

ISMAT CHUGHTAI

A Strange Man

ONE

DHARAM DEV!

Which Dharam Dev?

The same Dharam Dev who was once a mystery, whom no one had seen.

A bashful young boy who made one think, “How unfortunate—why is he a boy?” If he had been a girl all the pretty girls on Flaw Line would have been jumping up and down with aggravation; people would have been mad with love for him, and consumed with admiration for his alluring mannerisms, they would have come to his flat and threatened to commit suicide; the young men of the country would be clutching his photograph to their hearts and sighing deeply; politicians would consider having their pictures taken with him an important part of their service to country and nation.

He had eyes that were sweet and innocent, darkened naturally as if they had been circled with kajal, a well-proportioned nose, small delicately chiseled, soft lips, a babyish chin, lissome hands and feet, not muscular like a wrestler’s, but smooth and sleek like Kanhayaji’s. If he didn’t have a fine, close-trimmed mustache he could have passed for an eighteen-year-old Nalni Jewant.

The film *Bali* was such a hit that it took the film world by storm. A slew of films like *Bali* followed, and those productions that were half finished became mutations after they were forced to become copies of *Bali*. Cabaret was not that common in Bombay at the time. By presenting a Western-style dance performed by a beautiful dancer, Dharam Dev was responsible for making the sequence an essential part of every film that followed. There were very few films produced after this that did not contain a sequence in a hotel with dancing in progress, either on a stage or

between the tables. Western-style villains, or scoundrels engaged in smuggling or any other despicable trade, became integral to every film after *Bali*. Suddenly Dharam Dev rose from being a mystery to join the ranks of the best film directors.

When Ashok Kumar and Wacha breathed new life into the Bombay Talkies in 1946, it was as if the days of Himansu Rai had made a comeback. The atmosphere at the film studio resembled that of an academic or cultural institution. Many who were top-notch film stars at that time have now been forgotten, and many of today's renowned and top-notch stars then entered the compound of the Bombay Talkies only with the help of introductions and intercessions. The famous actors whom the public throngs to see today used to wander around in buses and trams in those days. Young hopefuls managed to make their way into the compounds of every large film studio where they waited around on benches all day long. Whenever a famous producer or a famous hero walked past they would immediately jump to attention. Many a young woman, now a celebrated star, would be found sitting patiently on a bench with a grandmother or her father, waiting for a meeting with Ashok Kumar or Wacha. That was the time when films that would cost upward of fifty lakhs to make today, could be completed for two-and-a-half lakhs, newcomers could get into films with relative ease, and producers and directors considered it extremely demeaning to push their sons and daughters into films.

Things moved slowly in those days. Today, someone can become a star after just one film; producers form long queues at the homes of actors even before the film is released and immediately take these stars to the top. Dilip Kumar, Raj Kapoor and Dev Anand, on the other hand, only became famous after working in God knows how many films.

Madras plays a very important role in elevating film stars to bombastic heights and increasing their value to the extent that one sees. Whenever a star appears on the horizon, the Madras film industry instantly hijacks him and, within six months, the film with the new star is ready and is a hit. This star now demands the same rate in Bombay that he received from Madras. There was a time when the Bombay film industry slowly chewed and swallowed the Bengali film industry, but today the Madras film industry has caused Bombay to become bankrupt.

At one time the producers and directors of Bombay exhibited the same pomp and circumstance that one sees among members of the Madras industry. That was when every hero did not own his own company as he does now. These days, either the hero himself is the producer

and makes films with his own profits in mind, or a friend or relative of his helps to make the film a decent production. All other producers are just conscripts and, with the exception of maybe three or four, all depend on the assistance and generosity of the film stars and distributors to make films, and in the process they end up spinning like a top.

Now look at this—we were talking about Dharam Dev, weren't we? There was a time when he used to sit with other young men and women in the Bombay Talkies compound, perhaps lost in weaving the very dreams that later became reality after the release of his film *Bali*. There was an ancient tamarind tree in the Bombay Talkies compound. There were always more crows on it than tamarind pods and at its base there was a large circular platform. On the left was a canteen and separate rooms for the senior staff. But the gathering place for the young aspirants was this platform. Minor character actors, assistants, and people with nothing to do sat around on this platform. Rambunctious chats were commonplace. Geeta Bali was acting in a minor film called *Girls' School* in those days. Indupal was doing a bit role as a vamp in *Ziddi*. Madhubala had been selected for *Mahal*, but she hadn't become important enough to abandon the platform altogether. Lata's voice was going through trials and two songs in Geeta's (Dutt) voice had already been recorded. That was the time when Shamshad Begum, Amir Bai Karnatki and Mrs. Ghosh were extremely popular. Khan Mastana and Durrani were in, while Muhammad Rafi and Mukesh were not well known. Kishore Kumar's voice was being tested for a ghazal in *Ziddi*. Dev Anand was *Ziddi's* hero, but he would sit among his peers. The crows in the tree and these men and women under it all chattered away like wild mynahs. Sitting off to one side, Dharam Dev would quietly smile to himself.

Indupal was very talkative. Kuldip Kaur longed to mingle with the platform-wallahs, but she was forced to think about her career. Still, that didn't keep her from probing Indupal for the latest gossip. And Indu unwittingly divulged secrets.

"Dilip Kumar and Kamini Kaushal's *Shabheed* is in progress."

"Kapla begins showing off the moment he sees Indu."

"Kishore Kumar makes Rooma laugh all the time." Rooma was playing the blind girl in *Mashaal* and she came to the studio whether she was shooting or not. Kishore Kumar always broke out in a sweat when Ashok Kumar happened to come along because he would start scolding him in Bangla.

"Geeta Bali isn't carrying on with anyone. She's a woman of loose morals and she just strings people along."

“Dharam Dev doesn’t talk to anyone except Mangala.”

How many times in one’s life does one fall in love?

And love was the very backbone of the film world. If a person doesn’t know how to love, how can he present a love scene on the screen and if there are no love scenes how can films be successful?

Dharam Dev was an incorrigible lover. As Indu had said, he fell in love with every girl one by one, including Indu herself. But the fever abated as quickly as it rose. Frequently it so happened that he would be consumed by Geeta Bali in the morning and by nightfall, when it was time to leave, his mind would be filled with Madhubala. And when he appeared the next morning the slate would be completely clean; he had run into a Poona acquaintance at the station. But by midday Mangala’s love had taken hold of him again. When Mangala’s brother came to fetch her, Dharam Dev sat alone and soon found himself madly in love with Kamini Kaushal. But for some reason, he always came back to Mangala.

And then for a day and a half it was Mangala and Mangala alone. And perhaps she would have remained the one and only if Suriya hadn’t shown up for a recording of her song. Every day of the recording Dharam Dev ignored his duties and circled the music room. Mangala made a show of her anger again and again, but the great lover did not budge. That day Mangala couldn’t rehearse and finally her song was given to Lata.

When Suriya finished her recording and left, he returned to the platform where he sat forlornly, looking like an orphan. Perhaps he would have sat there like that forever if Mangala’s eyelash hadn’t slipped into her eye. If that eyelash hadn’t gotten into her eye how would Dharam Dev have wiped her kajal-tinted tears with his pure white kurta front?

The song that Mangala recorded that day is a hit even now.

She had entered the industry as a singer, but her attractive dark Bengali looks, her long, curly tresses and heavy-lidded eyes became a nuisance for her. She hated acting. And Dharam Dev had not wavered in a long time. Madhubala was performing ravishing scenes, everyone was in love with her, but, steadfast like a rock, Dharam Dev was plunged only in thoughts of Mangala.

However, there was a sadness that enveloped Dharam Dev and which even Mangala’s promises and vows couldn’t remove. A sixth or seventh assistant director has no status or permanent responsibility; he’s embedded in one place like a rock. Presence and absence, both are the same. The director is making a mistake on the set, but any kind of suggestion will result in instant dismissal. The hero is stiff, the heroine is giving everyone the run around, there’s no recourse in sight and the frustration

and anger of all this is vented on the assistant. All budding young talents are being suppressed, intelligence is being trampled underfoot, common sense and everything else are suffering the pain of hell in the hands of these asses.

But the eyes dark without the aid of kajal, fragrant and dreamy, say, *Keep going. The uncut diamond's fate will know awakening. The undiscovered piece of stone will be cut and blind the eyes of all.* A quiet, silly girl who can't even wrap her sari properly, who demurs like a shrinking lily when she's talking—so what if there's honey in her throat?

But there's nothing that can be done. All the others know how to flirt, the flame of their love knows how to leap but it can also burn. There are arrows darting from all directions.

The best course of action would be to hold the hand of some serene, sweet companion so that the heartbeats can remain under control. Her *anchal* will provide a refuge when a hostile wind blows and then, once the heart is stabilized, go out to take on the world.

And so Dharam Dev entrusted his heart to Mangala and promised a wedding and honeymoon after the release of *Bali*.

And for months after the release of *Bali* he didn't have time to come down to earth. Dinners, parties, and one offer after another. The same person who until yesterday had only been on the fringes of good sense was now viewed as the embodiment of wisdom.

"Make your own film Dharamji, why fill the coffers of others?"

In those days independent producers were being harvested with great speed. In the past it was the film companies that made the films, each boasting its own studio, its own permanent staff, its own laboratories, its own musicians. You finished shooting at night, rush prints were ready the next morning and you took a look at those before you started work that day. A company produced about five or six films a year, and a film was sold without even one frame being screened. Designated distributors arrived, picked up the sealed cans and proceeded to make millions.

Suddenly, after the war, new cinema halls were built. The demand for films increased. New distributors jumped into the arena. And since the original distributors were already linked up with the film companies, there was no choice but to make more films. It would have been better if the number of films had been increased by creating more film companies, studios and stars. But because distributors didn't wish to make huge investments, preferring to start off with only ten or fifteen thousand at the most, and didn't want to tie up their money in a film company, a new process was born. The distributors came to the conclusion that the people

really responsible for making a film were not the owners of the film companies, but the directors and film stars, because it was their names which determined the success of a film. Subsequently they advised the directors to give up their loyalty to their masters. Sell the rights for each film separately in each region, they said, we'll pay you in installments and you can make films in installments.

What was so difficult about that? Films began to be produced in installments. And, filled with the idea that it was easy to become a distributor, everyone followed suit. Raise ten or fifteen thousand from here and there and anyone can do it. The staffs from various companies decided to become distributors and, in the end, many of the film companies were forced to shut down, some renting out their studios to producers on installments. Soon there were more producers than there were studios. This shortage of studios was compensated for by shooting outdoors. A shortage of film stars followed. In the process, those who were making films on installments went bankrupt. After this, producers who were able to snag a big film star began making films on installments again, while the others spent nearly all their time trying to secure installments rather than making films.

It wasn't necessary to have a famous and successful director to make a film. Some of the film directors, who had once worked for companies and had now been recruited to work independently, lost their touch. What luxury they had had when they were making films in a studio, where every conceivable convenience was available. There was no struggle to get a date from the film star, no need to book a studio, no running around for empty film, no traveling all over the place with bag and baggage in order to shoot. Some of them became incapacitated, and that was when young directors came forward as rivals, effortlessly shooting films that became instant hits.

Like Dharam Dev!

Now the distributor was sure that if you had a big star and good music the exhibitor would take the film and, participating in the installments, would share the burden. We don't need anything else, he figured, just a star and music. And once the stars and musicians became popular, they increased their rates. The money comes from the public's pockets after all, so why not fulfill their demands? Each star was busy shooting twenty films at a time. The twenty producers for these films took whatever their share was, while others who were still waiting for their installments were left with nothing.

At this point the star had to suffer another misfortune. So much money started coming in that if everything was declared nothing would remain after paying the tax. And so, the fashion of black money, that is, money obtained without receipts, originated. Now the independent producers and directors were forced to take on the task of cooking up false receipts along with all the other headaches they had to endure.

There was no time to carry out the promises and vows made under the tamarind tree and meant to be fulfilled after the completion of *Bali*.

Mangala had a role in the success of *Bali*. She had sung all the songs, the songs that constituted the film's essence and which Mangala had imbued with every ounce of her being.

Dharam Dev was a relatively unknown assistant when he was making *Bali*, not the year's most famous director. Now, in every part of the country, his name was plastered on all of the posters. His name echoed all over the world of film. Some people were burning with envy, the distributors were worshipping his name, and Mangala?

Mangala hadn't eaten for two days. She was tired of calling him on the phone. There was no sign of Dharamji. He's at the story session.

"To hell with the story! Go sit with the story or on my grave!" And when Dharamji heard this he came running, barefoot, to her.

"Mangli—my beloved—my soul—I have a splitting headache." He came and placed his head in Mangala's lap. Forgetting her fast she immediately began massaging his temples with balm.

"Oh, these people will drive me crazy."

"You're already crazy."

"Rita says the story should be about the girl."

"So what's the problem?"

"Prakash says, forget Rita, get someone else, make money with sex appeal."

"Oh! And don't just get rid of her clothes, skin the poor girl too; she won't make a sound, she'll be grateful." Mangala used an arrow from her quiver. "Less clothing and more heroine, profit and more profit!"

"And you'll talk to the censors?"

"I've spent all this time talking to you, now what's left to say to the censors."

"Mangli, are you angry with me?"

"What if I say yes?"

"Mangli—there are sixty acres of Pitaji's land near Nagpur, let's go there, there are a lot of tamarind trees there—we'll stretch out under the shade of the trees and ..." Dharam sat up as if he was about to leave.

“And do exercises on the tamarind leaves,” Mangala completed his sentence.

“Oh!” Mangala’s aunt stood in the doorway.

“Namaskar Mausi.” Dharam tried to touch her feet.

“Look, I don’t like all this empty talk. The poor girl hasn’t even put a grain of rice in her mouth, and now you come, after all this time.”

“Mausi was I working or sitting in the studio doing nothing?” He was moved by Mausi’s gentle scolding. He thought, there was someone who thought lovingly of him, rubbed balm on his forehead, who disregarded all her Mausi’s complaints and reprimands, even if her Mausi scolded her.

How loving Mausi’s reproach was.

And even before he had been given the opportunity to direct *Bali*, Mausi talked with him so sweetly—sweet candy on the outside, quinine within! Mangala would be severely reprimanded for meeting him, her brothers were after his blood, her father was threatening to kill himself.

Today he was being rebuked as if he was one of their own. The person who had been cursed and ordered to stay away was now being scolded for not showing up. Because now he wasn’t a dubious egg, he was an alert, active chick. He was being courted for marriage. Mangala’s brother is now thinking of becoming a producer; he has said repeatedly that the minute Dharam okays the story he’ll assign the stars.

Now when he’s late, Mangala’s family waits more impatiently for him than for her. There was a time when she was threatened with violence whenever she met him, now she was scolded four times over because she hadn’t yet trapped him. Dharam Dev might slip from her hands. A poor, innocent girl was being made to behave like a prostitute, as if this wasn’t so much a matter of love and friendship, but a case of snagging a pigeon.

Because of all this talk, Mangala too was beginning to feel a little insecure. He was fickle by temperament. If there was anyone his heart had held longer than her, it was Rita. Actually, of all the people who sat under the tamarind tree, the person most friendly with Mangala was Rita.

But this is the film business. No one is your friend. Your best friend is opportunity. Dharam Dev’s position had now changed. He was the rising sun. And Varmaji was setting. When Rita arrived in Bombay no one paid the slightest attention to her. She was young, but she wasn’t beautiful.

“Her nose is like a parrot’s,” someone would say.

“What a flat chin!”

But she was an excellent actress. What does a heroine need acting for? She should have good looks and a curvaceous body that you can twist around to mold into a film. And that's all it takes to warm the public's heart!

Rita had run off with some silly boy because of her interest in films. He couldn't surmount the hurdles and went back. The path in the film business only goes one way; there's no room for turning around. When she lost hope on all sides she finally placed her head in the lion's jaw.

"He's a wretch, he'll keep you as a mistress," everyone told Rita, but what other route was open to her? By chance Varmaji had no one just then. The actress he had molded became a hit and, with her foot resting on his shoulder, she became a star on the horizon. His wounds were still raw and very much in need of balm. He gathered together the shattered Rita with both hands. It seemed as if he had developed a fondness for being bruised constantly. To hell with the future; to prove that Rita was a diamond and the film industry an abode of asses, he lowered himself so that she could rise to great heights. While playing with her as if she were a doll, he made such films that soon she was raised up to the skies. She was inundated with contracts. Varmaji didn't get involved with paperwork, nor did Rita feel the need to make anything official. And he was the one in charge of her hot new business. He would make a decision after hearing the story and then he would receive payment. In other words, he kept everything under his own wing. Varmaji's wife didn't seem to mind much either. The relationship between husband and wife had come to an end after his first film became a hit. Now he had the status of a checkbook. Although he didn't touch a penny of Rita's money, he was still reaping a good harvest. He also paid the rent from his own pocket for the flat he shared with her. And Rita was offering her full cooperation for his new film.

The moment Rita became a star her family began to exhibit great affection for her. First her brothers and sisters came to see her. Rita's debased honor received a lift. She fell at their feet. At least her sister had thought of her—sister. She sent the rest of her family suitcases full of gifts. The sisters returned after two months. It seemed they liked living in Bombay. The mother, unable to withstand the absence of her daughters, also arrived. A few uncles came as well and decided to stay on. Who could bear to live in the village anymore?

Varmaji became a stranger in his own flat. Rita's brothers-in-law, overly confident due to Rita's success, got involved in one deal after another without Varmaji's advice. He was up in arms and protested

wildly, but to no avail. He wasn't really interested in sleeping with Rita; all he did was play with her as if she were a doll. The worries of business, his wife's unfair treatment, his friends' lack of loyalty—he drowned all these in Rita's laughter. When all these people gathered in his house he controlled himself for a few days but then, unable to take much more, he finally said to Rita, "Get rid of them. Give them presents and get them out of here." Rita's heart broke. How hard it had been to get her family to speak to her again. How could she do this? Her family, on the other hand, wanted to know why this man had glued himself to her. His presence only served to damage Rita's reputation. And anyway, there was already a dearth of rooms in the flat and he was only making the situation worse.

Rita didn't know what to do, but one day she put her head down on Dharam Dev's shoulder and broke down. Dharam Dev's soft heart was shaken.

"Get another flat, everything will be all right," he said decisively after hearing the whole story. And before night fell he had handed Rita the keys to her new flat.

But Varmaji didn't take this calmly; he was livid.

"What do you think? You, a handful of dust, now spread over the horizon because of me—you say that I'm a storm? Yes, if I can create, I can also destroy. I'll ruin you. My name's not Inderjeet Varma if I don't have all of your contracts cancelled. Wretch! You think your family is something special?"

Rita began trembling with fear. Varmaji was like a god to her. Indeed, she was someone he had created from nothing. She was new to all this, wasn't she? She believed that Varmaji would reduce her to dust. She didn't know that Varmaji was like a hollow drum. This she discovered after she had been in the industry a long time. But at that time she promised him that she would live in the new flat only for the sake of appearances, and would really spend all her free time with him. The train proceeded to move forward in this fashion.

But something went wrong. People spiced up the story of the move to the new flat and of Rita's quarrels with Varmaji, and passed the tidbits on to Mangala. Also, Rita and Dev's names frequently appeared side by side in newspapers, and Varmaji began to view Dharam Dev with a great deal of suspicion.

Mangala had been circling around in her rooms like a cat with burnt paws. At the insistence of her brother and mother, she had already made two or three calls to Dharam Dev reminding him that it was Durga Puja

tonight, an event in which his participation was a must. She had also warned him that if he didn't drop everything and come he would never see her face again.

She finally got through to him once more and he chatted lovingly with her for a long time. Mangala's spirit danced with joy. All her doubts and misgivings vanished. He was hers and no force in the world could separate them. At that day's puja ceremony he would participate along with the rest of the family, as her fiancé. Now the matter had gone beyond gossip. She had already made him her own, her family would also accept him formally and the two would receive Durga Mayya's blessing too. All that would remain then was the seven turns of marriage.

"Look, Dharam Dev is now an important man, he's in an air-conditioned office all day interviewing young girls. I think his resolve is faltering, and remember, Rita is a one lakh-rupee heroine."

Only a moment ago Dharam Dev's voice was pouring honey into her ears, but now Bhaya's remarks gave rise to bitter, sour doubts again. She kept trying the phone for half an hour. The phone was busy! Guests began arriving in the house. Trays of flowers and sweets were prepared. Children were creating a din on the stairs. After trying a long time she got through to the office. He's gone to drop Rita Devi off, she was told.

She called again after fifteen minutes. He hasn't returned yet, she was told.

She called again. Her hands were trembling. When Dharam Dev's sweet voice fell into Mangala's ears she became tongue-tied. She felt angry at herself for doubting him.

"What's the matter Mangu yaar?"

"You're coming to the puja, aren't you?"

"Puja?"

"Yes ... Durga Puja, don't you remember?"

"Oh!" Dharam Dev's voice lost its vitality. "The thing is Mangala, there's some work I have to do first."

"So you won't come?"

"I will, but I'll probably be late."

"You'll come when the puja is over?"

"But Mangala. Listen ... listen ..."

But Mangala didn't let him finish. She banged down the receiver and slumped over the table, her head cradled between her elbows.

"Not coming, is he?" Bare Bhaya said sarcastically.

"He says he might be late. But he'll come."

“Well, of course he’ll be late. Has he ever been early? After one hit film his head is in the seventh heaven.”

“Dial his number, I’ll talk to him,” wiping her hands with her sari, Mangala’s mother leapt toward her.

Bare Bhaya stopped her. “No. There’s no need to beg in front of anyone Maa. If he comes, fine, if he doesn’t, that’s fine too. He’s become used to people pleading with him. When I asked him to give Sheela a test he dodged the issue by saying this business wasn’t appropriate for girls from good families.” Bare Bhaya was head over heels in love with Sheela.

It was time for the puja. Everyone was waiting for Dharam Dev. People’s glances turned toward Mangala’s face again and again. She was sitting quietly, looking guilty, wishing she could squeeze this moment between her fists.

Seven, half past seven, eight, and then nine. No one arrived.

It was eleven. All the guests had left. But Mangala stood leaning against the front door waiting, just as every husband-worshipping wife waits for her thoughtless husband. But she’s still a virgin. What will happen after she’s married?

What if Keshu returns with a failed mission?

But Keshu couldn’t return with a failed mission.

Keshu was Dharam Dev’s most important uncle. He worked for the canteen at the Bombay Talkies and he used to pay all of Dharam Dev’s debts. How many cigarettes he had helped him smoke, how many paans he had gotten him and how many omelets he had stuffed Dharam Dev with. Dharam Dev hadn’t forgotten all this. When his first contract was signed Keshu came with him. There were no special duties assigned to him. Getting cigarettes for him, having omelets fried, obtaining biris for him from Varli Naakah—this was all he did. But now the money came from Dharam Dev’s pocket. Keshu followed him like his shadow. Even when Dharam Dev went to the bathroom, Keshu stood guard outside the door. If he hadn’t approved of Mangala there was no way Dharam Dev could have developed a relationship with her. Keshu regarded Mangala as his sister. As for Dharam Dev’s friends, they were afraid of Keshu. If any of them made the mistake of being rude on the phone, Keshu immediately made Dharam Dev break off relations with them. Keshu wasn’t just honest, unbeknownst to Dharam Dev he would also buy whiskey from his own pocket to ruin the credibility of Dharam Dev’s flunkies.

As an inducement to leave his nephew people tried to bribe Keshu with three or four times the salary Dharam Dev gave him, but Keshu refused all offers outright.

“If Dharamji decides not to give me a single penny and kicks me out of the house, even then I won’t leave him.”

Dharamji felt great pride when he listened to all this talk. How many years had Keshu spent in the industry, yet he never got involved with a woman. He lived quietly with his homely wife and three children in an old Dawar house. He had never touched a drop of alcohol, although he kept a bottle with him at all times; who knows when someone might ask for a drink. His only weakness was Dharam Dev. One wonders how and why an oddity like him had survived in the industry. Mangala knew that he wouldn’t even hesitate to lie for Dharam Dev. If Dharam Dev was at a party drinking and carousing, Keshu would always say “He’s working on the story. There’s testing going on, he’s listening to tunes.” And sometimes when Dharam Dev himself admitted that he had been at a party, Keshu would immediately declare, “Dharamji was just sitting there, he didn’t touch a drop.”

He took care of Dharam Dev just like a jealous wife, making sure he didn’t get into trouble. After all, clouds do gather around the rising sun—dark, thick clouds. Randhir was working on his new script. He was a very talkative man. Sometimes when Dharam Dev got to talking with him, he would forget to tell Keshu where he was going and Keshu would be spinning around like a suspicious wife trying to locate him. When Dharam Dev returned and Keshu discovered that he hadn’t been in a dangerous place and that he had gone for a drink of coconut water or to the corner shop for a paan, Keshu would heave a sigh of relief.

Keshu returned around twelve. When she saw him, Mangala acted nonchalant.

“Tomorrow Barman Sahib will arrive at the studio at ten. Shall I bring the car round for rehearsal?” he asked.

Mangala glowered at him. She had sent the wretch to find Dharam Dev. Why was he talking nonsense?

“Where is he?” she asked irately.

“He said, ‘We’re leaving, you find out the time from Barman Sahib for tomorrow’s rehearsal and tell Didi.’ I watched him get into the car with Randhir Sahib. And ... he ... he ...” He was groping for an excuse. “Maybe he got home and fell asleep.”

“He’s not at home, I called,” Mangala roared.

“Then ... the maybe ...” He was like a criminal who has admitted his guilt.

“Where did you see him?”

“He was with Randhir Sahib ... they had to read the story to Rita Devi.”

“Randhir has been calling here since eight o’clock.”

“Well then ... Didi, I’ll go and check right away.”

“There’s no need.”

“I’ll take a taxi. I’ll call.”

“Didn’t you hear me? There’s no need.” Mangala scolded him and Keshu lowered his head and left.

She sat quietly, staring at the blank wall. Then she tiptoed to the phone and picked up the receiver. What was the harm in trying one more time?

“Hello,” someone spoke at the other end. “Whom do you want?” the voice continued in an uneven tone. This was followed by a silvery giggle and then the connection was cut off.

For a few minutes Mangala stood motionless with the receiver suspended in her hand.

How quiet it was. How soundly Bombay sleeps after midnight. In her neighborhood some fool had forgotten to shut the water tap tightly. For the last hour the sound of dripping water had been hammering in her ears. She looked down from the window. The ground below was about eight or ten feet from the first floor.

Far away the tamarind leaves were heaving like sobs over the cool bricks of the platform, and her head was suddenly deluged with the screams of crows. □

—*Translated by Tahira Naqvi*