

NAIYER MASUD

Dustland^{*}

THERE WAS A RUSTLE in the bush up ahead and I froze in my tracks. The bush rustled again and I thought there must be a snake in it. Snakes scared me even before, but now one had actually bitten me. It was some poisonous kind and I nearly died. Only someone who's been bitten at least once by a venomous snake can appreciate how much a person who's been bitten comes to fear this slithery creature. He starts seeing snakes everywhere, and I too began to see one in this dry bush. This desolate area had two paths. The one I was walking on was wide and level with bushes running along both sides, and my suspicious eyes saw snakes in each and every one. I looked over at the other path. It was altogether barren and rugged, but there were far fewer bushes on it and they were scraggy. I turned on to that path and continued on.

After some distance, that path also split into two, one path had shrubs and vegetation, the other was quite bleak. This happened several times and each time I took the bleak and dreary path. It seemed evident that the paths with vegetation were the main ones and led to some settlement or settlements, but the dreary ones must lead somewhere too. Ever since my snakebite, strange notions sometimes assailed my mind, but such notions, I was told, were common among snakebite victims. On this occasion I fancied that these desolate paths would eventually take me to my destination—where that is only God knows—and that's why I avoided taking the paths that were lush and green.

So far I had not come across anyone on these paths. But now, as I turned on to another one, I saw a man walking along the same stark, bleak path. He was walking very slowly and clearly appeared to be quite tired. Finally, he plunked himself down on the ground. As I approached him, I too began to feel tired and sat down close to him. After I removed the bag from my shoulder and set it on the ground, I turned to him.

^{*}“Dhūlban,” original Urdu published elsewhere in this issue.

“Where are you coming from?”

He named some town.

“What do you do there?” I asked.

“I beg.” He gave me the answer I was expecting from a man of his appearance.

“And where do you live?”

He pointed at the bleak path in front of him and said in a tired voice, “Dustland.”

“You don’t get alms in Dustland?”

“I do. But not when the season of dust storms arrives,” he said and fixed his gaze on the horizon. “When a storm sweeps in, the whole place is covered in dust.”

“Dust storm?” I said.

“It rages all day long. Everyone stays indoors. In the evening, when it stops, people venture out, start cleaning up and then get busy with their work. I leave the house very early in the morning and return at night after the storm has subsided. Today, however, the beggars back there are on strike so I’m returning to Dustland.”

I wasn’t interested in his problems: who begged and who gave alms in Dustland at nighttime.

He had started gathering his tattered gear. “What color is the dust storm?” I asked.

“Earth-colored,” and he again looked toward the horizon. “It’s coming.”

He got up. As he started walking, I asked, “Is there some place in Dustland where out-of-towners might stay?”

“The Big House,” he said. “If you’re going there too, then get moving.”

“You go ahead. I’ll come shortly.”

Of course, how would he know that dust storms fascinate me. Since childhood I could never stay put inside the house during a storm. I would go out and let the whole of it pass right over me. In my city, colored storms also used to appear. A black storm, which would scare everyone, was my special favorite. The darkness would sweep over everything in sight. And I believe, at the onset, stars could actually be seen shining in the darkening sky. My family tried to keep me from venturing out, but there was no way I could stay inside. During the red and yellow storms I even went out and watched the landscape changing color. At those times it seemed as if a bright light had spread over the entire world. A yellow storm was the only one that scared me a little because one time I heard some human voices along with it—or perhaps it was just my imagination.

Neither black nor red nor yellow dust storms come through my area anymore. Ordinary dust storms blow through occasionally and during

those I would still go traipsing about.

Trudging forward in the dim light, I saw the beggar fellow moving farther ahead, and at the same time I also noticed that in the distance an earth-colored haze had begun spreading.

“An earth-colored storm,” I thought. I’d never seen such a storm until today. I let it come over me. Before long my entire body was coated. It looked as if someone was dumping baskets filled with dust on top of me. Now dust was flying all over the place and the light had become dim. Trudging through this muted light, I found that settlement a short distance away, but prior to that my feet got caught several times in small potholes and I nearly tripped. These weren’t natural potholes; rather they looked like pits that had been dug for small graves.

“Is Dustland in the throes of some child epidemic?” I asked myself.

There was no one on the road at the time and I was roaming around the settlement by myself.

The storm lasted five days and during all that time I was wandering around the settlement alone. Early every morning the storm started kicking up clouds of dust, by mid-afternoon its ferocity abated, and by evening it stopped completely, leaving the entire settlement buried in dust. Shortly afterward, people began to emerge from their houses with big brooms fastened to bamboo poles and swept the dust off to the sides in huge piles. Soon the dust was hauled away on carts and dumped somewhere outside the settlement to be carried away by the wind to God knows where. The entire settlement was cleaned up before nightfall and people would start walking on the streets. By this time I would already be outside the settlement under a huge tree where I had set up my temporary residence. There, I shook the dust off my clothes and removed it from my hair and body. After making myself more presentable, I would reenter the settlement, buy something to eat from the vendors and go back to the same tree. Early the next morning the whooshing of the storm would begin again, doors would close and the entire settlement would be left to me to do as I pleased.

Despite the haze hanging in the air, I was able to see nearly the whole of the settlement in the course of these strolls. Most of its houses didn’t appear to be very old and the area the settlement occupied didn’t seem to be very large. I wasn’t able to find out anything about the people who lived there because, so far, I’d only met the beggar on that first day and a few shopkeepers. The rest of the settlement was unknown to me, just as I was unknown to it. I didn’t realize that during the days of dust people just sat by their windows and looked out at the streets to pass the time. All they knew about me was that a man from some other place

walked around during the storm undaunted and spent the night under the tree outside the settlement.

Gradually I became acquainted with the people there. My first acquaintance was that same beggar. I often chatted with him and it was he who told me about the tree outside the settlement. He admonished me not to spend the night outside the settlement, especially under that tree because that tree brought bad luck. Without mentioning the name, he told me about someone who had fallen from that tree and lost his senses. When I asked him the person's name, he sighed and said, "You'll find out."

He again asked me to stay at the Big House and impressed upon me that poor people could live there for free. I wasn't poor, that's why I'd set up my lodging under the tree. But one night I began to fear the tree, imagining that its twisted branches were snakes. That night I had a dream and saw two snakes drop from the tree and slither right by me. Dreams no longer affect me, but it was the first time I had seen snakes in a dream. I even groped the area around me fearfully. Of course, I couldn't see any snakes, but like everyone who's been bitten by one, the notion that snakes were definitely lurking in that tree and that I was well within their range took relentless hold of my affected brain.

The next day I gathered up my gear from under the tree and started asking people about some other settlement. First off, I looked around for my oldest acquaintance, the beggar. When I couldn't find him in the place where he usually begged for alms, a few people told me that he had been lying ill in the Big House for the past few days. Everyone knew the address of the Big House and I went there. It was a good, solid building over a fair stretch of land and it had many small rooms. I found him in one room, wrapped up in a bundle of raggedy old clothes. He seemed quite out of place in that neat, tidy room of the Big House. When he saw me he made an effort to get up, carefully holding on to his rags, but he couldn't. I also gestured to him to stay put and he almost fell over the rags. When I asked him about his ailment and treatment he replied, "Doctor Sahib comes around every third day. He'll come tomorrow."

After that he started going over the drab details of his illness. It was an ordinary fever and would have come down within a few days on its own, but he took it to be some major problem. Only then did it occur to him to ask how I was. I told him that I wouldn't stay under the tree anymore, or in the charity-house. I then asked him, "Could a place to stay be found in the settlement you go to on the days of dust storms?"

"Even alms are hard to get there," he said. The people aren't kind. I just go there for the sake of my stomach." Then he mentioned again,

“What’s wrong with the Big House, after all?”

Absolutely nothing was wrong, but I didn’t want to stay there. I was mulling over some appropriate answer when I heard the sound of foot-steps outside the room. The beggar, again making an effort to get up, said, “Oh, Doctor Sahib’s come *today!*”

Meanwhile the doctor and another man walked into the room. The other man said, “What’s this Sardar, you’ve been ill for so many days and didn’t even inform us.”

“Huzoor, Doctor Sahib was scheduled to come tomorrow ...”

“Don’t you know that when someone takes ill here Doctor Sahib doesn’t go by the schedule, he comes right away?” He made a sign and the doctor then examined the patient, took out some pills from his medical bag, and got up to go after explaining how to use them.

But the man who was with him took a seat and started talking about this and that. He made some sign to the doctor, who said goodbye and left. The other man said to the beggar, “Well, Sardar, it’s being said that some outsider has come to the settlement.”

“Outsiders, Mukhtar Sahib, do come here now and then.”

“No, the one who wanders around during the dust storm.”

At that point I gave this man whom the beggar was calling Mukhtar Sahib a closer look. From his clothes and the way he carried himself, he seemed to be someone important. The beggar pointed at me and said, “He’s the one.”

Perhaps it was then that Mukhtar first became aware of my presence. I greeted him, to which he replied with ample courtesy. The beggar informed me, “Mukhtar Sahib looks after the estate here.”

“You live here in the Big House?” he asked me.

“No. I’m staying outside the settlement and now I’m thinking of going on to some other place.”

“Why? You don’t like the Big House? It was built just for people like you.”

“It’s meant for the poor and the needy. I don’t have a right to it.”

“Why not? Have our dust storms unsettled you?”

“Dust storms don’t unsettle me. As long as storms tore through my city, I used to go out and feel each one of them wash over me. I quite enjoyed that.”

“Amazing!” he looked at me with interest. “Didn’t your storms also bring dust?”

“Perhaps not. I didn’t pay attention. Not, at any rate, compared to the earth-colored storms here.”

“You’ve looked at storms as a spectacle.” He drew a long, deep

breath. "We, on the other hand, have to wage a battle with them."

"Why then have you chosen to live in this settlement?"

"It's a long story. Anyway, the dust gives us a reason to keep it neat and clean."

I reflected. I really had never seen a place cleaner and tidier than this settlement."

He got up, stared at Sardar for some time, and then made a face and said, "Well, Sardar, don't you have proper clothes? What's this, wrapping yourself up in tatters?"

"I do have good clothes, Mukhtar Sahib. But I wear them on festival days and at weddings. If I didn't wear rags, who would give me alms?"

"That's true," he dug into his pocket, took out some money and put it at the head of Sardar's bed. Then he said to me, "Please stay at the Big House today ... for our sake. You could make other arrangements tomorrow. By the time you reached another settlement it would be very late. It's not safe to travel in this area at night. The road is riddled with potholes," he looked at Sardar with a smile, "the adjacent room is vacant. Rest there. Sardar will keep you amused. He is an interesting fellow, but he talks too much."

Sardar started to laugh, "You, too, Mukhtar Sahib ..."

But he had already said goodbye and left.

Sardar was indeed an interesting fellow and very talkative. We talked quite late into the night and I learned as much from him about Dustland as it perhaps would have taken months to find out on my own.

Dustland, he told me, had not been a settlement, it was basically an assortment of various-sized, ragged parcels of barren land with tall, thick bushes and a few trees that didn't require much water. Bare Maalik had bought up the whole lot and had houses and such built on it. He'd also had the lowland along the edge dug deep and made into a huge pond. Since water was quite far down in the ground, he had deep wells sunk. In the middle of all this, storms kept coming, but Bare Maalik didn't let it bother him and had the dust removed each time a storm piled it on.

"But what made him want this place ... Dustland?"

"Why, the desire to build his own settlement, of course. Didn't I tell you this hadn't been a settlement, no one owned this stretch of land. Just a few gypsies would come here every year or two and set up their temporary camp. Bare Maalik bought all the land from the government and set aside a small piece on the western edge for the gypsies. Then he flung himself head first into building houses and shops here. But his time

was up and the heavens took him.”

Sardar took a deep breath and launched into a philosophical discourse on death. I fell asleep listening to him talk.

After the uncomfortable life under the tree, I slept so well in that room in the Big House that I didn't wake up until late morning. By then the storm was already upon us and the doors of the settlement had been closed. Under the tree, even if I woke up late, I was still free to go out into the storm; here in the Big House, though, I was cooped up and felt like I was suffocating. All the same, I stayed in bed, sleeping off and on. The thought of returning to my abode didn't cross my mind. In the evening I went on a round of the bazaar. The shopkeeper had by now come to know me and the two of us talked for a while. He too asked me why I wandered around outside during the storm. I gave him the same answer: it pleases me to go out. He said, “Mukhtar Sahib was wondering about it too. Chhoti Maalikan must have asked him.”

This was the first time I heard the mistress of Dustland mentioned. I thought I might ask him more, then thought better of it and got up. Sardar's condition had now worsened quite a bit and he was lying wrapped in his rags. I asked him how he was doing. He wasn't even well enough to respond properly. He was feeling quite chilly. Nevertheless I stayed with him for a time, feeling perplexed. At some point, as I was getting ready to return to my own place, I fell asleep. The next day I again got up late and again stayed cooped up all day inside the Big House.

In the evening the doctor visited Sardar again. Mukhtar Sahib was with him and he stayed on even after the doctor had left. He felt Sardar's pulse a few times and then asked me, “Well, so what have you decided?”

I had decided nothing, but I wasn't going to stay at the Big House anymore so I just blurted out, “I'll leave tomorrow. Perhaps I'll spend tonight at my old place. Tomorrow during the daytime I'll look for another settlement.”

“Daytime?” he asked. “What about the storm?”

“I'm used to going out during storms,” I said and regretted that I had wasted today. Had I stayed under the tree, I could have sought out some other settlement. Perhaps Mukhtar Sahib guessed what was going through my mind. He said, “Nothing can be done during the daytime in a dust storm,” and repeated what he had said the first day, “You've looked at storms as a spectacle.”

“It was my childhood. Back then even a spectacle seemed essential.”

I thought I was getting needlessly embroiled in an argument. I was thinking of something to change the subject when Mukhtar Sahib said abruptly, “Tell us about colored storms.”

I gave a cursory description. Mukhtar Sahib listened and then commented, "That surely must have seemed like a spectacle, especially to children."

"Sometimes children did get frightened. I didn't feel scared, so I went outdoors."

"Amazing!" he said the same thing he'd said the first day and then repeated it again, "Amazing!"

A short time later, Mukhtar Sahib took his leave. I stayed on with Sardar for a while. He was beginning to doze off and I didn't talk to him. I returned to my room and collected my things. When I went out, I saw Mukhtar Sahib some distance away. A well-dressed woman and some men who looked like laborers were with him. I pushed on ahead avoiding their eyes. After walking a short distance I stopped, gathering the strength to return to my spot under the tree, which took some time. I started to move on, but stopped when I heard Mukhtar Sahib's voice behind me. He was standing nearby saying, "Sahib, where are you off to?"

"Perhaps I've already told you."

"But traveling at night ..."

Just then one of the laborers went up close to him and said, "Mukhtar Sahib, Chhoti Maalika is asking for you. She also said to bring him along."

"Him—who?"

"The man who wanders around outside in the storm," the man said. His eyes fell on me, "This one."

"All right, you go ahead," Mukhtar Sahib said, then he said to me, "Come along, Sahib, Maleeka wants to see you ..."

"Who's Maleeka?"

"She's the one who owns Dustland. Now and then she invites outsiders to her place."

"But why me?"

"Perhaps because you go out in storms."

"But there's nothing so extraordinary about that"

"No, but when I told her that you just can't stay indoors during a storm ... She thinks she knows you. At least her mother used to, and perhaps her husband to."

"Is her husband alive now?"

"He *is*. But he's unconscious."

"Why?"

"He fell from your tree. He fell on his head. Since then ..."

"So he's the one Sardar was talking about," I thought. "But why in the world was he climbing on that tree in the first place?" During this time I forgot that I had asked Mukhtar Sahib something—perhaps some polite

query about the man's medications and treatment. He was saying:

"He was examined in several hospitals in the city and spent some time in two of them. Help was even sought from necromancers, exorcists, and gypsies, but all in vain! He remains unconscious. A doctor's been hired to look after him. Now and then when he does slip back briefly into consciousness, he doesn't make any sense. First, nothing at all comes out of his mouth, and then his voice ..." suddenly he stopped and then he said, "Here, we've arrived at her house."

I looked over at the mansion to my right and couldn't take my eyes off it.

It seemed as if I was looking at my boyhood home, long since gone and which it had taken me a long time to put out of my mind. The façade of this house, the verandahs, the doors, the *devrbi* inside—everything was like that house.

Mukhtar Sahib went inside and I started remembering everything about my own house. The people who lived there, my elders—I was flooded with memories of not just their faces but even their voices. The servants of my house, the guest, and all the commotion that took place so frequently. All those people, none of whom were with me now. I had managed to forget all of them, but had I, really? No, I was mistaken. Like other childhood memories, these too still lurked somewhere in my mind and were now coming back to me one by one, or all together.

Perhaps this all went through my mind in just a few moments.

Mukhtar Sahib hadn't been gone long when he returned and stood looking at me closely. I turned my attention to him.

"Please come, she's calling you," he said, and I followed him into the house.

This was the men's section of the house and quite different from the one in my old house. A door separated the women's quarters from the rest of the house. I could hear women's voices coming from there as well as the monotonous sound of a child crying. Mukhtar Sahib knocked at that door and said loudly, "Let her know that he's come."

In the meantime I looked over the men's quarters. There was a big room with two adjacent small rooms. The door of the big room was closed. Ordinary office paraphernalia was piled up haphazardly in the small rooms. There were quite a few books too, mostly about trees. The doors were open and Mukhtar Sahib seated me in one of those rooms.

After some time Maleeka entered. I had assumed that she was a woman well advanced in years—but she was young, much younger than

me—and that I would have to conduct myself with due etiquette and ceremony in talking to her, but the age difference did away with that feeling. Even so, I chose my words carefully for a time. She asked me a few customary questions, such as: You aren't having any trouble here, are you? ... How did you find your way to this place? and the like. I gave her a fleeting account of meeting Sardar and then fell silent. She asked Mukhtar Sahib, "You've told him everything, haven't you?"

"Not everything. He hardly gave me a chance to get a word in edgewise."

"Well, do tell him now." Then, getting up, she asked me, "What do you like to eat?"

"With the way I live," I replied, "there's no question of liking or not liking. Whatever I can find and wherever." I motioned to her to sit back down and resumed, "And for now, I've already eaten. Please don't go to any trouble on my account."

Maleeka sat down. A brief silence ensued and I then asked her the question that was hounding me, "Your house is very nice. Who built it?"

My Ammi had it built. She very much liked the house she often visited before her marriage. Here in Dustland, when my Abbu was going to have a house built for her, she asked him to have it built in the likeness of that other house and she drew up a plan for it from memory, that is, as much as she could remember...

All of a sudden I remembered, and before Maleeka could finish, I interrupted her with a question, "Excuse me, by any chance is your mother's name Zeenat Begum?"

"How did you know?"

"She often came and stayed as a guest at our home."

Maleeka glanced over at Mukhtar Sahib and he exclaimed, "Amazing! Amazing!"

"When was that?" she asked me.

"I can't say exactly, but I was a small boy at the time."

"So what makes you remember her?"

"She loved watching me wander around in a dust storm. Most of the people in the house would be stopping me and scaring me, but the minute I detected an oncoming storm I would rush to her and let her know and she would go and stand by one of the windows. Back in those days we used to get colored storms in our city. Perhaps she liked those storms too."

Zeenat Begum was a very quiet person by nature and delicate like her daughter. She had met my mother by chance during some train trip. There was something in my mother's disposition that inspired people,

whether they were family members or not, to lay bare the story of their sufferings and anxieties to her, holding nothing back, and derive comfort in her empathy. Zeenat Begum's life also had its share of pains. When she visited us, she would shut herself up with my mother for many long hours talking, and sometimes even crying. Mother would explain things to her, persuade her, and then she would go back feeling more serene. Afterwards, she would send letters for a while and in them she never failed to ask about me and mention my fascination with colored dust storms.

One by one, the memories of all those days were returning to me and I was so lost in reminiscing that I quite forgot where I was at the moment until Maleeka asked, "How long did she continue coming to visit?"

"Oh, it must have been through my boyhood."

"All of this is from before I was born," Maleeka said to herself out loud, then, as she got up, she said to Mukhtar Sahib, "He's one of us. Please tell him everything." And then she went inside.

After a brief silence Mukhtar Sahib said, "I don't know where I should begin or what all to tell."

"Whatever you can remember, just talk freely," I said. "If there's something unclear, I'll interrupt to ask." Mukhtar Sahib began:

"Zeenat Begum was my older sister and was married quite young. Her husband was the son of a rich man and loved the company of prostitutes. He didn't care much about his wife. For two years Zeenat Begum was very distressed because of him. She even tried to reform him but he didn't mend his ways. Eventually he died in a prostitute's chamber. He still had a lot of money left, so Zeenat Begum didn't have to face financial difficulty. Only the loneliness was hard to take so she sometimes went on trips to other cities. It was during that time that she met your mother on a train. Your mother was very fond of Zeenat Begum and often invited her to her home. I was without a livelihood at the time and also young. Zeenat Begum had me live at her place. Your mother repeatedly advised her to remarry. Eventually she consented. Your mother selected Bare Sahib for her after much thought and deliberation. He too had been married once before and was also much older, but your mother was convinced that he would value her a lot and he did indeed ..."

"Tell me what happened next."

"He was a very capable man. God knows how many things he knew. And he was also quite wealthy. He owned many mansions and other property in the city. Your mother wasn't able to attend the wedding. A short while before it the incident of your house ..."

"I know," I cut him short. "Tell me what happened next."

"I was saying that God only knows how many things Bare Sahib

knew, but his main interest was in building and in trees. To satisfy his passion he bought this desolate place, Dustland, and brought trees in pots from all over for it. He had houses built for the poor, the best of them being the Big House. Besides that ...” he paused and then said, “His younger brother had died during his father’s lifetime. Later his mother also died. So he raised his orphaned nephew, I mean Chhote Sahib. At the time he married, he obtained Zeenat Begum’s consent to keep his nephew with him. Chhote Sahib was about twelve years old at the time and went to a school in the city. Maleeka was born to Zeenat Begum during the second year of the marriage and, when Maleeka was six years old, she was also sent to the same school. Her absence weighed heavily on Zeenat Begum, so, after just two years, Bare Sahib had her taken out of school and arranged three separate tutors for her instruction under his own supervision here at Dustland. She had become quite attached to Chhote Sahib, so Bare Sahib also arranged for his education in Dustland.”

“Please, tell me what happened next,” I interrupted him again. This wasn’t a polite way of listening to someone, but all these details seemed quite uninteresting to me at that point. Mukhtar Sahib had perhaps also sensed my irritation, so he stopped and fell into thinking about something. I felt sorry for him and said, “Tell me about yourself.” With some interest, he began:

“Zeenat Begum had also placed one condition on the marriage—that she would keep her brother with her. Bare Sahib was ready to accept any and all conditions, so this is how I too ended up here and Bare Sahib began to love me just as he did his nephew. One day he said, ‘Well, Mukhtar, even your name is Mukhtar!’ So, here, I’m giving you the power of attorney for the estate of Dustland.”

“What a wonderful man,” I said.

“He was exceptional. To settle Dustland he selected men from the city and provided houses for them, and for those who had no resources whatsoever he provided the Big House. He got hold of Sardar and brought him along with the first contingent. He said every settlement ought to have a fakir.”

“Most of the people appear quite poor to me.”

“Because they *are* poor; most of them are the artisan and mason type who couldn’t make a go of it in the city. Even Sardar used to idle away his time in front of a *dargah*. His business also picked up here. He’s the oldest resident of Dustland and knows a great deal about it.”

* One who is invested with power or authority, has legal power to act on behalf of the owner.

“Was Bare Sahib at ease with him?”

“It didn’t take him long to drop all formalities with just about everyone. And when something funny happened, he would burst into such uproarious laughter that it sent the birds flying out of the trees.”

The mention of trees reminded me of something. “Mukhtar Sahib, were there any trees around Dustland ...”

“A lot of them. Bare Sahib had them all chopped down. He only spared your tree for doing measurements.” He was about to tell me something more but stopped and went out after saying goodbye.

That night I looked at my tree closely. There was something peculiar about it that I couldn’t figure out and I fell asleep looking at it. In the morning when I got up, I looked at it closely again. Its branches were jumbled and quite thick with foliage, but each branch pointed in one of four directions. There wasn’t a single branch on the whole tree that didn’t point in a direction. That tree now seemed quite exceptional to me, one in a thousand. At least I was absolutely sure I’d have no difficulty picking it out in the middle of a thousand trees.

A few days later the storm died out and the daytime business got underway in Dustland. One day I also ran into Sardar and spent nearly the whole day talking with him. He told me that the band of gypsies had arrived back at its grounds. He also mentioned the name of their chief: “Chief Ballam is an old coot now but still as stout as ever.”

Ballam? Are all the ghosts from the past gathering here in Dustland? I thought with annoyance. When I had first left home I spent some time with Ballam’s band. They were a fine lot. After leaving Sardar I headed straight to the gypsies’ campsite. Chief Ballam recognized me straight-away.

We continued talking late into the night. I was mostly asking him about his wanderings. He told me that his group had searched out and found many trees for Bare Sahib.

I asked, “Chief, tell me, the tree that’s been left standing ...”

“I don’t know what it’s called. Bare Sahib brought it from somewhere, or perhaps it was here all along. Bare Sahib never allowed anyone to even snap one branch of that tree.”

It had gotten quite late so I slept at the gypsies’ camp. In the morning I woke to the sound of Mukhtar Sahib’s voice asking Ballam how he happened to know me. After he saw that I was awake, he turned to me. “I was looking for you under the tree. You’re to meet with Maleeka today.”

“What time?”

“The sooner the better. She’ll tell you her story, like her mother used to tell your mother. She said talking to you would ease her heart.”

Shortly afterward I met with her. Today she was wearing very elegant clothes and the air of sadness that always hovered over her seemed to have left her. After some light conversation she began telling me:

“Abbu was madly in love with Ammi. When she complained about the dust storms, he immediately set about finding some way to stop them. God knows how many kinds of trees he collected and put in earthen pots and nurtured with great devotion. The potted plants were several years old and he said that after being transplanted into the soil they would grow into big, shady trees within a couple of years. One day he and Chhote Sahib came to Ammi beside themselves with joy. Some trees they were having difficulty finding had now been located with the help of the gypsies. The line of trees started from quite a distance away, each tree working as a filter against the dust stirred up by the storm so that, by the time it reached the last tree, the dust had disappeared and only a gentle breeze was left that had none of the ferocity of the storm. At least that’s what they said.

“The dust storm had started two days earlier. Abbu and Chhote Sahib had gone outside in it and, after using your tree as a guide, they were marking out the places to plant the other trees. Suddenly, in his kidney, perhaps it was his kidney, he felt such an excruciating pain that he died right there.”

A hush fell over her for some time and I too remained silent. Then she said, “After that, Ammi became unusually quiet. She hardly ever talked, but one night Chhote Sahib saw a yellow dust storm in his dream. When he got up in the morning he was terrified. It was then that we realized he was deathly afraid of yellow, or perhaps actually colored dust storms. To alleviate his fear Ammi told him several stories about you sauntering around outside in storms, and that did rid Chhote Sahib of his fear. In fact, he started mentioning you as though he knew you from a long time ago.

“In her effort to remove Chhote Sahib’s fear, Ammi recalled the hospitality she was shown in your home in such a way, and so often, that she herself fell ill and one night she quietly passed away in her sleep. Who knows what might have happened had Uncle Mukhtar not been here.”

“What kind of talk is that?” I heard Mukhtar Sahib’s voice. God knows when he had snuck in and sat down there. “Why do you keep thinking about such things?”

“After Abbu, Chhote Sahib was very badly affected by Ammi’s death, but he managed to get hold of himself and went on with planting the trees,” Maleeka said. “But ...” her voice stopped. “Uncle Mukhtar, you tell it, please.”

“What’s the point of asking about it and fretting about it again and

again, daughter?" Mukhtar Sahib admonished the way a family elder does. "You've heard it many times already. He knows that Chhote Sahib fell from the tree and ..."

"Please tell it again. I'd like to hear you tell it."

"I will, but promise you won't start crying. It'll harm your health."

"I don't cry anymore, do I?"

"You hold it inside, which is even more harmful."

Mukhtar Sahib started to tell the story: "So anyway, Chhote Sahib picked up the work where Bare Sahib had left off. First of all, he had the dirt removed from the pits that had started to fill back up again after Bare Sahib was gone. Then the branches of your tree ..."

"Why do you all keep calling it my tree?" I interrupted him feeling a bit annoyed.

"Why, you live under it, don't you?" Maleeka said. "No one else does. Then again, no one even knows what it's called."

Mukhtar Sahib continued, "Chhote Sahib once again marked the spots where trees were to be planted using that tree's branches as a guide for the direction. He was very happy then and climbed up on the tree to examine the whole area. Everyone warned him not to, but by then he had already reached the lowest branch. I saw him fall, but I didn't know that he had fallen on his head. And in any case, he hadn't fallen from very high. 'Maleeka' escaped from his lips, then he got up laughing it off. I was holding on to him carefully as I was bringing him back but suddenly he collapsed to the ground. Blood was spilling out of his ears and he was completely unconscious. He was immediately taken to the hospital in the city. Whatever treatments he was given you already know."

After a while Ballam came in to pay his respects to Maleeka. In the midst of the conversation she asked him, "Wouldn't you like to see Chhote Sahib?"

"Of course. I've come especially for that."

Maleeka said to me, "You come see him too. I saw him in my dream last night and thought he might regain consciousness today."

"Dreams can't be trusted," I thought and entered the big room with Ballam, Mukhtar Sahib, and Maleeka. There I saw the man who called me his friend but whom I was seeing today for the first time.

He was in a deep sleep. No one could say what was in his mind, or indeed whether there was anything there at all. I placed my hand on his chest and called softly, "Chhote Sahib!" Then I put my hand on his nostrils, gently lifted his eyelids and lowered them again, and looked at his earlobes. I was examining the patient like some skillful physician, but none of this had anything to do with a desire to find out anything. I

couldn't have. But everyone was watching me with such hopeful eyes that it seemed completely heartless to reveal my lack of skill. Throughout the examination I called him repeatedly, and at each call everyone bent forward a little and looked, first at Chhote Sahib, then at me. But Chhote Sahib remained as he was. I also spotted a stranger there. He stood leaning against the door. I gave him a second, closer look. It was Sardar. He had come to see Chhote Sahib wearing proper clothes that were neat and clean. He didn't talk to anyone and quietly turned around and left.

I terminated my examination and asked Mukhtar Sahib, "Does he ever say anything?"

"Just that one call 'Maleeka' that was on his lips when he fell from the tree."

"I know the meaning of that call," Maleeka said. "He was saying: leave that tree alone." Then she asked me, "You've examined him—will he get well?"

"You're asking me, Maleeka?" I said in my heart. I suddenly remembered a relative of mine who had fallen from a swing. She remained unconscious some twenty or twenty-five years. Hair began to sprout on her face, as if she had a beard and mustache, and her face looked horrible. I had only heard about her. It was probably somewhat, or indeed greatly exaggerated. I banished the thought of her from my mind and answered Maleeka, "He might. Apparently he's not suffering from any illness."

Then suddenly I felt weary of Dustland. I wondered why I was idling away my time here. The world again seemed the same as when I was leaving home. There was still a good part of the day left. I went to the tree and collected my things, and I looked at it one last time. I didn't take leave of Maleeka, Mukhtar Sahib, Sardar, the Chief—of anyone. I wound my way out of the settlement, carefully avoiding the potholes, and set off in search of another city. □

Lucknow
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—Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon