

SA‘ADAT HASAN MANTO

## Gilgit Khan\*

SHAHBAZ KHAN HAD IT UP TO HERE with Jahangir, who worked in his restaurant and also ran errands. He couldn’t stand the man’s indolence, so one day he gave him his marching orders. Actually, Jahangir wasn’t lazy or slow at all, he was so agile and fast that his movements seemed stationary to Shahbaz Khan.

Shahbaz Khan paid him the salary he was due. Jahangir said good-bye to him, bought a train ticket and went straightaway to Baluchistan where coal had been discovered. Some of his friends had already made it there. He wrote to his brother Hamzah Khan in Gilgit to seek employment with Shahbaz Khan because he liked the man quite a bit.

Hamzah Khan went to Shahbaz Khan’s restaurant one day, showed him the postcard he had received and asked, “I want to work for you. My brother says that you’re a good and pious man. I’m also a good and pious man. How much will you pay?”

Shahbaz Khan looked at the man. He didn’t look like Jahangir’s brother at all—dwarfish, snub-nosed, and terribly ugly to boot. After reading Jahangir’s letter and taking a look at him, Shahbaz Khan’s immediate thought was to send him packing. But being a good-hearted man who had never turned away anyone in need, he took him on for a salary of fifteen rupees a month. “Look,” he told him, “whatever work is given to you, do it honestly.”

Splashing a smile on his ugly lips, Hamzah Khan assured his boss, “Khan Badshah, I’ll never give you any trouble. I’ll do whatever you ask me to do.”

The assurance pleased Shahbaz Khan.

At first Hamzah Khan’s work left a lot to be desired, but soon he learned all the ropes: how to brew tea, how much jaggery to throw in with refined sugar, how to bargain for coals with the itinerant coal-peddling

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\*“Gilgit Khān,” from the author’s collection *Manṭō Kabāniyān* (Lahore: Saṅg-e Mil Publications, 1995), 652–58.

women, how to treat each customer in an appropriate manner—everything.

He only had one shortcoming: his unbearably bad looks. He was also a bit ill-mannered. This made the customers a little uncomfortable. But when they got used to his bad looks, it stopped bothering them. In fact, some even started taking an interest in him because he was, after all, an amusing fellow. However, their interest didn't please Hamzah Khan, who thought it was a sham. It was just for their own fun and amusement, to have a good time.

The customers had christened him Gilgit Khan, not only because he came from Gilgit but also because he referred to his native place far too often in his speech. He didn't mind his new name at all. While he had no inkling what "Hamzah" meant, he knew quite well what Gilgit was.

It had been a whole year now since he started working for Shahbaz Khan. During this time it didn't escape his notice that his employer hated his looks, and the thought gnawed at him constantly.

One day he saw a puppy outside the restaurant—a creature even more unsightly than he himself was. He picked it up and brought it to his dingy little room above the restaurant, which the owner had allowed him to live in. This room was so small that one more puppy and Gilgit Khan would scarcely have been able to fit inside.

The puppy's legs were terribly misshapen, the snout awful to look at. Strangely, Gilgit Khan's own legs, or rather, his lower half was disproportionately smaller than his upper half. He and the puppy were both bent out of shape.

Gilgit loved his pup a lot. Shahbaz Khan hated the sight of the animal and threatened many times to put a bullet through him, but Gilgit was not about to part with him, come what may. Initially he kept quiet and listened patiently to Shahbaz Khan. But one day he told his employer flat out, "*Khu*, you're the owner of the restaurant, you don't own my friend Tan-Tan."

Shahbaz Khan eased up. After all, Gilgit was a workhorse. He got up at five in the morning, got the two braziers going, hauled water from the hand-pump across from the restaurant, and then got busy diligently serving the customers.

In three months Gilgit Khan's Tan-Tan grew into a sizeable dog. He slept with his master in the same room, in fact, in Gilgit's bed, which Gilgit didn't mind given the punishing cold nights of winter. Indeed, he felt immensely happy that the dog loved him so much that he didn't want to part with him even at night.

It was a special customer of Gilgit who had given the pup his name Tan-Tan. What with the pup's terribly bad looks, the man took an interest in him. Gilgit had saved some pennies from his meager wages and bought

a collar studded with tiny bells for the little pup he had picked up from the street. This special customer, who probably was a columnist for some daily paper, heard the tinkling bells and started calling the puppy Tan-Tan.

As Tan-Tan got bigger, his legs began to look even shorter—which resembled his owner's appearance. Gilgit's legs also seemed to shrink with amazing rapidity, while his torso grew normally. His appearance didn't sit well with Shahbaz Khan, but what could he do. Gilgit was an exceedingly hard-working man who toiled like a donkey from five in the morning till eleven or even twelve at night without a minute's rest—although during this time he didn't fail to go up to his dingy quarters three or four times to look after his darling puppy, now grown quite a bit bigger. He would feed him the leftovers from the restaurant kitchen, give him water to drink, cuddle him, and then promptly return to his work.

One day his Tan-Tan fell ill. The majority of the restaurant's patrons were students from the neighboring medical college. He overheard one of them mentioning that quail or chicken meat was especially good for someone who was suffering from a stomach ailment, starving him was pure foolishness.

Since the dog had diarrhea, Gilgit hadn't given him anything to eat since the morning. He started looking everywhere for a chicken but couldn't find any. No one in the entire neighborhood raised chickens.

Shahbaz Khan was very fond of quail fights and had a quail that he cared for more than his own life. Gilgit Khan stealthily opened the cage and grabbed the bird, which he later slaughtered reciting the *kalima* over it, and then fed it to his dear Tan-Tan.

The sight of the empty cage made Shahbaz Khan very anxious. How could the bird fly away from its cage, he wondered nervously. The quail was so used to acting on his cues. How wondrously it had won many fights. He asked Gilgit Khan, who promptly replied, "*Khu*, how would I know where your quail went. It must have run away somewhere."

On pursuing the matter further, Shahbaz Khan found patches of blood and some feathers by the open drain in front of the restaurant. No doubt was left in his mind that the gore belonged to his quail. Anguish swept over him. Some monster had roasted his quail and gobbled it up, he thought.

He gathered the bird's remains lovingly, dug a small pit in the open field behind the restaurant and laid them to rest. Then he recited the *fatihah* over the spot. At the restaurant he offered food to the poor, hoping the reward for the good deed would go to his quail.

If anyone inquired about the quail, Shahbaz would tell them, "It has attained martyrdom." Gilgit heard these words but pretended not to and

continued with his work.

He was overjoyed to see that his Tan-Tan had fully recovered and no longer suffered from his ailment. As a gesture of thanksgiving, Gilgit fed two beggars at his own expense. Shahbaz asked him why he didn't charge them for the food. "Khan, a little charity now and then is a good thing." Shahbaz kept quiet.

One day a fledgling mynah came flying from somewhere and dropped down right in front of Gilgit Khan just as he was taking the breakfast tray to some college student. He put the tray to one side, picked up the frightened chick and put it in the cage that was formerly the home of his employer's quail.

He nurtured the chick for a little over a month. By then it had grown quite plump and chirruped a lot. One day Tan-Tan wandered in, saw the chick and became restless: how could he reach it and chew it up?

Gilgit looked at the cage hanging from a hook on the wall and his Tan-Tan staring at the chick with such longing, but with no possibility of reaching it. Without another thought, Gilgit took the chick out of its cage, wrung its neck, plucked its feathers, and offered it to his darling dog.

Tan-Tan sniffed at the corpse of the plucked bird a couple of times, emitting a powerful sneeze, and took off.

Gilgit felt terribly sad. The same day, two college girls who regularly came to the restaurant for tea, and Gilgit cared the world about them, came in. Previously they always talked to him with lighthearted smiles; today, though, they seemed somewhat annoyed. One of them, the favorite of Gilgit Khan, asked him, "Why did you kill the mynah?"

Gilgit was confused for a moment but pulled himself together and replied, "*Khu*, I wanted to feed my dog."

"So did he eat it?"

"That swine ... he just sniffed it and let it be."

"So what did you gain by killing it? Before, you killed Khan's quail and fed it to him. Did he eat it?"

"Yes, he did," Gilgit replied proudly. "He even chewed up the bones."

Shahbaz Khan was standing nearby. The minute he heard this he whacked Gilgit on his neck with all his might. "You bastard ... now you're admitting it. Why did you keep denying it before?"

Gilgit kept quiet.

Both girls cracked up in resounding laughter. Gilgit didn't much care about the whack, but their laughter wounded him deeply.

Shahbaz Khan was beside himself with anger. The blow alone wasn't enough. He now assailed him verbally, unloading all the obscenities he knew on his employee. And finally, "Why do you love that Tan-Tan or

Chan-Chan so much, bastard. You call that thing a dog, huh! He's uglier than you, so ugly it turns my stomach!"

After the whack and the obscenities, Gilgit Khan went up to his hovel, his ears still buzzing with the girls' laughter. Tan-Tan was lying in a corner with his legs, which couldn't be more crooked, resting against the wall.

He thought for some time and then pulled out his jackknife and stepped toward the dog. A sudden thought made him snap the knife shut and put it back in his pocket. He called the dog to him lovingly and went out with him.

The train was fast approaching when the two reached the tracks. Gilgit ordered his loving dog to go stand right in the middle of the tracks. The animal obeyed his master.

The train was approaching quickly. Tan-Tan, planted in the middle of the tracks, was looking at Gilgit, his eyes brimming with loyalty. Gilgit glanced at himself. He felt his dog was infinitely better looking than he was.

When the train got close, Gilgit Khan quickly pushed Tan-Tan off the tracks, but in the process got caught himself. He was turned into minced meat. The dog sniffed at that pile of raw meat and started crying loudly in a heart-wrenching howl. □

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—*Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon*