

SA‘ADAT HASAN MANTO

For Freedom’s Sake

I DON’T remember the year but it must have been when Amritsar was reverberating everywhere with the cries of “*Inqilab Zindabad!*” (“Long Live Revolution!”). These cries, I recall, were filled with a strange excitement, with a gushing energy one saw only among the blossoming milkmaids of the city as they tore through its bazaars, with baskets of *uplas* carefully balanced on their heads. It was a wild and woolly time. The dread, tinged with sadness, which had hung in the atmosphere since the bloody incident at Jallianwala Bagh had completely disappeared and a dauntless fervor had taken its place: the desire to fling oneself headlong, regardless of where one might land.

People chanted slogans, staged demonstrations and were sent to prison by the hundreds. Courting arrest had become a favorite pastime: you were apprehended in the morning and released by the evening. You were tried in the court and thrown in jail for a few months. You came out, shouted another slogan, and got arrested all over again.

Those days were so full of life! The tiniest bubble when it burst became a formidable vortex. Somebody would stand in the square, make a speech calling for a strike, and a strike followed. A tidal-wave would sweep through requiring everybody to wear only home-spun *khadi* (cotton) to put the textile factories of Lancashire out of business, and all imported cloth would be boycotted. Bonfires would go up in every square, and in the heat of excitement people would peel off their clothes then and there and throw them into the flames. Now and then a woman tossed one of her ill-chosen saris down from her balcony and people would go wild with applause.

I remember one conflagration across from the main police station by the Town Hall. My classmate Shaikhu became so excited that he took off his silk jacket and cast it onto the pyre of imported clothing, setting off a round of thunderous applause, because he was the son of a noted toady.

The applause excited him even more. He peeled off his silk shirt and offered it to the flames too, realizing only later that the shirt had gold buttons and links.

Far be it from me to make fun of Shaikhu. The fact is, I felt just as passionate in those days. I'd dream of getting hold of handguns and forming a terrorist group of my own. That my father was receiving his pension from the government never crossed my mind, at any rate. Something inside me was boiling to spill out, akin to the heady feeling of a game of flush.

I had never cared much for school anyway, but in those days I came to positively detest it. I'd leave the house with my books and make straight for the Jallianwala Bagh. Here, I'd watch whatever activity was going on until school ended. Or I would sit under a tree and stare at the women in the windows of houses some distance away, hoping that one of them would fall in love with me. Why such a thought entered my head I have no idea.

Jallianwala Bagh was the scene of much activity at the time. Canvas tents and enclosures were set up everywhere. People would choose somebody as "dictator" every few days and install him with due ceremony in the biggest tent. He would receive a military salute from his ragtag army of volunteers. In mock seriousness he would receive the greetings of *khadi*-clad men and women for three or four days, at most a fortnight. He would collect donations of flour and rice for the soup kitchen from the *banyas* (merchants), and one day while drinking his *lassi* (God only knows why it was so readily available in the Jallianwala Bagh area) would be raided by the police, arrested, and whisked away to prison.

I had an old classmate, Shahzada Ghulam Ali. You can get some idea of how close our friendship was from the fact that twice we had failed our high school exams together and once had even run away to Bombay. Our plan was to end up in the Soviet Union eventually. But when money ran out and we had to sleep on the streets, we had to write home to be forgiven, and returned.

Shahzada Ghulam Ali was a handsome young man: tall and fair as Kashmiris generally are, with a sharp nose and playful eyes. There was something particularly majestic in the way he walked, but his walk also carried a trace of the swagger of professional *ghundas* (street toughs).

He was not a "Shahzada" ("Prince") during our school days. But as revolutionary fervor picked up and he participated in a dozen or so rallies, the slogans, strings of marigold, songs of patriotic zeal, and the opportunity to talk freely with female volunteers turned him into a sort of half-

baked revolutionary. One day he delivered his first speech. The next day I found out in the newspaper that Ghulam Ali had become a “Shahzada.”

Soon he became known all over Amritsar, which is a fairly small city, and it doesn't take long for one to become famous or infamous there. Its residents—quite critical of ordinary people, and going to all lengths to find fault with them—couldn't be more forgiving to a religious or political leader. They always seem to be in need of a sermon or speech. One can survive here as a leader for a long time. Just show up in different garb each time: now black, now blue.

But that was a different time. All the major leaders were already in prison, and their place was free for the taking. The people of course had no need for leaders, at least not so terribly, but the revolutionary movement certainly did. It urgently needed people who would wear *khadi*, sit inside the biggest tent in the Jallianwala Bagh, make a speech, and get arrested.

In those days Europe was going through its first “dictatorships.” Hitler and Mussolini had gained quite a bit of notoriety. Perhaps that's what led the Congress Party to create its own “dictators.” When Shahzada Ghulam Ali's turn came, a full forty “dictators” had already been arrested.

I headed off to Jallianwala the minute I heard that the strange mix of circumstances had made our Ghulam Ali a “dictator.” Volunteers stood guard outside the large tent. Ghulam Ali saw me and called me in. A mattress was spread out on the floor with a *khadi* bedcover on it, and there, leaning against cushions and bolsters, sat Ghulam Ali talking to a group of *khadi*-clad *banyas* about, I believe, vegetables. He finished the session quickly, gave instructions to his volunteers and turned toward me. He looked far too serious, which prompted me to tease him. As soon as the volunteers had cleared away, I laughed and said, “Hey, Prince, what's up?”

I made fun of him for quite a while. But there was no denying the change in him; it was palpable, and what's more, he was aware of it. He kept telling me, “Sa'adat, no, please don't make light of me. I know I'm a small man and don't deserve this honor. But from now on I want to keep it this way.”

I returned to Jallianwala Bagh in the evening. It was packed with people. As I had come a bit early I found a place close to the platform. Ghulam Ali appeared amidst tremendous applause. He looked dashing in his immaculate white *khadi* outfit, the slight swagger mentioned earlier adding to his attraction. He spoke for nearly an hour. Goose bumps broke out on my body several times during his speech. A couple of times I

felt an overwhelming need to explode like a bomb then and there. Perhaps I was thinking that such an explosion might free India.

God knows how many years have passed since then. Our emotions and the tide of events were in a state of flux. It is difficult to describe their precise modulations now. But as I write this story and recall him making that speech, all I see is youth itself talking, a youth innocent of politics, filled with the sincere boldness of a young man who suddenly stops a woman on the street and tells her straight out, "Look, I love you," then surrenders himself to the law.

I've heard many more speeches since. But in none of them have I heard even a faint echo of the bubbling madness, reckless youth, raw emotion, and naked challenge that filled Shahzada Ghulam Ali's voice that day. Speeches today are laced with calculated seriousness, stale politics and a prudence couched in lyricism.

At the time neither side, the government or the people, was experienced. They were at each other's throats, unaware of the consequences. The government sent people to prison without understanding the implications of such a step, and those who submitted to voluntary arrest showed equal ignorance of the true significance of their act.

It was wrongheadedness, and potentially explosive. It ignited people, subsided, and ignited them all over again, creating a surge of fiery exuberance in the otherwise dull and gloomy atmosphere of servitude.

The entire Jallianwala Bagh exploded with loud applause and inflammatory slogans as Shahzada Ghulam Ali ended his speech. His face was gleaming. When I met him alone and pressed his hand to congratulate him, I could feel that it was shaking. A similar warm throbbing was evident on his bright face. He was gasping a bit. His eyes were glowing with the heat of passion, but they also hid the trace of a search that had nearly exhausted itself. They were desperately looking for somebody. Suddenly he snatched away his hand and darted toward the jasmine bushes.

A young woman stood there, wearing a spotless *khadi* sari. The next day I came to know that Shahzada Ghulam Ali was in love with her. It was not a one-sided love. Because she, Nigar, loved him madly in return. Nigar, as is obvious from her name, was a Muslim girl. She was an orphan. She worked as a nurse in a women's hospital. She was perhaps the first Muslim girl in Amritsar to come out of purdah and join the Congress Movement.

Partly her *khadi* outfit, partly her participation in the activities of the Congress, and partly also the atmosphere of the hospital—all these had

slightly mellowed her Islamic demeanor, the harshness which is part of a Muslim woman's nature, and softened her a bit.

She was not beautiful, but she was a model of femininity in her own way. Humility, the desire to respect and worship, and *adarsh*, so characteristic of a Hindu woman's makeup, had come together in Nigar in a most pleasing combination. Back then the image would never even have occurred to me, but now whenever I think of her, she appears to me as a beautiful confluence of Muslim *namaz* (prayer) and Hindu *arti* (offering).

She practically worshipped Shahzada Ghulam Ali. He too loved her madly. When I asked him about her, he told me they had met during the Congress rallies and after a brief time together had decided to tie the knot.

Ghulam Ali wanted to marry her before his imminent arrest. I have no idea why. He could have just as easily married her after his release. Prison sentences used to be quite short in those days. Three months, at most a year. Some would be let go after only a fortnight, to make room for others. Anyway, he'd told Nigar of his plan, and she was willing. All that was needed was Baba-ji's blessing.

Baba-ji, as you must know, was a major figure. He was staying outside the city in the palatial lodgings of the city's richest jeweler, Hari Ram. Ordinarily he lived in his *ashram* in a neighboring village. But whenever he came to Amritsar, he encamped at Hari Ram's. For the duration of his stay this house would become a shrine for his devotees, who would stand in long lines patiently waiting for his *darshan*. Baba-ji gave a general audience and took donations for his *ashram* in the evening seated on a wooden platform laid out under a cluster of mango trees some distance from the house. This was followed by the chanting of *bhajans*, and the session would end at his bidding.

Baba-ji was an abstemious and god-fearing man. He was also very learned and intelligent. These qualities had endeared him to everyone, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, and untouchable. Everybody considered him their leader.

On the face of it, Baba-ji was indifferent to politics, but it was an open secret that every political movement in the Punjab started and ended at his behest. The government found him intractable, a political riddle which even the brightest government people could never hope to solve. His barest smile stirred up a million speculations, but when he proceeded to interpret it himself in an entirely novel way, the populace, already in thrall, felt truly overwhelmed.

The civil disobedience movement in Amritsar, with its frequent

arrests, quite clearly owed a lot to Baba-ji's influence. Every evening at *darshan* he'd drop an innocuous word from his toothless mouth about the freedom movement in the whole of Punjab and about the fresh and increasingly harsh measures of the government, and the mighty leaders of the time would scramble to pick it up and hang it around their necks like a priceless amulet.

People said that his eyes had a magnetic quality, his voice was magical, and he had a cool head—so cool indeed that the worst obscenities, the sharpest sarcasm, could not provoke him, not even for a millionth of a second—which made his opponents writhe in frustration.

He must have taken some part in hundreds of demonstrations in Amritsar, but, strangely, I hadn't caught a glimpse of him, from far or near, although I'd seen every other leader. So when Ghulam Ali mentioned going to his *darshan* to request his permission to marry, I asked him to take me along.

The very next day Ghulam Ali arranged for a tonga, and we arrived at Lala Hari Ram's magnificent mansion.

Baba-ji was done with his morning *ashman* and worship and was listening to a beautiful "pandatani" (Pandit woman) sing patriotic songs. He was seated on a palm mat spread out on the immaculate white tile floor. A bolster lay near him but he wasn't leaning against it.

The room had no other furnishings besides the mat. The pandatani's onion-colored face looked stunningly beautiful in the light reflecting off the tiles.

In spite of being an old man of 70 or 72, Baba-ji's entire body—on which he had only a tiny red ochre loincloth—was free of wrinkles. His skin had a rich dark color. I came to know later that he used to have olive oil rubbed into it before taking his bath.

He greeted Shahzada Ghulam Ali with a smile and also glanced at me. He acknowledged our greetings by a slight widening of the same smile and then made a sign for us to sit down.

Today, when I imagine that scene and examine it closely, I find it quite intriguing. A half-naked old man sitting on a palm mat in the style of a yogi, his posture, his bald head, his half-opened eyes, his soft tawny body, indeed every line in his face radiating a tranquil contentment, an unassailable conviction: he cannot be dislodged, not even by the worst earthquake, from the summit where the world has placed him. And close to him sits a just-opened bud from the vale of Kashmir, her head bowed, partly from respect for the elderly man nearby, partly from the effect of the patriotic song, and partly from her own boundless youth, yearning to

spill out of the confining folds of her coarse white sari and sing not just a song for the country, but a song dedicated equally to her youth; she wanted to honor not just the nearness of this elderly man, but also that of some healthy youth who would have the spunk to grab her hand and jump headfirst into life's raging fire. Opposite the elderly man's granite confidence and serenity, her onion-colored face, her dark lively eyes, her bosom heaving inside her coarse *khadi* blouse, all seemed to throw a silent challenge: come, hurl me down from where I stand, or lift me up to sublimity.

Nigar, Shahzada Ghulam Ali, and I sat somewhat off to one side; I was frozen like a perfect idiot, equally flustered by Baba-ji's imposing personality and the unblemished beauty of the young Kashmiri woman. The glossy tiles also had an effect on me, indeed quite an effect. What if the Pandit girl would let me kiss her eyes, just once. The thought pulsed through my body, and my mind immediately darted off to my maidservant, for whom I'd begun to feel something lately. I felt like leaving everybody and making straight for home—I might succeed in stealthily luring her upstairs to the bathroom. I just might. But the second my glance fell on Baba-ji and the passionate strains of the nationalistic song swelled in my ears, a different thought would begin to run through my body: if I could just get hold of a handgun, I'd rush to the Civil Lines area and start making short work of the English.

And next to this perfect idiot sat Nigar and Ghulam Ali, a pair of hearts in love, somewhat tired of their long and uneventful throbbing, ready to melt into each other to find those other shades of love. In other words, they'd come to ask Baba-ji, their uncontested political leader, for permission to marry. Obviously it was not the song of the nation that resonated in their heads at that moment. It was their own song, beautiful, but as yet unsung.

The song ended. With a hand gesture Baba-ji gave his blessing to the Pandit girl and then turned, smiling, to Nigar and Ghulam Ali, again managing a small glance at me as well.

Ghulam Ali was perhaps about to introduce himself and Nigar but Baba-ji—goodness, his memory!—quickly said to him in his sweet voice, “Prince, you haven't been arrested yet?”

“No, not yet,” Ghulam Ali replied, his hands folded in respect.

Baba-ji picked out a pencil from the pen-box and toyed with it as he said, “But you *are*—I think.”

The remark went over Ghulam Ali's head. So Baba-ji looked at the Pandit girl and said pointing at Nigar, “Nigar has captured our Prince.”

Nigar blushed. Ghulam Ali's mouth fell open. And the onion color of the Pandit girl flushed with good wishes. She gave the pair a look that seemed to say, "How wonderful!"

Baba-ji looked at the Pandit girl once again. "These children," he said to her, "have come to ask for my permission. How about you, Kamal, when are you going to get married?"

So she was called Kamal! The abrupt question caught her off guard, and she turned red in the face. "Me?" she said in a trembling voice, "I've decided to join your *ashram*."

She said this with a trace of regret, which Baba-ji's perceptive mind registered instantly. He gave her a smile, the soft smile of a yogi, and then turned to Ghulam Ali and Nigar and asked, "So have the two of you made up your minds?"

"Yes," they answered softly in unison.

Baba-ji scanned them with his politician's eyes. "Sometimes," he said, "one is obliged to change the decisions one has made."

For the first time in Baba-ji's lofty presence, Ghulam Ali loosed the boldness of his coltish youth, saying, "Even if our decision is put off for some reason, it will never change!"

Baba-ji closed his eyes and proceeded to question him in the manner of a lawyer, "Why?"

Surprisingly, Ghulam Ali didn't lose his nerve at all. His ardent love for Nigar made him say, "Circumstances may force us to put it off, but our decision to free India is irrevocable. Absolutely!"

Baba-ji, I now feel, didn't think it profitable to query him further on the subject and smiled—a smile which everyone present must have interpreted in his or her own way. And if asked, Baba-ji would have given it a radically different meaning. Of that I'm sure.

Anyway, stretching further the smile which evoked a thousand different meanings, he said, "Nigar, come join our *ashram*! It is only a matter of days before Prince will be sent to jail."

"All right, I will," she answered softly.

Baba-ji changed the subject and asked about the revolutionary activities in the Jallianwala Bagh camp. Ghulam Ali, Nigar and Kamal filled him in for what seemed like a long time about various arrests, releases, and even about milk, *lassi*, and vegetables. During this time I sat there like a bumpkin, wondering why Baba-ji dilly-dallied so much in giving his blessing to Ghulam Ali and Nigar. Did he have doubts about their love for each other? About Ghulam Ali's sincerity? Had he invited Nigar to the *ashram* just to help her get over the pain she'd doubtless feel at her

husband's incarceration? But then, why had Kamal responded to Baba-ji's question, "Kamal, when are you going to get married?" with, "I've decided to join your *ashram*"? Didn't men and women marry at the *ashram*? These were the kinds of questions that were raging inside my head, as the four of them sat speculating about whether the number of lady volunteers was enough to deliver *chapatis* for 500 militants on time. How many stoves were there? How large were the griddles? Couldn't one get a griddle big enough for six women to bake *chapatis* all at once?

This Pandit girl Kamal—I was wondering—would she just chant national songs and religious *bhajans* for Baba-ji's edification once she was admitted to the *ashram*? I had seen the male volunteers of the *ashram*. True enough, they all took their ritual bath and brushed their teeth every morning, they all spent most of their time out in the open air and chanted *bhajans* in accordance with the rules of the *ashram*, but their clothing still reeked of perspiration, didn't it? Quite a few had bad breath to boot. And I never saw on anyone even a trace of the good nature and freshness one associates with outdoor living. Instead, they looked stooped and repressed, their faces pallid, eyes sunken, and bodies ravaged—as blanched and lifeless as the udders of a cow from which the last drop of milk has been squeezed out.

I'd seen these *ashram*-wallahs on numerous occasions in the Jallian-wala Bagh. I couldn't imagine Kamal, who was molded in her entirety out of milk, honey and saffron, being subjected to the gaze of these men who had nothing but filth in their eyes. Would she—a being swathed all over in the scent of *loban*—have to listen to them with their mouths smelling worse than the stench of rotting mulch? Perhaps, I thought, the independence of India was above all this.

But this "perhaps" was not something I could understand, what with my patriotism and passion for the country's freedom. I thought of Nigar, who was sitting very close to me and telling Baba-ji that turnips usually took quite a long time to cook. For heaven's sake, what had turnips got to do with marriage? She and Ghulam Ali had come for Baba-ji's blessing to get married, hadn't they?

My thoughts wandered off to Nigar and the *ashram*, which I had never visited. *Ashrams*, *vidyalas*, *jamat-khanas*, *takiyas*, and *darsgahs*, all such places inspire only the deepest revulsion in me. I don't know why. I've often seen boys and the caretakers of orphanages and schools for the blind walking in a row along streets asking for handouts. I have also seen *jamat-khanas* and *darsgahs*: boys donning *shar'i* pajamas well above their ankles, their foreheads marked with calluses despite their tender age, the

slightly older boys wearing thick bushy beards, the younger ones with a revolting growth of sparse bristles on their cheeks and chins; absorbed in prayer, but their faces reflecting pure beastliness.

Nigar was a woman, not a Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, or Christian, just a woman. No, she was more than that, a woman's prayer intended for her lover, or for one whom she herself loved with all her heart. I couldn't imagine her—she who was herself a prayer—raising her hands in prayer every morning as required by the rules of Baba-ji's *ashram*.

Today as I recall Baba-ji, Nigar, Ghulam Ali, the ravishingly beautiful Pandit girl, indeed the entire atmosphere of Amritsar, engulfed as it was in those days in the fine romantic haze created by the independence movement, all appear like a dream, the sort one longs to have over and over again.

I still haven't seen Baba-ji's *ashram*, but I hate it as passionately today as I did then. I don't care at all for a place where people are subjected to an unnatural way of life. To strive for freedom is fine. I can even understand dying for it. But to turn living people into mere vegetables, without passion or drive, is beyond me. To live in poor housing, shun amenities, sing the Lord's praises, shout patriotic slogans—fine! But to stifle in humans the very desire for beauty! What kind of humans have no feeling for beauty, no zest for life? Show me the difference between the *ashrams*, *madrasas*, and *vidyals* that accomplish this and a field of horseradishes!

Baba-ji sat talking about the remainder of the activities in Jallianwala Bagh with Ghulam Ali and Nigar for a long time. Finally he told the couple, who had not forgotten, apparently, about the purpose of their visit, to return there and the next day in the evening he himself would wed them.

The two were elated. What greater fortune could there be than to have Baba-ji himself perform their marriage! Ghulam Ali later told me that he had become so overjoyed he thought it couldn't be true. The slightest gesture of Baba-ji turned into an historic event. He couldn't believe that such a great man would personally come to Jallianwala Bagh for the sake of an ordinary man, a man who had become the Congress's "dictator" merely by accident. Precisely the headline which splashed across the front pages of newspapers throughout India.

Ghulam Ali wondered whether Baba-ji would show up. Wasn't he a terribly busy man after all? But the doubt, which he had raised as a psychological precaution, proved wrong, as expected. Promptly at 6 p.m., just as the bushes of *rat ki rani* were beginning to pour forth their fragrance, and a band of volunteers that had set up a small tent for the bride

and groom was decorating it with jasmine flowers, marigolds and roses, Baba-ji walked in, supporting himself on his *lathi*, with the patriotic song-spouting Pandit girl, his secretary, and Lala Hari Ram in tow. The news of his arrival came at precisely the same moment Lala Hari Ram's green car pulled up at Jallianwala Bagh's main entrance.

I too was there. In another small tent, lady volunteers were fitting Nigar with her bridal adornments. Ghulam Ali had made no special arrangements. He had spent the whole day negotiating with the city's *banyas* for provisions to feed the volunteers, after which he stole a few moments to talk briefly with Nigar in private, and then, as I recall, he told the officers under his charge only that at the end of the wedding ceremony he and Nigar would raise the flag together.

Ghulam Ali was standing by the well when he heard that Baba-ji had arrived, and, if I remember correctly, I was asking him, "You know, Ghulam Ali, don't you, how this well was once filled to its mouth with the bodies of people slain in the firing? Today everybody drinks from it. It's watered every flower in this park. People come and pluck those flowers. But strangely, not even a drop carries the salty taste of blood. Not a single petal of a single flower has the redness of blood in it. Why is that?"

I vividly remember that as I said this I had looked at the window of a neighboring house where, it is said, a young girl had been shot dead by General Dyer as she stood watching the massacre. The streak of blood had begun to fade on the old lime wall behind the window.

Blood had become so cheap that spilling it no longer affected people as it once had. I remember I was in my third or fourth class at school, and six or seven months after the bloody massacre our teacher had taken us to see Jallianwala Bagh. It hardly looked like a park then, just a dreary and desolate stretch of uneven earth, strewn all over with clods of dried dirt. I remember how the teacher had picked up a small clod, reddened I believe from *pan* spittle, and showed it to us, saying, "Look, it's still red from the blood of our martyrs!"

As I write this story a myriad of small things keep coming to mind. But it is the story of Ghulam Ali and Nigar's marriage that I want to write, isn't it?

Anyway, hearing that Baba-ji had arrived, Ghulam Ali rushed to gather the volunteers in one place. Together they gave Baba-ji a military salute. The two inspected different camps for quite some time. All the while Baba-ji, who had a keen sense of humor, fired off numerous witty remarks during conversation with female volunteers and other workers.

In the meantime the evening haze began to settle over the Jallianwala Bagh and lights came on in nearby houses here and there. A group of volunteer women started to chant *bhajans*. They sang in unison, some sweetly, most harshly and out of tune. Together, though, they sounded pleasant enough. Baba-ji was listening with his eyes closed. Roughly a thousand people must have gathered. They sat on the earth around the platform. Except for the *bhajan*-singing girls, everyone else was hushed.

The chanting tapered off into a silence which seemed anxious to be broken. So when Baba-ji opened his eyes and trilled sweetly, “Children, as you already know, I’m here to unite these two freedom lovers in marriage,” the entire Bagh resonated with loud cries of jubilation.

Nigar, in her bridal attire, sat on a corner of the platform, her head bowed low. She looked very lovely in her tri-colored *khadi* sari. Baba-ji motioned for her to come closer and sat her next to Ghulam Ali, which caused more cries of jubilation to go up.

Ghulam Ali’s face was unusually flushed. When he took the wedding contract from his friend and handed it over to Baba-ji, I noticed his hand was shaking.

A Maulvi Sahib was also present on the platform. He recited the Quranic verse customary at weddings; Baba-ji listened to it with closed eyes. The custom of “proposal and acceptance” over, Baba-ji gave his blessing to the bride and groom. Meanwhile the congratulatory showering of the couple with dried dates—the *chhuwaras*—traditional at such events had begun. Baba-ji snatched a dozen or so for himself and tucked them away.

Smiling shyly, a Hindu girlfriend of Nigar’s gave Ghulam Ali a tiny box as a present and whispered something in his ear. He opened the box and covered the part in Nigar’s hair with *sendur* dust. The drabness of Jallianwala Bagh was enlivened again with a round of loud applause.

Baba-ji got up amidst all the noise. A hush instantly fell over the crowd.

The mixed fragrance of *rat ki rani* and jasmine wafted by on the light evening breeze. The scene was absolutely breathtaking. Baba-ji’s voice had acquired an extra measure of sweetness today. After congratulating the couple on their wedding, he said, “These two will work for their country and nation with even greater dedication now, because the true meaning of marriage is none other than true friendship between a man and a woman. Ghulam Ali and Nigar will work together as friends for *swaraj* (freedom). Such marriages are commonplace in Europe—I mean marriages based on friendship and friendship alone. People who are able to exorcise carnal

passion from their lives are worthy of our respect.”

Baba-ji explicated his concept of marriage at length. He firmly believed that the true joy of marriage was something above and beyond the bodily union of the mates. He didn't consider sexual union as important as people generally made it out to be. Thousands of people ate just to satisfy their craving for flavor. But did this mean that to do so was incumbent on humans? Although people who ate solely out of the need to stay alive were very few, they alone knew the true meaning of eating. Likewise, only those people who married out of the desire to experience the purity of this emotion and the sanctity of this sacred relationship truly enjoyed connubial bliss.

Baba-ji expounded on his belief with such clarity and profound sincerity that an entirely new world opened up before his listeners. I too was deeply touched. Ghulam Ali, who sat opposite me, was so engrossed in Baba-ji's speech he seemed to be drinking in every word. When Baba-ji stopped, Ghulam Ali briefly consulted with Nigar, got up, and declared in a trembling voice:

“Ours will be just such a marriage. Until India wins her freedom, Nigar's and my relationship will be entirely like that of friends.”

More shouts of applause followed, enlivening the dreary atmosphere in the Jallianwala Bagh with its cheery tumult for quite a while. Shahzada Ghulam Ali grew emotional, and streaks of red blotched his Kashmiri face. “Nigar!” he addressed his bride in a loud voice. “Can you bear to bring a slave child into this world?”

Dazed in part by the wedding and in part by Baba-ji's harangue, Nigar lost her remaining presence of mind when she heard this whip-crack question. “No! Of course not!” was all she could get out.

The crowd clapped again, sending Ghulam Ali to an even higher pitch of emotion. The joy at saving Nigar from the ignominy of producing a slave baby went to his head, and he wandered off the main subject into the tortuous byways of how to free the country. For the next hour he spoke nonstop in a voice weighed down by emotion. Suddenly his glance fell on Nigar, and instantly, he was struck dumb. He couldn't get a word out. He was like some drunkard who keeps pulling out note after note without any idea how much he is spending and then suddenly finds his wallet empty. The abrupt paralysis of speech irritated him greatly, but he immediately looked in the direction of Baba-ji, bowed and again found his voice: “Baba-ji, bless us to remain steadfast in our vow.”

Next morning at six Shahzada Ghulam Ali was arrested. In the same speech in which he had vowed not to father a child until the country

gained her freedom, he had also threatened to overthrow the English.

A few days after his arrest Ghulam Ali was sentenced to eight months' imprisonment and sent to the Multan jail. He was the forty-first "dictator" of Amritsar and, if I remember correctly the figures quoted in the newspapers, the forty-thousandth political activist apprehended and imprisoned for taking part in the independence movement.

Everybody thought that freedom was just around the corner. The astute British politicians, however, let the movement run its course. The failure of the major national leaders of India to reach an agreement pretty much took the teeth out of it.

Following their release, the freedom lovers tried to put the memory of their recent hardship behind them and get their interrupted business back on track. Shahzada Ghulam Ali was let go after only seven months. Even though the revolutionary fervor had considerably subsided by then, people did show up at the Amritsar Railway Station to greet him, and a few parties and rallies were held in his honor. I attended all of them. But they were largely lackluster affairs. A strange fatigue seemed to have come over people, like runners returning listlessly to the starting line after being suddenly told in the middle of a dash, "Stop! We'll have to do it over."

Several years passed. The listlessness, the exhaustion still hung over India. My own life went through a series of upheavals, some major, some minor. A beard and mustache had sprouted on my face. I entered college and failed twice in my F.A. My father died. I knocked about looking for a job and found work as a translator for a third-rate newspaper. Fed up, I decided to go back to school and enrolled in Aligarh University, but I contracted tuberculosis and within three months found myself wandering around rural Kashmir recuperating. Then I headed for Bombay. Witnessing three Hindu-Muslim riots in two years was enough to send me packing to Delhi. But that place, by comparison, turned out to be terribly drab, with everything moving at a snail's pace. Even where there was some sign of activity, it had a distinctly feminine feel to it. Well, maybe Bombay wasn't so bad after all, I thought, even if your next-door neighbor has no time to ask your name. What of it? Where there is time, you see a lot of hypocrisy, a lot of disease. So after spending two uneventful years in Delhi I returned to fast-paced Bombay.

It was now eight years since I had left home. I had no idea what my friends were doing; I barely remembered the streets and bylanes of Amritsar. How could I? I hadn't kept in touch with anybody back home. As a matter of fact, I'd become somewhat indifferent to my past in the intervening eight years. Why think about the past? What good would it do

now to total up what was spent eight years ago? In life's cash, the penny you want to spend today, or the one another may set his eyes on tomorrow, is the one that counts.

Some six years ago, when I wasn't quite as hard up, I'd gone to the Fort area to shop for a pair of expensive dress shoes. The display cases in a shop beyond the Army & Navy Store on Hornby Road had been tempting me for some time. But since I have a particularly weak memory, I wasn't able to locate the shop in question. Out of habit I started to browse in other stores, even though I'd come specifically to buy shoes. I looked at a cigarette-case in one store, pipes in another, and then I strolled on until I came to a small shop that sold footwear. I stopped and decided to look for a pair there. The attendant greeted me and asked, "Well, Sahib, what do you want?"

For a moment or two I tried to remember what I had come to buy. "Oh, yes. Show me a pair of dress shoes with rubber soles."

"We don't carry them."

The monsoons will start any day now, I thought, why not buy a pair of ankle-boots? "Well then, how about rubber ankle-boots?"

"We don't sell those either," the man said. "Try the shop next door. We don't carry any rubber footwear at all."

"Why?" I asked out of curiosity.

"Boss' orders."

After this brusque but definitive reply, there was nothing I could do but leave. As I turned to go, my eyes fell on a well-dressed man with a child in his arms standing outside on the footpath buying a tangelo from a fruit-seller on the street. I stepped out just as he turned toward the store. "You! Ghulam Ali!"

"Sa'adat!" he shouted and hugged me, the child at his chest sandwiched between us. The child didn't like it and started to cry. Ghulam Ali called the man who had attended me, handed the child over to him and said, "Go! Take him home!" Then he said to me, "It's been years, hasn't it?"

I probed his face. The swagger, the ever-so-slight trace of rakishness that had been such a prominent feature of his appearance had entirely disappeared. It was a common family man who stood before me, not the fiery young *khadi*-clad speech-maker. I remembered his last speech, when he had energized the otherwise bleak atmosphere of Jallianwala Bagh with his sizzling hot words, "Nigar! Can you bear to bring a slave child into this world?" Instantly I thought of the child Ghulam Ali was holding in his arms until a few moments ago. I asked him, "Whose child was that?"

“Mine, of course,” he answered, without the least hesitation. “I have an older one, too. And you, how many do you have?”

For a second I felt it was somebody else talking. Hundreds of questions rattled in my mind: Had Ghulam Ali completely forgotten his vow? Had he disassociated himself entirely from his political life? The ardor, the passion to win freedom for India, where had they gone? Whatever happened to that naked challenge? Where was Nigar? Had she been able to bear giving birth to two slave children after all? Maybe she’d died and Ghulam Ali had remarried.

“What are you thinking?” Ghulam Ali smacked me on the shoulder and said. “Come on, let’s talk. We’ve met after such a long time.”

I started, let out an elongated “Yes-s-s,” and fumbled for words. But Ghulam Ali didn’t give me a chance and started to speak himself instead: “This is my shop. I’ve been living in Bombay for two years. Business is good. I can easily save three, even four hundred rupees a month. And what are *you* doing? I hear you’ve become a big short story writer. Remember the time we ran off to Bombay together? But, *yar*, that was a different Bombay. It was small. This one is huge. Or it seems huge to me, anyway.”

Meanwhile a customer walked in, looking for tennis shoes. Ghulam Ali told him, “No rubber stuff here. Please go to the shop next door.”

“Why not?” I asked Ghulam Ali as soon as the customer left. “I was looking for a pair of shoes with rubber soles myself.”

I’d asked the question only casually, but his face fell. “I just don’t like them,” he said, softly.

“What do you mean, ‘them’?”

“Rubber—I mean things made of rubber.” He tried to smile, but couldn’t. He let out a laugh instead, loud and dry. “O.K., I’ll tell you. It’s just a silly thing, but somehow it’s had a significant impact on my life.”

Traces of deep reflection appeared on his face; his eyes, playful as ever, dimmed for a second and then lit up again. “That life—it was absolutely phony! To tell you the truth, Sa’adat, I’ve completely forgotten the days when this thing about being a leader had gotten into my head. But the past four, five years have been pure bliss. I can never thank God enough for all He’s given me. I have a wife, children ...”

“Thanking God enough” got him started about his business venture: the initial investment, the profit he’d made in a year’s time, the money he had in the bank now. I interrupted him, “But what’s this ‘silly thing’ that had a profound impact on your life?”

The glow once again disappeared from his face. “Ye-e-e-s,” he said.

“It *had* a profound impact. Thank God it no longer does. I guess I’ll have to tell you the whole thing.”

Meanwhile the attendant returned. Ghulam Ali turned the store over to him and ushered me into his room in the rear. Here, leisurely, he told me why he had developed such an abhorrence for rubber goods.

“How I got started on my political career you know well enough. And you also know what kind of character I had. We were pretty much alike. I mean, let’s be honest, our parents couldn’t brag about us being without blemish. I don’t know why I’m telling you this. Maybe you get my drift. I wasn’t endowed with a strong character. But I had this desire to do something. That’s what drove me to politics. But I swear to God that I was not a fake. I could have laid down my life for the country. I still could. All the same I feel—in fact, it’s a conclusion I’ve come to after much serious thought—that India’s politics and her leaders are all pretty green, as green as I used to be. A tidal wave rises, but I think it doesn’t rise on its own, it’s deliberately created... Perhaps I haven’t been able to lay it all out for you clearly.”

His thoughts were terribly muddled. I gave him a cigarette. He lit it, took a few long drags and continued, “What do you think, doesn’t every effort India has made to free herself look unnatural? Perhaps not the effort, maybe I should say the outcome of the effort. Why have we failed to achieve freedom? Are we a bunch of sissies? Of course we aren’t. We’re men. But the environment is such that our energies fall short of what’s needed to reach our goal.”

“You mean like there is a barrier between us and freedom?” I asked.

His eyes gleamed. “Absolutely. But not like a solid wall or an impenetrable rock. It’s like a membrane at the most, a cobweb, created by the way we conduct our politics, and live our sham lives. Lives in which we deceive others, and ourselves even more.”

His thoughts were still in a jumble. He seemed to be trying to make an accounting of all his past experiences on the spot. He stubbed out the cigarette, looked at me and said, “A person should stay the way God made him. He does not need to shave his head, wear red ochre clothes, or cover his body with ash to do good works, does he? You might say a person does all those things out of his own will. That’s just it. This novelty, ‘out of his own will,’ is precisely what leads people astray, at least that’s what I think. Their lofty position makes them indifferent to natural human weaknesses. But they completely forget that it is not their character, thinking or beliefs that will endure in the minds of simple people—as a matter of fact, these disappear into thin air in no time at all. What does

endure, rather, is the image of their shaven heads, red ochre garb, and ash-smearred bodies.” Ghulam Ali grew terribly excited. “The world has seen a whole host of reformers. Nobody remembers their teachings. But crosses, sacred threads, beards, bracelets and underarm hair survive. We are more experienced than our ancestors a thousand years ago. I can’t understand why none of these contemporary reformers can see that he is disfiguring humans beyond all hope of recognition. There are times when I feel like screaming: ‘For God’s sake, haven’t you deformed him enough already? At least take pity on him now and let him be! You want to make him into God, while the poor thing, he’s having a hard time just holding on to his humanity.’

“Sa’adat, I swear to God this is how I feel. If it is wrong and false, then I don’t know what is right and true. For two full years I’ve wrestled with my mind. I’ve argued with my heart, with my conscience, in fact with every pore of my body. In the end, I feel humans must remain humans. If a couple wants to curb their carnal passion, let them. But the entire human race? For God’s sake! What good will all that ‘curbing’ accomplish?”

He stopped briefly to light another cigarette, letting the entire matchstick burn itself out, shook his head ever so slightly, and continued: “No, Sa’adat, you cannot know the incredible misery I’ve been through, in my body and in my soul. But it couldn’t be otherwise. Whoever attempts to go against nature is bound to come to grief. The day I made that vow in the Jallianwala Bagh—you remember, don’t you?—that Nigar and I would not bring any slave children into this world, I felt an electrifying surge of happiness. I felt that with that declaration my head had started to rise up until it touched the sky. However, when I got out of jail the painful realization slowly hit me that I had curbed a vital part of my body and soul, that I had crushed the prettiest flower in my garden between my palms. At first, the thought brought an exhilarating sense of pride: I had done what others could not. Slowly, when my reasoning became clear, the bitter truth began to sink in. I went to see Nigar. She had given up her job at the hospital and joined Baba-ji’s *ashram*. Her faded color, her altered mental and physical condition—I thought I was mistaken, that my eyes weren’t seeing right. Spending a year with her convinced me that her torment was the same as mine, although neither wanted to mention it to the other, feeling the noose of our vow tight around us.

“All that political excitement simmered down within a year. *Khadi* clothes and the tri-colored flag no longer seemed so attractive. And even if the cry of ‘Long Live Revolution’ did go up now and then, it had lost its

previous resonance. Not a single tent could be seen anywhere in the entire Jallianwala Bagh, except for a few pegs left in the ground here and there as reminders of a time gone by. The political fervor had pretty much run out of steam.

“I spent most of my time at home, near my wife ...” he stopped, the same wounded smile playing on his lips once again. I kept quiet, so as not to interrupt his train of thought.

After a while he wiped the perspiration off his forehead, put out his cigarette and said, “We were both struck by a strange curse. You know how much I love Nigar. I’d think: ‘What kind of love is this? When I touch her, why don’t I allow the sensation to peak? Why do I feel so guilty? Like I’m committing a sin?’ I love Nigar’s eyes so much. One day when I was feeling normal... I mean just how one should feel, I kissed them. She was in my arms—or rather I should say, I had the sensation of holding a tremor in my arms. I was about to let myself go, but managed to regain control in time. For a long while afterwards, several days, I tried to believe that my restraint had given my soul a pleasure few had experienced. The truth was, I’d failed. The failure, which I wanted to believe was a great success, instead made me the most miserable man on earth. But as you know, people eventually find ways to get around things. Let’s just say I found a way around it. We were both drying up. Somewhere deep inside a crust had started to form on our pleasures. ‘We are fast turning into strangers,’ I thought. After much thinking we felt that we could, without compromising our vow, I mean that Nigar wouldn’t give birth to a slave child...” The wounded smile appeared a third time, dissolved immediately into a loud laugh, with a distinct trace of pain in it, then he continued in an extremely serious tone of voice: “Thus started this strange phase of our married life. It was like a blind man suddenly having sight restored in one eye. I was seeing again. But soon the vision blurred. At first we thought ...” He seemed to be fishing for the right word. “At first we felt satisfied. I mean we hadn’t the foggiest idea that we’d start feeling terribly dissatisfied before long. As though having one eye wasn’t enough. Early on we felt we were recovering, our health was improving. A glow had appeared on Nigar’s face, and a shine in her eyes. For my part, my nerves no longer felt so hellishly strung out all the time. Slowly, however, we turned into rubber dummies. I felt this more than she did. You wouldn’t believe it, but by God every time I pinched the flesh in my arms, it had the feel of rubber to it. Absolutely. As though I didn’t have any blood vessels. Nigar’s condition, I believe, was different. Her perspective was different too. She wanted to become a mother. Every

time a woman in our lane had a baby, Nigar would sigh quietly. I didn't much care about having children. So what if we didn't have any? Countless people in the world don't either. At least I had remained steadfast in my vow. And that was no mean achievement. Well, this line of thinking did comfort me quite a bit, but as the thin rubbery web began to close around my mind, I became more and more anxious. I grew overly pensive, the feel of rubber clung to my mind. At meals the bread felt chewy and spongy under my teeth." A shudder went through his body as he said this. "It was disgusting! All the time it felt as though soap lather had stuck to my fingers and wouldn't go away. I started to hate myself. I felt all the sap had drained out of me and something like the thinnest of skins had remained behind—a used sheath." He started to laugh. "Thank God, I'm rid of the abomination now, but after what torment, Sa'adat. My life had turned into a dried and shriveled piece of sinew skin, all my desires smothered. But, oddly, my sense of touch had become unusually keen, almost unnaturally keen. Maybe not keen, but focused, in one direction only. No matter what I touched, wood, glass, metal, paper, or stone, it felt like the same clammy tenderness of rubber that made me sick! My torment would grow even worse when I thought about the object itself. All I needed to do was to grab my affliction in two fingers and toss it away, but I lacked the courage. I longed for something to latch on to for support, for the merest straw in this ocean of torment, so that I might reach the shore. I kept looking for it desperately. One day as I sat on the roof top in the sun reading, rather browsing, a religious book, my eyes caught a *hadis* of the Prophet Muhammad and I jumped for joy. The "support" was glaring in my eyes. I read the lines over and over again. I felt as if water had gushed through the desiccated arid landscape of my life. It was written: 'It is incumbent on man and wife to procreate after they are married. Contraception is permissible only in the event of danger to the lives of parents.' Then and there I peeled off my affliction and threw it aside."

He chuckled like a child. I did too, because he had picked up the cigarette with his two fingers and tossed it aside like some infinitely revolting object.

All of a sudden he became serious. "I know what you'll do, Sa'adat," he said. "You will turn all I've told you into a story. But, please, don't make fun of me in it. I swear to God, I've told you only what I've felt. I won't get into a debate over this with you. But the substance of what I've learnt is this: it's no bravery to fight nature; no achievement to die or live starving, or dig a pit and bury yourself in it for days on end, or sleep for

months on a bed of sharp nails, or hold one arm up for years until it atrophies and turns into a piece of wood. This is show business. You can't find God or win freedom with show business. I even think the reason India hasn't gained freedom is precisely because she has more showmen than true leaders. And the few leaders she does have are going against the laws of nature. They have invented a politics that stops faith and candidness from being born. It is this politics which has blocked the womb of freedom."

Ghulam Ali wanted to say more when the attendant walked in. He had a child, perhaps Ghulam Ali's second boy, in his arms. The boy was holding a colorful balloon. Ghulam Ali pounced on it like a madman. It burst with a loud boom. A piece of rubber dangling from a little bit of string remained in the boy's hand. Ghulam Ali snatched it with his two fingers and threw it away like some infinitely revolting object. □

—*Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon*