *chapatis* to sustain me on the way and left for the place early in the morning. I did not think of taking along a companion with me because if it involved taking a grave risk, why not face it alone? Am I not capable of facing the odds myself? Why should I make anyone else know the secret of this adventure?

I kept on walking through and over hills, forests, rivers and cliffs. At around mid-day I reached near the temple of Goddess Kali. I saw a host of people gathered there. First I thought the crowd must have collected to offer collective worship with lighted lamps and chanting of hymns. When I went closer there was no trace of such a thing. People were standing in a queue and pushing and jostling each other. A volunteer was guiding the people to form proper queue and even hit a person who would not fall in line. I asked him what the matter there was. He laughed and replied, 'I think you are a newcomer here. Don't you know anything?' I nodded my head in negative sign, indicating that in fact I knew nothing. So he continued, 'From heavens the Lord of Righteousness 'Dharma Raja' has sent his representative, who is distributing tickets for entry into the Paradise. Whosoever is desirous of going to heaven after his death, can purchase a ticket right here.' The ticket was priced at a hundred rupees but I had only twenty rupees in my pocket. I was ignorant about the fact that tickets to heaven could be got here on this earth itself. I thought it was good for me that at the behest of the mendicant I had come that side; let me accomplish this task as well. What if I do not have the full amount with me, there should be no problem in securing a ticket on credit. After all I am not going to run away with this amount. More so from tomorrow I will be counted among the elite rich of the society after the treasure reaches my home.

I explained my financial position to this young volunteer appealing to his compassion. He said, 'Don't you mind. I shall recommend your case.' On the strength of his assurance I also took my place in the queue. My face showed such elation, as if I was the only person to be granted entry into the paradise. To ensure that the person does not ditch me at the last moment, I befriended him. I learnt from him that this camp for selling tickets to heaven was going to function for five days. This man was from some other city and was brought by the representative along with himself. I was engrossed in conversation with him but the joy of conversation did not last long. As soon as he asked me where I was heading to after obtaining the ticket, I started sweating all over. My legs trembled and I was apprehensive that he may have known the truth. I thought why else would he bother to know where I was going. I did not reply but he insisted, 'which ideas are you lost in? You are not replying; are you afraid that I may insist to go along with you.' I retorted, 'No, not at all. That is not the case. I was only thinking how to make good the deficiency in the cost of the ticket.' Hearing that, the young man kept quiet and I also distanced myself from him.

I kept on moving forward. There was a dais in front on which was seated an elderly man. By his side there was another young man who would collect the money. The elderly man himself distributed the tickets. When it was my turn, I kept my twenty rupees before the young man. He looked towards me with a stern eye but I explained, 'Look here brother, this is all I have in my pocket today. If you trust me I shall pay the balance tomorrow. In fact I will pay five rupees extra.' My plea had no effect on him. He refused point blank. The elderly man did not speak a word. He would give instructions through gestures only. He forbade the young man from accepting the money. But I was not going to yield. I begged of him. Those behind me in the queue raised hue and cry. I was not prepared to leave without getting a ticket. This forced a few persons standing in the queue to intervene. Their decision was that by paying twenty rupees I could only make a booking but I would get the ticket on paying the balance. I felt favoured and thought that today I could make the booking and tomorrow when I return along with the treasure, I could collect my ticket. The representative gave his consent to this arrangement. He indicated his approval by nodding his head. He handed over a piece of paper to me. It was a receipt for twenty rupees and a note of booking the ticket. I pocketed the paper and left the place.

On the way a thought came to my mind, 'May be tomorrow these people play pranks with me and refuse to give me a ticket. Or it could be that by the time I reach this place, they may have closed their shop.' I became anxious. I was on the horns of a dilemma. I knew if I returned home to fetch the balance amount, I would be late for the treasure. I consoled myself, 'What can they do? Is there no rule, after all I have made a booking properly. If they cheat, there is always a court for redress. I will not leave them and take an account for the last penny.'

I reached the Pakhlan hill after the Sunset. It was dangerous to climb during the night but where to spend the night? The place was full of danger from the wild animals. I saw a pine tree. It was quite big and there was a seating space on one of its branches. I decided to spend the night on this tree. I crawled up the tree like a monkey. I made a space for rest. I took out the packet of *chapattis* and filled my belly. Thereafter I went to sleep on the tree.

At around four in the morning I woke up. The dawn was still some hours away. I thought it proper not to waste any more time. I came down from the tree. I took a stick in my hand and started my journey up the hill. Although the visibility was poor, yet I searched my way in that darkness and kept on moving forward. I encountered some thorny bushes. My feet and legs got scratched but I did not give up. Like a wild lion I proceeded forward. The attraction of the treasure was an impetus already but the ticket for the heaven gave my legs some more fillip. At a couple of places I slipped badly but then I had to muster some more courage. My eyes were centered at the top of the Pakhlan Hill and the treasure over there. Finally I was at my destination but my entire body was aching with pain. It was yet to dawn and so I decided to rest on a stone slab at the apex of the hill.

I reckon I must have been lying for about half an hour when I heard a violent noise, as if some lion was roaring. I was frightened to think, 'So far I reached here safely. Now the lion should not eat me up.' I looked around but could see nothing. Finally I spotted a birch tree far away, that too withered. I rushed and climbed the same tree. There was no trace of a lion anywhere. May be it was a hallucination only. After sometime I climbed down and started looking for the huge birch tree. Now the dawn was imminent. I could not find any other birch tree. Finally I looked at the very tree on which I had climbed due to the fear of a lion. There was neither any treasure nor any cobra guarding that. I thought that possibly the cobra has already left on seeing me. Now the treasure must be under this very tree.

I picked up stone slab pieces and began digging the ground under the tree. My hands got bruised. In the meantime there was light all around and the Sun began shining. I dug up about two feet deep but there was no trace of the treasure. I did not lose my courage or cool. I kept on digging hoping that some effort now would result in a luxurious life in future. I went on digging, first up to three feet and then four feet deep but there was no treasure to be seen.

I was very thirsty by now. I searched for some water but there was no water anywhere. I saw a host of insects hovered around a thorny bush at some distance. The clay at that spot was wet. I lowered a big leaf in the pit and made another leaf into a small cup shape in such a way that water dipped into it drop by drop. It was indeed a long drawn affair but then there was no other alternative.

Once a few drops collected in the cup-shaped leaf, I emptied it on my tongue. It gave me some cool feeling and I felt some solace. Now the Sun was on my head. I rushed back to the birch tree to dig the ground further. On reaching there I was astonished to see a big cobra coiled in the pit dug by me. I thought that every word of the *Fakir* was coming true. I was waiting for the cobra to depart on seeing me as the mendicant had predicted but it did not move. I thought perhaps he has not seen me yet. So I made some sounds to drive it away. It did not move. Then I tried to push it with my foot so that it goes away and I take out the treasure. But instead it moved violently and bit my foot. I fell on the ground. My eyes turned into stones and I was gazing towards the birch tree. I had already died perhaps.



Heaven And Hell

I died and soon thereafter two hefty young men appeared before me. They must have been the death-agents of modern days for they were bright-faced and devoid of any horns. One of them was clean-shaven and the other had a French-cut.

I was gauging their size and gait when they suddenly held me by my hands and lifted me up. Then they took towards the sky. I was stunned. I could hardly walk straight on the smooth earth and here was I flying as it were along with them on the sky path. My limbs were still but I was drifting like a fighter aircraft in the air without any strings. I realized that I had ceased to live yet I had aspirations ripe in my heart. I looked down. The cobra was coiled in the ditch. He was perhaps apprehending my return to usurp the treasure that he was guarding.

After traversing a whole world we reached some spot. Pardon me, where is the question of the world? That I had left behind on my death itself. Of course you can say that after traveling the whole length of the sky these agents carried me to a place. The clean-shaven agent took out some instrument from his pant pocket and held it before his mouth. It resembled a telephone in our world. It was attractive no doubt. Perhaps it was also a telephone but a wireless one. I had heard that in foreign countries there are wireless telephones. May be he had brought one from there itself. But why should I bother. I had desired to get a telephone installed at my house but that desire had remained unfulfilled. My father had deposited five hundred rupees in the telephone department ten years back but without any result. When I approached the concerned officers of the department they had this to say, 'Are you gone mad! People have deposited two thousand rupee each under the 'Own Your Phone' scheme some twenty years back and they are yet to get their telephones. Where do you stand with only five hundred rupee deposit?' I had no reply. Then with the grace of this mendicant, I had thought to go in for a telephone under the Immediate Installation scheme by paying extra money but alas I did not live to see that come true. Had I been favoured by providence and got hold of the treasure, I would have been sitting at my window today with a telephone in my hand and calling Makhn Lal, my neighbour. He would get stunned but that was not to be. Obviously how could this happen with a luckless person like me? Who should I complain to?

I heaved a sigh and gazed at the wireless telephone of the agent. He was talking to somebody. In between he was looking to me and shaking his head and occasionally he would burst into laughter. The other agent continued to hold me by my hand. After a while he put his phone back into his pocket and asked me my name. I replied, "Back on earth people used to call me with my pet name 'Sahab' but in reality my name was Krishna Das or the servant of Krishna. I was my own servant more than that of Lord Krishna." He gave a stern look to me but did not respond. We continued our journey, aerial one at that. We got into deep clouds and that cooled me a lot. I tried to engage these agents in conversation but both of them were self-centered. They did not listen to me with the result I had to keep mum.

As soon as we came out of the clouds I spotted a wall, with two doors. On one was written 'Heaven' and on the other 'Hell'. With great enthusiasm I started proceeding towards Heaven but these agents forcibly turned my head towards hell. I protested but to no avail. My limbs were numb. As I entered, my eyes became blank. The scene in the hell was exactly the same as I had heard down below on the earth. Fire was aglow at many places and the agents of death were singing and dancing in front of these fires. May be people of questionable deeds were getting burnt in it. At some places people were hanging on the branches of the trees. There was a crowd at one place

and the people there were making a great noise. The Arbiter god was announcing punishments for these people sitting on a raised platform. When I reached near them I was stunned. I saw such persons there as were known for their charity and philanthropist deeds back home. To meet and see them, people would spend fortunes and traverse miles and miles of distance. I thought that all that appeared to be a falsehood. I realized that even what I thought was audible. The agent with French-cut was startled but did not figure out what I was thinking. Yet he told me, "Why are you repenting now? Why did you not think then?" I replied, "No, not at all. I am not thinking what you thought I was thinking. I am only at a loss to find even such persons here who had done good deeds on earth." The agent was perhaps knowledgeable. He replied, "That is not so. The fact is that people on earth are in essence different from what they appear." I had got an answer to my question. As for myself I had no doubt that I had hell and only hell to go to. Whatever little good I might have done that I had advertised there and then. There was hardly any person known to me whom I had not narrated the details of the good deeds done by me from time to time. But I was surprised about these persons who were counted among noble souls on the earth. Before my very eyes there were almost a dozen of such people begging before the Arbiter god with folded hands. Good that they did not spot me or else they would feel more humiliated and I would incur a sin for nothing.

The nature was in my favour. I had a booking for the heaven and the ticket was still with me. I pulled my hands off the grip of the agent and took a seat on a stone slab. There was hardly any grass where one could sit with ease. The agent with French-cut gazed towards me and asked, "Are you tired so soon; you have still a long way to go." I replied, "No, not at all. Actually I have a booking done for the heaven from the earth itself. If you do not trust me I will show you the receipt." He could hardly take my word for it. So he said, "You a woebegone person and a booking for the heaven! You must be joking. The tickets for heaven are not scattered like litter that you have picked up one for yourself. Let me see what ticket you have got."

I took out the paper from my pocket and showed it to him. It was duly signed by the signatory authorized by the Arbiter god. The agent became pale to see it. He showed it to his companion and the two muttered something to each other in some alien lingua. May be they spoke Sanskrit but I could not fathom it at all. We never studied Sanskrit. As for the Bhagavad Gita, I could read maximum four or five initial shlokas or verses that too because I had committed these to memory. Sanskrit for us was a far cry because even our parents gave more prominence to English only. They would say that Sanskrit would be of no use in later years.

I was looking like a lamb towards them both. The agent with the phone explained, "See dear, we have no axe to grind. We did what we were asked to do. Now let us show this paper to the Arbiter god and ask him about the future course of action." Now it was my turn to get rigid. I told him, "Look I am not going to take even one more step. You have to approach him go ahead. I shall wait for you here itself." They allowed me to sit down and went to see the god. I took time to look around and all that was happening was quite grotesque. I prayed to Shri Krishna! "Please give me protection henceforth. I may have my failings but your name is tagged with mine. If something wrong happens to me you will also get a bad name. People will say that Krishna was taken to the hell."

My prayers were perhaps heard. After a while both these agents were coming towards me smilingly. They told me, "Look here, half the job is done for you. You owe a sum of eighty rupees still. But where will you get those? If you can pay this amount today itself we can take you to the heaven. Else you are where you are." I had no money with me. I begged of them, "For God's sake, do me a favour and lend me this amount. You see in the heaven I am sure to meet some rich acquaintance of mine. I will get

this money from him and then repay you the amount." They replied, "Where is the money? Do you think anybody gets his pay here on time? Believe us, it is three months now that we have not been paid our salary. You think that we are enjoying here. We only know the reality of our life at this place." I was puzzled and asked them, "Don't you have a budget prepared here? Where does the money go?' They sighed and replied, "Of course we have a budget here as well but the amount is entirely spent on the T.A. and D.A. of the gods."

"What sort of T.A. and D.A.?" I asked with bewilderment. They explained, "You see they plan trips to the Earth and the plane below the earth very frequently along with their retinue. They do not stay there long but it takes a lot of time coming and going to these places. That costs a lot and leaves hardly any money for us. We have to tolerate all this silently because there is no other way. We do not have High Courts and Supreme Court like you have on the earth. Here the word of the gods is the rule, a final rule at that."

Listening to all this gave me a chill down the spine. I thought at this rate we have a heaven on our earth itself. Even if a person shouts for a short distance there, dozens of people will enquire of him what the matter is. Position here is quite the opposite. We have not seen any situation like this. On the earth stoppage of the salary for a day will drag the authorities to the courts.

However, this was not the time to discuss all this. It was time to arrange for eighty rupees. So I addressed the agent with the phone, who was senior of the two, "Please treat me like your younger brother. Why not you take me to that birch tree. May be the cobra has left the place by now and I am able to snatch the treasure. You could even strike a deal with me. I will take half the amount and you can keep the remaining half. If you apprehend that I may escape, you can even tie my legs." This did not work. They told me that once a person is in that world it is not possible to revert to the earth. I begged of them to find a way out for me. After all, the amount of twenty rupees paid by me should not get wasted.

He consulted the other agent and then took out his phone from the pocket and spoke to someone. The expression on his face indicated that the matter was in my favour. After sometime he put his phone back in his pocket and then told me, "There is a way out. If you have ever paid some money to some beggar or a needy person without making a fuss, that can be credited to your account." I remembered that I had given a crisp hundred-rupee note to the mendicant who had given me the clue to the treasure. This secret I had divulged to nobody, as I did not want anyone to know about the treasure. I immediately told them, "Yes, I have. I have paid a good hundred rupees to that mendicant. But if you ask for a receipt I cannot produce one because I have not obtained the same from him."

The agent again had a telephonic conversation and then nodded his head. He told me, "You are very lucky. This is the only act of kindness, which you have done but not bragged about before any one. You have got its fruit now. Come let us take you to the heaven."

We were about to walk towards heaven that there was a commotion behind us. Some known persons chanced to spot me from the hell. They came running towards me and touched my feet. They told me, "We are here alone and forlorn. You are the only one who can console us here. Please do not leave us and proceed to heaven. Stay with us. We were party to every good and bad of yours on the earth. Why should you turn your head away on seeing us now?" Gokul also was among them. It was the same Gokul whose possession and property I had usurped back on earth. He was rather more enthusiastic.

I thought if I pay any heed to their saying, I shall lose this golden opportunity of going to heaven. With great difficulty I earned an entry to heaven and here they are spoiling my chances. "Friends, I owe you nothing. Whatever account there had been between us, that stands settled on the earth itself. Better you leave me alone and go your way." I addressed them in an appealing manner, "I do not know you, why are you pestering me for nothing? Go and attend to your own chores." I signalled the agents to proceed towards heaven speedily. They caught hold of my arm and started flying up. Alas my bad luck, I was about to move forward that Gokul held me by my leg and pulled me down. I got tossed on to the stone wall and bruised my head badly.

With this bang I woke up. I observed that my mother was holding my leg and waking me. She was saying, "Get up, are you not going for a circumambulation to Hari Parbat? You are late. Your friends have been waiting for you for quite sometime now."



Odd & Even

I rubbed my eyes. All this that I saw was just a dream. I looked towards the clock; it was five o'clock. My three friends, Vijay, Raja and Nika were waiting for me at the door. I got up and went to the courtyard. There I washed my face and hands and put on *Kurta and Pyjama*, just washed and pressed by the washer-man. Then I proceeded towards Hari Parbat along with my friends.

Actually the result of our matriculation examination was expected that day. We had overnight decided that early morning we would go to Parbat and execute two things. First we would do a circumambulation of the hill and second we would pick certain rice grains from near the Ganesh temple to see what was in store for us, success or failure.

We increased our speed in that dim light. We crossed Safa Kadal, Nawa Kadal, Ali Kadal and Nowhatta and reached Ganesh temple. There we applied a vermilion mark on our foreheads ourselves, for, had we allowed the priest to do it he would have offered us lamps but we had no money to pay him for that. That would embarrass us in the presence of so many pilgrims who were there. We paid obeisance to Lord Ganesha and moved ahead. We reached that tree where people scatter rice grains for the birds. This is the place where people pick up rice grains to see their luck. Particularly this was a favourite habit with students to foresee whether they were going to pass or fail. If the grains were odd in number they were assured of their success but even number would mean that they were going to fail. The nearer we reached that tree the more nervous I became. My legs were trembling.

Nika was the first to pick up rice grain. He handed them over to Vijay. His face turned pale. Nika was our leader and had to be first in everything we did. Vijay counted them and found that those were eleven. He said, 'Friends, Nika has got Eleven with the grace of the saint of the same name. (Kashmir has had a saint by the name Kahnov, which literally means a person with eleven names) Since it was an odd number, it was a good omen. Nika was happy. Now it was the turn of first Vijay and then Raja. Vijay got nineteen so he was assured of success. Rajah got fifteen and a half. We took a decision that the broken grain need not be counted. So he was also declared pass. I was emboldened. I thought that the day appeared to be auspicious. Every one got an odd number. There is no reason why I too should not get a similar result. I pounced upon the rice and picked up a few and handed them over to Nika. Since I was second in command, only he was authorised to count my grains. He counted and counted again. I held my breath and waited for his announcement. Nika put these on my palm and said, 'Brother, these are twenty-six, neither more nor less.' I was shattered to think that it meant that I alone would fail. How could that be? Raja had copied every bit from my answer sheets. How could he pass and I fail? I told them that there has been some error somewhere. Let me try once again. Let me see what is in store for me. I picked up some grains and this time handed them over to Raja for counting. He counted and these turned out to be seventeen grains. I jumped with joy but Nika put a hurdle. He said, 'Second attempt is not valid. Wise men say one should try a third time.' Others dittoed his opinion. I was all in sweats with fright of the unknown. Somehow I picked up some rice the third time and counted myself. Luck did not favour and this time too the number was even. I trembled and shook. There was no question of trying a fourth time. Still I pondered, 'If God had ordained me to fail why would I get an odd number the second time? I think the second attempt should be valid.' I asked my friends, 'which wise man has said that the third attempt is valid?' They were not sure. They replied, 'We have heard from others but do not know the

name of the wise man who has said so.' I was bold to declare, 'Forget about it then. Whatever was the result the second time only must be correct.'

My friends felt relieved by my statement. After all we desired that all of us should pass the examination. They agreed with me. Nika went to the extent of saying, 'these examples and sayings of so-called wise men are all wrong. This is actually a rumour spread by a selfish person.' He then congratulated me treating the second attempt as the correct indicator. Others also joined him in felicitating me. Thereafter we resumed the circumambulation. We were followed by two boys and three girls in picking the rice grain. Perhaps they too were awaiting their results.

We bowed before every big and small idol that we came across while going round. Wherever vermilion was smeared on any stone we touched it and then touched our eyes. This was our way of seeking blessings so that the announcer on the radio announces our names also as successful candidates.

After the circumambulation we reached the big gate called 'Kathi Darwaza'. Some vegetable vendors were selling vegetables. Nika's mother had told him to purchase '*Hund*'. One of the vendors had three bundles of this vegetable. We bargained with her when a bespectacled person came, lifted the vegetable, put it in his bag and paid her half a rupee. We pleaded with him saying that we had already purchased it and there was no reason for him to put it in his bag. He was a tough guy. He said, 'Have you gone mad? You want me to give you a beating here and now. Did you not see that I purchased it by paying half a rupee in hard cash? Nika also lost his temper. He said to him, 'You are perhaps seeing us as children. We shall tear your bag into pieces. Return the vegetable to us without any fuss.' In a moment a crowd collected on the spot. Those two boys and three girls also came who had followed us in picking rice grains and counting. They appeared to be happy. Surely all of them had got odd number of rice grains.

All these students and an elderly person sided with us. The vegetable vendor also took our side only. The bespectacled gentleman was obliged to take out the vegetable bundles from his bag. We paid him and he proceeded forth. Thereafter we engaged these students in a conversation and so talking resumed our journey back to our homes.

Some half way through these children bade us goodbye. We thanked them for siding with us. One of the girls asked us where the vegetable was. We looked lost as in the melee we had left the bundles there itself. We rushed back to the Kathi Darwaza. There was neither any vendor nor any vegetable. We were frightened for fear that we would get a good beating at home for this negligence. Whenever one of us committed a mistake, all of us would get punishment. Our homes knew that we were in league with one another. We were particularly afraid of the elder brother of Nika, whom we called '*Bai Toth*' (Dear Brother). He was ruthless in punishing us. But he was very possessive of us too. He took care of us all. Whatever he would get for his brother Nika, the same item he would purchase for each one of us.

We held an emergency meeting to decide the future course of action. We knew that the half rupee was lost for good but the vegetable was also hard to get. Raja showed a remarkable ingenuity. He said that he had a plan. We were eager to know that. He said, 'Near the Ganesh temple there is a wild vegetable called '*Nunar*' grown in the grass. If you agree, we shall go there and pluck the vegetable sufficient to value half a rupee.' Nika was furious. He said to him, 'You fool, we are required to get *Hund* and not *Nunar*.' Raja retorted, 'Use your brains. I know we had to get *Hund* but we can say that only *Nunar* was being sold today.' Nika jumped with joy and said 'the plan is very

thorough. Let us make haste and reach the spot.' Then we rushed to the Ganesh temple.

When we reached home it was already ten o'clock. I deputized for Nika and approached Bai Toth along with the vegetable and said to him, 'Today there was no *Hund* on sale, only *Nunar* was being sold and all Pandits were taking it in bundles. We too purchased it.' He picked the vegetable and said that it was fresh and of good quality. He appreciated our feat and we were relieved.

At twelve Noon, the results were due to be broadcast from the radio. I was rather apprehensive of my own result. No doubt I had argued that the second attempt, which was favourable to me only should be treated as valid. Yet in my heart of hearts I was crust-fallen. The nearer the hour of the result the more exhausted I felt. However Goddess was Kind. At eleven it was announced that the results would be declared next day. Hearing this I was delighted. It meant that tomorrow we have to go to Hari Parbat once again. Once again we have to pick the rice grains to peep into our luck. This afforded me a fresh chance. My other friends did not feel happy. They feared for the turn that tomorrow would take. Who would pick an odd number of grains and who would get an even number, no body knew.



Success & Failure

I could not sleep till late the previous night. As soon as I fell asleep I would see one or the other frightening dream that would shake me back into wakefulness. I decided not to sleep at all. Lying inside the quilt I began chanting a prayer. I continued the prayer till Vijay called me from below. I looked into the timepiece. It was about five in the morning. I sprinkled some water on my face and started towards Hari Parbat along with my friends.

One of my friends lived at *Nawa Kadal*. His name was Chaman Lal. As for studies, he was a few steps even behind us. He was more attached to me because we both were well versed in calling other boys names. Jay Kishen was somewhat taller than us and we called him 'Poplar'. Moti Lal had intoxicated eyes and we called him 'Liquor'. One day Shiban came in glittering attire. We named him 'Brocade'. Pran Nath's family owned some agricultural land and he would often talk about new rice and new fertilizers. We nick named him 'Sweet Fertilizer'. Toja had very little hair on his head and we named him 'Baldee'. The list is very long; how much should I reveal? When we reached *Nawa Kadal*, I thought let us take along Chaman as well. I called him from the courtyard of his house. This awakened his father and he peeped through the window. I asked, 'Sir, where is Chaman? Will he accompany us to Parbat?' He replied rather with anger, 'what has he to do with Parbat? He has already passed the examination.' Saying so he got back to his room. I felt rather bad. Rest of my friends rebuked me, 'why should you have called him?' I apologized to them.

Not that Chaman had known his results already. Actually his uncle was a spiritualist. He was known as Kakuji. He used to visit their house occasionally and Chaman would serve him well. This he would do partly due to the fear of his father and partly because of his own interests. It is said that before Chaman's exams Kakuji had started living in their house. He had his tong and bowl with him and it was Chaman's duty to take care of these important items of his. When his father raised the issue of his examination with Kakuji and told him that Chaman was not very serious about his studies, he retorted, 'Why should he study? Mind your business. I will give you some sanctified candy. Give him a little out of that every morning when he leaves for examination. The result will be that he will pass irrespective of whether he writes something in the answer sheet or not. I will guarantee him a second division right now.' This detail had already been narrated to me by Chaman. I had requested him to take me also before Kakuji and he was almost prepared too but his father did not allow. He told him that such secrets should not be revealed to others.

We proceeded further and met two more students. They too were on their way to Hari Parbat. When we narrated the story of the previous day to them they laughed and said that the result is not to be seen from the rice grains. It should be seen with the help of the pebbles. We realized that the previous day we had committed a mistake. We, therefore, started walking along with them lest we should commit a mistake once again.

After visiting Ganesh temple we reached the spot where we had to find our luck through the pebbles scattered over there. The two students took their turn first. One got a favourable result and the other unfavourable one. The latter sat on a low stonewall and began crying. The other tried to console him but in vain. We forgot our mission in this tragic scene. I approached him and said, 'my dear friend! This is not the final verdict. May be you also are successful. Get up and proceed towards your home with hope and confidence that you will pass.' While I was talking to him Raja signaled to me and whispered in my ear, 'Why are we here then. Why not leave

everything to our luck. Whatever is destined will happen. Why should we bother from now itself?' I retorted, 'does that mean we should not find our result from these pebbles at all?' He replied, 'tell me, 'when you are advising him that this is not the final verdict, why do you not tell the same thing to yourself?' I thought that he was right after all. However the fact was that he himself was apprehensive of the outcome.

The two students started back for their homes. There were still tears in the eyes of one of them. He was sobbing and the other boy was consoling him. Once they were off, we had a meeting under the shade of a Chinar tree to decide whether it is prudent to try our luck with these pebbles. We were discouraged to a great extent after seeing one of the two boys weep. Nika was the one who pronounced the final decision. He said, 'let us leave everything to Goddess Sharika. She will give us success. Why should we create restlessness for ourselves by going after these pebbles? Every one of us agreed. We completed the circumambulation and reached the last gate '*Kathi Darwaza*'. The vegetable vendor lady of the previous day was at the same spot. We looked around but the bespectacled person of the previous day was nowhere to be seen. Suddenly the vendor saw me and said, 'Sunny! Take this half-rupee. Yesterday you had forgotten the *Hund* vegetable and I sold it to someone else and your money was retrieved.' So saying she took out a fifty paisa coin from her pocket and handed that over to us. We were delighted and Nika remarked, 'Friends! The day has started off on a happy note. I am sure that the whole day will be fine and all of us will pass the examination.' I agreed with him and we all proceeded back happily and finally camped at the house of Nika.

After merely half an hour we heard someone calling from the lane below. We looked from the window and found Nika's friend Ali Mir calling with a News Paper sheet in his hand. Seeing us he rushed inside and addressed Nika thus, 'by my mother, I will not leave you today. You have to give a treat, which must include special fish prepared by *Kakni*, your mother. By God, I have brought you a good news.' Nika promised that he would get the desired dish of fishes. Ali Mir took out the News Paper sheet and spread it before us. It contained our results. Ali Mir's father worked in a News Paper press. He had brought this sheet home early in the morning. We scanned through the paper but could not locate our roll numbers. Presently Ali Mir snatched it and said, 'what are you looking for? You are all successful. I have also passed.' Then he showed us our roll numbers one by one among the passed candidates. We were in fact all successful. We hugged him. The news of our success in the matriculation examination spread in the meantime. The family members of all of us assembled in the house of Nika. Nika's brother also joined and was very happy. Although he rebuked us for getting only a third division but in the heart of hearts he was very happy. Hearing the demand of Ali Mir, he went off to the market to purchase fishes. There were festivities in Nika's house that day. Every one was dying to feast the special dish of fishes. I was rather sad. Chaman's roll number was nowhere to be seen in the paper, which meant that he had failed. One could not say whether his father had missed giving him the candy every day or the candy given by Kakuji itself was ineffective.

Listening to the broadcast of the results on the radio shakes even the strongest of the students. When the newscaster announces the roll numbers 'one one two, one one four, one one seven, one two one

At twelve the special result bulletin was broadcast. We were hilarious counting how many failures there were between two numbers. Nika's commentary was on. He would tell us the result of which school was being announced and which one would

follow. When our turn came we started getting perturbed. We were apprehensive what if the announcer forgets announcing our roll numbers? But that was not to be. Our numbers were declared at the proper turn. Raj shouted, 'I must congratulate now that the result has been announced on the radio as well.' Now there was no count of the money we got as prize money for being successful nor of the fish pieces that Ali Mir consumed. But alas Chaman was declared fail even on the radio. I thought alas! if his father had allowed him to accompany us to Hari Parbat, he might have passed. Mother Goddess would have perhaps favoured him as she did in our case.



Caterpillar

It was the onset of the spring. New leaves had sprouted forth on the tree branches and some trees were full of blossom. I had got ready rather early in the morning at about eight and was enjoying refreshing sip of the morning tea in the lawns outside my quarters. I thought that simultaneously with the cup of tea I better go through the official papers once again. I ran through the pages and committed to memory some important points. There is an adage that one should never go behind a horse and never pass in front of one's officer. The horse strikes from behind and the officer begins scolding once he sees you before him. If there is nothing to scold for still he will assign you some task or the other. Today I was not to go in front of just one officer but I had also to meet the Chief itself. God alone knows which lapse he will point out and which one he will ignore. I was, therefore, preparing replies for every possible query of his. After all it is the junior most who has to bear the brunt in the end.

The problem was that there was a breakdown in the electric supply because of a fault in the turbine at Charivan. In spite of their best efforts the local engineering staff could not locate the fault. So an expert engineer had been called in from outside. He put up a plan to rectify the fault in the turbine. The plan had been sent to the Chief Engineer for approval. But he would not approve it without a thorough examination of the ground realities. He decided to visit the site at Charivan in order to assess the damage. After waiting for four days the Chief was expected to visit that day. His programme was to reach around nine. His first halt would be at Divisional Office at Tharigund where he would meet local officers on a cup of tea. Thereafter all would proceed to Charivan. There he will examine the situation and discuss the matter with the guest Engineer Mr. Tiwari. Then they were to return to Thargund where lunch was arranged for them. After the lunch there would be a session of discussions and mutual consultations.

The Chief arrived at Thargund at eleven. The Executive Engineer Magray along with Assistant Engineers Jalla and Tariq were waiting for him on the roadside itself. Mr. Tiwari also was with them. There was an exchange of pleasantries followed by tea and thereafter all started for Charivan. Since I happened to be the technical Assistant to Mr. Magray, I was also required to accompany the team. There was a cavalcade of jeeps following the car of the Chief Engineer. I also boarded one of them. It was twelve noon by the time the cavalcade reached Charivan. Pran Nath, the Junior Engineer and his Works Supervisors, Jamal Din and Gafar Dar were waiting there since morning without having anything to eat.

It was the first visit of the Chief to this area. Alighting from the jeep, he made a quick survey of the place. The powerhouse was situated down below near the river belt. Although the road up to that was tarred yet he thought it better to foot the distance. He addressed Magray and said, 'what a sight to see! All around there is a thick forest, fresh air and clean water. You cannot get such a place in the city. If one walks a mile every morning here, he will add a pound of flesh to his health. You could say that this is God's gift to us.' Magray could not agree more. He nodded his head in affirmative although the fact was that he had visited this place only twice during the past three years and only once up to the powerhouse. That too he had travelled by jeep. We also supported his remarks and began walking briskly as if we were used to walking throughout our lives. All the rest were obliged to follow suit.

Hardly had we traversed half a mile when the Chief spotted something. A branch of a tree had fallen and he was watching that intensely. We all turned our eyes in that very direction but could observe nothing special. By then the chief was very near to the

branch of the tree. All the officers and subordinates were just following him. I almost ran after them lest I should miss what they get. All the persons surrounded the Chief. I pushed Mr. Tariq a little and he made way for me. The Chief was looking intensely towards a leaf. We closed our ranks and saw that there were two fat caterpillars on a big leaf. One of them was green in colour and the other resembled a bright mulberry. Both were shining in the brightness of the Sun. The Chief almost shouted 'Caterpillar' and looked towards Magray. He in turn shook his head in such a way as if somebody had left some treasure on the ground there and the Chief had spotted it. With a smile Magray looked towards Jala Sahib, who was himself ready for the act. He too shook his head as if appreciating the sharp sight of the Chief. In the meantime every one of us stepped forward and had a glimpse of the caterpillar. Everyone looked to the chief with thankful eyes. I thought may be all of them get promoted and I only remain behind. I mustered courage enough to ask Mr. Magray in a loud voice, 'Sir! Who was the first to spot these caterpillars?' Magray tried to exhibit his elation and indicated towards the Chief who was still engrossed looking at these insects from all sides and declared, 'The Chief and who else.' I moved nearer to the Chief and remarked, 'Sir, They are so colourful that one would like to put them in one's heart.' He raised his head, looked to me and said, 'may I have your introduction?' I was shaken to think that it might have been out of place for me to speak out of turn. I replied politely, 'Sir, I am the Technical P.A. to Mr. Magray.' He stood up and I was afraid he might not slap me. I withdrew a step or two. Rest of those present were bewildered. Chief held me by my hand and said, 'will you please ask some one to fetch me my camera?' I was elated. By asking me to do something for him the Chief had shown some nearness to me, which added to my prestige. I turned back and told him, 'Sir, I shall go and get it myself.' Magray looked to me with a queer look and whispered, 'you need not go yourself, send Jamal.' It was clear by his looks that this he spoke not out of any sympathy with me but he never wanted that I should develop any proximity to the Chief. I was sad and said to Jamal Din, 'Go and get the camera from the jeep of the Chief.' He rushed fast. The Chief was now standing in deep thought. All other officers pretended as if they too were in deep thought. No body knew what the other was thinking about. This state of affairs lasted nearly twenty minutes. Jamal was nowhere to be seen. Chief looked to his watch. It was about one O'clock. He addressed Mr. Magray thus, 'we better go to the site in the meantime. It should not take us long there.' Magray looked to Jalla Sahib who said, 'Sir! It will take us hardly half an hour.' All present proceeded to the Powerhouse led by the Chief and Mr. Magray. The Chief was still looking behind occasionally to see whether the caterpillars are still in position. Magray said to Gafar Dar, 'you better wait here. Jamal Din will bring the camera. You bring him along.' There was a park near the Powerhouse. The Chief took a fancy for it perhaps. He said, 'what have we to do at the Powerhouse. Let us have some chairs and sit here itself.' The order was executed. The Chief, Magray, Jalla and Tiwary all sat in chairs. The rest kept on standing. the local staff served tea and biscuits. Magray began writing something in his diary. Sipping the tea the chief looked towards Tiwary. He immediately took out his drawing and placed it before him.

There was a major fault in the turbine of the Powerhouse. This was Tiwary's finding. The Chief glanced through the drawing. Tiwary was required to give the reasons for the fault and the proposed plan for its rectification. Mr. Jalla hinted to him and he started his statement. But the Chief was in no mood. He was perhaps still engrossed with the caterpillars. He told Magray, 'Can't we take it up later; what have we to do after the lunch?' Magray indicated to Tiwary that this discussion can be had after meals. Presently Jamal Din was there with the camera. The Chief lost his temper. He shouted at Jamal, 'You have taken so long to fetch the camera. What is your name?' Jamal blushed. He was speechless. Magray asked, 'why don't you reply? Where were you so long?' Jamal replied, 'Sir, the vehicle was not there. The driver had gone to upper village to take tea and had taken the vehicle with him. I was waiting for him.' Both the Chief and Magray had no reply to this revelation. Chief held the camera in

his hand and told Magray, 'let us move.' Magray asked, 'Sir, what about having a look at the turbine?' The Chief replied, 'what use is it to examine the turbine? You must have already seen it.' Magray shook his head in affirmative although after it broke down, he had not seen it even once.

The Chief walked briskly and the rest followed him. Since it was an ascent everyone was out of breath. After sometime the group reached the spot where there were caterpillars on the branch of a tree. Alas! the branch was there but no insects. The Chief was looking here and there. Magray was behind him. Magray asked Jalla to look on one side. Jalla was looking on one side and Tariq on the other. With bated breath I was waiting for the Chief to issue some other orders for me but that was not to happen. I too began looking on all sides, less to locate the caterpillars and more to impress the boss. I was sure that every one else was indulging in the same game.

Suddenly I looked towards the Chief, his face was death-pale. I mustered courage enough to go near him. With a begging countenance I told him, 'Sir, what were you going to do with these caterpillars?' His face turned red. He hung his camera on his shoulder and then replied, 'what do you think, had I to take them home?' I was non-plus as I lost my face in presence of all these persons. Magray looked so fierce as if he was going to eat me up. Jalla Sahib spoke something inaudibly. Perhaps he was saying why the hell I should have opened my mouth. I concluded that whatever the Chief may say or do at least these officers are not going to spare me. I implored, 'Sir, I did not mean that.' The chief cut me short by saying, 'Hell with this turbine which took our time. The caterpillars were here all right. God knows in a moment where these eloped.' The chief blamed the turbine as if he had spent days locating its fault. However, his statement gave me some courage. I could see that he was not annoyed with me at all. Had he been angry, he would scold me. I told him, 'Sir, if you so please I will find some other caterpillar tomorrow and take a snap of his. A lot of them are seen here scattered and I have a camera too.' Factually I did not possess a camera at all but I said this with a purpose so that he does not think me to be a pauper. I thought should there be a need I could anytime borrow one from a friend. Even Magray has one. I could ask him to spare it for me. He will not refuse. After all it is not to oblige me but the Chief. He was still sad but my words gave him some solace, I thought. He placed his hand on my shoulder. I was elated. I looked towards Jalla and Tariq rather in a queer way. I exhibited to them that I had become special to the Chief. He asked my name, which I told him and then he said, 'Manzoor studies zoology and I had to take this photograph for him only.' Then he addressed Magray, 'wherever I go I carry my camera with me so that should I come across some rare species of insects or animals I can take a snap. These photographs are very useful to Manzoor.' I could figure out that Manzoor must be his son. Magray shook his head in appreciation and said, 'Sir, He is not an ordinary boy. He is very studious. Which class he is in?' The Chief was somewhat tense. He looked around and then replied him, 'He is in the final year. But how do you know him?' Magray was at his wit's end. He had never seen the boy. He actually wanted to flatter the Chief. Now that he had made a statement he was obliged to reply. 'Sir, I have seen him in some party accompanying you. Most probably last year at the marriage of Commissioner's son.' The Chief was not convinced. He said, 'No, no, how could that be. It is now two years that he is in America.' Magray was pale with embarrassment in our presence. He put up a stone face and said, 'In that case I must be having some misunderstanding.' The Chief did not respond. He was still looking around to spot the caterpillars. After a while Magray told him, 'let us move now lest the food gets cold.' The Chief looked in his watch. It was about to strike four. He said, 'yes, let us move fast. The discussion also will take some time.'

Magray had arranged choicest dishes for the Chief. There was special '*Wazawan*' for him. Expenditure was doubled and it was sure to be shown redoubled in the accounts.

This expenditure would be booked to some head of account for which the Chief would unquestionably give his sanction. He was very satisfied with the tasteful meals. The remaining officers and the staff too enjoyed the food. After the food a special *Kehwa* was served. Now the time was six in the afternoon.

The Chief looked to his watch and addressed Magray, 'I think it is late now. Have you seen my driver? God knows whether he has eaten something. Tell him we are going to leave now.' Magray replied, 'Yes Sir, he had his food. Here Mr. Tiwary is waiting. Would you not like to talk to him? The Chief did not like the idea. He said non-challantly, 'Why should we break our heads in discussing things with him. Let him do as he likes. His proposals will not be wrong.' Tiwary was in a corner engrossed in writing something.

The Chief proceeded towards the city. I told Mr. Magray, 'the day passed off well. May be the Chief has seen nothing but he did give his approval to the work. What else did we want?' Magray agreed. He addressed Jalla Sahib, 'Hell with these caterpillars. They came from out of nothingness. Otherwise I had to seek approval to some more items of expenditure. That remained pending. Let me share a secret with you. The camera belongs to the department. I thought he has brought it to take our photograph with the turbine at the background. He is using it to snap insects. Now what can one say?'

After the Chief left, Mr. Tiwary came forward. He was still holding the drawing of the turbine in his hands. Magray told him that there was no need for any discussion and the work could proceed as per his drawings. Tiwary was lost. He could not understand how the plans were approved without having a look at the drawings? He would sometimes look to Mr. Magray and sometimes to his drawings. It was no different from mine. I too was looking to his face sometimes and sometimes to my file, which I had no occasion to open even once during the whole period. Thanks to the caterpillars, which vanished as dramatically as they had appeared.



Uninvited Guests

We were returning from the college. As we walked through the locality of Dewan Bagh we saw a place covered with a canopy. The canopy was brand new and shining with its multi-coloured patterns. Vijay looked towards me and said, 'It appears that someone is getting married. It is a long time that we have not had a feast on a marriage.' I agreed. My mouth had begun watering on hearing the word marriage-feast. Vijay kept his hand on my shoulder and said, 'What do you say?' I was at a loss for I could not understand what he meant. I was rather a dunce in such matters. I asked, 'about what?' Vijay said, 'proceed further and I will let you know.'

After walking about half a kilometer we arrived at the canopy. It had been erected after blocking a portion of the road. Some workers were fixing decorative partitions around the area and some were covering the ground inside with floor-coverings. Some young men were running about outside the canopy and some elders were engaged in conversation on the sidelines. I was engrossed watching the whole scene. Some three boys were trying to fix buntings inside it but not in a proper manner. I had half a mind to show them how to fix the buntings but had to eschew the idea after seeing the mood of Vijay. He would often accuse me of fishing in troubled waters.

Vijay indicated to me to stop where I was and himself ran inside the canopy. I stood by the side of the road. He did not return for quite some time and I went after him. He was nowhere to be seen. Through the canopy there was an entrance into the house but I did not think it proper to go in. After about fifteen minutes Vijay returned and said, 'I have made full enquiries. I am told the son of some Gopinath is going to be married. Today it is the night of henna and the occasion is going to be celebrated in a grand manner by throwing a feast of non-vegetarian dishes. It is said that there will be eight different dishes served. Additionally pickle and yogurt will also be served.' I asked, 'who gave you all these details?' Vijay replied, 'I made friends with the canopy supplier and he only provided me this information. In fact he said that the host is very rich and affluent.'

When he uttered the word yogurt, my mouth watered further. I had a weakness for it right from my childhood. Before I fantasized further Vijay held my hand and said, 'I tried to see if someone there was known or familiar but without any success. Even so there is nothing to worry. If you muster courage we too shall join for the feast. Nobody is going to ask us who we are. They will think that we are related to one or the other person.' I kept quiet. Basically I am timid. Where was the need to get into trouble? Vijay read into my silence and then we proceeded towards our homes.

We left our books at our homes and dashed into the home of Nika, another friend of ours. He was ironing his trousers. We gave him the day's account and apprised him about the canopy affair. When he was told that the son of some Gopinath was getting married, there was grimace on his face. He remarked, 'why don't you say that Satish's brother is getting married?' We enquired, 'which Satish?' Nika kept the coal-iron on a stone slab and enquired, 'was the canopy not erected on the left side of the road near circular graveyard?' We confirmed and he went on to say, 'that is where Gopinath Wali lives. He is the father of Satish. Do you get me?' 'Who is this Satish?' I asked once again. 'Satish is my classmate in the S.P. College. You do not know him,' Nika clarified. Nika hung the ironed trousers by a peg in the room and began ironing his shirt. Then he looked up and said, 'you also get your dresses ready; are you not going for the feast?' I asked, 'but we are not invited.' He replied, 'this is where you act foolish. I told you it is the brother of Satish who is getting married and Satish is my

class fellow. He had informed me last week but I forgot it altogether. Therefore, you are also accompanying me to the feast and that is final.' I was elated to hear this. I had not enjoyed a marriage feast for a long time. I thanked Vijay and Nika both. Vijay was too happy to confess, 'I was ready even to go uninvited but now our joining the feast will be with honour, which is still better.' He was gazing the face of Nika with a deep sense of thankfulness.

The feast was scheduled at 8 P.M. but we reached the venue at 7 P.M. The members of the host family were busy in different chores. There were chairs arranged outside the canopy. These were occupied by some elders, who were discussing politics, the statements of Sheikh Abdullah and Mir Qasim. We were least interested in their dialogue. We stood quite a distance away from them. I asked Nika where Satish was. He advised us to stay put while he would search him out. Satish was reported to be busy looking after the arrangements in the grand kitchen.

Nika would offer salutations to some of those who were busy with different jobs. They too responded. Some even enquired about his welfare. We also would ask him to give us introduction to some of these people. Nika would identify one as Satish's uncle and the other as his cousin. We could conclude that Nika knew the Wali's family quite well. The guests started arriving from eight-thirty onwards. We joined the first lot of guests and went in. Inside long woolen sheets had been spread on the floor in rows for the plates to be kept before each one to serve the dishes. Nika took his seat in a corner and signaled us to follow suit. We took our seats and in half an hour's time the place was full.

In the forefront were two boys who made the guests wash their hands. They were followed by some young men placing a plate each in front of the guests. Dishes started getting served. When the person serving '*RoganJosh*' approached me I told him that I was vegetarian. He picked up the chunk of meat back from my plate. He gave me a strange look and remarked, 'vegetarian and that too a young boy like you! Have you appeared in some examination?' I replied, 'No, not like that. In fact I have been a vegetarian right from my childhood.' This was vouched by my companions as well.

This man called aloud someone at a distance, 'O! Gasha Lal, there is a vegetarian guest in this row.' He consulted someone and directed this man named Balji to find out if there were any more vegetarians among the guests. Balji was followed by other persons serving various dishes. A guest sitting next to me addressed me, 'what a fuss you have created. If you are a vegetarian you should not have come for the feast.' I did not relish his remarks. I told him rather angrily, 'Am I an uninvited guest? Satish has invited me.' He was about to say something when Balji enquired aloud, 'is there any other vegetarian guest, please?' Four persons raised their hands and Balji counted, one, two, three and four. Balji informed Gash Lal that there were four vegetarian guests. He discussed with some other person and then asked us to move to other side. He asked some guests to swap their seats with us so that vegetarians are seated on one side together to facilitate serving them.

There was a commotion in the rank and file of the guests. It all wasted some five or so minutes and then the routine of serving various dishes restarted in a proper manner. While we took our seats at a different place a couple of more people also joined us there. There were now six of us. The persons who were helping guests wash their hands first attended to the bigger congregation. Thereafter it was our turn. Plates were placed in front of us but nobody came to clean these with a duster. One of us, who was elderly, took out his handkerchief and wiped his plate. We followed suit. I searched my pocket but found that I had forgotten to pick up one from my home. The person next to me showed magnanimity and wiped my plate as well with his own

handkerchief. I looked up to him with a thankful glance. Now we were waiting to be served but it was getting delayed. I looked towards the row where Nika was seated. A host of persons serving different dishes was attending to them. These dishes included '*Rogun Josh*', '*Minced meat*', '*Sour liver pieces*', '*Greens*', '*Chutney of radish*', '*fried lotus stem*' etc.

On that non-vegetarian side rice began to be served, followed by yellow meat dish with gravy called '*Kaliya*'. My hunger was getting sharper by the minutes but there was no way out but to wait our turn. My plate was still dry and there was no trace of the serving men.

Management team was moving all round but nobody seemed to take notice of our group. I cursed the day I had decided to be vegetarian. In fact I was not keen to be a vegetarian but Kakaji Maharaj had advised so after seeing my horoscope. I still remembered what he had said then. When my mother placed my horoscope before him he glanced through it and said, 'Stars are somewhat heavy on the child. You have to do two things, first ask him to pour some milk in the fire every Thursday and second let him give up eating non-vegetarian dishes. Then you will see how he will shine. He will lift you to new heights.' I was cut to quick. After about eight or ten days one would get a piece of meat with rice and that too was going to be denied to me. Kakaji Maharaj had a great influence on my mother. He was the elder brother of her father-in-law. Result was that I was forced to become a vegetarian.

Soon after this statement from Kakaji Maharaj it was the season for '*Gada bata*', when fish is prepared and offered to the house-deity. My maternal people used to celebrate this occasion on a grand scale. My maternal grand mother used to invite all near relatives for a feast on this day. It was like a fair there on that day. Apart from the elders even children would number about sixteen or seventeen. My granny would prepare the fish herself and cook radish along with it. The dish would be so delicious that even after the meal was over one would lick one's plate and fingers. I was a favourite of my granny. I used to feel assured that one piece of cooked fish would be saved for my next morning meal. When I implored my granny for this she would shower hundreds of blessings on me. But this year's festival remained memorable for me for I was served rice with greens of varieties. Every one relished the fish. I remained gazing them and heaving a sigh. In order to give me a moral support my mother too did not eat fish that day. When it was dark and people went off to sleep I was wide-awake. I saw fishes all around. After sometime I was unable to resist any more. I got up and stealthily walked towards the kitchen. I picked up a piece of cooked fish on some paper and started eating it inside my bed. Unfortunate as I am, a fish bone got stuck in my throat. First I tried to hush up the matter and coughed silently. When it did not help, I shrieked aloud. This woke up everyone asleep. The commotion that followed is indescribable. I was given a morsel of dry cooked rice that pushed the thorn down. I was beaten severely for this act. My granny could tolerate neither my eating fish nor my being beaten hollow. She came to my rescue. Defying Kakaji Maharaj proved very disastrous. I failed in my examination that year. Thereafter I became a vegetarian scrupulously.

I was pulled back from my thoughts by the arrival of Gashlal accompanied by yet another person. He told him to pick up the plates. Shiban obeyed and began removing the empty plates. I looked to the gentleman next to me with an enquiring gaze. He understood that the removal of the plates had disturbed me. So he whispered, 'since we are less in number, they will fill up the plates with various dishes in the kitchen itself.' I was relieved. May be Gashlal had said so but I had not heard. How could I have heard him when I was busy thinking about the fish-festival? After about ten or fifteen minutes three men brought us our plates and placed them before us. The dishes placed in the plates included '*DamAaloo*, *red Paneer*, *yellow Paneer*, *sour*

brinjal, lotus stem' and pickles of sorts. The plate was as if looking to me and I was looking to it. Without wasting any more time I pounced upon it and started eating. In between I looked towards Nika. He was holding a second piece of '*Rogan Josh*' and insisting the serving person to serve one more to Vijay also. Vijay could not refuse the offer.

After placing the plates before us nobody came to ask us whether we needed to be served with anything else. Every one was looking after only non-vegetarian guests. Suddenly I observed that yogurt was not served to us. I called one of the persons in charge and reported to him this lapse. He told another person who in turn told the third one but no one brought us the yogurt. I spotted Gasha Lal and told him that we were not served the yogurt. He said, 'where are the yogurt-cups?' I told him that we had seen these in the grand kitchen. He placed his hand on my shoulder and said, 'the fact of the matter is that we had put yogurt in two hundred cups. The first lot of guests itself was of two hundred and fifty. Now we cannot serve this to some and deprive others. So we decided not to serve this item at all. The trouble these days is that the invited guests arrive later and un-invited ones attend before them. This creates shortage in all that is planned and cooked.' I blushed and was embarrassed. Seeing this Gash Lal whispered to me, 'I could see that you also relish yogurt like my dear Raviji. Finish with your food. I will give you one cup secretly. But be careful not to reveal it here. Take it home and consume it there.' I agreed gladly. I came back to my seat. I was restless lest Gashlal leaves without giving me the yogurt. But then I thought that was not likely to happen because he was a nice man. Time and again I was reminded of what he had said. 'If one is not invited why should one be an uninvited guest? That would be tantamount to getting disgraced.'

After finishing the meal I stepped out. My friends also came out. I looked for Gashlal but without any success. I enquired from a gentleman, 'Sir! Where is Gashlal?' He did not respond but placed his hand on my head and asked me, 'Are you by any chance the son of '*Jigri*' (Dear Sister)?' My friends confirmed that I was. Before he could say something more, Nika held me by my hand and took me aside saying, 'why should you create a fuss? Let us leave now.' I told him, 'but then Gashlal will be put to trouble looking for me. Moreover are we not going to meet Satish?' Nika was about to say something that I saw the same man approaching us, who had made an enquiry from me. Before he could speak out I asked him, 'Sir! Where is Satish?' He questioned, 'which Satish?' Again Nika intervened and said, 'Sir! He is our friend. Presently he was here.' So saying Nika caught hold of my arm and dragged me towards home. My cup of yogurt was left behind.

On the way Vijay asked Nika, 'why did you not introduce us to your friend Satish? We would also give him greetings. With grinding teeth he replied, 'which Satish and which friend? Are you gone mad?' Both of us blushed. I asked with curiosity, 'what are you saying? Isn't Satish your friend?' 'What friend? Actually you were dying to have a feast and I managed it for you. Have I committed a sin?' Blushed, I had to remorse, 'Why did you not tell us the truth? It means we were uninvited guests.' Nika replied, 'had I told you the reality you would not have agreed to come. I too had not tasted a marriage feast for a long time. When you mentioned the canopy, I thought there was a God sent opportunity, which should be grabbed.'

It saddened me to realise that we had devoured a feast uninvited. I recollected that we only were the cause for the shortage of the yogurt cups. Nika rubbed my head and advised, 'Do not get upset, one should not be too serious about such things.' I told him, 'I am not bothered about that. My concern is that Gashlal should not come to this place searching for me along with a cup of yogurt.'



Lion Hunt

It was a serious matter. If you believe me, I had been pale for quite sometime but I was trying to put up a brave face. The healthiest boy in our class Ghulam Rasool too was chanting something in low tone. When I tried to shake him, he became mad but did not utter a word. Jalal Din and Raj Nath were so huddled together as if they had vowed not to get separated ever. Jay Kaul tried to muster some courage by puffing at a cigarette but unaware of the fact that it was not lit at all. Munir Ahmad was in deep thoughts perhaps trying to take stock of the situation. He was the team leader and, therefore, responsible for everything. Hanif Khan too had a red face but he was mum. It was not clear whether he was frightened or enthusiastic that made his face red. Munir Ahmad peeped through the gaps of the tent flaps once again. I also gazed through a gap but held my breath due to the fright. The lion was looking towards us with its shining eyes. I was so scared that I could see only one eye but Munir Ahmad said that both its eyes were shining. No body was allowed to talk. Every thing was conveyed through indications only. After hearing Munir I looked once again rather closely. Now I too could see both its eyes. Raj Nath seconded it. Jalal Din could not see the lion's eyes but he could hear the sound of it drinking water. He whispered, 'By God, the lion is drinking fast and churning the whole water as it were. I can hear the noise clearly sitting here.' Jay Kaul was not convinced. He told him, 'I have seen in the films that a lion never drinks by churning the water of a pond or reservoir.' Jalal Din wanted to enter into an argument with him but had to keep quiet because Munir Ahmed was watching. Once again we peeped through the tent door but it was pitch dark outside. We were rubbing our eyes and trying to figure out what will follow.

I pushed Rajnath and took the front position. I could clearly see the lion drinking water. Then it got up and stretched its body. Seeing its size I was frightened. It was hardly visible in the dark but its shadow was clear. This gave an idea that it must be six feet long. When I reported this to Munir Ahmad, he also took courage to observe. He was unable to spot anything and insisted that the lion was drinking water. On looking more closely he too agreed that it was now standing. His estimation was that it was about four feet long. All of a sudden Ghulam Rasool shrieked, 'Oh! We are doomed' and all of us fell on one another. No body knew the cause for his shriek. When Munir Ahmad asked him, he enquired with astonishment, 'did you not hear the roar of the lion?' While Munir Ahmad and I shook our heads in negative, Jalal Din agreed with him and said, 'By God, I also heard the frightening roar of the lion. But I did not reveal it lest you should get scared.' Hearing this we were half dead. We concluded that the lion was readying to eat us up. Jai Kaul had dropped his cigarette. He had perhaps realized that it was unlit. I cursed the time when I had consented to Munir Ahmed and had joined this adventure. At the heart of my hearts I was apologizing to my parents for not being of any service to them and fell prey to the lion at the ripe age of twenty five. Tears rolled up in my eyes. I remembered my relatives, friends and other acquaintances, one after the other. In no time I burst into tears. Seeing me cry, others also were in tears. Now that the death was so near, I remembered all my relatives and friends. We held one another's hands tight and I started reciting the prayer 'Indrakshi' in my mind.

We were eight of us in the team. Six were adventurers, Munir Ahmed, Ghulam Rasool, Jay Kaul, Raj Nath, Jalal Din and I. Two were porters, Hanif Khan and Kasana. We should have been eleven in all but three of my friends who usually are with me could not make it this time. They did say that they were busy but I am sure

they were scared to enter the forests. My pleading with them did not bear any fruit. They flatly refused to accompany us.

On our way up the mountain we had a problem. Kasana and Hanif Khan got detached from our group at a crossroad. We took to one way. They reached little later and took the other path. We did not realise this for quite sometime. At about noon when we reached a small plateau, we began searching for water to drink but alas water and milk was in the luggage being carried by Kasana and Hanif Khan. We had no other way but to wait but they did not turn up. After waiting for two hours, Munir Ahmed ordered us to continue the trekking. We had no life left in our limbs but how could we disobey the leader? Somehow we reached the bigger plateau at about five in the evening. We camped there. Nearby there was a spring. We drank with such eagerness as if we would not see water for another one year. After sometime, Kasana and Hanif also arrived. They were in a bad condition worse than ours. In spite of having water with them they had not had a drop of it. Hanif Khan said that they were lost and were busy trying to locate us.

All of us were busy pitching the tents. That job over, Munir Ahmed distributed work among all. Jalal Din and Raj Nath were asked to cook the food. Ghulam Rasool and Jay Kaul were given the task of digging a drain round the tents. Hanif and Kasana were engaged in drawing water from the spring. Munir and I began gathering dry firewood for the campfire. Rajnath left on a reconnaissance of the surrounding area. In short, every one of us was busy with one job or the other.

It is dark rather earlier in the forest. Before having our dinner, we began chatting with each other. Hanif was bragging about the tales of his valour. He possessed a gun and the licence for it. He would, therefore, often accompany hiking parties so that if need be, he can save them from wild animals. This would get him a good income although according to him so far he never had to confront any wild animal. He was robust but bad looking. He was so ugly that seeing him a lion or a bear would take to its heels.

We started arranging the firewood for the campfire around nine o'clock. It was decided that we would dine in front of the fire. We had hardly lit the fire that Ghulam Rasool heard some sound. He said that somebody was approaching. We looked around but because of the darkness could see nothing. We were all ears to the sound. I could figure out nothing but Jalal Din could. He said, 'true some horrible thing is approaching the spring'. Munir Ahmed asked us to get into the big tent. We entered the tent and huddled together. In the meantime Munir Ahmed took stock of the situation. He endorsed that something terrible could be on its way and we trembled in our pants. Later it became clear to us that the terrible thing was actually a lion. I listened to Munir Ahmed while I was muttering a prayer. He was whispering to Hanif to keep his gun ready. Hanif was reminded of his gun and he took out the double barrel gun from out of his bag. Munir made way for him and he came forward. He took position and began aiming. He was about to shoot when Jalal Din shrieked aloud, 'beware, you should not shoot.' We thought that the sight of a lion has made him deranged. I felt his forehead to see whether he had any fever. He pushed me aside saying, 'my father has told me a wounded lion is ferocious and dangerous. He eats up anyone he comes across.' We thought he was perhaps right but Hanif was not prepared to pay any heed. He said that he knew all about that matter and nobody need advise him.

Inside there was a hot discussion whether the lion should or should not be shot and outside the lion was all eyes towards us. Jalal Din caught hold of the gun lest Hanif shoots and Munir Ahmed intervened. He was advising Jalal Din but he would not listen. Meanwhile Jay Kaul observed that the lion was slowly approaching towards us. Kasana mustered courage to have a look. He cried aloud and said that the lion is

sitting just outside the tent. Every one was crest-fallen. Hanif blushed rather more than others. He said that now there was no occasion to fire. That will be an invitation to it to pounce on us. I lost track of the prayer I was chanting silently. Suddenly Jay Kaul rose on his feet and said, 'I have seen a similar scene in one picture. The lion was in front with its mouth ajar. Heroin was dead with fright. She was hardly six feet away from the lion. Hero was watching from a distance but dared not come near the lion. The lion was alternately looking towards the hero and the heroin. Then it went closer to the heroin. It was about to assault her that the hero got an idea. He spotted a bundle of grass, lifted it and put it on fire with his lighter. The grass was ablaze. The hero jumped towards the lion with this lighted fire in his hands. When the lion saw it, it left the heroin unscathed and ran for its life.' Jalal Din asked, 'do you mean to say that we should also light fire? Where is the grass?' Jay Kaul retorted, 'you mad cap! don't we have inflammable wood?' So saying he lifted a log of inflammable wood and set it in fire. Then he set another piece on fire and held both in his hands. Others followed and lit small logs of wood. Munir Ahmed lifted the tent door and everyone came out with fire in his hands. Timid as we are, Kasana and I remained behind. I thought that all of them have gone out with fire in their hands. What if the lion comes from behind and eats us up? We ran after them and what followed is indescribable.

We ran round all the tents, went up to the spring but there was no trace of the lion. We searched everywhere in that pitch-dark night but came across nothing. Ghulam Rasool burst into laughter. Others also laughed in frenzy. It was all because of our fright that some had felt a lion approaching, some had heard its sound and some had felt its shadow. Basically there was nothing. We returned and set the firewood on fire.

Campfire was touching the skies. Chickens were hanging on the tripod getting roasted. Jalal and Jay were laying the table for dinner. Munir became alert lest some one should accidentally pull the trigger of the gun. He called Hanif Khan and asked him to fetch the gun. He brought it and Munir opened the magazine. But oh! The magazine was all empty. Munir Ahmed was pale with embarrassment. Hanif Khan was looking with mischievous gaze towards him and towards the gun that was without the cartridge.

Hanif Khan had come to hunt the lion without a single round of bullet in the gun. The shame that he had to undergo was notable and apparent from his reddened face.



Naba Lala

The matter became rather too complicated. Naba Lala had not dreamt that the situation would come to such a pass. It was the first time that he had been drawn into a tiff with a contractor and the case had crossed all limits. Sapru Sahib, the head clerk tried his level best that the matter should get settled amicably but Naba Lala would not listen. The entire office was surprised at his attitude, since this was the first time that they had seen this facet of his.

Basically there was nothing serious about it. The fact of the matter was that Akram Khan had got a contract to supply uniform for drivers and conductors. His claim was that he got this order because the rates tendered by him were the lowest. Dar Sahib, the personal assistant to the Chief endorsed it but Naba Lala could not swallow this. Why him alone, no junior employee would accept this. It was, however, well known that the Chief, who had floated the tenders and issued the supply order, was above board. He was honest but the junior officers had managed it very tactfully at lower level itself. Akram Khan got four tenders himself and handed them over to Dar Sahib. Then all the juniors and seniors managed and got him the order issued. The Chief was totally unaware of all this intrigue involved in this case.

The Chief would even otherwise not meddle in these small affairs. He knew that right from the peon up to his P.A. every one would accept some bribe without which they could not survive. Even then he would not interfere. He would get involved only if the case involved money in lakhs. The cases involving money in thousands would not attract his attention. It is said that he had once told Dar Sahib that if the junior staff did not get this chicken feed, how would they be able to make two ends meet? Dar Sahib had kept this to himself and not revealed to others. But such things seldom remain a secret in the offices. The statement reached all the ears gradually.

When Akram Khan came to collect the order this morning, he straightaway approached Sapru Sahib. After some initial stray talk, he called Dar Sahib. Then all the three left the office. Perhaps they went to have tea. After sometime when they returned, Akram went to Naba Lala and asked him to give him the order. Naba Lala was typist cum dispatch clerk. He looked in his face, took out the order from out of the file and held it in his hand. Then he said, 'Now come out with my share.' Akram was a veteran in the field. He had a lifetime's experience of dealing with employees. So nobody would bluntly demand money from him. Sooner or later he would on his own pay everyone his share. Naba Lal was a late entrant to this office. He was not familiar with Akram Khan. Akram took out a tenor from his pocket and placed in his hand. Naba Lala placed it back into Akram's pocket and said, 'Please, no games with me. The order is for a job of sixty thousand. I will not accept anything less than twentyfive rupees.'

Naba Lala was young in age, hardly twenty or twenty-one year old. He was employed for the last two or so years only but had joined this office three months back. He came from a reasonably affluent family. His father was a Naib-Tehsildar with a good extra income. It was, therefore, within his reach to spend lavishly. He was used to smoking and chewing betel leaf. Even for a short distance he would hire a horse carriage. He was nicknamed 'Lala' or called Naba Lala, more out of a satire less as a mark of respect.

When Akram Khan heard him demand twentyfive rupees, he was enraged. He replied, 'Have you gone mad? I have so far never paid that much amount even to the P.A. Where do you stand in comparison to him? Naba Lala lost his temper on hearing this.

He said, 'very well, you can go for now. Come back tomorrow and I shall give the order. I have not yet entered this in the dispatch register.' Naba Lala kept the order back in the drawer of his table.

The matter was reported to Sapru Sahib. He summoned Naba Lala and told him, 'my dear child! You are too young; you should not behave like this. Khan Sahib has his approach to high ups. You should not spoil your relations with him.' He then called in Akram Khan and told him, 'Please come in Khan Sahib! Give him fifteen rupees, after all he is a child. We should not mind his attitude.'

Akram showed his magnanimity and replied, 'I would not pay him more than a tenor. Now that you recommend, very well I will pay him fifteen. I never go against your directive.' He took out fifteen rupees from out of his pocket and paid that to Naba Lala. He felt emboldened thinking that Dar and Sapru must have got a lion's share and he was being treated differently. So he said firmly, 'Sir! twentyfive rupees is not a big amount for him. He has a lot to earn from the deal.' Akram was infuriated and said, 'Are you out of your mind? I will crush you in one blow.' Naba Lala was conscious of his father's position as Naib-Tehsildar. He said, 'You do whatever you like. You can report the matter to the boss as well.' He knew that such matters are not reported to boss. If he gets an inkling that it was a fraudulent tender, he would cancel the supply order. Akram felt that Naba Lal was showing his temper perhaps because his father was a Naib-Tehsildar. He could not let himself down. So he said, 'By God! I will now pay you not even a single paisa. Are you going to give the order or not?' Naba Lala refused point blank. The matter became complicated in no time. Before Sapru Sahib could figure out the position, Akram Khan got up and dashed into the Boss's room. What transpired there could not be known. The boss asked his peon to close the door of his chamber. After sometime Akram Khan came out of his room and without talking to anyone went home. In the meantime Dar Sahib also came to know of this commotion. He rushed to Sapru Sahib, who narrated the whole episode to him. Dar said, 'The matter has come to such a pass. You should have sent me a word. I would have suitably advised Naba Lala.' Sapru replied, 'I tried my best that the matter should get settled calmly but Naba Lala was adamant. He did not pay any heed to what I said.' Both were anguished. This was the first time that such an incident had taken place. People would tremble at the sight of the chief. Nobody would dare raise the issue of bribery before him. Now Dar Sahib was summoned by the Chief. His face was red with fear. He told Naba Lala, 'Look what you have done. You have placed yourself in difficulty and us too. God knows what the Chief is going to say.' The fact was that the Chief was in a hurry to go somewhere. He had advised Akram Khan also to meet him the next day. He told Dar, 'this is the position of your administration. How am I to face the contractor? Tell this boy to be present tomorrow.' So saying he left the office.

Naba Lala could not sleep the whole night. He could not talk to his father on this subject. He was imagining the impending scene and perspired with apprehensions. He had not thought the contractor would report the matter to the boss. Next day the Chief called Akram Khan and Naba Lala together. Dar Sahib too was in attendance. The Chief ordered that the door be closed from inside. People were putting their ears to the door to know what was transpiring therein. Sapru was at his table in a gloomy mood. Naba Lala stood pale in the corner of the room. Akram Khan was seated in a chair. Dar was standing but the boss asked him to take the chair. On being asked Akram Khan narrated the whole story to the Chief. He concluded by saying, 'I offered him ten rupees of my own free will but he insisted for twentyfive rupees. You tell me what big margin I have in this whole deal?'

The Chief listened patiently and in the meantime Naba Lala was mustering courage. He thought, if asked he would deny all together and say that he was lying. If Dar Sahib sides with him he would say that he too was lying. They both are in league with

each other. But the events did not take that shape. The Chief did not ask him anything. He was furious. There were wrinkles on his forehead and fire was emitting from his eyes. He looked towards Dar Sahib and said, 'I cannot understand. These contractors go on distributing large sums of moneys to different high officers. They carry gifts to them. Now this poor chap demanded just a paltry twentyfive rupees, why should he have felt bad about it. He must have given you too some money without which you would not have favoured him. But he would not give anything to small fry.' The atmosphere changed altogether. Dar had thought that Naba Lala would be in trouble at the hands of the Chief but today he was in a different form and mood. He hung his head not knowing what to do or say. Akram Khan was wiping sweats from his face. The Chief addressed him, 'You have a lot to gain in this contract. Fifty rupees is not a big sum. You should not bring such frivolous matters to me. If you want to come to me come with a complaint against a big gun. That you will dare not, eh!' Akram Khan was all in sweats. Dar did not know how to run away from the scene. Both of them took to their heels. Akram rushed back to his home. He had no face to show to anyone.

Naba Lala was delighted and his joy knew no bounds. He was now alone in the room. The chief called his peon and got the door closed. The peon retreated and Naba Lala had no clue what was happening. He was looking to the chief as a sheep would look to a butcher. Presently the Chief took out a stick from his drawer and got up from the chair. In a moment he gave a thrashing to this boy. He got red marks on his naked body. Then he said to him, 'you have just joined the office and right from now you have the audacity of making demands, that too in my office and under my very nose. Is Akram Khan required to supply uniforms or fill your pockets?' Then the Chief gave him a terrible slap. Naba Lala started crying bitterly. Thereafter he asked for his forgiveness. Other employees were watching through the gaps in the door.

Naba Lala returned to his seat with red eyes. Other employees came to express sympathies but he did not open his mouth. He hung his head and supported his forehead with his hands. The employees returned to their respective seats. After about two hours Akram Khan came back and went straight to Naba Lala. Sapru Sahib accompanied him. Naba Lala raised his head. Khan said to him, 'Please excuse me Naba Lala.' Then he took out twenty-five rupees from his pocket and placed before him. Naba Lal glanced towards Sapru Sahib. He indicated to him to accept the money without any fear. Naba Lal counted the money and then folded them. He looked to Akram Khan and smiled. Thereafter he put the money back in the pocket of Khan Sahib and said, 'Now I will accept nothing short of fifty rupees. Then only I will hand over the supply order to you.' Akram was flabbergasted. Sapru returned to his seat. He could not understand what was going on.

Akram thought it futile to report the matter again to the Chief. So he took out fifty rupees from his pocket and paid Naba Lala. He handed over the Supply Order to him. Sapru Sahib was watching from a distance. He was unable to conclude who was wrong and who was right.



Destiny

Bakshi Sahib did return home but was restless. Alam Din was still in front of his eyes, wrinkled face, sunken eyes, semi-bald head grey and black mixed and lean and thin limbs. Alam Din could listen all right but his eyesight was weak. He would talk authoritatively as if he knew everything. Alam Din was above sixty in age but people would say that he is only thirty-two year old. Even Bakshi Sahib could not agree at first but when Tarik Sahib vouched for this before him, he was taken by surprise. Alam Din would talk sporadically and take breath between each talk. Today when he virtually shed tears, Bakshi Sahib could not bear it. He said to him, 'Alam Din, I will try my best to get you employed. Just give me some time. For your sake if I have to approach higher ups even, I will.' Then he held him by his hand and took him along up to the gate to bid him adieu. While taking leave of him Alam Din once again looked to him with an appealing gaze, Bakshi was touched to his heart.

It was Tariq who had brought Alam Din to Bakshi Sahib about two months back. Tariq was a B.D.O in that area and had friendship with Bakshi. Tariq was an old hand in this area and people took him to be a native of the place. He had a direct approach with people in the matter of getting employment to them because of which he knew them personally. He had narrated Alam Din's story in detail to Bakshi sahib. The story goes that Lal Din was twelve year old when along with four other friends of his school he had escaped to Pakistan. This would remain a secret had Majid not divulged it to his parents. Majid was yet another friend of Alam Din. According to the programme he had also to elope to Pakistan along with them but he could not because he got fever and could not step out of his home. When Tariq and his friends did not return from their school to their homes till late in the night, their parents searched for them in every house and finally landed up in Majid's home. There they came to know the truth of their elopement. Alam Din's father, a farmer by profession, was crestfallen. His mother got a bout of fits and was bedridden. Even before many boys had eloped to Pakistan from that area but no one had returned. Some news about them would come now and then. It was reported that some of them were well off and some were almost paupers. Those who were rendered beggars would not dare return for fear of parents and others back home. It was rumoured that some three or four of them had tried to cross over from there but the army people spotted them. It was not known whether they ran back to Pakistan or got drowned in the river flowing near the borders. After some enquiries Alam Din's father came to know that it was Rashid who had actually hatched the intrigue. His maternal cousin had eloped to Muzaffarabad two years back and he was trying to induce him to follow suit by sending a word through one or the other person. He had given him reference of a person who would show him the way. This person was one Habib Dar resident of a nearby village. He would travel to and fro through a secret route and also carry merchandize from here to the other side and from there to this side. This way he would make a quick buck in the bargain. When Rashid divulged the plan of eloping to Pakistan many of his friends agreed to accompany him. He approached Habib Dar and the date was accordingly fixed. As the date was nearing, one after the other boys began wriggling out. Only six of them remained to run away by the eve of the actual date but eventually only five could go. The families of other children and of Alam Din left no stone unturned but could not get any information about their children. They went as far as the 'Red Bridge' but got no clue of them. The whole area being full of forests there were many routes to cross over to the other side. No doubt the Military was on the vigil round the clock yet the elopers would find a way to cross over unnoticed.

Twenty years after Alam Din eloped to Pakistan it came to light that he was behind bars in Jammu Jail. This was revealed by another detainee of the same prison, Salim Khan by name after he was released from the jail. He was the resident of another

village adjacent to that of Alam Din. When Alam's mother heard the news she was eager to see her son. His father had already died about eight year's back.

Nobody knew why Alam Din was in prison and how he landed up there from Pakistan. At first people took it lightly and did not bother to probe into the matter but when Tariq sahib heard, he was serious about the matter. He called a meeting of the seniors in the village. Salim Khan, who had given out the news, was summoned. He confirmed having seen him as a prisoner and having identified himself as Alam Din. He, however, had no knowledge about how he had come to be in jail and wherefrom he had come. Alam Din had not divulged anything in detail. He had only requested him to report to his parents should he get a chance to do so. There was a lacuna in that the description that he gave of the person did not tally with that of Alam Din. For example according to him he was of an advanced age whereas Alam should not be more than thirty or thirty-two years of age.

Tariq made use of his influence. Along with some of his fellow villagers he reached Jammu and contacted a friend of his, Parvez Ahmad. He was employed in the Police Department. He accompanied them to the place where Alam Din was imprisoned. There he made arrangements for them to meet him. It is said that when these people approached his cell they could not see anything clearly. It was pitch dark inside. One person was sitting inside in a corner with his head sunk in his knees. Bashir Malik, who had come along with Tariq Sahib went near him and gave him a slight push. The man lifted his head and gazed first at Bashir Malik and then at others present. Bashir saw him closely and declared that he was not Alam Din. The prisoner said to him, 'no, I am in fact Alam Din, who are you?' Bashir Malik replied, 'I am Bashir Malik. If you are Alam Din tell me do you recognize me?' He said, 'how can I recognize you. I am meeting you people after twenty odd years. Are you by any chance the son of Mahi Din Malik?' Bashir Malik got the correct clue and said, 'yes, I am the same person. Do you know these persons?' He pointed to two other persons. The prisoner could not place them and said, 'you tell me.' Bashir Malik told him their names and he placed them immediately and said, 'Yusuf is my neighbour and Majid was my classmate. He was to elope to Pakistan along with us but he did not. Thereafter all of them hugged and kissed each other. Bashir Malik introduced Tariq to Alam Din and told him that due to his grace only they were able to reach him. Alam Din enquired about the welfare of his family. They informed him that Muhammad Din had died about eight years back and that his mother was alive and awaiting his arrival. They told him that after seeing him she would get a new life. Alam Din cried on hearing about the death of his father. However, he had no tears to shed. At the insistence of Bashir Malik Alam Din also narrated all that he had undergone during the past twenty years.

Twenty years back when Alam Din and his friends ran away from their homes, it was Habib Dar, their guide who took them to Muzaffarabad. He handed them over to a Kashmiri teashop owner. His name was Maqbool Khan. He belonged to the same place. For initial couple of days he fed them to their fill and then started putting them to odd jobs like cleaning and washing utensils. At first they felt bad about it and resented it very much but soon they got used to it. It was usual for those who had escaped from their homes in Kashmir and arrived here to do such chores. Slowly they developed intimacy with other such Kashmiris. Rashid could not meet his maternal cousin. Habib Dar enquired and was told that he had gone to Karachi. On knowing this Rashid was disappointed very much. He felt restless in Muzaffarabad. After a month and a half Rashid also eloped and Alam Din and others could not know his whereabouts. They thought he too must have gone to Karachi. Alam Din worked on the teashop for about two years. He too wanted to go to Karachi like Rashid but no one guided him in this respect. He was friendly with a customer and so he consulted him. His name was Jamal Khan. He was a truck driver and often went to Lahore. He too was a Kashmiri and came from Muzaffarabad. He consoled Alam Din and promised him that he could take him to Lahore but not Karachi. Alam Din took it as something Godsent.

One day Jamal managed to take him along in his truck to Lahore. The rest of the friends were left behind at the teashop itself. Jamal asked Alam, 'what will you do at Lahore?' He replied, 'I will sure come across some one known. There are many people from our village who have come here. I hear they are doing a good business here. Some one or the other will have an opening for me.' 'But what compulsions you had to escape from your village? What were you doing there?' asked Jamal Khan. 'I was reading in a school. I had a craving to visit Pakistan and live here. His maternal cousin had told Rashid also that Pakistan was a heaven on earth. The people here love Kashmiris a lot and are eager to help them. Hearing this I too had a desire to come here,' replied Alam Din. Jamal Din said to him, 'my dear child home is after all a home. It is matchless; don't you see how Kashmiris are earning their livelihood by doing odd manual labour?'

This made Alam Din ponder over the whole matter. He had been remembering his home for quite sometime now and his parents, relations, friends and neighbours. But the strong urge to see Pakistan and live there was still uppermost on his mind. Jamal Khan added, 'you are still young. Remain with me on this vehicle till you get a job here. Alam Din agreed. He thought that his aim was to go to Karachi and so for a temporary phase the idea was not bad at all.

He remained with Jamal Khan for a good four years. He too treated him well almost like a younger brother. In the meantime he learnt driving. Jamal Khan bought one more vehicle and entrusted that to Alam Din. He remained busy driving the new vehicle. Jamal paid him adequately. Thereafter Alam began living separately. It continued for yet another five years. Alam saved a good sum of money. One day he got an opportunity to drive his truck to Karachi. Jamal Khan accompanied him. Through him he got introduced to some Kashmiris. He enquired about Rashid but there was no trace of his. It was difficult to find him. After all Karachi is not a small city at that. He gave up all his hope to find Rashid. All the same Alam Din liked the city. He thought that this was the real Pakistan. He hired a room there. He did not want to drive the truck any more. He returned the truck to Jamal Khan and started a small merchandize shop.

Gradually Alam Din made a good progress. The small shop got expanded and became big. He put up a Signboard 'Alam General Store'. He hired some employees and in a matter of six years became reasonably affluent. He was able to purchase a house very near his shop. There was a small restaurant in front of his shop. It belonged to one Sarwar Khan. He hailed originally from Poonch but at the time of partition he had migrated to Lahore along with his family members. He was a noble person. His age was around fifty or fifty-two years. He developed a good relationship with Alam Din. Many a time he suggested to him to marry a girl distantly related to him. Alam Din was not prepared yet. He wanted to meet his parents before having to look after his own family.

Sarwar Khan was eager to widen his business. He wanted to establish a big hotel but was short of funds. Once during a conversation with him he said to Alam Din, 'I want that we should have an eternal relationship. I am fond of having my hotel on a large scale but have limited means. Would you like to join me as a partner so that we do business together.' Alam Din replied, 'how can I ride on two boats? You see how busy I am with my shop.' Sarwar Khan was prepared for this reply. He said, 'Do you mean to say that you intend selling groceries all your life? One has to move along with the times if one has to progress. God willing, in ten years time we will own a hotel of the international standard. Our business will run in millions.' Alam Din got the message. Sarwar wanted him to sell off his grocery shop and join his hotel business as a partner. Alam Din gave it a thought. He thought that the suggestion of Sarwar Khan

was appropriate. After a short period 'Hotel Sarwar-Alam' was established on the crossing. Both of them put all their savings in the hotel. It was not a very big hotel but in that area it was unique of its kind. Soon it was very popular with middle class visitors and office employees. Day by day the income from this venture started growing.

One day Alam Din was loitering in the market when he spotted an aged man. He came from the same place as his. He called him and when he was before him Alam Din said to him, 'Sir, I know you well. You hail from Salamabad in Kashmir, isn't it?' The old man confirmed but said, 'but I do not know you. Who are you?' Alam Din told him, 'I am Alam Din. I used to live in Rampore. It is now eighteen years that I have eloped from my home.' The old man shook his head and said, 'yes, I guess that you are the son of Mohammad Din.' Alam replied in affirmative and added, 'I have come here only fifteen days back to see a relation of mine. I knew your father well. He was a noble person. He was crestfallen when you ran away and thereafter died very soon. I understand your mother is seriously ill. God knows when her end will come, perhaps after seeing you.' Alam Din was sad to know this. After a few days he was panting to go to his home. He discussed the matter with Sarwar Khan. He was very influential and knew some high ups. He assured him that he would make sure that he goes to Kashmir. Days passed on and Alam Din was eager to see his mother. Kashmiris would not be permitted to go back to Kashmir very easily but Sarwar Khan was sure that he would find a way for him.

His influence did not work though. Alam Din did not get permission to visit Kashmir and for the first time after coming to Pakistan he wept bitterly. His condition deteriorated. Sarwar Khan could not bear the sight of his condition. He made an alternative arrangement. There were people in Pakistan who would make it possible for one to cross the border for a fee. Sarwar approached one such person. His name was Waqar Khan. He demanded two thousand rupees. He informed him, 'It is very dangerous to go to Kashmir via Muzzafarabad these days. I will, however, take you to Indian side of the border via Sialkot without any fuss. There is no danger this way but still you have to be cautious. Once you are on the other side I shall not be responsible for any eventuality.' Alam Din agreed.

It was a long journey. Alam Din along with Waqar Khan travelled first to Lahore and then to Gujranwala. From there they boarded a truck and reached the border near Sialkot. There Waqar Khan guided him on a road that would take Alam Din to Jammu region. He was restless but Waqar advised him to wait for it to be dark when crossing over would be safe. At about seven in the evening Waqar Khan took him along and made him cross the border. Alam Din heaved a sigh on reaching to the other side. It would now take him only two days to reach his home. He journeyed along imagining only his own home and the picture of his mother. But the fate did not favour Alam Din. He was awe-stricken when three young men caught him by the wrist. They did not belong to Indian Army but were from the Pakistan Rangers. When they took him to their post he realized that he was still within the Pakistani territory. Waqar Khan had cheated him squarely.

Alam Din's plan failed. He was sweating profusely. The Rangers took him to Gujranwala and handed him over to the Military Intelligence squad. They opened a case file in his name wherein he was identified as an Indian agent. It was recorded that the Rangers had arrested him while crossing from Indian side into the Pakistan territory. The treatment that he was given thereafter is un-describable. They struck all the details that he gave about his name, about his home in Karachi and his business concern as false and concocted. They snatched forcibly from him all the money that he was carrying. He was there in the Pakistan Interrogation Centre for a good two years, at various places. He was meted third degree treatment too. Finally he was pushed back into the Indian Territory, in a half-dead state of health.

This was not all for Alam Din. There was more trouble in store for him. At Jammu he was spotted by the B.S.F. jawans. They identified him a certain Pakistani agent intruding into Indian side. Thereafter he got the same treatment as he had got at the hands of the Pakistani intelligence agency. This included a close interrogation, beating, questioning and third degree methods at different centres of interrogation. In order to escape further punishment he accepted all that was alleged. His condition deteriorated so much so that that he almost lost his eyesight. A young man of thirty odd years began looking like a sixty year old aged person.

Tariq Sahib managed to approach the minister with the help of some higher-ups. They narrated the whole story of Alam Din to him. They also assured him that they were prepared to stand guarantee for his conduct. For this purpose he had to camp at Jammu for about a fortnight. After a confinement of one year and three months Alam Din was released. The case against him was withdrawn under the orders of the higher authorities. Tariq took him to his home after his release. But the bad luck continued to haunt him. One day before his arrival his mother had passed away. It was not destined for him to see her face when he underwent all the troubles to meet her. People said that the mother too was eager to see her son before her death and even in the last moments her eyes were towards the road expecting him to return any moment.

Bakshi was thinking about all this when his mother called him. She was bed-ridden and whenever he was home he would sit by her side. Hearing her call he remembered Alam Din's mother. He thought she too must have been all eyes towards her son. He wiped his eyes and went to his mother.

Alam Din wanted to serve somewhere. Going back to Pakistan was out of the question. No body would allow him to go back, if permission was sought and going clandestinely was ruled out. Tariq Sahib had discussed this matter with Bakshi Sahib on these lines. The latter needed some men for his office. Alam had applied for the post of a peon there. Bakshi Sahib had forwarded the same to higher authorities because he was not educated for one thing and secondly had been jailed for a long time. Bakshi Sahib tried his best but without any success. Alam Din's application was rejected. He reported this to Tariq Sahib also.

In the meantime Alam Din got in touch with Sarwar Khan. On the telephone Sarwar Khan talked very briefly. First he told him not to worry as everything was all right. Next time he told him that the hotel was running at a great loss. The third time he refused even to talk to him. An acquaintance of Alam Din had got permission to go to Pakistan. Through him he sent a letter to Sarwar Khan. When he approached him he denied knowing any one by the name of Alam Din. However, he reported that his hotel had grown to be a five-star hotel.

For a long time he continued to enquire about his employment from Bakshi Sahib but the latter could not tell him the truth. He would always say that the matter was under discussion and something would turn up. Disappointed he stopped going to him all together.

After about six months of his disassociation with Bakshi Sahib a miracle happened. Bakshi was called by his boss, who told him, 'if you take personal responsibility we can appoint Alam Din temporarily for six months in the first instance and thereafter make him permanent on your recommendation.' Bakshi Sahib agreed and took the responsibility.

Next day Bakshi Sahib took along Tariq Sahib with him and went to Alam Din's house to convey him the good news. When they reached there the atmosphere was altogether different. The entire village was collected there. When he enquired what the

matter was, he was stunned to know the answer. Alam Din had again eloped to Pakistan clandestinely. This was revealed by Samad Magray, a neighbour of his. He elaborated thus, 'Alam Din came to my house late last night. He informed me that he had decided to run away to Pakistan. I had come here for the sake of my mother. She is no more. I could not get an employment so that I could make my life comfortable. Now I have only one aim and that is to go to Karachi and take revenge against Sarwar Khan.'

No body knew after this what had happened to Alam Din.



Trident Stick

It was a Monday but our teacher did not turn up. Still we remained calm and disciplined. We did not make any noise. At about eleven o'clock when it was confirmed that the teacher is not going to come, we were delighted. Thereafter we started making a noise. Some of us played our wooden boards as imitation drums and some began singing. Some were standing and shouting and some were laughing aloud. Hearing the noise the Head Master came to our class and we were dumbfounded. He asked the monitor to stand up and name the students who were making a noise. He was speechless because he himself was imitating the teacher and feigning to teach us. Head Master asked us to hold our ears as a punishment. Then he directed our monitor to teach us.

Neelkanth was the name of our teacher. He lived at Habba Kadal in a house on the river-bank. He had two long coats, one blue and the other black. These he would wear on alternate days. He would wear white tight pyjamas along with these and black laceless shoes. His head would be covered with light pinkish turban.

I was then in fifth standard. We were eighteen students in the class. After the morning prayers when we entered our classroom we used to be listless. We would sit in rows on the jute mat and wait for the teacher to arrive. As soon as he entered we would stand up and salute him. He would reply by nodding his head, sit in the chair and open the roll call register. Then he would take the roll call. He would call out a roll number and the student concerned would stand up and say, 'Present Sir'. The teacher would identify him and then move on to the next number.

We were mortally afraid of him. He was very strict in teacher. Any student wanting to go to toilet to ease himself was observed by him closely in order to ascertain the genuineness of his need. Any student making a false request would turn pale and return to his seat. If a student had not completed his homework he would be shouted at and made to soil his pants with the loud scolding. The teacher would point out towards the trident stick hung by him behind the doors. The student would shriek and shiver and ask for pardon promising not to miss the homework again. Whenever someone committed a big mistake the teacher would take the stick in his hand and ask him to show his palms. This would create a scene in the classroom. Without even getting the first lash the boy would start sobbing. The entire class would shiver and ask for pardon on behalf of the delinquent student. We loved our teacher only once when before the closing of the school for the day he would call us and ask our welfare. He would ask one about his father and enquire the reason of the death of their cow from the other. To one he would ask why he could not pay his fees and to the other he would promise to get him some relief from the school poor fund since he could not afford to pay the school dues. From one he would enquire where his father was posted and from the other he would ask about the present condition of the ailing person in their family. In short he was concerned about each one of us and would render help to every needy student. Some he would help financially, to some he would provide books and uniform and others he would teach after school hours.

Why were we mortally afraid of his trident stick? This stick was a small branch broken from a willow tree. At the end it was branching into three offshoots. It was about three feet long with each offshoot about one foot long. The teacher had got its peel removed and then the whole stick oiled. This four feet long stick was a terror for us.

This trident stick has come to our class about seven months back. The teacher got it with him and placed it on the table. Then he said to us in a commanding voice, 'Do

you see this stick?' We shook our heads in affirmative. He added, 'It is not an ordinary stick. I got it twelve years back from the top of the hill at Ganderbal with great difficulty. It is special in as much as it cannot be stolen by anyone. If a liar is struck with it, he speaks the truth. If someone has stolen a thing this stick shakes and indicates towards him. Even a lion is mortally afraid of this stick.' Saying this the teacher picked up the stick and kept it close to his chest. He said, 'I had gone to Pahalgam once. I had this stick with me. Late night I lost my way and was detached from my family members. I was looking for the proper way when I spotted a lion. I was scared. I lost hope of my living. The lion saw me and pounced upon me. But as the luck would have, I had this stick and it touched the lion's face. The lion's legs shook seeing the stick and scared it took to its heels and ran towards the forest. Next time I was travelling by bus to Sopore. The bus was filled to capacity. A young man left his seat for me and I sat down. When the conductor asked me to purchase a ticket, I was all sweats to find that some one had picked my pocket and stolen my purse. The conductor scolded me and asked me to alight from the bus. I had kept this stick by the side of the window. As soon as I got up from my seat the stick slipped and fell on a gentleman sitting behind. He tried to throw it from the window but its one end got entangled with his pocket and lo my wallet was there in it. It was the same person who had left the seat for me. I cried aloud, 'my wallet, my wallet!' The man threw the purse towards me and jumped off the bus in a huff. Thus the stick got me my purse back. Another time a student of mine had spoken a lie and taken off from the school. Next day when he came to school the stick fell on his feet. I sensed that this boy had committed some wrong. When I lifted the stick to strike at him, he cried and told me the truth. Once I had to hit a child with this stick for his mischief. It created a black mark on his palm. The mark has not vanished to date even after two years of the occurrence.'

These anecdotes had created a scare in our minds. Even a mention of this stick would send a shiver down our spines. Ever since the teacher brought this stick to school, he took it home only once. He said that a child there was too mischievous and needed to be punished thoroughly with this stick only. We shivered in our pants. We thought if this was how he was going to treat his own child what rigours we would have to undergo and how could we be spared?

Today we were delighted since the teacher had not come to school. We thought that we would have a hay day but Headmaster's arrival put some spokes in our merriment. As soon as he departed we were back to our mischief of dancing and singing but in a low key. We thought that this was the opportune time for our frolics. We hid the trident stick in a corner lest it observes us. The Headmaster did not turn up again. Probably he was under the impression that the monitor would be teaching us properly in the absence of our class teacher.

During the recess time Nika thought of a plan to do away with the stick. I was stunned. I told him that the teacher would fleece us when he comes to know of it. He said that he would not come to know of it. He said that we would keep it a secret from the other students as well. The stick would be in hiding and thus cannot reveal to the teacher. I was convinced of this argument but realized the danger involved. We were still in the process of planning the strategy that Raja sensed something was fishy. He told us what was cooking. He also threatened us that if we did not take him into confidence he would report to the teacher. We were aware that it was imperative to involve him too or else he would create some problem. When he heard our plan he was very happy. He endorsed our strategy and volunteered to hide the stick. We agreed but advised him to throw it in the river. He too consented. Raj went down and we threw the stick to him. He held the stick, looked around carefully and then departed. After half an hour he returned. We asked him where he had thrown the stick. He indicated that he had thrown it in the middle of the running water. No other child came to know

of this, as they were busy playing or pulling each other's hair. Later when we were heading towards our homes, Raj was in deep thoughts. We asked him what the matter was. He did not reply. We thought that he might have been scared while disposing of the stick in the river.

On Tuesday the teacher came and entered the classroom. After taking our roll call he asked us what we had done the previous day. We were mum. He sensed that we must have been busy with all sorts of mischief. Head Master too had briefed him about the previous day's happenings. He asked us individually to name those students who had engaged in mischief the previous day but nobody replied. Then he looked for his trident stick.

He could not find it. He searched behind the door, below the table, underneath the floor-mat, inside the cupboard and elsewhere but the stick was nowhere to be seen. The monitor also knew nothing about it. The teacher was red with rage. He could figure out that it was the handiwork of some child. He began questioning us one by one. I looked towards Nika and he looked to Raj. At the end the teacher said, look here, I know one of you has taken the stick away but you are not telling me the truth. If the stick is not back at its place by tomorrow I shall fleece every one of you.' Then he looked towards us as if he would swallow each one. The three of us decided come what may we shall not divulge the secret.

On Wednesday when the teacher came to the class he had the trident stick with him. We were astonished. I looked to Raj who was bewildered. I could not figure out when Raj had thrown the stick into the river how it came to be in the hands of the teacher. It was clear that the stick was no ordinary stick. It had some magical features. We were all eyes towards the teacher. His face indicated the grief he had undergone. He placed it on the table and said, 'I committed a mistake yesterday. I scolded you but I was myself to blame. It seems on Saturday I had taken the stick with me to my home but was unaware. This morning I spotted it while leaving for the school. I must have left it in the courtyard. Even though I am your senior yet I apologize to you.' No sooner did he ask our pardon than we burst into crying. He came to us and hugged us one by one. He showed special consideration to those whom he suspected and whom he had scolded the most.

It was recess period and all of us came down to plat except Raj. He stayed back in the class. He said that he had some work to do. After the recess was over all of us as well as the teacher went back to the classroom. We saw Raj crying bitterly with his head placed between his two knees. The teacher thought that his apology must have affected him badly because of which he has been crying in private. He lifted him in his lap and made him sit near him. Then he told him, 'Why are you so upset? The chapter about the trident stick is closed now. I had erred and so had to apologize. It is always good to regret. It washes off one's sins, you see.' He then caressed his face with tender love. But this gesture made Raj cry still louder and he kissed the teachers hands time and again. He said to him, 'Sir kindly forgive me.' The teacher said, 'but why? What have you done to ask for forgiveness?' We went closer to him to hear what he had to say. Raj said, 'Sir, the stick had not been taken home by you. In fact I had stolen it.' The teacher was astonished. He said, 'what are you saying? I found the stick at my home.' Raj replied, 'Sir! The plan to hide the stick was hatched by three of us. I took the stick to the river but could not throw it in the water as some persons were bathing there. Then I went to the bridge thinking that I would throw it in the water from there but spotted my father coming from the other side. I took to my heels but there was no way to escape. I had reached a dead end near a stone wall. I was afraid lest my father sees me with this stick. I hurled the stick over the wall into the courtyard. I think it must have been your courtyard.' Then looking to us he said, 'I did not tell you all this as I was apprehensive that you will give me a beating.'

The teacher was flabbergasted to note what a difficult step Raj had taken because of the scare that the stick had generated. For him the stick was now a cobra. On the other hand he was pleased as well to mark that Raj had spoken the truth and truth should triumph. He pardoned him.

The teacher asked the students to take their seats and told them, 'this stick is no magic-wand. I had cut it off from a willow tree in my courtyard. Whatever I had told you about it was all fabrication. I never wanted to hit you because I consider you as my children. My intention was to frighten you with this stick so that you always do good deeds, study and attend to your lessons.' While speaking all this he choked his throat. At this hour we loved our teacher a lot.

After the school closed for the day he took the stick with him. He thought that he should not place anything in the classroom that frightens the children. He decided to burn the stick so that nothing remains of it. But he was unable to carry out his decision because Nka covered the stick with his body saying, 'Sir, Please let the stick remain here. Whenever you are transferred out this will remain your memento for us.' The teacher left the stick at the spot where it was.

He left for his home. I observed that while walking he was wiping tears from his eyes with his handkerchief.

