

Night City

THE two Kathiawari brokers chatted about the wholesale cotton trade late into the night. Then who knows what came over them, but suddenly the topic of the Municipal Corporation that ran the city came up, and by the time they were finished they were heaping abuses on the Department of Meteorology; finally they got up and left. After they were gone I heaved a sigh of relief, and stretching my legs out, I sat down on the empty bench.

It was a November night and there was a chill in the dew-laden air; a light fog hovered over everything. The traffic noise on the road had died down, and even the number of pedestrians had dwindled to just one or two. People slept curled up here and there on the tiny traffic island. All around human bodies could be seen lying on cement benches, on the cold ground, and under the trees, like so many corpses.

I was just going to lie down on a bench myself when another man appeared from out of the blue. He rudely shoved my legs to one side and plunked himself down. It's no surprise that his behavior made me angry! As usual I had no place to stay that night—that's why I had begun to hang around as soon as the market had emptied out. I finally got a bench after a long wait, and then this character came sweeping down like the angel of death incarnate! Outraged, I glared at him. From the way he looked he seemed to be a dangerous hoodlum type, so I realized it would be in my best interest to tuck my head between my drawn up knees and try to sleep .

The silence of the night deepened, and the moist breeze became chillier. Every once in a while a car would whiz past on the empty streets. The sound of talking voices at the rickshaw stand rose and fell. Occasionally an itinerant masseur would arrive at the traffic circle, toot his horn, and then go off again humming a song from some current film. I closed my eyes and listened silently to every sound and every voice. Even the dan-

gerous hoodlum sitting next to me was keeping quiet. Perhaps he was dozing or had actually fallen asleep; or perhaps, just like me, he was waiting for the bench to empty.

After something like half an hour I suddenly heard him ask, “Well, sir, what time do you think it is?” I don’t know how he figured out that I was still awake.

I raised my head up from my knees and replied irritably, “I don’t have a watch.”

“It must be around nine-thirty.” He said this as if he were talking to himself. Then he took a half-smoked cigarette from behind his ear and, after lighting it up, he started to take drags on it. But he didn’t stay quiet for long. He began, “So, my friend—it’s really cold today. Winter has arrived, don’t you think?”

“Yes,” I answered curtly.

He said, “Then why don’t you go to sleep now?”

I snapped, “I can’t sleep all crouched up.”

The fellow was quick on the uptake and he got the message right away. “Oh, so that’s it! Why didn’t you say so right off? Look, pal, I’ll be on my way—I don’t want to make you angry.” Saying this, he stood up again.

As soon as he took off I stretched my legs out over the entire bench without wasting a minute. Resting my head on my arm, I shut my eyes. But a short time later he reappeared and said in a very familiar way, “Hey, why have you gone to sleep?”

I was cozy the way I was and lay there without answering him.

“Hey man, what’s the point of faking? Move your legs over a bit,” he demanded.

The way he acted made me laugh. I had no choice but to sit up. “Look, just relax and sit down.” What else could I say? If I had just lain there he would have grabbed my legs and shoved them to one side himself. And then what could I have done?

Now all of a sudden he tried to get chummy with me. He laughed, “Look, friend, why get angry? It’s very late at night and you should just go to sleep.”

I didn’t answer. But he continued talking anyway. “Want some tea?”

I let him know that I didn’t.

“Come on, that’s no way to act. This is the best time of day to drink tea!” Then he blurted out an obscenity. Startled, I looked at him, but he was feeling around in the waistband of his *shalvar*. As I watched he pulled out a bent iron rod and threw it down in front of me. Rubbing his side he

declared, "The damn thing gave me a bruise!"

I picked up the iron rod in amazement. Looking at him I asked, "What's this?"

He said, "It's how I make a living." And still sitting there completely at ease, he stroked his side.

Amazed even more, I exclaimed, "Now tell me the truth! What kind of ploy is this?"

He burst out laughing and said warmly, "My dear friend, you've really brightened my day. You seem to be quite a character." After a moment's pause, he continued, "So, let's go have some tea and snacks. Or else how will you ever remember that you once met a fellow by the name of Saonle Khan?"

I didn't feel like going with him so I said, "No, my friend. Why don't you just let me go to sleep?"

But he wouldn't take no for an answer. Pulling me up by the arm he said, "What's the big deal? Why don't you just come along with me?"

Against my will, I had to go with him. For a while the two of us walked along the empty street. Then without warning he stopped at the corner of a lane and looked around carefully. All of a sudden he dashed over to the doorway of a shop, inserted the bent iron rod into the lock and said softly, "Open sesame, my darling." And the lock immediately gave way. At that moment footsteps were heard at the other end of the lane. Turning to look at me, he brought his face close to mine and whispered, "Hey pal! Here comes the watchman. But no need to worry. Why don't you zip over there and draw him into a conversation. Just start asking him about any old thing. I'll meet you at the little bridge that goes over the drainage ditch and ... oh yes..."

Without finishing his sentence, he opened one panel of the shop door and went inside. I was so frightened that I felt dizzier and dizzier by the minute! God, what an absolute mess I'd gotten into today! Suddenly I saw a human shadow under a street light. There was no time to think. I set off in that direction.

The watchman caught sight of me and called out while he was still some distance away, "Who goes there?"

I was so nervous that no sound whatsoever came out of my throat. But he didn't come any nearer. Perhaps he was frightened as well. He struck the ground sharply with his staff and called out again in a somewhat louder voice, "Who goes there in the lane?"

By now I was quite close to him so I quickly said, "Why are you making such a racket?" He straightened his shoulders and said, "Why didn't

you say what you were doing over there in the dark? What business have you got here?" This broad, sturdy Pathan from the border regions was persistent.

Hoping to placate him, I said, "*Lala!* I was actually looking for someone's address." This made him even more irritable. "You're looking for an address at two o'clock in the morning?! *Khoche*, what are you talking about?"

At that point I was thinking to myself that that bastard of a petty criminal had really gotten me into something tonight. The belligerent Pathan watchman was not about to be mollified. But the lucky thing was that there were no other watchmen around. Otherwise what would have prevented him from nabbing the two of us and hauling us in? So I made a final attempt to win him over.

"*Lala*, surely you know him. His name is Azimullah. He's an officer in a government department." I took a chance and threw in a few unnecessary English words as well. This proved to be effective. The watchman softened a little. Shaking his head slowly he exclaimed, "Azimullah! Yes, I know him. He's really tall. He gets drunk a lot and fights with his wife. And he puts on airs."

I instantly concurred. "That's exactly right. *Lala*, that's the Azimullah I'm looking for! Now please tell me which flat is his. There's something really important I need to see him about." Having said all this, I started to lose my nerve. However, when he answered, "But he's moved. He's been transferred to Lahore," I felt a wave of relief wash over me.

Expressing needless amazement, I exclaimed, "Khan! That can't be! He must still be here!"

For a moment he stood and thought to himself. Then he said, "I don't exactly know. The high and mighty people who live in these flats hand them over for bribes everyday, so I'm not really sure who you're asking for."

I insisted, "*Lala*, it's about something really important! If you would be so kind as to..."

But he'd had it by now. Turning away, he said, "Listen, I don't know anything. Go on ahead and ask someone else." I thought that by now Saonle Khan must have finished what he was doing so there was no point in continuing to tangle with this burly Pathan and I quietly walked on ahead.

After wandering up and down several lanes I arrived at the little bridge over the ditch and found Saonle Khan waiting there. As soon as he saw me he whistled as a signal. He was standing in the dark by a wall.

“What took you so long, pal?” he asked.

I told him how skillfully I had carried out my part of the job. But he didn't listen to the details. Slapping me on the shoulder with affection, he said, “Hey, the first time you opened your mouth I knew you'd be my kind of guy!”

“O.K. Now let me take off, otherwise someone else will come along and take over the bench.”

He laughed and said, “Forget the damn bench, pal. What a hassle! Now we can just relax and have a good time. This job was done perfectly.”

I tried to extricate myself again. “No, no, my friend, I mean it! I'm really tired.” But he wasn't the kind of person who gave up easily. “Boss! Don't break my heart! We both get a share here. I never cheat my partners—I always split the takings.” He thumped my back good-naturedly. “Come on, don't be so stubborn. Come along with me.” Then he uttered a forceful obscenity.

He walked in front and I followed behind quietly. Instead of going on a main street, the two of us made our way through dark, narrow alleys and lanes. It was so dark that I couldn't see properly. However, I had the distinct impression that Saonle Khan was carrying a box under his arm. When I saw it I became even more unnerved, thinking that if we ran into a policeman along the way we'd both get caught red-handed with the stolen goods. With something like that in mind, I said to him, “Brother, you really must let me go now.”

My voice was trembling with fear. Seeing me so flustered and distraught, he resorted to poking fun at me. With a laugh, he said, “Hey, what are you so afraid of? The worst that can happen is that we'll have to spend the night in jail. Then we could both stretch out our legs in comfort and sleep until morning.” He softly hummed:

*At least this moment is passing with ease—
What lies ahead, only God knows!*

I decided it would be best to keep quiet. I followed along behind him silently. His voice became louder and louder as he hummed along, but suddenly someone seemed to leap out of nowhere and then quickly disappear again into the darkness. Saonle Khan immediately became silent. The two of us stood still until the man was far away. Then Saonle Khan whispered, “The bastard scared us for no reason at all. He seems to be one of our own tribe.”

Again I didn't answer.

For a while we walked along without making a sound. Finally we stopped at a place where there were a lot of rundown and half-finished houses. It was quiet all around. In the darkness, the area seemed as desolate as a graveyard. Saonle Khan entered a narrow lane. I went along right behind him. The darkness was so dense that Saonle Khan seemed to be no more than a dim shadow.

We proceeded slowly up the alleyway one cautious step at a time. After we went about a hundred steps like this, Saonle Khan stopped by the well of a house and put his hand on my shoulder saying softly, "No need to go any further." For a few moments he just stood there quietly and took things in. When no sounds were heard he went along the wall and disappeared into the darkness.

A little while later there was a soft knock on a doorway. At the same time someone could be heard clearing his throat; then the door opened slowly and the sound of muttered whispering began.

Saonle Khan came over to me and murmured, "Come with me." I went with him and we came to the door of a house. He went inside, and I followed. Someone immediately bolted the door behind us. It was pitch dark inside.

We carefully groped our way toward a room where a candle burned. I saw that besides the two of us there was another person there. He was about middle age, and rather short and chubby. His potbelly protruded quite a ways out in front. The man seemed a little surprised to see me. Saonle smiled and immediately assured him, "*Seth!* This is one of our own guys."

The *seth* bared his dirty teeth and laughed. "Alright, alright. Sit down. But you need to be real careful. Those bastards run around like dogs sniffing at everything." They talked back and forth in the special lingo of their trade. Saonle Khan, who always seemed to joke around whenever there was trouble, teased him,

"*Seth*, there's no need to worry. If we get caught you'll have to do time in jail too. You'll enjoy yourself and that big belly of yours will shrivel to nothing. Won't that be nice?!"

He replied indignantly, "You son of a bitch! You're always saying things to start trouble. I can't stand the way you joke around all the time." He kept muttering under his breath for a long time.

Saonle tried to calm him. "*Seth* my pal, even joking upsets you! O.K., let's get down to business then." This was probably what the *seth* was waiting for and he immediately agreed. Running his hand over the tran-

sistor radio in front of him, he said with a skeptical look on his face, “Saonle, what is this useless thing you’ve gone and swiped? Now you’ve really created a problem.”

Saonle shook his head and said, “Look, boss, I’m only going to say this once. Give me a straight answer. These tactics don’t work on me.”

He said, “Look, my friend, handling devices of this sort is a risky business. Customers are afraid to buy such things.”

This wasn’t Saonle Khan’s first time. He knew all about these tricks of the trade. He said, “Get to the point, my friend. The house of Musa Bhai Ibrahim Ji isn’t far from here. He’ll be happy to do business with me. Just tell me if you’re going to buy it or not?” Then Saonle reached for the radio. The *seth* quickly replied, “Is this any way to speak to me, Saonle Khan? When it’s just a question of what goes on between the two of us you know that I’ll buy this and whatever else you happen to bring.”

“Then tell me what you’re going to give me for it. It’s a valuable item.”

He didn’t answer. He got up and quietly went off into the inner quarters of the house. When he came out again a few minutes later he had a hundred-rupee note in his hand. Saonle wasn’t ready to sell it for that price. The haggling went on for a long time. Finally, the radio was sold for a hundred and twenty-five rupees. And then the sly old fox buttered Saonle up and even reduced that amount by another rupee.

From there we went directly to an Irani’s restaurant. Now Saonle was like a king. He ordered one item after another. We feasted to our hearts’ content and had several rounds of tea.

I was feeling plagued by sleep again so I said, “My friend, now we’ve got to find some place to lie down.”

He said enthusiastically, “Yes sir, not only will there be arrangements for lying down, they’ll be such grand arrangements that they’ll make a real impression on you.”

What does a blind man want but his own two eyes to see with? I thought there couldn’t possibly be a better plan than this so I immediately agreed. Going up to the counter, Saonle paid the bill and we went outside. There was a *pan* shop a little ways away from the restaurant and it was still open at this hour. Saonle Khan went straight there. Letting out a long belch he said to the *panwala* in a lordly manner, “Boss, make us two sweet *pans*, will you? And put some extra betel pieces in one of them.”

The *panwala* set up two *pans* for us and said with a wink, “You’re really riding high today. What’ve you been up to?”

Saonle laughed loudly. “Son, when am I not up to something? Bring two of your cigarettes out from in there. One puff and your sorrows vanish!”

The *pan*-seller said in a confidential tone, “Friend, don’t talk so loudly!” He cast a cautious glance all around and then took two cigarettes out from behind his cabinet and gave them to Saonle.

Saonle brought his head up close to the *panwala* and whispered, “I’ve got the cigarettes, and now we’ll have some action as well.” He winked wickedly and rattled his pocket.

The *pan*-seller said, “I figured that much out already. But you’re too late. It would be quite difficult to get any action at this hour.”

Saonle rebuked him and said, “You bastard! Don’t make such a fuss! Why else are you keeping your shop open so late? Are you just leading people on or what?” He laughed obscenely.

“Saonle Khan my friend, you’re always so persistent. For heaven’s sake, don’t get mad. I’ll have to make some kind of special arrangement for you.”

The *pan*-seller stuck his head out and motioned for one of the rickshaws waiting in front of the restaurant to come over. When the driver pulled up he said to him in a low voice, “These two gentlemen are going to go with you. Say that they’re our own guys—and look, son, don’t argue with them, just take whatever they give you.” As the rickshaw was pulling out, the *pan*-seller said to Saonle, “Give him two rupees.” Saonle took a five-rupee note out of his pocket. Putting it in the *pan*-seller’s hand he said, “Pal, I don’t want this hassle. You take care of all of it!”

The *pan*-seller broke into a smile and said happily, “Don’t you worry. Now go on—why are you wasting your time?” The two of us got into the rickshaw and it started off. Saonle took the two cigarettes out of his pocket and lighting one for himself, stuck the other one into my lips. “Don’t take long drags.” As soon as I lit my cigarette and took the first puff I began to choke. The smoke had a strange odor. The smell was stronger than ordinary cigarettes and had some pungency to it as well.

I coughed a couple of times and quickly asked, “Good God, what kind of cigarette is this?”

He replied offhandedly, “Didn’t I warn you right away not to take long drags? They’re a little on the strong side.”

I continued smoking slowly. Suddenly I felt as if my chest was burning and the arteries in my neck were tightening. Black curtains began to flutter in front of my eyes. Anxiously I unbuttoned my *qamis*. Then the black curtains were hit by a gust of wind and flapped even more furiously.

I began to sway along with them as well. Once, I toppled over dizzily onto Saonle.

He burst into loud laughter and said, "You're moving pretty fast, fellow. Looks like you're high already."

I quickly got hold of myself and sat up again. I asked him, "What kind of tobacco is this cigarette made of, my dear Saonle?" To me my own voice sounded as if I were speaking from far away.

"My dear friend, it's called charas. You're enjoying it, aren't you?"

When I heard the name charas I immediately panicked. At the time the rickshaw was passing under an electric pole. In the light I saw that Saonle's eyes had become as red as a wild dove's. He was rocking to and fro and singing in his tuneless voice, "*Take a puff / Lose your sorrows.*" Saonle Khan looked extremely terrifying to me at that moment. God only knew where he was taking me. The coded conversation he'd had with the *pan*-seller, while not a complete mystery to me, was most certainly strange and novel. As I was thinking these things, a spasm tore through my body and went up into my head with such force that I lost my balance and fell forward. My eyes were closed. At this moment I heard Saonle's voice. He was saying, "My, my! You really are Mr. Lightweight, aren't you?"

I quickly opened my eyes to look. We had stopped at a dark street corner. Saonle carefully helped me out of the rickshaw. The rickshaw-wala said, "I'll be right back" and disappeared into the darkness.

The two of us stood silently by the side of the road. The rickshaw-wala came back in a little while and said to Saonle, "Let's go, sir." We set out after him on foot. He stopped at a three-story building and slowly opened the door. Then all three of us climbed up the stairs until we arrived at a flat on the third floor.

In front of us was big room, all lit up. The place was decked out in a fancy way. There were large pictures of half-naked girls on the walls, girls whose shapely calves could be seen from a special angle. Off on one side of the room there was an old sofa on which a heavy-set, middle-aged woman sat. She gave us a piercing once-over and, after gesturing to us to sit down on the sofa, she said, "We don't normally let anyone come inside at this hour. The gate closes at midnight, or twelve-thirty at the latest. You're acquaintances of Sulaiman and that's why we can't refuse. But if you come again, please come at an earlier hour."

This melon-shaped madam gave us a stern lecture. Even Saonle Khan seemed to have lost his edge for the moment. Scratching his head, he said softly, "No, *Baiji*, this won't happen again. This is why..." But he didn't have to make too many excuses. Just then two girls entered the room.

One had a fine, full figure, but the other seemed a bit sickly. Both of them had probably just put on their makeup. Powder was caked on their faces like a layer of white clay. The *kajal* around their eyes had gotten smeared in the rush and lipstick smudges could be seen clearly on the lower parts of their cheeks.

I looked at them out of the corners of my eyes. They both seemed rather worn out and ragged. However, Saonle was staring at them with his red eyes as if they were the advertisement that went with the song “*She’s something to look at, / Look at her again and again.*” But the middle-aged madam didn’t give us very long to look. She asked, “So, what’s your pleasure?”

Placing his hand on my shoulder, Saonle said, “Well, boss—what d’you say?” When he didn’t get an answer, he said very brashly, “My goodness, aren’t you the shy one? These women are getting the better of you—see how they’re looking at us boldly with their eyes wide open. Now come on, pull yourself together.”

I quickly retorted, “Why should I be timid?” and looked up at the two girls. One girl didn’t say anything; but the girl with the plump build flirted coarsely, saying “If you keep staring like that I’ll be struck with the evil eye!” Then she hid her face behind the other one’s shoulder. It was the most bizarre display of tawdriness, but Saonle was completely bowled over by her playfulness. Leaning forward, he said, “*Baiji!* Let’s talk business.”

She said, “Let me show you the place as well, then we’ll talk.” With that she got up and led the two of us out of the room.

There was a small rooftop terrace in front of us. At one end there was a passageway which we passed by and came to a covered pavilion. When the woman pressed a switch and turned on a light, I saw that under the pavilion roof, walls made of wooden boards had been erected in order to create several small cubicles. In each cubicle there was a bed as well as a table and a chair. It was exactly the kind of arrangement you’d find in a cheap hotel.

The woman said, “At such a late hour, this is the only thing available. All the rooms are booked already. But you can have whatever you want brought here, too. If it’s liquor you need, that can be arranged. We’ve only got *harsejna* among country liquors. Other than that, you can also get a meal. But you’ll have to pay for it right when you order.” She paused for a bit and then turned and scrutinized Saonle Khan. “You can spend the night here in peace. There’s no question of any danger. We send our protection money to the police regularly. In any case, the police

captain often comes here to pass his time along with our other clients.”

She gave all the details without pausing for a breath. She was a very skillful businesswoman. Then she took us back to the big reception room. Saonle stared lasciviously at the two girls and asked, “Now tell us the rest.”

“It will be a full one hundred and fifty rupees. Think about it. Think about it seriously.”

Saonle said, “*Baiji*, that’s a lot of money, especially when you consider the fact that the night is practically over.”

She said in the same serious tone, “We don’t bargain around here. There’s only one price: put down your money and take your goods.”

Saonle was unaffected by her tone. He smiled and said, “If you like, I can offer you eighty rupees straight off.” He spoke like someone who’d been around.

The woman didn’t agree, and said, “I already mentioned once that if you want to argue about rates then you should go somewhere else. There are plenty of other establishments in the city.” She was either accustomed to speaking this way all the time or she was speaking this way to us because of our down-and-out appearance. She kept refusing, and every time she turned him down Saonle upped the price five rupees, but the auction finally stopped at a hundred rupees.

In the end, when there was no way a deal could be struck, we got up to leave. Saonle wanted to give the madam ten rupees as a token of his defeat, but she refused to take it. She accompanied us to the door at the bottom of the stairs. She expressed neither annoyance nor contempt.

When we got to the street we saw that the rickshaw-*wala* was still waiting. As soon as he saw us he understood that the mission had not been successful. He came up to us and said, “Listen, I didn’t want to bring you gentlemen here in the first place. Those bitches really think too highly of themselves. On top of that, there’s a shipload of foreign soldiers from somewhere or other that has just docked. That’s why they’re putting on such airs these days. The truth is, that’s who they really make their living off of. These bitches have become complete memsahibs all of a sudden!” He kept blathering all kinds of things in order to dispel Saonle’s depression, thinking that he might be able to easily squeeze some more money out of him. Saonle really did seem disheartened. He interrupted, “To hell with the bitches. Come on, drop us off at Purani Numaish.”

I said, “Saonle, please listen to me—you go and stay there. I just want to flop down somewhere. Why don’t you just give me ten rupees instead?”

But he wasn't ready to do that. He said, "Friend, you're something else—this really is the limit. Why have you taken Saonle Khan for such a low creature? We're the best of pals now, and wherever we go, we'll go together." He jumped into the rickshaw, and grabbing me by the hand he made me sit down next to him. Then he said, "Let's go—let's see about some place to sleep."

The rickshaw began to move, and swaying from one side to the other, Saonle Khan began to sing in his awful voice. He was back in form again.

When we got to Purani Numaish he gave the rickshaw-*wala* a rupee, and then taking me along he went up to a wooden hut and began to call out, "Kallan! Hey, Kallan, are you sleeping in there?"

Someone inside asked, "Who's out there?"

Saonle called out familiarly, "Listen, you punk son of a slut! It's me, Saonle."

Coughing, Kallan got up and opened the door. He said, "Where're you coming from at this hour of the night?"

Saonle said, "Right now, I'd like to sleep inside your hut. I'm awfully tired." Kallan didn't answer for a while however, he was looking down.

Saonle barked, "What's there to think about, punk? Step away from the door—I'm coming inside."

Kallan spoke up quickly, "Wait a minute, pal. Your sister-in-law is sleeping inside."

Saonle asked in amazement, "Hey, you punk, don't tell me your wife has come back? Aren't the two of you a shameless pair! Just yesterday there was still constant talk of divorce, and now suddenly today the house is occupied."

Kallan said, "What can I say? All the relatives got together and...!"

Now a woman's voice was heard from inside, "Brother Saonle! Just listen to him! He's started saying the same thing all over again. It was he who coaxed and cajoled me in a thousand different ways to come back. I never begged anyone to do anything."

Kallan quickly came up with an excuse. "Now, now, dearest, if you'd only listened to everything I said."

But she was a clever woman. She didn't heed Kallan for a moment and kept asserting her own point of view. Saonle scolded them both, and handing Kallan a ten-rupee note he said, "Please give this to the children for me."

Kallan kept talking, "Listen, at least have some *pan*." But Saonle didn't stay.

Once more we were confronted with the same problem, where to

spend the night. I was homeless to start with, but Saonle too had no place of his own either.

We walked on but didn't go very far. There was a rickshaw stand by the side of the road and the drivers there were sitting around a small open fire. A tea-seller had set up his samovar nearby. Each of us bought a cup and sat down right there by the fire to drink it. At that moment the tea tasted truly wonderful.

Saonle sat there for a while. Then suddenly something occurred to him and he said, "Come on, pal, we'll try one more place. Sitting here in this damp air will be the death of both of us." As usual, he didn't tell me everything. We hired a rickshaw and started off.

He had the rickshaw stop in front of the entrance to a deserted alley in Patel Para and, after paying the fare, we turned into it. We had gone just a few steps when the beam of a flashlight waved across our faces and someone asked in a low voice, "Who is it?"

Saonle replied gleefully, "The beloved sweetheart."

This time the man said in a more forceful tone, "Tell me the truth. Who are you looking for?"

His challenge had no effect on Saonle; he kept going and when he got close he said, "Punk, you're on the job today! Bastard! Don't even recognize your own uncle!" Then the fellow immediately realized who Saonle was.

"My God! It's you, Khan Sahab! Look, I was just saying to myself, who's this showing up out of the blue at this hour of the night!"

Saonle asked, "So, is anything going on?"

He replied, "Oh yes, there's a big prizefight on today."

He made us wait there and went off into the neighboring house. When he came back we went inside with him. The room was long, and glowing lamps sat on shelves along both walls directly in front of us. Yet the light seemed a bit dim and hazy, and the air in the room was thick with tobacco smoke. At the far end of the room there were some men sitting on a rug talking like crazy, with no rhyme or reason to their words. Their hair was disheveled and they had expressions of fearful desperation on their faces. In this stifling atmosphere, they dealt out cards and planned their strategies.

Saonle's face brightened as much as mine fell when he saw this gambling den. Taking me along as his companion, he went forward smiling and laughing and joined the cluster of gamblers. He took a ten-rupee note out of his pocket and shouted, "Ten inside on two rupees!"

A voice next to him said, "I lay a card down and say a ten outside on

two rupees.”

Saonle said, “Raise it. Make it a whole five.”

The voice answered, “No, leave it alone,” and then said to the dealer, “Come on, out with a ten.”

The cards continued to be dealt out, and Saonle laid down bets with another gambler as well. He was now singing out with great zeal, “A suite inside! A five outside!” Meanwhile, a five of diamonds came out of the dealer’s hands and landed in front of us. Saonle picked up the card and kissed it ecstatically. “Long live my dear King!” A little later he pocketed another bet as well. Before long he had gathered all the money in front of himself. A voice came from one side, “Take it easy, boy. The first winnings will beggar you.”

Saonle stared in the direction of the voice. “Look, bastard—comment on my hand again and I’ll slap your face so hard all thirty-two teeth will fly out.”

All of this was both interesting and astonishing to me. The gamblers lost and won, won and lost. They took deep drags on cigarettes and *biris* which clouded the air in the room with smoke. For a while Saonle kept talking to me about this and that. Then he became so absorbed in the game that he lost all awareness of himself. For a while I enjoyed the excitement of the gambling; but gradually my interest waned and I became more and more sleepy. I don’t know when I actually fell asleep, but when my eyes opened I saw that Saonle was shaking me by the shoulder to wake me.

“Pal, you sleep like a log.”

I had been in deep sleep. Being woken up like this was quite annoying. Against my will, I had to get up.

The sound of peoples’ voices talking could still be heard in the room. Cards were being dealt and rupees were clinking. But Saonle didn’t even glance to the right or to the left. He made me go outside with him. As we walked down the dark lane and came out onto the road, the blackness of the night still lay all around us. The breezes coming off the Arabian Sea felt even colder. Saonle was absolutely silent now. His face seemed as rigid as the face on a stone statue. There was neither sorrow nor joy on it, although his eyes were even redder than before. As we went along I grew tired of the silence and asked, “I fell asleep. How did the rest of the gaming go?”

He said, “If you’ve got anything on you, why don’t we go somewhere so you can treat me to a cup of tea?”

I said in amazement, “What, you went and lost everything? Now

you've really done it."

"Leave me alone, pal. That's how gambling is, you either win or you lose. Come on—buy me a cup of tea. My damn head hurts."

I felt really peeved. I thought to myself, when I was asking him for ten rupees the bastard brushed me off every time. Now there are just a few annas left in my pocket, and not only is he fighting for a share of that, he's kept me up all night to boot! I got angrier every time I thought about it. The two of us had gone past Khoja Jama'at Khana and were walking along the road leading to Soldier Bazaar. Silence and dim patches of fog surrounded us. The beautiful buildings on both sides of the street seemed to be dozing in the charcoal-colored haze. Everything in creation was asleep—only the two of us, who had no home to lay our heads down in and no place to go, were awake. The night was passing so slowly that it seemed as if it would never end.

While I was thinking randomly like this, I glanced over at Saonle. He was still as quiet as a carved figurine. Right then he looked really filthy and disgusting to me. I knew that if I kept going along with him this way, that disgust would just keep getting worse. So I said, "Look, Saonle my friend. I'm going to go off somewhere else now."

When I started to turn at a corner Saonle said with a start, "Don't say such a thing, pal! If you abandon me at a difficult moment like this—no, it just can't be, it can't be!"

I noticed that my words had made him quite sad and dejected. But I didn't want to stay there with him much longer. Finally, when I was about to turn off in a different direction after going a little further with him, he grabbed my hand.

When I angrily shook my hand free and refused to go any further with him, he suddenly stared at me with a murderous rage in his eyes and grabbed my neck as if he was about to perform a sacrificial slaughter. To get free of him I clutched his long hair in both of my hands and we ended up locked in combat.

The street was completely deserted. Tall buildings stood dreamily all around. The night was creeping by like a serpent and there the two of us were, savagely beating and scratching and clawing each other. At one point I managed to knock Saonle down and, sitting on top of his chest, I pummeled him with blows nonstop. Incensed, he let loose a string of curses at me, and somehow he was able to take the iron rod that he had called his "means of livelihood" out from under the waistband of his *shalvar*. He wanted to strike the rod against my side and gouge my flesh, but I quickly grabbed onto it and threw it to one side. I began to pound

on him again. I kept beating him until I was panting myself. Finally he pushed from underneath and toppled me. I sprang forward to pick up the iron rod but staggered and fell down. Saonle couldn't get up to go towards it either.

The two of us were panting like buffaloes; our mouths hung open and our breathing sounded like a blacksmith's bellows. Our clothes were torn in places and our faces were smeared with dirt and grime. We looked like ghosts roaming about in the wee hours of the morning on the deserted streets. Still panting, I lay down right there and shut my eyes in exhaustion.

After a while I realized that Saonle was sitting next to me stroking my back. He said gently, "Breath through your nose, your nose." There was concern in his voice. I felt a little better now. I couldn't say a single word but I sat up. Seeing me sitting there silently with my head bent low, he said, "Get up, pal. How long are you going to sit there like a sulking woman?" He grabbed my arm and pulled me up to a standing position. Patting me on the back he said, "You're quite a strong guy yourself—what a good time I had with you! But look pal—our clothes are torn. That isn't a good thing at all."

He made light of my mood this way so that even then I couldn't bring myself to say anything. But he went on in his familiar way. He held the bent iron rod in his hand. Twirling it in his fingers, he said, "Why are you getting upset, boss? The night isn't over yet. Let's go and try our luck somewhere else. What are you worried about? There's no sorrow to be found when you're around." I didn't have it in me to refuse so I turned to go down a desolate street along with him.

After walking along aimlessly for a while we came to a place where it was pitch dark and desolate. Saonle looked around carefully. Walking here and there, he surveyed the surroundings. Then he leapt like a monkey onto the courtyard wall of a bungalow. He took me by the hand and pulled me up on top of the wall as well. This was an old-fashioned bungalow and it was entirely surrounded by trees; the whole place was eerily silent.

Saonle Khan slid down off the wall and disappeared from view in the blink of an eye. Several minutes passed. The surroundings were blanketed in darkness. Suddenly the barking of a dog rang out in the silence of the night, and along with it came the sounds of Saonle Khan's bloodcurdling shrieks. Without wasting a second I leapt off the top of the wall, hit the street and ran like hell.

I've never seen Saonle Khan again since that day. God knows whether

he's in jail or whether he's still wandering around in the night like a stray dog.□

—*Translated by Sagaree Sengupta*