



CONSECUTIVE SERIAL HOW MUCH TO SAY



M.K.Raina

Dedicated To My Parents

Consecutive Serial 'How Much To Say' :

- 1) Imported Time Piece
- 2) The Treasure
- 3) Heaven & hell
- 4) Odd & Even
- 5) Success & Failure
- 6) Uninvited Guests
- 7) Lion Hunt
- 8) Naba Lala

Imported Time Piece

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. 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 Makhan 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 Ganesh 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.



Pass & Fail

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 Yousuf 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'. Rashid 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.



Wedding Feast

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. Raja 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. Raja kept his hand on my shoulder and said, "Is there no wedding this year at any of our relations' place?" I said, "No". Raja was sad.

After walking a little more, 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 Raja. He would often accuse me of fishing in troubled waters.

Raja 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. I saw him talking to an elderly person inside. As soon as he saw me, he signalled me to wait outside. I came back and waited outside.

After about fifteen minutes Raja 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 twelve different dishes served. Additionally pickle and yogurt will also be served.'

I asked, 'who gave you all these details?' Raja 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.

There was a shopkeeper a few yards ahead. We had to wait there for Nika. Nika was studying in S.P.College. He used to stop at this shop on his return from his college. From here we used to go to our home together. But today, he was not there. Shopkeeper said that Nika had already left for his home and had asked us to meet him at his place.

We left our books at our homes and dashed into the home of Nika. He was ironing his trousers. We Raja told him that some Gopinath's son was getting married, Nika laughed. He said, "Satish's brother is getting married. We are also invited there." Satish was Nika's college friend but he did not have any special

intimacy with us. We said to him, "He is your friend, not ours." But he did not listen. He said, "Doesn't Satish know that we are all one? He has already told me about you. I had come earlier today from the college to help him."

Nika kept the coal-iron on a stone slab and said, "Gopinath Wali is Satish's father. I call him Bhaigash with love, as Satish calls him by that name. He also knows all about you."

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, otherwise we will gate late." I had not enjoyed a marriage feast for a long time. I thanked Vijay and Nika both. Raja 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, and the statements made by India and Pakistan at United Nations. We were least interested in their dialogue. We stood quite a distance away from them. Nika went inside to meet Satish. He came back in a while with Satish. I said to Satish, "We thank you for inviting us." He said, "What has happened to you people? Am I not like your brother?" We apologised. Nika got us seated at a spot and went inside again with Satish.

After some time, Nika came back. He had two more people with him. He asked us to wish them. We did. They blessed us. Later we came to know that one of them was Satish's Mama and the second person was his friend.

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 '*Rogan Josh*' 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, two more people joined us. 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 and I got some relief. Now we were waiting to be served but it was getting delayed. I looked towards the row where Nika was seated. Satish was also seated with him. He signalled us to eat leisurely. We signalled back, telling him yes we will. 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 Kak 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. One he should recite Yendrakhi mantra every Thursday and second, he should give up eating non-vegetarian dishes. Then you will see how he will shine. He will lift you to new heights.' I was shocked. 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. Kak 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 Kak 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 not tolerate my being. She came to my rescue. Defying Kak 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 Raja. Raja 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 is yogurt?' 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*'?' I corrected him, "No Sir, I am son of

Kakni." He left. Before I could ask him who he was, Nika caught me by my arm, took me aside and said, "You don't have to mix up with the people here. We have to leave." I told him "I have to meet Gasha Lal. Won't he get annoyed not finding me? And we would wish to meet Satish too. Where is he?" Nika said, "What will you do with Satish. He has to attend to so many things," We left for our home.

On our way back, Raja asked Nika, "When I come back from my college tomorrow, should I go to Satish's place to help him. After all, he is alone and may need our help." Nika got rash. His face became red. He said, "Which Satish? Do you think I really know these people? Like you, I had also seen this canopy in the day and had visited it inside to get feel of things. I wanted to have a wedding feast and so did you. Did I do any blunder by arranging this feast?" I got pale. I asked him, "You mean, this was not Satish's house? Didn't you tell us Satish's brother was getting married?" "Satish lives at Narsingh Garh, not here. And he has no brother. He had also come to have a feast like we did. Yes, I had briefed him about what he had to do before you." Said Nika.

"Then who was that Satish's Mama?" I asked.

"He was not Satish's Mama. He was the electrician. I got him purposely to meet you so that you don't have any doubt."

It appeared as if the ground was slipping under my feet. Raja face turned black. Nika put his hand on my head and said, "Forget everything. You don't need to worry about these petty things." I said, "I am worried on another account now. I fear Gasha Lal will come searching me to my home and find we were uninvited."



Lion Hunt

It was a serious matter. Believe me, I had been pale for quite sometime but was trying to put up a brave face. The robust boy in the team Parvez 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. Ghulam Rasool 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. Parvez 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 Ghulam Rasool said that both its eyes were shining. No body was allowed to talk. Every thing was conveyed through indications only. After hearing Ghulam Rasool 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. 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 Ghulam Rasool 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 Parvez, 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 only five feet long. All of a sudden Raj Nath shrieked, 'Oh! We are doomed' and all of us fell on one another. No body knew the cause for his shriek. When Ghulam Rasool 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. Jay Kaul had dropped his cigarette. He had perhaps realized that it was unlit. I cursed the time when I had consented to Jalal Din and had joined this adventure. At the heart of 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. 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. Others were also reciting something.

We were eight of us in the team. Six were adventurers, Ghulam Rasool, Parvez, 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, Ghulam Rasool 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. Our condition was worst for want of water. We just fell down on ground.

After sometime, Kasana and Hanif also arrived. They were in a condition worst 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. We quenched our thirst and started moving again. There was a spring some distance ahead. We camped here.

All of us were busy pitching the tents. That job over, Ghulam Rasool distributed work among all. Jalal Din and Raj Nath were asked to cook the food. Parvez 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. I began collecting dry firewood for the campfire. Ghulam Rasool 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 frightening that seeing him only would take a lion or a bear 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'. Ghulam Rasool asked us to get into the big tent. We entered the tent and huddled together. In the meantime Ghulam Rasool 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 Ghulam Rasool 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. Parvez 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 Ghulam Rasool 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, 'don't we have inflammable wood?' So saying he lifted a piece 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 pieces of wood. Ghulam Rasool lifted the tent door and everyone came out with fire in his hands. Timid as I was, I remained behind. Abruptly this thought came to me. All of them had gone out with fire in their hands. What if the lion comes from behind and eats me up? I 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.

In fact, shadow of a big branch of a Deodar tree was falling on the spring. Because of the shaking of the branch, we saw moving images on the waters and it looked as if a lion was looking at us, or drinking water. Since high and dense deodars did not allow moonlight to reach ground everywhere, it was partial darkness and we could not get the real picture. Now everything was safe. We came back and lit the fire.

Flames of the campfire were touching skies. Chickens were hanging on the tripod getting roasted. Jalal and Jay Kaul were laying the table for dinner. Ghulam Rasool 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. Ghulam Rasool's face got pale. Hanif Khan was looking with mischievous gaze towards him and towards the gun.

Hanif Khan had come to hunt the lion without a single round of bullet loaded on 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.

