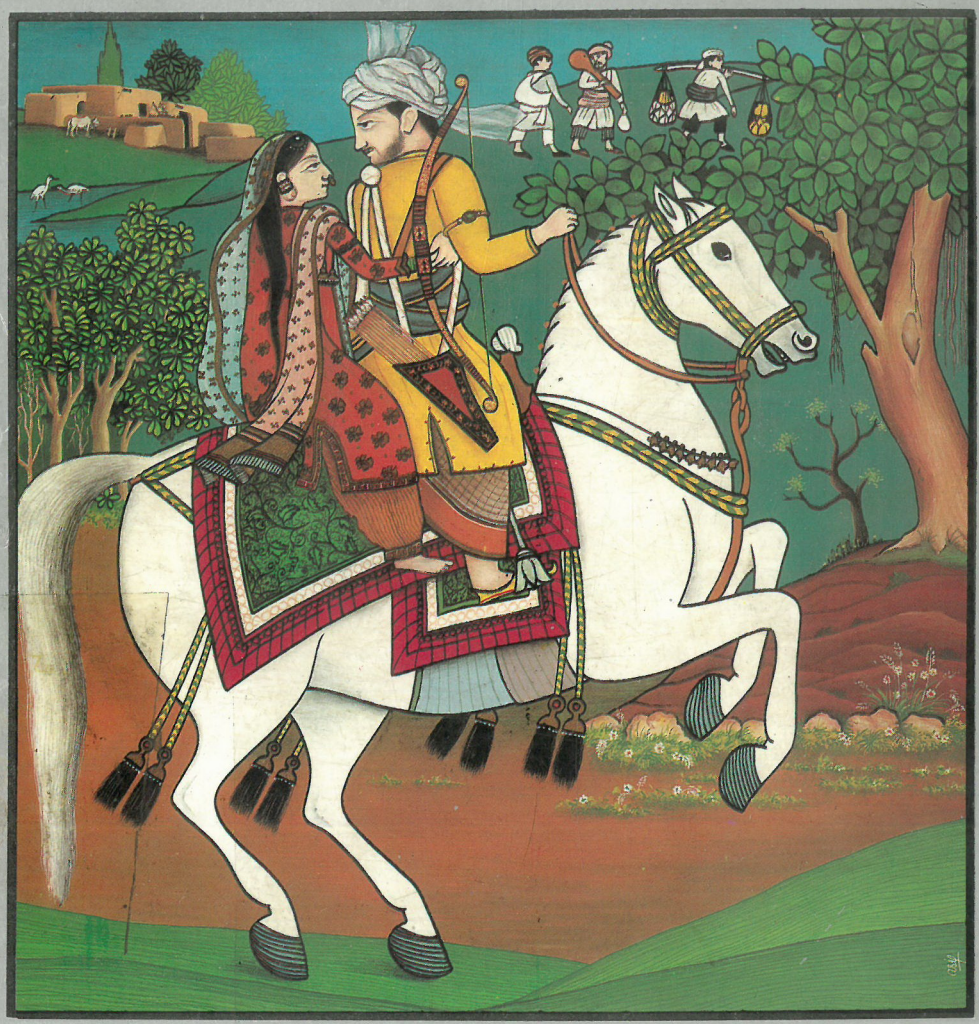
Folk Romances of Pakistan

Sayyid Fayyaz Mahmud



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Dedication

To my son
Dr.Sayyid Asad Mahmud

General Introduction

Folk romances like epics are the products of generations. In an epic we find a grand theme, the clash of nations, the conflict of civilizations, with a more than life-size hero or group of heroes, who have extraordinary powers. All this is expressed in a style rich and highly eloquent, even ornate. The origin of the action may have been based on a one-time really heroic figure. Gradually, the hero was endowed with more and more attributes. As time passed other heroic figures were attached to the central character and the theme expanded. So from individual to group, and from group to a clan, tribe or nation, or as is in Paradise Lost, from mankind to God, the theme expanded. The scope being thus enlarged, the theme began to reflect in all epics the highest ideals of a culture. Thus the epic no longer dealt with an individual, rather it began to embody the aspirations and ideals of vast groups.

Take for instance the Iliad of Homer, or the Mahabharta of Ancient India. The Iliad is apparently the story, the avenging action of the Achaians of Greece against the Trojans of north-west Asia Minor or Ionia, for the abduction of Helen, the wife of Menelaus, King of Sparta. In reality, it appears to be a war of the semi-barbaric Greeks (Achaians) against the more civilized rulers of Ionia, probably a racial conflict, perhaps a long feud over commercial rights about maritime trade, all allegorised in the form of heroic endeavour with the participation of super-natural powers. The Mahabharta, apparently the story of the rivalries of collaterals, the Kurus and Pandus is, to my mind the conflict between the old Aryan settlers and a new wave of invaders. The Pandus are more civilized, have better values, have lived long enough in an ancient land to imbibe high ideals of wisdom and statecraft. Higher qualities are in symbolised in each Panduan hero; sagacity and moral

fervour in Yudhishtar, the eldest; sheer strength in Bhim; gallantry and extraordinary military skill in Arjun, wifely devotion in Darupdi, incidently showing polyandric social practices. The Kurus represent the brute force and cunning. Lord Krishna, the incarnation of spiritual insight, the giver of exalted injunctions expressed in Bhagvat Geeta (The Lord's Song) sides with the morally advanced Pandus. In the end, the Mahabharta shows that wars of this nature, or of any other kind end in nothing but universal disaster. Embodied in the epic are a number of stories, the cream of the life of those distant times, of a high artistic order, enriching the main stream of national upheaval. Its canvas is too broad and the personnel too colossal for a folk romance.

The main difference between an epic and a folk romance, therefore, though both products of cumulative communal experience, hammered into shape and given final artistic form by some gifted bard is that, in the folk romance the centre of interest is some individual hero or heroine and not a tribe or a nation. The intensity of emotional experience, which gives birth to such a romance is really the main reason why such a romance has caught the imagination of generations. An epic (a true epic) is not the expression of one poet, rather it is the interpretation of a whole culture. And culture includes religious beliefs, social and moral codes and the courtesies of civilized behaviour. The ideal of a certain way of life is embodied in a hero, who becomes the symbol of that culture. A folk romance is also not a single poet's creation. Many strands go to the making of it. Generation after generation, additions are made to it with some aspect emphasised and some angle dissipated, a sort of artistic mutation working at and moulding the primary theme, till a complete picture is offered to the public by a more persuasive tongue or a person of more graphic imagination.

Let us look at the folk romances narrated in a more cohesive and a more integrated form in the pages that follow. The oldest story appears to be that of Puran Bhagat. This folk romance does not deal with romantic love. Its theme is an intriguing one and has attracted the

attention of many writers from the ancient times. It is a triangle of a father, son and young step-mother. This was first tackled by a anonymous writer of old times in ancient Egypt. In a papyrus was found the "Story of two brothers". The characters were Anpu, Bata and Anpu's wife. Bata the younger brother was a good lad vigorous, steady, hardworking, obedient and reverent. He ploughed, sowed, reaped, herded and garnered for his elder brother whom he respected and obeyed as if he were his father. Anpu's wife cast longing looks at the handsome younger brother, trying to seduce him. He repulsed her advances. She tore her clothes, scratched her face and made out that she had been assaulted. Anpu on learning what Bata was alleged to have attempted, tried to knife him on his return from the fields. But Bata, the cow-herd was warned by first one cow and then another, that Anpu was hiding behind the door with a knife. Bata fled. He swam across a river and was met by nine gods, who blessed him. Bata was rewarded for his goodness and became king and forgave his brother (Papyrus C. 1300 B. C Translated by F . L Griffiths and edited by the famous Egyptologist Sir William Flenders Petri, 1853-1942).

This theme was next taken up by the Greek dramatist Euripides (480-406 B. C.) in his play Hippolytus (428 B. C.). Hippolytus, the son of Theseus the famous King of Athens was assaulted by his step-mother Phaedra (daughter of King Minos of Crete), who complained to Theseus. Theseus in his anger called on his patron god Poseidion, the sea-god, to avenge him. Poseidion sent a bull from the sea who gored Hippolytus and killed him. Phaedra confessed her guilt and hanged herself.

We come next to an incident in ancient Indian history. Let me quote from Al-haj Maulvi Mohammad Hamid's "The Archaeological Museum and Monuments of Ancient Taxila" (Fifth Edition 1965 p. 43):"The memorial of Kunal's misfortune is the stupa which occupies a commanding position in the south of Sirkap".

"Huan Tsang describes this stupa as being 100 feet high. The

blind, he says, came here to pray and many had their prayers answered by the restoration of their sight. He then proceeds to narrate the story of Kunal, the elder son of Asoka (213-232) that Kunal's step mother Tishyarakshita fell in love with him and on his rejecting her advances, she induced Asoka to send Kunal as viceroy to Taxila. Later she forged a Royal despatch, sealing it with the seal of the Emperor's Teeth, while he slept, bringing accusations against the prince and ordering his eyes to be put out, the ministers shrank from carrying out the cruel order, but the prince insisted that the same must be obeyed. The prince then left Taxila with his wife and begged his way to the far off capital of his father, who recognized him by his voice and the strains of his lute, the vindictive queen was put to death and the prince's eye-sight was restored at Bodh-Gaya through the help of a Buddhist saint named Ghosha.

The incident bears such a close relation to Puran Bhagat's legend that one is persuaded to think that it may be the origin of the story. In Puran's tale his step-mother insists on his eyes to be torn from his head and brought to her; the executioner refuses to carry out this monstrous order and is punished. Puran is mutilated and recovers by the efforts of his friends (in my narrative) but through the prayers of a saint in the legend.

In the XVIIth century France, Racine the famous dramatist (1639-1699) wrote his celebrated tragedy Phedre (1677) on the same theme and some critics (Eric Bentley) think Racine did better justice to it than Euripides. Some thirty odd years ago an English historical novelist Mary Renault wrote two novels based on the adventures of Theseus and his winning of Phaedra (The King Must Die) and the tragic story of his son Hippolytus, his handsome son by a previous wife, in the sequel "The Bull from the Sea".

This would show that this sort of sex-triangle must have been a not uncommon phenomenon in all ages, though we cannot tell with surety whether this is a universal social abnormality or whether the

story has travelled like a folk-tale from one region to another except, of course the true life story of Asoka's son Kunal.

"Puran Bhagat" is a story and travail of a man who was born pure and without any sexual impulses or who had smothered it very early. He saw the light of day after much praying of his parents. His father Raja Salbahn was the ruler of upper Punjab in early eighth century. Sir Richard Temple, the famous antiquarian and author of "Legends of the Punjab" and other books, said in the introductory remarks to Legend No. 30 (Puran Bhagat) and his article on Raja Risalu in the Calcutta Review of 1884 p. 390) that it was Raja Salbahn and later his second son Raja Risalu who stopped the advances of Muslim forces under Mohammad bin Qasim and his successors, early in the 8th century, from further conquests. That may have been the reason why Puran's younger brother Risalu became a legendary hero.

But at the birth of Puran the astrologers and the Pundits prophesied that he would be the cause of great trouble and would hurt himself if he was brought up at the court. So he was sent away with nurses, attendants, teachers, priests and guards to a forest sanctuary, which had been the country seat and retreat of Raja Salbahn's father when the deceased Raja was given to devotions and yoga practices.

Puran grew up in peaceful surroundings and imbibed the tranquil qualities of nature. A very handsome lad, he was given to meditation and was fond of yoga exercises like his grandfather. Gradually, he got alienated from the bonds of flesh. When he was brought to the court at the age of sixteen, people were amazed at his fascinating face and figure, though he himself was unconscious of his attractions.

The Raja and his councilors were overjoyed to see the prince, so was his mother Rani Ichhran who had missed him so much. The second wife named Lunan was a creature given entirely to the demands of her ardent nature. When she heard of Puran's beauty she desired to see

him. Puran was asked to go to her and pay her respects as she was a second mother. But when Lunan saw Puran, she fell instantly, passionately and desperately in love with him and without any preliminaries wanted him to become her lover. Puran was shocked and ran away from her side. Lunan tried again to win his love but Puran was horrified at her demands. Nothing now could abate her burning passion or vindictive hatred. She insisted on dire punishment for Puran and succeeded in having him mutilated and flung in a blind well.

Puran escaped and became well again. He sought the famous saint Guru Gorakh Nath and became his disciple. The saint put him through a rigorous ascetic regimen but Puran won through. So the saint sent him to another beautiful and demanding queen, named Rani Sundaran. Puran was not tempted by either the riches or the love offered to him by this second beauty. The saint at last gave him joag admitted him to his fraternity and invested him with spiritual powers.

One last task the Guru set him through. He sent Puran to his birth-place, to right some wrongs. There with the help of four Sadhus the Guru sent with him, Puran took his abode in his old abandoned garden in whose blind well he had been flung years ago. The garden soon became green again and the well was drained. People heard of the new Guru who had come to the garden and made it blossom again. Soon suppliants began to come in flocks. The old gardener who had once tended the garden came and saw Puran. He went to the Raja and reported that a saintly person who resembled Puran had come and settled in the old royal garden and that people said he performed miracles.

The Raja also came and with him came a sobered and remorseful Lunan. They touched the Guru's feet and stood before him with folded hands. The Raja ventured to ask the guru if he was indeed Puran. Puran did not answer but asked to see the old Rani. Rani Ichhran who had taken to wandering after her bereavement was sought for, found and brought before Puran. Rani Ichhran had become half-blind from

weeping constantly for a long time. Puran and his associates restored her eyesight and she recognized Puran. Everybody begged Puran's forgiveness. He advised that people who had befriended him should be awarded, and prophesied that Lunan who was now genuinely repentant would bear a son who would become a famous warrior and ultimately a legendary hero. His name would be Risalu. After this, Puran went back to the hermitage of the great saint and spent the rest of his life in praying and meditation.

The story is obviously based on a true incident of which to this day many instances could be found, but the miraculous element added to it by one bard or another has made it a popular folk-romance.

The next folk-romance in this collection is "Hir and Ranjha". It is such a popular tale that it has caught the fancy of scores of poets of whom Muqbil and Warris Shah are more famous among the Punjabi poets. This must have been a very old story or legend for three reasons:

(a) Two poets, one in persian and the other a hindu writer, Damodar by name, wrote the story in the 16th century. Baqi Kolabi (d.1579) who came to the subcontinent in the days of Akbar the Great (1556-1605) wrote a mathnavi named Hir Ranjha during (1575-1579). Akbar who was known as Shah-i-Adil (the just king) is referred to as Adli Raja by Kolabi. Even Warris Shah writing in the XVIIIth century uses this label for the ruler of Multan. Damodar is not too well known but his Hir Ranjha is extant. The incidents are mainly the same. Only the emphasis is different. Both assume that everybody knows this popular romance. Though Said Saidi (1628-1658), another persian poet who wrote up this story says he invented the story himself. Another poet Chenabi attempted the story and wrote a mathnavi about it in the reign of Aurangzeb (1658-1709). He was a contemporary of Muqbil, the Punjabi poet.

(b) Though all poets mention the meeting of Ranjha with the Five Saints, of whom one is a prophet (Khawaja Khizer) and who blessed him and promised him his heart's desire, that is Hir. Ranjha goes to a Hindu saint, Guru Balnath for spiritual enlightenment and gifts. This indicates that the meeting with the Five Pirs (a popular legend) was interpolated and originally the story had either a pre-Islamic origin or was conceived when Hindu culture was predominant.

To this may be added a curious resemblance of the cardinal features of the romance with the legend of Krishna and his period of cow-herdship, his love and longing for Radha and his miraculous flute-playing. Deep indeed are the Wells of Days, as Thomas Mann says in the beginning of his great novel "Joseph and his Brethren". Krishna the ideal lover, the Lord of Life and the ultimate goal of all spiritual endeavour appears to take a new shape in Ranjha the ideal lover, the symbol of the god-head in the Kafis (mystical songs) of Madhu Lal Hussain. Consider the following two Kafis:

And the Kafis will show that Lal Hussain is using the name Ranjha as a symbol. It is a symbol of the Eternal Lover or the Eternal Beloved the goal of all mystics, the final accord with the Ultimate.

Kafi

Let people call me Ranjha now, only Ranjha!
Let no one call me Hir any more.
I called, "My Love! Oh my Love!
Till I became Ranjha myself.
The Beloved, I have sought I have found at last!
Says Hussain the simple, "It is the pure in spirit
Who find a WAY out of life's tangles".

Kafi

I also want to go to the Wake of Ranjha
Will any one go with me?
I beg people, I fall at their feet,
I find, that I have to go alone.
The current is deep and my dinghy is frail and old
And tigers are in ambush at the crossing.
If anyone were to bring me news of my Beloved
I would give him the rings off my hand!
My nights are spent in anguish and my body is weak
The wounds of Love given by the Beloved are so strange!
I her Ranjha is the Great Healer
Only the aches of my soul are so strange!
Says Hussain the humble faqir,
My beloved Master has sent a Call to me!

A study of these two Kafis written by Lal Hussain (1539-1593) shows that the name Ranjha must have become so familiar, so long-established in people's memory to have acquired symbolic value. Therefore, the story of Hir and Ranjha could not have been a contemporary incident. An age must have passed for the word Ranjha to have become a symbol of the god-head.

Let us now have a brief account of the legend. A handsome, dreamy, idealistic young man, the youngest of eight brothers, is deprived of his patrimony on the death of his father, a rich landlord. He had been the target of sneers and taunts of his sisters-in-law, as being a favourite of his father, he had not been trained for hard work in the fields. Moreover, being good by nature, he had earned their jeers as he would not pay any attention to the blandishments of some of his sister-in-laws, who taunt him constantly with the remark that if they were nothing in his eyes, let the world see if he can win for wife, the famed beauty of the Siyals called Hir. Ranjha who had, up to this time been

called by the pet name of Deedo, is fed up and leaves home.

After some adventures, including a meeting with the Five Saints, he meets Hir and they both fall in love at first sight. Hir, who is a very resourceful girl suggests that Ranjha should take service under her father, Mehr Chuchak. She presents Ranjha to her father, who would deny her nothing and Ranjha is engaged as a buffalo-herd. He is a gifted flute-player and playing his bansari, he charms man and beast. Soon the buffaloes follow him around. He tends them in a fertile sand-bar in the middle of River Chenab and Hir goes to him almost daily with rich food. The lovers live in a paradise of their own but cannot escape jealous eyes. One such person is Kaidu, the lame uncle of Hir. He reports Hir's doings to Mehr Chuchak who reprimands Hir.

Hir takes her revenge by burning Kaidu's hut and, with the help of her many companions, gives him a beating too. But this does not stop Kaidu's machination and he succeeds in rousing Hir's brothers and other members of the family who decide that Hir should be married off. This is done, in spite of a spirited defence by Hir. She bids a very tearful farewell to Ranjha who first blames her, them learns how Hir had been forced into this hateful marriage. Hir departs but refuses to have any nupital relations with her husband. She makes an ally of her husband's sister named Sehti, a fire-brand and a fighter, who is secretly in love with a Baluch lordling called Murad.

Ranjha does not despair. He goes to a Hindu saint, Guru Balnath, becomes his disciple, undergoes a rigorous discipline and ultimately wins the favour of the Guru, who at first refuses to admit Ranjha into the holy fraternity but relents later, promises Hir to Ranjha, gives him joag and makes Ranjha a jogi. And Ranjha with black rings in his ears, ashes rubbed all over him and clad in brownishred garments, the universal livery of these men of God who have renounced the world, goes forth to Hir's village.

At first he is repulsed by Sehti the audacious sister of Hir's

husband but is later accepted by her and she arranges a meeting of the lovers. On being promised the love of Murad by Ranjha, whom Sehti now accepts as a saint, she manoeuvres an elopement. Ranjha and Hir escape, are pursued, caught and brought before Adli Raja, the ruler of Multan who gives a decision in favour of Hir's husband and Ranjha is thrown in prison. There he uses his spiritual powers and sets fire to the town. The Adli Raja is now converted to Ranjha's cause and gives Hir to him. It is decided that Ranjha should go to his home town and bring back a ceremonious bridal procession. Ranjha agrees to do that.

In his absence Kaidu persuades the brothers of Hir to poison her rather than to suffer the disgrace of having their sister causing this scandal. Hir is poisoned and when Ranjha comes with the marriage procession, he is told that Hir has died. His heart breaks and he falls down dead on Hir's bier. They are buried in the same grave. A cursory glance at this outline will show that, it has all the hall-marks of a folk-tale, an imaginary tale, born of wish-fulfillment, based perhaps on a fragment of truth.

Consider the following points:

(a) The hero is youngest of eight sons of a rich man (it could have been the youngest daughter of a King).

(b) He is deprived of his patrimony by jealous brothers.

(c) He is forced to leave home.

(d) He goes in quest of an ideal (a princess, a treasure, a talisman, a fabulous Beauty).

(e) He is helped by Unseen Powers (saints/ jogis, gods or jinns).

(f) He serves an apprenticeship (as servant confidant, a supposed half-wit).

(g) He wins the object of his desire. (In the Tales of old Sind by C.A. Kincaid, Ranjha is a prince of Hazara, is flung out by his elder brothers, goes to win Hir, brings her back in triumph, overthrows his hard, oppressive brothers and gains the throne).

In the version popular in the Punjab, Ranjha looses his beloved and dies with her, after gaining her for a time. But like the folk-lore tradition, both Ranjha and Hir are buried in the same tomb and become immortal. This similarity with a folk-tale is another sign of the antiquity of this romance, or at least of its basic elements.

It may be repeated that if Ranjha and Hir had lived in the XVIth century as Madhu Lal Hussain's contemporary Damodar the Arora Hindu poet, who first versified the tale in a native language said, or as the Persian poet Baqi Kolabi who first wrote up the story in Persian both living in the reign of Akbar the Grand Moghul (1556-1605) intimated, the word Ranjha could not have acquired a symbolic value. It takes generations for a story to become first a legend and then a symbol. This alone shows that the story has deep roots.

Another point would perhaps bear consideration too. It has been a convention of folk literature that there is a two-way traffic between the Unseen World and the protagonists of a tale, drama or poem. We have seen how in the ancient Egyptian story of Anpu and Bata, nine gods came down to greet the good Bata. Saints and Pirs have thus an old tradition of making impact on human lives. In all Greek literature the Olympians have the same entry into the mundane life of human beings. A god solved a human tangle in the end and he was called Deux ex Machina. In "Hir and Ranjha", too though Ranjha has not yet merited any supernatural concern, he is met by the famous traditional Five Pirs, one of whom is the wandering Prophet Khizer. They bless him and promise him Hir and disappear from the scene, nor do they come to his rescue when later he is in trouble. And strange to say, for spiritual exaltation, high morale and miraculous powers he is indebted to a Hindu Saint. It is with the powers invested in him by Guru Balnath that Ranjha makes a headway. It appears, therefore, that the Balnath incident belongs to an original theme and the Five Pir episode is a later addition. This too points to the ancestry of the tale and it may be the truth as a folk-tale has no age.

Another feature of the folk-literature is the utter absence of cause and effect, or any pretense of realistic presentation of human behaviour. Of course the audience would not be interested in the why and wherefore of human conduct, or the everyday routine of life. They would only be interested in the high-lights. They would be thrilled if gods and jinns, jogis and pirs, saints and sadhus came unasked to help poor mortals or in answer to prayer. The more dramatic the entrance of a person of this order, the more pleased and thrilled would be the unsophisticated listeners. So either the minutae of everyday life or observance of psychological truth or analysis of motive, would be beyond the compass of the bards or the people, whose wishes and imagination gave, in the words of Shakespeare "to airy nothing a local habitation and a name".

We shall now retail in brief the stories of the other three romances.

Sohni Mahinwal

This is the shortest romance in this collection. It has fewer episodes and fewer snags, very little conflict and no heroic exploit. Yet it has all the elements of romance in it. It has strangeness added to beauty and intensity of feeling allied to extraordinancies of face, figure and spirit.

A noble hero comes out of a distant land, falls in love with a country maid, looses his all for her sake and wins her devotion. These incidents in themselves fulfil all the requirements of true romance. It now depends on the heroine to rise to the occasion and prove that she is no ordinary village maiden or a run-of-the-mill potter's slavey; even though her father is a famous Kuza-gar (maker of fancy earthenware). Sohni fulfils the role of the spirited heroine to perfection, though it must be confessed that she does not come to life in the most popular account of this folk-romance, that is, the poem of Fazal Shah.

There is however, a curious things about the name Mahinwal, the label given to the hero, because he become a buffalo herd. Dr. Lajwanti Rama Krishna in her book "Punjabi Sufi Poets" (latest edition by Ashajanak Publications, New Delhi 1973) on page 42 quotes the following Kafi of Madho Lal Hussain:

Oh! Mother! whom should I tell the story of the pains of separation?

I have been pierced to the point of madness by the thorns of my bereavement.

Whom should I tell O Mother ?

I wander from jungle to jungle in search of my Beloved.

My Mahinwal has not come !

Whom should I tell 0 Mother !

If I rake the smoke of my heart, burning as it does with pain.

It would be red hot at its centre

Whom should I tell 0 Mother !

Whom should Hussain the faqir of the Lord
Tell of the disinherited ones of the earth?
0 Mother Mine ! Whom should I tell all this?
(Punjab University Library MS No. 374 Kafi No. 9)

This would mean that like Ranjha, even the word Mahinwal was being used as a symbol of Divine Beloved in the days of Lal Hussain (1539-93). It may also indicate that the tale of Sohni Mahinwal has also a long background and it was given flesh and blood much later. The time indicated in the romance is the reign of Shah Jehan (1627-1658).

Sassi and Punnu

This romance is time-old but not time-worn. It is the old, old story of the Desert and the Sown. Myriads of actual contacts between the two worlds and the consequent human involvement, the recurring incidents of attraction and repulsion, of longing as well as prejudice are the background of this romance. Nothing could be more romantic than a desert prince the archetype of the Sheikh of modern European extravaganzas, falling in love with a washer-girl and pledging his family prestige and honour and even his life in the pursuit of ideal love. Therefore one cannot question any incident in this story, rooted as it is in the pulsating border between the Nomad and the Settler, between the vibrating horizons of the wanderers and the beckoning glamour of civilization.

As to who were the parents of the heroine who come from nowhere, lapped in the waves of a mighty river, a new Approdite born of foam, we need not bother much. Beauty always comes as a surprise and is always a mystery. It bursts into splendour, sometimes causing havoc and sometimes bestowing great happiness and is soon extinguished. This romance may be taken as an allegory which illustrates this age-old enigma.

One point may, however, be mentioned here. C.A. Kincaid, an old Indian civil servant and anthropologist, the author of "Tales of old Sind" (O.U.P - 1922) says in his version of the story named "Saswi and Punhu", which he collected from the Ghats of Sind that Saswi was the daughter of a Brahmin high priest of North Sind, who was foretold that if he had a daughter, she would turn muslim and marry a muslim. The Brahmin was so outraged at hearing this that he put his baby-daughter in a small box and floated it down the river.

Dr. M. Baqir in his excellent and scholarly books, "Punjabi Tales in Persian" 2 vols, published by the Punjabi Academy (1957) mentions four Persian mathnavis on the subject in vol 1. The first of them was

Dastur-i-Ishq (1723) by Munshi Joat Parkash, the second by Inderjit (1727) both Hindus and they give Jam Adam, the ruler of Bhambhore as the real father of Sassi. The other two writers of these Persian poems were Mahmud Hussain and Shahbaz (1735) and Farrah-Bakhsh Farhat who wrote his poem in 1840. These two also give Sassi a muslim father. But in Vol 2, Dr. Baqir discusses a mathnavi named "Zeba Nigar" by Mohammad Raza Razabi, who wrote his poem in 1643, in which he says that Sassi's father was a Brahmin priest. Obviously there must have been an old oral tradition of this nature in Sind, which Kincaid gathered two and a half centuries later. Razabi changes the names giving Sassi and Punnu muslim names but his story is obviously based on what he heard from a Ghat, like Kincaid. This indicates that even "Sassi and Punnu" may be a timeless legend. The best version of this glorious tale in Punjabi is of course by Syed Hashim Shah and in it Sassi is the daughter of Jam Adam.

Mirza Sahiban

Three authors have been consulted about this romance: Peeloo (or Pilu), Hafiz Barkhurdar and Malik Mohammad Ashraf. Peeloo's poem is the oldest. It was discovered by Capt. (Later Sir) Richard C. Temple, the author of "Legends of the Punjab". Temple heard it from the Ghats of Jullundar. He translated it into English too. It is fragmentary yet, but as the Americans say "it packs a punch". Hafiz Barkhurdar's poem is long, detailed and has a folk-tale tinge, as birds and beasts speak and participate in the narrative. Malik Ashraf's poem is of recent days, but it lacks the sternness of Peeloo and the humanity of Barkhurdar.

Temple says in his Legends (Vol III Legend No. 39) that as a result of the abduction/elopement of Sahiban the Mahinis (Siyals) and the Kharls entered on a long feud which has lasted for centuries. It is doubtful whether the feud was the result of elopement or the story emerged out of long feud by means of the creative imagination of a gifted bard, assisted by later generations of minstrels.

"Mirza and Sahiban" is really the romance which is a true child of reality. Stark and rock-like, it has the glow of diamonds on it and yet is soft like the petal of a rose, with fresh dew-drops giving it a rain-bow tint.

Mirza Khan the hero is a creature of flesh and blood, born of the soil the land. A young blade, fearless of mien, peerless in a fight, an adventurous leader of a gang of young men, boastful of his skill in arms, a famous marksman, raiding caravans playing Robin Hood and seldom out of mischief. Loved by the young, petted by the old, he is sent to the North of the Chenab Valley to his mother's folk to get him tamed under the tutelage of his stern maternal uncle, Khewa Khan the chief of the Mahini (Siyal) clan, and his two redoubtable elder sons Mir and Shamir. There is also in the village Mirza's aunt and Khewa Khan's younger sister Beebo, a most affectionate person.

Here Mirza is sent to the maktab in the mosque and he meets daily and is attracted to Sahiban, Khewa Khan's very pretty daughter. They also meet at Beebo's house which has been a second home to Sahiban so far, and where Mirza Khan is now lodged. Gradually they fall in love, aided and approved by aunt Beebo. Two years of this and everybody knows where the wind lay.

Sahiban's mother, a virago has a deep prejudice against Mirza's family because she was once betrothed to Rehmoo Mirza's uncle on the father's side and Rehmoo broke the engagement having heard of the viperous tongue of his betrothed. She is violently opposed to any kind of understanding between Mirza and Sahiban. So Mirza is sent home but he obtains a promise from Sahiban to send for him if she was in trouble of any sort.

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As soom as Mirza's back is turned, Sahiban is betrothed to Tahir, Khan a section of the Jadhar clan, an allied branch of the Siyals and actually the people of Sahiban's mother.

Sahiban sends a message to Mirza who comes dashing to the rescue in spite of his own family's advice and upbraidings. In his pride he vows to win Sahiban despite the opposition of the whole Mahini clan. And in fact he succeeds in eloping with Sahiban. He has been without sleep for two days and two nights; he had ridden hard over eighty miles he had now come away with Sahiban but he was tired. About twenty miles away from Khewa Khan's village he comes to a wood of shady jand trees. It is night and he gets down to rest. He goes to sleep asking Sahiban to keep watch. After a time Sahiban hears distant hoof-beats. She fears these hoof-beats are of the rapidly approaching horsemen of the Mahinis. She tries to awaken Mirza. He wakes and says she should not be afraid because he has a hundred arrows in his quiver and he would lay low a hundred Mahinis, be they her valiant brothers, Mir and Shamir. Sahiban is desperate and tries again and again to awaken Mirza. Mirza opens his eyes, says something or brags a little and goes to sleep again.

Meanwhile, a horseman comes up. Sahiban shakes Mirza awake. Mirza takes his bow and shoots the horseman down even though there is not enough light in the dark wood. The horseman falls. It is her elder brother Shamir. Mirza goes to sleep against and Sahiban fearing that Mirza would thus kill all her people, hangs his quiver on a high branch, so that when the Siyals finally surround Mirza and Sahiban and Mirza gets up to reach for his quiver, he finds it out of his reach. The Siyals shoot arrow after arrow at Mirza who takes his stand against a jand tree but he is without a weapon. An arrow pierces him and then another. He cries "Sahiban where is my quiver? You have at last sided with your brothers and betrayed me." She denies it vehemently, but more arrows pierce him and he dies while still standing against the tree. The Siyals set fire to the tree and burn Mirza down. They catch Sahiban and hang her. It is Mirza's mare, lean Bakki which comes riding disconsolately to Danabad (Mirza's home). She has had scratches all over; there is an arrow fixed into her saddle, but exhausted as she is she comes home. Mirza's people thus learn that Mirza is no more.

A true tragedy. As Peeloo (or Pilu) the poet it, "Death came to Mirza (as it must come to all) but Mirza's pride had something to do with his death".

Pride was the tragic flaw of Mirza.

Entirely true to life, without a shade of fantasy or cloying sentiment, this romance has all the hall-mark of a masterpiece.

S.F.Mahmud

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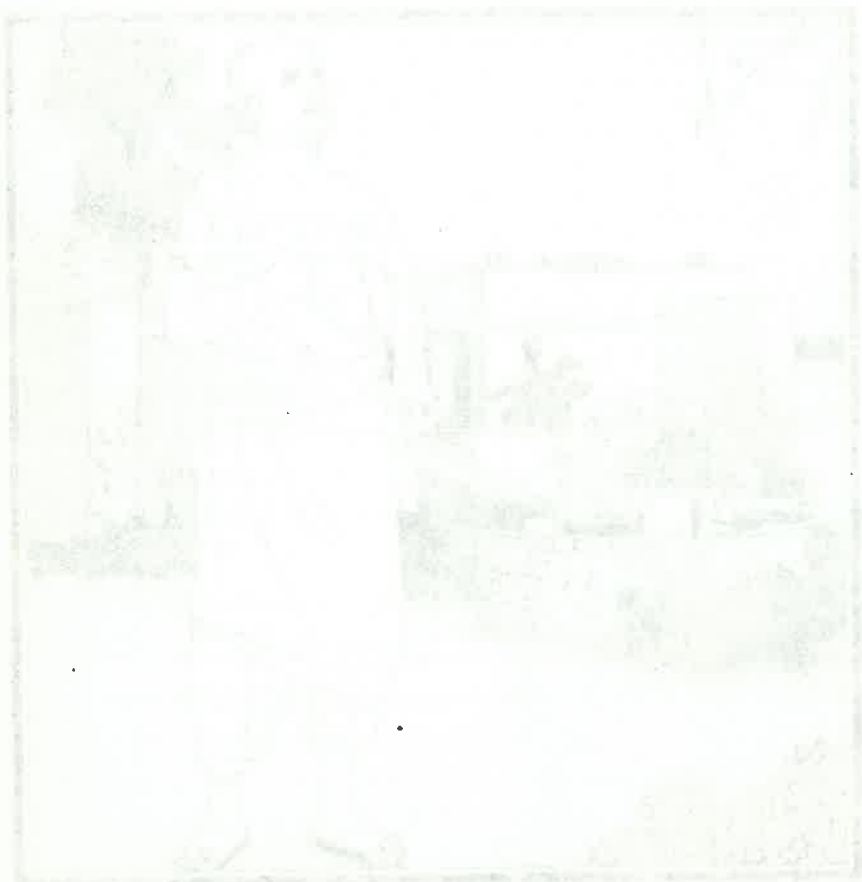
PURAN BHAGAT



I

Two young Sadhus, Madho and Ganesh, were strolling along the bank of Tavi, the stream that flows outside Sialkot. It was early morning. The young anchorites had come from Tilla Jogian (Mount of the Jogis) that lay on the left bank of the stream, a matter of two miles from Sialkot. They both had shaven heads and their bodies were smeared with ashes. It was early summer and they wore light clothes. They walked in a sedate manner and did not talk much. Each was lost in his own thoughts. They both were dear friends.

After a time Madho broke the silence and said: "Ganesh! I see that you have been more than usually quiet for some days. What is the matter?"

His companion smiled at this and replied: "No! my brother! not unusually! I find that our ascetic practices are perhaps not proving very beneficial to me".

"How?"

"Well! you see Madho! We study, we mediate, we practice yoga; to find what? Peace of mind? Spiritual exaltation? Liberation of inner self from the bonds of flesh? Illumination? Call it any thing. But do you really think a true spiritual excellence can be acquired this way? Is it a matter of ritual and practice? Is it a mental or moral skill? In a nutshell, I ask myself that can holiness be acquired?

"Ganesh! I did not know you were being disturbed by doubts. Surely you have faith in our way of life, in the guidance of our Guru Dev. Surely you don't think, we are cheats and pretenders".

"No! No, Madho! I don't mean any such thing. I have myself chosen this ascetic way of life, because I was not happy with what I saw around me. Brothers quarrelling over property, friends betraying friends for gain, women given to infidelity, nobody bothering about honesty in itself, or goodness as an end by itself. Everything was being weighed and measured with a view to profit in this life or the next. The world was not a beautiful phenomenon. We learnt a lot in our Dharamsala but did we ever find goodness, true unsullied, unprofitable goodness?".

"Well! Ganesh you do ask some awkward questions. But if you are right, what is the purpose of life? One must live somehow. Either in the turmoil and battle of life or in peace here"

"Yes! Madho, like the simple honest fellow you are, you make everything simple. But are there not rivalries among us? Are not some of us more assiduous in pleasing the Guru Dev, than in seeking spiritual calm. That peace, that uplifting of the spirit which should be our aim. I don't want to be a spiritual weed. I don't want to vegetate physically or spiritually, but I do not know how to achieve that complete mastery over self, that complete self-possession which is the core of saintliness".

"Ganesh! you are ambitious and that is worldliness, and yet you are longing for calm, inward peace, and spiritual non-attachment. Are there any persons who are given this spiritual gift? Is it not to be acquired by these ascetic exercises which are our code; although it may take years".

"Well Madho! you may have been right but there have been persons in this world who were sort of born saints".

"Can you quote any person in the near past, not in antiquity. We have heard all sorts of legends of saints flying on winged sandals and stopping floods with a raised palm and even raising the dead".

"Well! I don't know, but recently I have been reading about a saint of this area, who must have been a special kind of person to have given rise to a cult".

"Who was that?"

"Why! don't you know? I am talking about Puran Bhagat. Who was, I think, a born saint".

"Why a born saint?"

"Because from very birth he was secluded from others and found time for meditation and had inherent quality in him to be able to withstand all temptations even when a mere boy, with no Guru to inspire him or infuse him with holiness".

"Have you checked the legend?"

"I have done my best to do so and I think it is a genuine story. Puran was pure in spirit. He must have been born with a pure spirit. His sort of purity could not have been instilled in him by a teacher or acquired by yoga so early".

"Can you tell me his story in detail?"

"I think I can do that as I have thought over it for a long time."

II

"You see Madho" began Ganesh, "it appears that at one time, how long ago, one cannot tell, at Tilla Jogian where our Ashram is now, there lived a great saint. At least that is what the tradition says. He is now remembered as Guru Gorakh Nath. He is said to have great

spiritual powers. In fact the legends relating to North Punjab all contain mentions of this saint. He is said to have come to the aid of helpless people and seldom refused a supplication. It is said that he came with a band of disciples from the north and settled here. From here he stretched his hand over vast distances and came to the rescue of people in dire straits. The Raja of Upper Punjab in those days was Salbhan. His seat of government was at Sialkot. He was famous for his prowess in arms and his wealth. He, like most heroes of legends, had no issue, so he came to Guru Gorakh Nath. He had heard like everybody else that the Tilla became green when the Guru selected it for his base. Trees grew around. Dry wells became full of water and people flocked to the Tilla. They came and bowed low before the Guru and begged for one favour or another. They bought presents and it was not long before the land around ran with milk and honey. At one side of the Tilla was a garden which was so rich in fragrant shrubs and glowing flowers that the whole Tilla smelled like a rose-garden. To this place came Raja Salbhan with a royal retinue but was so awed by the exalted state of the Guru that he too prostrated before him. The Guru seemed to know what the Raja wanted. He received the Raja kindly and said "Salbhan we have heard of your justice and bounty, your sympathy for the downtrodden and your readiness to go to the help of the prosecuted. Your wishes will be fulfilled, but there is danger in hasty judgements. You should beware! The Raj Kumari of Uday Nagar is your true mate, but beware of temptations."

The Raja was rejoiced at the blessing, remembering the good part and forgetting the warning. He thought he at least was never hasty in giving judgements, and as for temptation, what could tempt him? He would soon have a wife recommended by the Great Guru and reputedly a great beauty. He desired nothing else. So he went back contended.

He soon made preparations for a bridal party. It was an escort composed of his nobles and his best army officers. It was a splendid show. The whole procession looked like a gilded stream, so costly were the raiments of the nobles and as was customary those days, many

jewels were worn by the Raja and his nobles. The horses had saddles, bits and reins studded with gold and silver and the sumpter mules carried gifts equal to the whole treasury of a minor kingdom. A joyous ride it was to Uday Nagar.

"And here is a diversion" continued Ganesh, "normally nothing could happen to this peaceful procession but legend has embroidered the tale with extraordinary omens. It was of course a well known fact that Raj Kumari Ichchran, whose suit Raja Salbhan was pursuing was a proud beauty, who had rejected many a suitor. The legend said many Raj Kumars had died for love of her and that she was pitiless and so on. Raja Salbhan is supposed to have been warned by birds and beasts that he was taking a great risk, that nothing good would come of this mission and that he would rue the day he would marry the Raj Kumari. But I think this was the result of a hindsight, which afterwards was made into a prediction. Actually, what happened was that Salbhan married Ichchran and brought her home. Further that in a year's time she gave birth to a son whose face, they said, shone like the sun. The legend added another miracle to the birth. Ichchran said that it appeared that Surya, the sun-god had come down and settled in her lap. There were great rejoicings all over the kingdom. The Raja gave away untold wealth to the Brahmins and free food and drink was provided to everybody for a month. The baby was named Puran".

III

"Rani Ichchran sought a noted pundit. She begged him to see in his books and tell what sort of son was born to her. The Brahmin went into a trance whispering Ram! Ram! Ram! all the time. After a time he raised his head and said: "Raniji! Be happy. Your son is blessed. He has come into existence as Hanuman was born to Anjini, as Ram was born to Jasrath, but I see a cloud howering over his life, though in the end he shall emerge as the sun rises in the east piercing the thick veil of clouds on the horizon.

The Raja in his own way celebrated the birth of Puran. He gave generously to Brahmins and the commoners. Everybody in the kingdom was happy. Astrologers and soothsayers were summoned as was the custom and the Raja asked them to cast Puran's horoscope. Astrologers, soothsayers, Brahmins, yogis all bent their minds to the task. They worked for hours but when one finished his calculations, he looked up and kept silent. A silence reigned in the hall, where they had made their calculations. The Raja would come, stare at them, but they kept looking down and were silent. At last the Raja lost patience and ordered them to tell him what was worrying them. The oldest and most venerable among them took heart and spoke for them all. He said, "Rajaji be not annoyed. We all have done our best. We have compared our findings. There is little doubt about the result. All of us have come to the conclusion that the Raj Kumar is an exceptional child. Highly gifted. An elect among men. A light in the darkness, but he is ill-fated. He should be kept away from the court and the royal household. There is danger for him in this environment".

The Raja was puzzled. He asked: "Then what should I do?" They consulted each other, and again the oldest among them made bold to say: "Maharaj! what we recommend is difficult and may be painful to you and the Maharani but the prince should be brought up, away from here, because for him danger lurks in this environment. You have many forest palaces, all well-equipped. Let the prince be nourished there, trained like a prince both in knowledge and manly skills. He is specially gifted and there is nothing that he will not learn quickly, but this mundane world will perhaps not be very attractive to him. We cannot foretell correctly, but he will have trouble and suffering if he enters this world too early. In the end, we see, he will triumph, but there is agony of some sort in store for him. We can say no more, because we do not see what kind of agony. Truth will, however, prevail in the end. Be comforted therefore. One word more. In the matter of this horoscope of the prince, we have decided to accept no fee or reward".

IV

"The Raja was greatly puzzled. He neither understood the involved predictions and fears of the pundits, nor their decision to take no compensation. Normally the pundits and the astrologers, the soothsayers and the wise-men were not satisfied with small, even large benefices. In any case he consulted Rani Ichchran and they decided to act on the advice of the council of the pundits. Rani Ichchran was secretly happy because her pundits had predicted a glorious future for the prince, though he had first to undergo some hardship, she thought, every human being has to suffer now and then, but if the end was good, what matter the hardship? So they settled on a compromise. They would have the prince brought away from the court and the royal household as they had been warned, but they would not hide him from the light of the sun".

"The Raja," continued Ganesh, "had a grove of trees outside Sialkot. It was a large grove. Almost a small forest. In the middle was a fairly large clearing, where the father of Raja Salbhan had built a retreat for himself. He had built here a magnificent palace, with many courtyards, large halls and well-furnished rooms. There were basements too to go to in summer as they were deep enough to keep cool. But arrangements were made for light and ventilation. There were gardens around and a small canal ran through them to provide fresh water for the gardens and lawns and to keep the fountains playing. It was a very quiet place. Salbhan's father was given to meditation and yoga exercises. Here the baby prince was brought, with nurses and attendants, servants and all paraphernalia of a well-organized household".

Here Madho broke in: "Who suckled him?" he asked "Or was he brought up on fairy food?"

"No Madho! There seems to be nothing mysterious here. A lady attendant of Rani Ichchran, a buxom full-breasted young woman was

found to have enough milk in her breasts to suckle her own baby and prince Puran. She was sent to the hidden palace along with other servants and here Puran grew up. He had other children of his age to play with, especially his foster-brother, and go about in the vast interior of the palace. Do not think Madho that he was a lonely child. In fact when at the age of four he began to learn his letters, he had quite a few playmates to accompany him. Learned Brahmins came and started Puran on a systematic course of studies. If he learned faster and had a quicker understanding, and an insight which amazed his teachers, nobody envied him. He was so gentle and friendly to all. He never tried to lord it over his fellow-students and playmates. If ever there was a difference, out would come his gentle smile which was irresistible. Somehow it melted anger in others and gave them a warm feeling, a feeling of belonging. So grew Puran and his teachers were not surprised when even in his early teens, he began to show a great zest for metaphysical studies. The Upnishads were his favorite studies. And when in his fourteenth years he discovered the cell where his grandfather did his yoga exercises and sat in meditation for hours, Puran began to copy him. At first his mentors tried to dissuade him, as they thought he was too young for any rigorous practice, but since Puran would only answer their objections, with a winsome smile, they desisted, especially as they saw that Puran seemed to take to these meditative yoga exercises as a duck takes to water. And so Puran besides learning to ride, to shoot with a bow and arrow, to wield a sword, also learnt to subject his body to abstentions. He kept fasts, at first for a day, after a time for two days and later still for three days at a time. He would suspend his breath for longer and longer periods besides. And yet he was in other ways as normal as any boy of his age. Only now and then there shone a light in his eyes which made others blink. At such times, he appeared to be in a waking trance, as if he was in communication with another world. This went on for two years till Puran was sixteen and the long period of his seclusion and estrangement was to be over. Everybody knew that soon prince Puran would be summoned to the capital. And it was not long before the call came. A company of nobles

arrived with princely raiment and gifts for the prince and preparations were made for his departure".

V

"Sixteen years had passed and much had happened in that time. In fact the whole atmosphere of the court had changed. Rani Ichchran, who had been a gay young Rani, fond of song and dance, of fun and festivals had gradually become a gloomy, even a grim old lady. She had taken to religion and her palace rang now, not with the sound of cymbals and sitars but of hymns and religious chants. She still welcomed the embraces of her husband, but as a duty and not out of love. Especially as Raja Salbhan had taken to wile a young woman of low caste, who though a ravishing beauty was a woman who had no inhibitions, who flaunted her beautiful figure in semi-transparent clothes and bathed in her palace pool with nothing on. No doubt there were only her maids around, but still it was not worthy and there was a whisper around that she claimed to be an apasra from Lord Indra's court in her previous life. And some favourities of her even reported to Rani Ichchran that the new Rani whose name was Lunan claimed to be really an apasra and above human restraints. But she was so lovely that Raja Salbhan did not pay any attention to such whispers. In fact he laughed at Rani Lunan and said that she was really worthy of Lord's Indra's court."

"How and where did Raja Salbhan meet this extraordinary woman?" asked Madho.

"Well there are two versions in the legend of Prince Puran, about this lady. One is that she was the daughter of the royal gardener who was a cobbler by caste, a very low caste indeed. By an extraordinary chance, as it happens once in a hundred years or more, he had a lovely daughter. Not only was she extremely good looking, she was also lively young sprite, whose whole body was in a dance all the time. A bold

young hussy who cared for nobody and had no respect for father, mother or any elder".

"Yes! that is all right! Now and then, or rarely such a creature appears in the world and brings pain, misery and destruction in her wake" retorted Madho the ascetic.

"May be, may be" replied Ganesh, "I don't know, but in this legend she did play havoc with Puran's life".

"All right! Ganesh. Let us have the story. Give us both the versions".

"Well! the first and the more fantastic of the two is that Raja Salbhan had been out on a hunt and got separated from his company. So he rode home by himself and coming to the royal gardens stopped for a drink of water. Coming to the well he found a young girl drawing water, but what first surprised and then intrigued him, was the sight of a girl drawing water and swaying her body in a most fascinating manner, especially when from the corner of her eyes, she noticed the arrival of the Raja. Raja Salbhan got down from his horse and came to the well. At this the girl giving the final pull to the rope pulled up a pail of water and putting it on the coping turned to him. She joined her hands and putting them between her surging breasts bowed to him in a manner which could charm a saint".

"What poetry"! exclaimed Madho.

"No! No! Madho" returned Ganesh, "Not poetry". The Raja was dazed. He asked: "Who are you?" She replied: "Maharaj! I am an apasra!" A mischievous smile lurked in her twinkling eyes.

The Raja asked in a most surprised tone: "Apasra?" "Yes, Maharaj!" answered the enchantress.

"But how are you here then?"

"My Lord"! said the siren, "We apasras are permitted now and then to visit the world of human beings. A few of us flew down and seeing this wonderful garden alighted. We saw the lotus pool and thought of having a bath. The rule, Maharaj! is that on such visits, an apasra cannot touch anything, human, animal or vegetable except of course under orders. Unfortunately I swam near a lotus flower and my hands touched it. The result was that when I came out to resume my clothes, I found that my body had become heavy and I could not fly so here I was stranded. But your mali (gardener) took pity on me and adopted me, so I am now known as his daughter".

"When she was spinning out this yarn, the mali came along and seeing the Raja talking to Lunan who was swaying her body in a provocative manner, fell on his knees and joining his hands cried: "Maharaj! Maharaj! Please have mercy. My daughter Lunan is a very pert girl. She should be on her knees before you and I find her talking to you in that brazen manner"! And turning to his daughter, he shouted "Go inside you shameless baggage". Lunan smiled boldly at the Raja and taking her pail of water went into her quarters, walking in an idle, slow manner, exaggerating the swing of her full backside".

Madho laughed at this description and said: "She must have been a witch to affect you in this manner".

Ganesh replied: "No, no! You don't understand. I am only repeating the legend and these details have a significance as you will see".

"But you haven't told me the second version".

"Oh! Yes! The other story is that the Raja came to the well to drink water and found a bewitching girl swaying rhythmically as she was pulling up the pail. The Raja asked for water and the girl, making a

devastating of her charms, replied: Maharaj! I cannot offer you water as I am your mali's daughter and he is a chamar (cobbler) by caste. We are of the lowest caste and a great Raja like you cannot and should not take water from the hands of a girl of such low birth"! The Raja was fascinated by her coquettish manner and was for prolonging the talk when the mali came up and falling on his knees begged the Raja's pardon and sent the girl away. The Raja who had been sort of bewitched, went again and again to the garden and at last asked for the hand of Lunan from her father, who was stunned at the turn of affairs. In the end however, the Raja prevailed on the mali and married Lunan. So infatuated was he with her that he neglected his proud first Rani who would not meet the low-born Lunan. The result was estrangement and Rani Ichchran turned to her gods and gradually became a recluse. This was the state of affairs when Prince Puran was brought in triumph to his father's court".

VI

"There were shouts of joy "Raj Kumar Ki Jai" (Victory for the Crown Prince) and everybody turned to have a look at the heir to the throne. And Prince Puran was worth looking at. Extremely good looking, with a serene, confident and happy look on his face, Puran looked at everything with a sort of affection. Whosoever met his eye, felt glad. His smile seemed to enter the hearts of people. The same effect was noticed by observant eyes, when Puran was brought before the Raja. Salbhan greeted his son with joy, rose and embraced him, led him to a gold throne on his right and exclaimed: "Gentlemen! Behold the Crown Prince! My son Puran". There were loud exclamations of joy at this. Drinks were served and after a while the proud Raja turned towards his arch-priest, and the scholarly pundits, and asked them to test Puran's educational attainments. Puran answered all their questions in a calm and unruffled manner. However abstruse the question, Puran was not flustered".

"The Raja was pleased. He asked "how about your skill in arms, my son"? Puran answered: "Father! rest assured. When the occasion arises, you will not find me wanting". "How about your physical well-being? You appear to be delicate for a rajput"! Puran smiled and said: "More or less the same as others". "Is that so?" cried the impatient Raja, "When I was your age I could bend this rod of office and straighten it. Can you do that?"

"Puran still smiled and said in the same serene manner, "that should not be difficult Maharaj!"

"All right" cried the by now annoyed Raja who was rather abashed at the utterly calm self-possession of a mere boy, he cried, "Try it".

"Every one in the court was surprised at this. They all knew the tempestuous character of their ruler, but this questioning, which looked like harassment, puzzled them".

"Puran, was undisturbed however. He took the golden rod of office, looked at it for a moment in deep concentration and then took it in both hands, bent it double effortlessly and then with a jerk straightened it and offered it to his father. The entire court shouted for joy, though Raja Salbhan was rather chagrined".

"Refreshments were served at this time and during the friendly chit-chat that followed, a venerable pundit whispered something into the ears of the Raj Mantri. This diplomat finding the Raja in a softened mood begged permission to make a suggestion. On being given the go ahead, he said: "Maharaj! it is now months since the Raja of Kiratpur sent his chief Brahmin with the offer of the hand of the Raj Kumari Kamla a known beauty, and a very good-natured maiden, for Prince Puran, who the whole country knew would come out of seclusion, ready to face the world, on his sixteenth birthday, which is today. Why not ask the Prince to accept the offer?"

"The Raja raised his eye-brows and said frowningly: "Why ask the Prince? He does not know anything of the world yet. It is a good match. I had already decided in my mind to accept it". The Raj Mantri however requested firmly that the Prince should be asked. But when the proposal was made to Puran, he was shocked. More. He was startled. He was however no hasty customer. He shut his eyes for a few moments and appeared to commune with himself. Then he opened his eyes and looking straight at the Raj Mantri and said firmly: "Shri Mantri Ji, I have no intention of marrying anybody. I am half-way through my yoga exercises and until they are complete, I cannot take part in anything worldly".

"What is that"? spluttered the Raja.

"The Prince looked at his father in a patient and serene manner and said: "Maharaj! I cannot yet take any part in worldly affairs. As for marriage, it is out of question. I am perhaps not made for family life". The Raja was first angry, then exasperated, then impatiently silent. The atmosphere of the court changed. There appeared to be thunder and lightning in the air. But the Raj Mantri soothed the Raja and said, "Maharaj! there is plenty of time. We have rather flustered the Prince. Let him go and see his mother who is as much in favour of the match as we. I think she may persuade the Prince". The Raja smiled again and dismissing the court asked Puran to go and pay his respects to his mother. "We shall" he added "talk of this again as of other important matters of state". The Prince bowed to his father, the Raj Mantri, to the Chief Brahmin and other senior nobles and calmly walked out of the Court Hall."

VII

"Outside was waiting his foster-brother, Ramoo. Ramoo a sturdy young man was the other baby, her own, which Puran's wet-nurse had suckled. His father was a junior military commander in the Raja's forces

and a big landlord besides. Ramoo had been brought up with Puran and had been a constant companion of the prince from the earliest days. But there was a difference. Where as Puran though a healthy and well-built boy, had been of a contemplative type, Ramoo was an essentially out-door youngster. His muscles rippling like cables, he could run, ride, climb, jump, swim better than any other boy in the bustling jungle palace, where Puran had been sequestrated. Above all he was utterly devoted to Puran, who treated him and loved him like a brother. They had been almost inseparable, except for the deep meditative periods to which Puran had subjected himself since his fourteenth year. But this had made no difference to Ramoo or Puran. They were still all but twins. Now Ramoo got hold of Puran and looking at him said: "Brother! something the matter"? He had seen a frown on Puran's face, which was usually serene and unruffled. Puran smiled and the frown disappeared, but Ramoo was not satisfied. He said, "All right! later. Now where? To your mother? I have found her palace. Let us go and pay our respects to her, but I warn you, there is a rival here. A girl of very low caste whom the Raja has recently married. A brazen type, from what I learn, and a dangerous one too".

"Oonh, Oonh"! said Puran and smiled.

"I am serious, brother. From what I gather, there is something sinister about this lady. But never fear, we shall face it together".

"Oh! I knew that" replied Puran.

"At this stage Madho asked Ganesh: "Tell me Ganesh, how do you know all this"? Ganesh replied: "You see, I was interested in the legend and collected all that was known about it and I put it together. Of course I had to add a word here and there to link up the details". "Yes! I understand. All right, carry on. Tell us what happened to your hero". Ganesh laughed at this and said: "Not my hero, Madho. He was a great saint from all accounts".

"Well, the two young men went up to Rani Ichchran's palace. They were announced. Everybody appeared to know who Puran was. There were smiles on all faces and a spirit of joy pervaded the air. Rani Ichchran, now middle-aged and gray of hair rose from her couch and opened her arms. Puran bent low to touch her feet, but the Rani raised him and pressed him to her heart, kissing his forehead, his eyes, his hair. Puran himself lost his calm air and was visibly agitated. After a while when the Rani had asked him a thousand questions about his long exile and appeared satisfied with what she heard and saw, she asked: "Are you alone"? Puran sort of woke up and said: "Oh! how bad of me? I have left my brother outside".

"Your brother"? asked the surprised Rani.

"My foster-brother, Mataji (dear mother). He is like a twin to me. He is my other self. He is the body if I am the spirit. May I call him in"?

"Certainly" replied the Rani "if he is that dear to you". Puran said: "He is Mataji, he is. You will see for yourself" and he went out to bring Ramoo with him.

"Ramoo (Ram Singh) bowed very low before the Rani, who saw an upstanding young man, straight as an arrow, with an eagle eye and a bold look. She spoke affectionately to him: "Ramoo you are Puran's foster brother, so you are like a son to me. Please consider me as your second mother". Ramoo was overwhelmed. He said: "Maharaniji, I am honoured". The Rani smiled and said graciously: "Not Maharaniji! Call me Mataji as Puran does. He says you are his twin, so you must behave like a son to me" and she laughed. Her laughter had not been heard in these chambers for years".

"Later in the evening, the three sat together at their evening meal and talked of what had happened at the court in the morning. When the talk of marriage came up, the Rani said: "I know Raj Kumari

Kamla. She is a good girl and quite pretty. She would suit you son". But Puran said: "No! Mataji, I am not yet ready for marriage. I have to finish my yoga training. I don't know, how I would feel after that. Sometimes I feel as if I have no substance as I meditate".

"That is all right son. Your grandfather was given to these spells too. Of course your father is a different type, but I won't press you. It is enough to have you with me. We will manage to delay our answer".

"But Mataji, I hear father has married again and for what Ramoo has picked up she is a peculiar sort of person".

"Peculiar! May the gods help you. She is an abandoned creature. Half a day she sprawls on a silken bed, semi nude, and she does not care if the servants see her like that. She is, I learn, utterly shameless and without any restraint".

"A pity, Mataji, because father wants me to pay my respects to her tomorrow".

"No! My son! No! She is a witch. I have a premonition that she will bring disaster yo you".

"What can harm me"? replied Puran. "If you are my real mother as your bore me, she is my mother in religion. I expect her to treat me like a son. I certainly shall pay my respects to her, as if she were my own mother".

"Gods forbid!" exclaimed Rani Ichchran, who recalled the prediction of the pundit, who had drawn up Puran's horoscope. He had said: "There would be danger to him when he comes out of seclusion and enters the world of men". But this was no occasion for fears. She had seen her son after sixteen years. Sixteen years of longing. Sixteen years of loneliness. Sixteen years deprived of affection and love. So she talked. She asked about Puran's childhood, his boyhood, his education,

his habits, his life in the secluded hermitage of a jungle palace, his friends and ambitions and so on. Far into the night the talk went on. Ramoo was as much a part of it as Puran, because now Rani Ichchran understood the relationship, the bond, the affection for each other that was patently clear and the utter trust that one had for the other, the wise Rani accepted the close link between the two foster brothers. She also learnt that Ramoo's father was now retired and lived on his jagir and was affluent. Ramoo told her quite naively that he himself carried much gold in a belt around his waist and besides, kept a full purse on his hip for emergencies, because he said confidingly "Raniji one never knows what may happen in the new places we are visiting now"?

VIII

"And much was happening. Great mischief was being hatched in another place. Not far distant from where they were sitting. Actually, something was brewing which was to have disastrous consequences for Puran and those close to him. It was Rani Lunan's palace, which was the seat of this evil. It came about this way. Rani Lunan had a favourite maid-servant. This girl named Shimmy was of the same age. She was a distant cousin and had been her playmate and intimate friend since her childhood. Lunan had no secret from Shimmy and Shimmy was utterly devoted to Lunan. In fact she loved her in a possessive way and her greatest pleasure lay in rubbing almond-oil on the lovely body of the Rani, caressing her and patting and massaging her curves. A depraved soul, Shimmy pandered to all appetites of Lunan, whether normal or otherwise. That day she had been out on an errand. She came back all flushed, and falling on her knees before her mistress, began to kiss her feet. Lunan asked lazily: "What is the matter with you?" "Oh Raniji! I have found the answer to your soul's prayer". "What is it?" Sharply asked the Rani. Shimmy said in a breathless manner: "I have today seen a young man, whose face shines like the sun. There could be nothing handsomer in the world than he. He is the dream lover you have been longing for".

"What do you mean you miserable girl?" exclaimed the now roused nymph.

"Haven't you often told me that you had never wanted a middle-aged husband and your and your ideal mate was one whose face and figure should be like that of the devas?"

"You wretch" sharply cut in Lunan "These are idle fancies. Raja Salbhan is not old after all. He is only fifteen years older than me. He is now thirty three and at the height of his vigour".

"Oh! Come on Rani" pertly replied the favourite "Don't play the innocent with me. I know and you know what you often sigh for".

"Well! you snake in my bosom! what news do you bring?"

"No! Nothing Raniji. I was just joking".

"Do you want a beating you strumpet. Tell me at once" snapped Lunan.

"Shimmy laughed at the temper of Lunan. Kissed her feet again, caressed her leg and said: "I saw Prince Puran coming to the court. The whole town had been decorated in his honour. Everybody was eager for a glimpse of the young Prince and Rani! he was worth looking at. My heart melted within me. I longed to leap up and embrace him. In fact I fell in love with him at once". And she laughed.

"Lunan did not answer for a while. Then she leaned forward, slapped Shimmy lightly, but Shimmy caught at her hand and kissed it. Lunan smiled and said: "Tell me really and truly, how Puran looks".

"He is really very handsome, but there is something peculiar about him. There were hundreds of women, young and old lining the road and hanging from balconies throwing flowers before him and over

him but he did not look at any one of them. In fact he had no eye for women. His gaze was calm and as it were aloof. I could not understand that. He seemed to look at everybody and yet see nothing, especially women. But he would be a fit mate for a fiery young soul like you. He could quench your fires Rani!" And again Shimmy laughed lasciviously. The Rani appeared to pay no heed to her insinuations. In fact she began to think her own peculiar thoughts. All she said was: "And the Prince has not bothered to pay a call on me. Well! We shall see to that.

"Again Shimmy laughed and crowed: "Yes! We shall see. The apasra will find a deva!"

"The Rani kicked her away and lay back with a heaving bosom. The fires in her body were shooting little flames already."

"What poetry! What imagination! My Ganesh!" exclaimed Madho.

Well! Madho! I am building up the scene really. Something terrible is now going to happen".

IX

"Puran and Ramoo spent the next day lolling about Rani Ichchran's palace, enjoying the loving care, which the Rani starved of love, lavished on them. On the other side the Raja celebrated the return of the prince by organizing a hunt. But Rani Lunan burning with lust, roused to fever point by her intimate, Shimmy the maid, cursed the Raja for not calling on her. And when he did come, she lashed him with scorn for not observing common courtesies in forgetting to ask his precious son to pay respects to her, who after all stood in place of mother as much as Rani Ichchran. The Raja coaxed her back into good humour and promised to observe all such formalities in future. Consequently word was sent to Puran that he was to pay his respects to Rani Lunan at the earliest.

"When Rani Ichchran heard of this, her heart missed a beat. She feared that here perhaps lay the danger of which she had been warned years ago. So she begged Puran to be careful, to say nothing, or do anything to arouse the demon in Lunan as she put it. Puran was not disturbed. He feared no evil, because he had no concept yet of evil. He consoled his mother and looked at Ramoo to support him. Ramoo the practical rajput lordling, swore that no harm would be allowed to come near Puran as long as he was alive. "Maharaniji!" "No, no. Ramoo! no ceremonies, I have accepted you as my son, so I am your mother in religion. Therefore act like a son". Ramoo apologized and continued "Mataji. I have three things which are a guarantee of Puran's safety: my readiness to lay down my life for him, if necessary: my purse which can buy anybody, if required, and my dagger if anything else fails."

"The Rani smiled at this bravado. After all Ramoo was only sixteen years old. A boy of that age should be that confident, she thought, but her fears kept knocking at her heart."

"The next morning, Puran dressed in his finest ceremonial dress and looking like an effulgent sun called at Lunan's palace. Ramoo was asked to stay in the antechamber, but Puran was welcomed as if he was Surya the sun-god. Shimmy led him into Lunan's shaded bed-chamber with ingratiating smile, feasting hungrily herself on Puran's beauty. And Puran oblivious of any thing else walked in gravely and bowed low before the Rani, who was reclining in a most voluptuous pose on a wide silken bed-spread. Puran said with joined hands: "My deepest respects Mataji"! "Mataji!" cried Lunan "what nonsense! why Puran dear, I am your age. Look at me. Do I look like a mother? Don't be shy my dear. Come and sit beside me and tell me all about that cruel sequestratim. What nonsense is this, hiding such a handsome young man in a dungeon?

"Not a dungeon, mother dear. There was no dungeon, in the forest palace. It was the retiring palace of my grandfather, who was a very saintly person".

"Oh! bother all that Puran dear. Here you are, young and handsome like a god. Come sit here by me. Let us have a drink together and enjoy ourselves."

"No mother dear! that would not be proper. I am your humble son, you are my mother. I could not sit, but at your feet."

"Don't be silly Puran! You are annoying me. Why do you persist in calling me mother. I never gave suck to you, I never held you in my lap which I am eager to do now, but this is different. I have heard of your beauty, and now that I have seen you, my heart tells me that you are my ideal mate. I am already burning for love of you. Come and let us enjoy life. Time passes so quickly. Look at me. Am I not beautiful? Look at my body, look at my breasts (and she bared them). Are they not perfect? Come dearest, I am dying for love of you. Ram knows how I spent last night longing for you". And addressing Shimmy she said: "Shimmy, you lazy bitch, Puran is shy, lead him to me. Let me get my hands at him. I will teach him what love is. He is but a boy, I will teach him all the tricks". And seeing that even Shimmy the shameless, hesitated to lay hands on Puran, who stood like a statue, Lunan got up herself and leaping forward put her arms around Puran's neck and began to rub her body rhythmically against him, breathing heated body-odour into Puran. This woke up Puran, who had stood dazed, as if carved from wood. He now wrenched himself from Lunan's arms and saying: "Ram! Ram!" rushed out. Ramoo seeing him so disturbed, followed him briskly and soon the two friends were running to Rani Ichchran's palace as if the devil was after them".

X

"That evening when Raja Salbhan came to Lunan's palace, he found her disheveled and almost distracted. There appeared to be scratches here and there which in the dimmed lights appeared serious and Lunan would not speak. Sounds of muffled sobs came from the

disturbed bed. Raja Salbhan was greatly upset. When he found Lunan to be deaf to his endearments, he turned to Shimmy her intimate companion and asked her what the matter was. Shimmy was ready with an account of Puran's visit and his unabashed advances and improper suggestions to Lunan and finally at Lunan's indignant repulse, assaulting her step-mother. Salbhan was thunderstruck. An irascible man at best and impatient to boot, he required no proof, even no word from Lunan. He presumed that the irresitable charms of Lunan had gone to Puran's head and he had tried to make violent love to his step-mother. He rushed out and going to his own chambers, sent for the Chief of his Personal Guards. Frothing at the mouth he ordered him to go to Rani Ichchran's palace arrest Prince Puran and bring him to court, which he ordered to be assembled at once."

"Summoned in this manner, though the Commander of the Royal Guard, did not lay hands on the Prince, Puran was aghast. His mother had been moaning for hours and Ramoo was striding up and down the hall, fingering his dagger one instance and shaking his fist at everything the next. He accompanied the Prince, who recovered his poise and presented his usual calm and almost serene facade to the assembled court. There the Raja wild with anger, accused Puran of the heinous crime, the unholy outrage of trying to violate his step-mother. The noblemen of the court looked at the foaming Raja and the calm prince. Puran listened to the abuses the Raja hurled at him and said in a quiet tone! Maharaj! I did not no such thing. This is a calumny. I only paid my respects to my step-mother and came away. In fact I stayed in her room for a very short time. My foster-brother the son of Sardan Anup Singh was outside in the middle-chamber. He can testify that I was in my step-mother's room for a very short time."

"The Raja was impervious to Puran's pleadings. Puran then said: "Maharaj! There is a tradition that if an accused can put his hand in boiling oil without injury to himself he is considered innocent. Let this test be made. It will show whether I am guilty or not". All the courtiers agreed to this, but the Raja would not listen to Puran or any one else

and finding his courtiers in agreements with Puran, grew more and more angry and ordered Puran to be taken to jail. He then dismissed the court. Ramoo was witness to all this and followed the guard to see where Puran was to be shut up. He then went and informed Rani Ichchran, who went immediately to Raja Salbhan's quarters to plead for Puran but was not admitted. Ramoo, however kept a watch on the jail. The night was a quarter gone when he saw two muffled figures stealing stealing towards the jail. He tried to see who they were but the night was too dark. The two figures were, however, admitted to the jail after some talk with the warder. It was the warder's lamp which showed Ramoo who they were. To Ramoo's utter surprise, he saw that they were Rani Lunan and her maid Shimmy."

"The two ladies entered and the gates were shut. They were led to an inner chamber and left there. There was a light here. They found Puran sitting cross-legged with his hands palm up on the thighs and eyes closed. They approached him and the Rani spoke: "Puran my beloved! listen to me. I have come here not as a Rani but as a suppliant. Be a little kind to me. Don't spurn me. I am your slave. Look at me Puran? You will never see anyone as charming as willing, as loving as myself. Speak to me Puran! Have pity on me. I am burning for love of you".

"There was utter silence in the room. Puran neither responded, nor opened his eyes. He appeared to be in a trance. He hardly seemed to breath. Rani Lunan was exasperated. She grew angry. She advanced towards Puran to shake him, to wake him, to make him aware of her presence. At this Shimmy the bold hussy tried to hold her back. She was awe-struck by the immobility of Puran and was afraid. She stepped forward herself and touched Puran. She found him cold and stiff. She whispered to Lunan: "Rani! don't strike him. I am afraid. Puran is either dead or in some trance. I have heard that he practices yoga". But Lunan the wild nymph would not listen. She went up to Puran, touched his cheek then and tried to shake him. When he did not react in any way, she slapped him and found that his face was hard and cold."

"She was baffled and drew back to strike him again with force, but Shimmy who was shaking with fear now, caught her hand and clung to it. She even succeeded in drawing Lunan away. Utterly frustrated and raging with thwarted passion Lunan was led away. But she cried: "Puran I gave you a chance but you have a heart of stone. All right, you will see how I punish you for your insolence, your sham holiness. This is some trick, but I shall know how to teach you a lesson. The Raja has left your punishment to me. Before the sun rises, you will no longer be the handsome god you pretend to be. You will not be able to sit like the Buddha any more. Beware of my vengeance".

XI

"Lunan went to her palace and sent for the executioner. Shimmy who was by now a shivering wreck, begged her on her knees: "Rani! don't do anything drastic. Puran does not look like an ordinary young man. I am terribly afraid. I fancied that though his eyes were closed, he was looking at us. He was hearing everything, and he was smiling in his serene manner. Be warned, Rani, do not go to extremes". She said this and more."

"The Rani was, however, in a passion. When Khaddoo the executioner came, she first ordered Puran to be strangled, then that his hands and feet be hacked away, again that he be blinded. The executioner was horrified. He refused to do any harm to Puran, much less mutilate him. Lunan was furious. She told Khaddoo that she would have him impaled for refusing to do what she ordered. But Khaddoo was firm. He was even rude. He said: "Rani! you can not assuage your fires in this way. Puran is holy. He is pure. You have to satisfy your passions in some other way". At this Lunan leapt like a tigress at Khaddoo and beat him with a whip. Khaddoo stood quietly before her and when she was tired, he said: "Even now I will not harm my Prince". So Lunan had him thrown into prison along with his family and sent for some known villainons sweepers. To them she gave orders that Puran should be

bound hand and foot, taken to some dark place, where his limbs should be broken and then he should be thrown in some deep well to die of his wounds. At this Shimmy wrapped herself round Rani's feet and shed tears over them and kissing them said: "Rani don't do it, Rani don't do it, something terrible will happen to us if you do anything like this". But Lunan would not agree. She repeated her orders to the villains who had been summoned and said again and again, "Break him into pieces, spoil his looks. He can not insult me like this". The hired villains bowed low and departed. By morning the news spread apace that Puran had been done away with, under Rani Lunan's orders. Ramoo who had just laid himself down to rest, was shaken out of his nap with the news by a maid of Rani Ichchran. The Rani, he was told was wild with grief, and she had torn her hair, put dust and ashes on her and had gone out shouting, "Puran! Puran!" The maids said she had gone mad."

"Ramoo did not waste any time. He got ready, took his horse and galloped away to the forest stronghold. He told his mother what had happened, collected his brothers and other companions and armed to the teeth, rode back. Ramoo though young and angry was a wise lad. He knew he could not attack the royal guard and he disdained to avenge Puran on a woman however guilty she was, but he could find out what had actually happened. Ramoo first went to Khaddoo the executioner's house. They found his house burnt down, the ashes still smouldering. He was told that Khaddoo and his entire family had been thrown in prison for refusing Rani Lunan's orders to do harm to Prince Puran and the Rani had sent for the lawless villains of the town to the dirty job. Ramoo also found out the lair of these rogues. So he and his gallants laid an ambush for the villains and their assistants. That very night, they caught them and carried them away. Ramoo took them to the forest, hung them by their feet, lit a fire under them and asked them to tell what they had done with Puran. At first they only said they had killed him under orders, but when the smoke and flames rose and they realized that these desperadoes would burn them alive they confessed that they had broken Puran's arms and legs and thrown him in the old

well near the Tilla. But they had not spoiled his looks though ordered to do so".

"This well" asked Ganesh, "you know. Don't you"? "Why yes" said the surprised Madho. "It must be the well we use. It is called Puran's well. I never realised why".

"Yes" continued Ganesh "It was dried up then, but you know Madho, it is more than a well. It is what is called a "baoli". It has an opening on one side of the shaft. This is really a passage, half ramp, half steps, leaving to the water from outside. It was choked up then and the well had long been dry. The boys would not at first believe the executioners but when the wretched men, half roasted and half-dead were taken down from the trees, Ramoo questioned them further and was at last convinced that they spoke the truth."

"So leaving the wretches to the mercies of the servants, Ramoo and his companions rushed away. They came to the well, found the passage after some search, cleared it by an herculean effort and reached the bottom where they found Puran, with broken limbs, with blood clotted on his clothes, lying in a dead faint. They made a rough stretcher and carried him away to Ramoo's father's place. Silently and carefully, laying him on a stretcher which hung between steady-paced horses they jogged their way and bore Puran away. There Sardar Anup Singh, Ramoo's father, a most capable and resourceful man, got a Ved and an experienced barber (the surgeon of those days) and had Puran treated. Splints were made and Puran's arms and legs were bandaged. An old soldier, Sardar Anup Singh himself knew all about broken limbs. He was better than a nurse and Ramoo wore himself to a bone by unremitting attendance. The treatment took long and it must have been very painful, but Puran was given opiates to relieve his pain. Even then, nobody ever heard him complaining or uttering a moan. His serenity never left him. It was some months later that Ramoo taught him to walk again. Weeks later, he could walk with a stick. By constant

exercise he got over his limp and in a year's time Puran was again the healthy young man he used to be. But he was a changed man. They never heard him laugh. Now and then there was a hurt look in his eyes which Ramoo was pained to see. Puran stayed with Ramoo for another year. Then he asked Ramoo to go about and find out where Guru Gorakh Nath, the holy saint was at present abiding. He himself had resumed his meditative yoga practices and would sit for hours in one pose, hardly breathing and still as if carved out of stone. He said, it gave him not only peace of mind, but a sense of upliftment. Puran also begged Ramoo to find out about his mother, because he said, he felt she was in trouble. Being his mother, she was, he felt, a condemned soul and being also the proud high-born princess, and obstinate at that, she must have been treated badly by the rival queen Lunan as she would not recognize Lunan or accept her as a Rani and an equal. Lunan as they knew was vindictive and unforgiving. Ramoo brought back news that the Raja was enslaved and almost bewitched. Lunan's seductive arts had bereft Raja Salbhan of his reason. He was like clay in Lunan's hands".

XII

"Puran was in good health now. He took long walks; he ate sparingly but did not deny nourishment. He said you could not exalt the soul by starving the body, because it was the body which had to serve the higher impulses and spiritual needs. Nobody interfered with Puran's routine. Sardar Anup Singh, Ramoo's father, treated him as his royal overlord, although Puran begged him again and again to consider him as Ramoo's other self.

"After a couple of weeks, Ramoo came back with the news that Guru Gorakh Nath was said to be coming down from the hills soon. Secondly, that he had met Rani Ichchran whose hair had gone gray from sorrow and her eyes half-blind by tears but Ramoo had at last convinced her (a very strenuous task) that Puran was alive and wished her well

and begged her to wait for him, but he feared that she may forget, although Ramoo assured her again and again that Puran would come back one day. She must wait. He told her that she was constantly in Puran's mind and he would not fail her. But the time had not yet come. What is more Ramoo had arranged with an old cook of Rani Ichchran who had set up as a baker to look after Rani who now wandered about seeking Puran."

"After a month or so, Puran bade Ramoo and his father farewell. He again asked Ramoo to visit his mother regularly and be ready, as he would be needed, he said, sooner or later by Puran, and he would know when Puran was coming. And so with a staff in his hand, clad in simple but serviceable garments with a pair of stout sandals on his feet, Puran went away, as he said, in search of his soul. A few years passed, but they heard nothing of him, neither of Guru Gorakh Nath, who was supposed to be coming that way. Ramoo the faithful did not neglect his duties. Puran's parting words to Ramoo were: "Brother! I have seen enough of the world. And I go to see if there is anything worthwhile in the world of spirit. You will hear from me in time. I have a feeling this is not the end. Keep looking after my mother".

"It took Puran months to find Guru Gorakh Nath. Wandering from village to village, seeking shelter in a temple, or ashram or a peasant's hut, always kind, always smiling, but always with a far away look in his eyes, Puran went calmly about his business. The business as he had told Ramoo was to gain enough spiritual strength, to face the world, its temptations and its onslaughts unafraid; to go about doing as much good as he could, just because doing good was food for the soul. It nourished man's inner self, he said, and prevented life in this world from being miserable".

"In the foothills was the hermitage of Guru Gorakh Nath, a truly holy man, a man of charismatic personality; one who had telepathic vision, who could foresee events, a person of genuine reputation. Apparently he knew that Puran was wandering in search of him, or it

may have been a happy accident, but Puran met two sadhus one day, who greeted him affectionately, as if they knew him and asked Puran where he was going. When Puran told him that he was in search of Guru Gorakh Nath, they smiled and said, it was lucky they had come across him, because they were the Guru's disciples and lived in his ashram. Puran was glad to hear that and asked them about their ashram (hermitage). They told him that it was quite a big place having being granted to the Guru by the local Raja. It had a temple, many cells, a vegetable garden, a fruit garden, wheat fields, a cow pasture and was a self contained centre of peace. The disciples had duties in all these places and worked with a will, without any orders and without supervision. It was all voluntary and part of their spiritual training. Their one aim was to be worthy of service to mankind and to eliminate, if possible, all disturbing factors in social life. Nobody owned anything in the ashram; yet one had all one needed. Whatever a new disciple brought with him was put in the communal chest for the maintenance of the ashram. And so talking, in a day or two, Puran reached the hermitage to be welcomed there by everybody, as if they had expected him. The Guru did not ask questions; he seemed to know what had happened. He looked keenly at Puran's arms and legs and Puran felt as if his glare made his limbs utterly sound. The Guru's eyes, though shaded by his brows, were penetrating though soothing. Puran sat at his feet and felt elevated. He continued his yoga exercises at the ashram, went into deep meditative fits and came out of them lighter in body and soul. This went on for months, in fact for a couple of years, till a time came when the Guru said: "Puran I think you have reached as far as was possible for you. There was I think but very little dross in your composition to begin with, and you have been purged of that now. You have a task or two in front of you, but before I send you home you have to go to a place a few miles away. There is a princess named Sundaran not far off from here. I think you should go to her with a begging bowl which will from now on be your constant companion and beg for alms. It is a task, which every disciple, every chela, every sadhu has to perform, whether Prince or beggar". Puran bowed his head reverently and touched the Guru's feet and departed.

"But the Puran who went on this mission was not the man who went seeking his soul's purification. It was a still young and very handsome sadhu with gold rings piercing his ears and ashes rubbed lightly rubbed over his body. His eyes still shone with an inner light, though outwardly the was no different from the other disciples (chelas) of the great saint. He had begged the Guru for weeks and months to get joag (final renunciation of the world and the gift of spiritual powers). Guru Gorakh Nath had hesitated. He had told Puran that it was a difficult life, that it would be devoid of physical comforts, of human sympathy, of love even. In place of all these human needs he would get reverence but no real intimate contact with mankind. But Puran had insisted. He undertook the most difficult and ritualistic tasks but he persisted and begged the great saint to admit him to the choice sacred fraternity. He said again and again that his one aim in life was to attain utter spiritual peace and freedom from all worldly distractions. Guru Gorakh Nath had pondered over Puran's state of mind, considering the great shock he had had so early in life. He proposed that Puran should first go to Rani Sundaran (a very great beauty) and beg alms from her personally. Puran did not fully understand yet, why the great saint, wanted him to do so, but he obeyed".

"Reaching Rani Sundaran's palace, Puran raised his voice begging for alms. A maid servant saw him. She came out and beheld a vision. A young man, with a hint of ashes on his flowing locks, gold rings in his ears, a dust of ashes on his face, and yet with luminous eyes and a face glowing with etherial beauty, one who looked at her and saw her not. Who repeated his calls for alms in the name of parameshwar and yet appeared to pay no heed to anything in front of him. She went in, dazed and told Rani Sundaran that a peculiar sadhu was begging for alms. A sadhu who had magic in his face and form. Rani Sundaran said: "Go and give him some atta or something". The maid went and offered Puran a plate-full of atta. But Puran said". I want alms from the Rani herself, not from anybody else". But he said it in such a sweet tone that the maid was not offended. In fact she lingered and kept looking at Puran as if charmed. She then went and reported to the Rani. She said:

"He does not take any alms from me. He says he would take only from the Rani."

"The Rani was intrigued, especially as the maid said that the sadhu was so handsome that she herself had stood if enchanted".

"The Rani took a plate-full of pearls and went down. She saw the Sadhu standing there and poured the jewels into his bowl. She looked and looked and was ravished of her senses. She then said: "Why should a person like you seek a life of denial and renunciation? Come stay with me. I have unlimited wealth and numberless men-at-arms. How could your mother have survived your leaving her? She who suckled you! And your sister who dandled you on her knees. I would like to kill that jogi who has rubbed ashes on your body. What will you get out of this barren life? Come marry me, I will gladly become your wife". Puran did not say a word in reply and returned to Guru Gorakh Nath."

"He placed the alms he had received from Rani Sundaran at the Guru's feet. They were nothing but pearls and diamonds. The Guru said: "Son! What use are these pearls to me? You return them where you found them. Go and get atta as your befitting alms."

"Puran went back. At the door of Rani Sundaran he raised his call for alms again. The Rani recognized his voice and came running down to him. She caught hold of Puran by the arms and took him upstairs. She said: "How lucky I am, that you have come back to me. Now rest here and rule over me and everybody else".

"Puran said to her: "Will you let me tell you the truth? Just carry out the instructions of my Guru and just give me something plain to eat!" The Rani was astonished. She asked: "What do you want? Sweets? I can get you all kind of sweets". She then ordered that a large quantity of the best sweets be prepared. When they were ready she had them loaded on a cart and said to Puran: "Take them to where your Guru is". Puran took these alms to the Guru. He said: "This is a humble offering

from a poor seeker after truth. Please accept it and now enroll me in your brotherhood. Put wax-rings in my ears and rub my body with ashes from your own hearth".

XIII

"The Guru made a gesture and his disciples blew the big horn. Other chelas came round. He seated Puran beside him and asked: "Son! who has prayed for clouds and Who for bright sunshine? Who has asked for the power of speech and who has been content with silence?" Puran replied, "Guru Maharaj! Gardeners pray for rain and washermen for sunshine; the minstrels asked for eloquence and the faqirs were content with silence". The Guru shook his apron and out came a pair of wax-rings. Kanayya, the Guru's favourite disciple pierced Puran's ears and put the rings in them. The Guru now gave to Puran some bead necklaces and garlands, and rubbed ashes on Puran's body himself. The Guru then fixed his burning eyes on Puran, till Puran felt that a current was passing through his body. Puran was the enrolled in the inner fraternity of the great saint."

"But Sundaran came and complained: "O Guruji! What harm have I done? What sin have I committed? I have given away all my wealth. I have nothing with me now. I came here to beg Puran from you and you have made him a jogi. If you are a true saint, give Puran in alms!" The Guru turned to Puran and said: "Son! Go with Sundaran. I have been asked a boon and I cannot deny such a request. Go with Sundaran and take over her administration". Sundaran took Puran away with her. She said to him: "Now go and take possession of my palaces and stables and the flower laden nuptial bed. You are my husband and I am your wife. Now give up the idea of renunciation. How can you benefit by your joag (renunciation). I have the permission of Guru Gorakh Nath. You are mine now".

"Puran spent about four hours in the palace and then left the place. He said: "I am going for a stroll in the forest. I shall come after a

while". The maid who looked after him waited for quite some time and then went to the Rani. She said: "Your Puran has run away and has again joined the jogis". Sundaran was thunderstruck. She went to Guru Gorakh Nath. She cried: "The disciple you have bestowed on me has joined the jogis again. Either give me back my Puran or I will stab myself with this dagger. Or make me also a jogan, so that I may remain with Puran".

"Guru Gorakh Nath, that holy man said: "Rani, those who choose to wear only nut-brown clothes and have hearts shinning white do not live in luxurious places. maybe you will find Puran in some solitary corner of your vast palace or perhaps in the forest beneath a leafy shelter. "Go and find him". The Rani bewildered and crazed went searching like a lost soul but found Puran nowhere. She went up to the top of her palace and looking wildly all around flung herself down and killed herself".

XIV

"The Guru meanwhile sent for Puran and said to him: "Son! you have one task more before you. Go to Sialkot and find your parents. Bow to your father and do the needful". Puran took with him four jogis, all chosen by the great Guru and left for Sialkot.

"When they reached Sialkot, they found that Puran's garden was in ruins, the great well was dry; the trees were dead; there was no flower to be seen; the birds had abandoned a once fragrant place. They found only one wandered there, who welcomed them. It was Ramoo. He was poorly dressed but had the mien of a noble a warrior. He looked keenly at all five of them and more searchingly at Puran, who was now clad in a mantle of holiness. Rays of love for bird, beasts and man shot from his eyes. Puran and his companion first attended to the well. The stranger (Ramoo) soon found a lot of labour, all unasked. He seemed to know what was wanted. The well was cleaned. The springs that fed it had been choked by rubbish. They were found and drained. It was not

long before the well (the well Madho to this day, is called Puran's well) began to fill up. Puran took its water and began to sprinkle the dried up plants with cleansing water. Such was the charismatic effect of these attentions that in a few weeks the garden was again a blaze of colour. Everything was green. Birds came back to sing there and roost. Ramoo mingled with the jogis and was soon accepted as one of them. Puran had of course recognized him. It was his loyal and loving foster-brother Ramoo who had perhaps an intuition that Puran would one day come back to his garden. No word passed between them but both recognized each other and understood their roles. It was not long before the fame of the holy Guru who had, people said, performed a miracle and breathed a new life into the long dead and abandoned garden. People came with offerings, for boons, for blessings. Puran looked at all and smiled his soothing, hearing, heartening smile. People went away deeply stirred and yet comforted."

"The news reached the ears of Raja Salbhan. They told him: "Maharaj! Puran's garden is green again. The well is full of health-giving water". Raja Salbhan turned to the gardener who had brought him the news and said: "Don't be foolish! There have been no clouds, no rain, nor has the dried canal which brought water to the town started flowing again. How can an abandoned garden be suddenly green and a well dead and dry for years start filling up". The gardener joined hands and bent low and said: "Maharaj! I am telling you the truth. There is a jogi there who resembles our lost prince Puran. He wears rings in his ears and he with his jogis keeps busy tending the garden, feeding the suppliants and granting their wishes. They are all holy men. Come and see with your own eyes".

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"The Raja went to the garden. He bowed low before the jogis and begged them to come to his palace for a meal, and bless the town with their presence. Then turning to Puran he said: "A thought has come to me. You look like a son of mine named Puran". Puran did not reply to the Raja's inquisitive remark, but said: "Raja! Let me tell you the truth. Jogis do not leave their hermitage, and going to palaces is very

mortifying to them. We shall stop here for a short while and then go our way. Those who die do not come back. They do not get a second life. If you still have a doubt in your heart, send your Ranis to me. They should recognize their son if he is among us". The Raja came back puzzled to Lunan and said: "In the old and abandoned garden has came a jogi who resembles Puran". The Raja and Lunan came out of their palace and began to look for Rani Ichchran. After a lot of search, they found her sitting in a forlorn place."

"Raja Salbhan said to Rani Ichchran: "Rani! Listen to me. We hear that in the abandoned garden has come a jogi who looks like Puran. Come with us to the garden".

"Ichchran raised a sigh and said: "My Puran was murdered by Lunan. That was years ago. Why have you come to reopen my wounds? Do you want to give me another stab. I shall see Puran again, but only when I go to the Universal Spirit myself."

"Lunan began to entreat Ichchran. She begged Ichchran to come with them. She said: "Jogis have come to the garden. Maybe parmatma will answer your prayers".

"When Ichchran reached the garden, she cried in a loud voice: "O you who have given a new life to this deserted garden of my lost son, call to me once more. If you are Puran speak to me. I do not see well these days". Puran looked deep into his heart and called to parameshwar and said: "Mother dear! What Puran are you seeking? Whom are you calling? I do not know this Puran. I live with the holy Guru Gorakh Nath. Go and ask the person who killed your son. Mother dear! Puran had been long dead. Whom are you seeking now: The dead never return to life, but be comforted". Ichchran began to weep with loud moans. She had recognized Puran's voice. She said: "I am seeking my own Puran. I am calling for him. One who has made this dried garden green again will send my Puran to me. If that does not happen I shall die".

"Jogi Nahir Singh threw his scarf to Ichchran and said: "Mother! pick up this cloth and touch your eyes with it. You will begin to see. And when you can, see if you can recognize your son among the jogis here". Ichchran picked up the cloth and called on God in her heart. She touched her eyes as directed and her sight returned to her. God was specially kind to her. She saw Puran and rushed to him. Puran prostrated himself at the feet of his mother and said: "Mother dear! please pardon me for my faults and failings".

"Ichchran replied: "Son! Now that you have come back, stay here and take over the government. Raja Salbhan has grown old, he can't have another, issue. You have neither an uncle nor have you a brother, who could inherit this kingdom. Nor has Lunan a son. Who will succeed Salbhan?"

"Puran turned to his father and said: "Father! listen to me carefully. Ichchran is my real mother, she bore me. Lunan is my mother in religion. I do not blame Lunan. It was written that I was to suffer. Do this. I hear that my mother Ichchran found refuge in a baker's shop. Give a jagir to the baker who fed my mother, when you turned her out of her palace. The boys who were my play-mates and friends especially Ramoo my foster-brother, who is now with me and has always been with me in spirit, his associates who have helped in restoring this garden, should be given high offices. I recommend my foster brother Ramoo especially to you. He will be a loyal and capable leader of men. Give a village or two to Khaddoo the sweeper who refused to kill me, and lastly do not be unkind or cruel to anybody as you used to be when in anger. If you control your temper, you may have a happy end. Rani Ichchran and Rani Lunan both said: "Puran! listen to us. Raja Salbhan has been a very good ruler. The kingdom has been run on the best lines, but he has no heirs, nor are you likely to stay with us. If Guru Gorakh Nath has given you any powers, grant us a link in this world of men."

"Puran called to his associate jogi Nahir Singh saying: "Bring forward your apron". Puran took up his bowl and poured its contents into Nahir Singh's apron. Grapes and some rich fell out. He called to Lunan: "Mother! take these and swallow them. You will bear a son, though he will be born at a difficult time. Look after him well. Do not expose him to the evil influences of the court. He will be a good son. He will roam all over the world seeking adventure and no harm will come to him. He will marry many Ranis, but beware of Raj Kumari Salvanti of Lanka who will play him false. She may veer him from the straight path. His progency may turn criminal, but I cnanot help that. Beware! Name him Risalu. That name will become famous."

"Turning to Ramoo he said: "This well brother! will never be dry again, and the garden which you and I have tended will always remain green. You should look after it; and come and see me sometimes. You will always be welcome".

"Puran then bent low before his father and touched his mother's feet and so departed from his garden. He went back to Guru Gorakh Nath and prostrated himself before the holy saint. He then selected a corner and lost himself in contemplation. In that way he found God! ... That Madho is the story of a pure soul".

SOHNI MANHIWAL

I

Gujarat has long been famous for its pottery. Near it are white-clay beds of very fine grain and for centuries the potters have made all sorts of house-hold utility articles with this clay. But now and then a very skillful worker, a great craftsman emerges among them, as such gifted people emerge in all levels of society. Such workers are called Kuza-gar, that is makers of fine and fancy articles of ornamental value. They make vases, jars, plates, mugs and other delicate artefacts, glazed and unglazed. The fame of such talented artisans spreads, and people come from far and near to appraise, appreciate and buy such curios, for presents, for home-up and for trade. This has been going on for ages.
One such man named Attaullah appeared among these potters early in the seventeenth century. By the time he was thirty, he was an acknowledged master. He designed vases or mugs or cups and plates and decorated them not only with arabesque but with trees and bushes, with flowers and fruit, with birds sitting and on the wings. He invented or discovered or learnt the art of multi-coloured glazing. And so the articles made by him fetched high prices and were sent for, from Kabul to Bengal. Especially so, that it was now the times so Shah Jehan the Moghul Emperor who was famous the world over, for his love of beauty and for his taste. And every noble vied with the other in collecting beautiful art products, whether they be painting or pottery, jewellery or carpets, brocades or silks.

Attaullah, who was known more as Tulla rather than by his full name, except on ceremonial occasions, became rich and famous. His luck increased when to him was born a daughter. The baby was very pretty. She had brown hair and brown eyes. And she had a winsome smile. She grew into a good-looking girl and a beautiful maiden. Few could look at her long-lashed wide eyes, her straight nose and her long wavy hair, her graceful walk and trim figure without being smitten by

her charms. So lovely was she, that she came to be known as Sohni that is "The beautiful".

What was strange, she inherited some of her father's unusual skill and helped him in designing the fancy articles and especially the birds and beasts he made. Her sense of colour was perfect and many times she would make suggestions which her father was glad to accept. And this was so even when she was but a girl. When she saw her father work at the wheel, she watched and could tell if there was any slightest excess in curve or the merest shortage in line and length. Her father valued her help and was very proud of her. She not only assisted him in the workshop, she was a good salesgirl. She looked straight at a customer and seldom haggled. Nobody dared to take a liberty with her. Everybody in down knew that Tull's Sohni was a siren, a witch, a dragon; beautiful as a fairy but hard as iron. She did not speak loudly but her soft voice had the ring of steel in it. If she quoted a price, it was final. Take it or leave it. That was her motto. And so she reigned in Gujarat, the acknowledged goddess of the potteries. Only fate was waiting around the corner.

II

In distant Balkh lived a Moghul merchant-prince named Mirza Aali. His import and export trade over the central Asian trade-routes had made him enormously rich. He gave generously to the poor and the needy, to the madrissas and khanqahs, to way-fares and the orphans and was greatly respected in the town. As it happened he had for quite some years no son, only daughters. He was advised by his friends to seek the prayers of a hermit who lived in a cave, not far away from the town. Mirza Aali went on foot and in ordinary clothes as a suppliant to the dervish and begged him to pray that he may get a son.

The dervish went into a trance for some time and after a time said: "Mirza Aali ! I know of you, though I live here alone and detached. You are reputed to be a good man. I have prayed for you. Most probably

you will have a son, a worthy son but he will be the victim of love at some stage of his life. So he warned. In any way, God's Will, be done". Mirza Aali was so happy to hear the news that he ignored completely the warning, and bowing deeply to the holy man, went back rejoicing. Nor was he disappointed. A year later a son was born to him- A boy so handsome that the wet-nurse claimed she was nursing a second Joseph. The boy was named Izzat Beg and brought up like a prince. Educated by the best teachers and taught the manly arts of riding, swordsmanship, archery and falconry by the most skilled masters, Izzat Beg grew into a stalwart and dashing young man with a princely look and a gracious manner. He joined his father in his commercial enterprises and led many a caravan himself to even distant places. His father as well as his mother and sisters were very proud of him.

As his experience grew, so did his ambition. He began thinking of thinking of travelling to Egypt, to India, to China and even across the Arabian Sea to the Spice Islands from where they imported spices, silks and precious stones. His choice fell at last on India, the golden land where Shah Jehan the Grand Moghul, the lover of beautiful things ruled in splendors. He began to cajole his sisters, entreat his mother to get him permission from his father to lead a caravan to Shahjehanabad the new capital of the Moghuls, of whom the whole world was singing such praises. It would, he said, be a very profitable journey and he would bring such wonderful gifts for his sisters and his mother. They at last promised to speak to Babajan. They did but Mirza Aali would not agree. Delhi was too far-away. There were dangers of the road, though the language was no problem as every one spoke and understood Persian and Izzat Beg spoke both Turkish and Persian, and he said, the journey was too risky for a young man. But the pressure was too great. Outside, Izzat Beg and his friends whom he proposed to take with him, each with own quota of goods and sharing the expense of the journey, which would be fairly heavy, what with muleteers and loaders, cooks and personal servants, guardsmen of the escort and camp followers. Inside his palace-like residence, Mirza Aali had to face the entreaties of

his daughters and even his grand children. At last he agreed and Izzat Beg started his preparations.

It took some time, because there were goods to select and pack, each member had to have his own choice of profitable articles. Packing and carriage were problem. The fancy articles did not take much space but the equipment, the tents, the cooking utensils, the food preserves, fruit and other articles of use which were necessary, when the caravan was to camp on some stage of the journey and there was no town nearby.

At last everything was settled and towards the end of summer, the young loaders bade good-bye to their parents and friends. It was not easy for Izzat Beg to wrench himself from the arms of his mother or his elder sisters but even this was done and with mullahs reciting verses of the Quran to bless their journey and almost half the town coming out to wish them God speed, Mirza Izzat Beg left the balmy villages of his home country.

There is nothing much to say about their journey except that they traded goods for local rarities wherever they camped and after a month's profitable march reached Shahjehanabad, that is Delhi. It was customary for such caravans to camp outside the capital, where conveniences were provided for them. Since this was by no means the first merchant-caravan to come to Delhi, the local middlemen and merchants soon made contacts with Mirza Izzat Beg. He was introduced to officials who dealt with commerce and arranged with incoming merchants, occasions and times for a display of their goods. Everything went well. Izzat Beg was a very polished young man. He had an engaging manner and he was lavish in making presents. He was soon taken to the bosom by many noble families and after a couple of weeks had an audience with the Emperor. He exhibited his choicest goods as did his companions before the Emperor and his noblemen. Costly presents were made and graciously accepted. The Emperor took a liking to the handsome young Turk and asked him to stay on for some time in

Delhi and see him now and then. He even invited him to one or two royal functions and when at last towards the end of winter, Mirza Izzat Beg begged leave, gave him handsome presents and bade him good-bye, with good wishes for his safe return home and greetings for Mirza Aali his father, the famous merchant-prince.

III

Mirza Izzat Beg left Delhi, with only half his retinue, as many of his friends chose to stay on and continue their commercial activities. But Izzat Beg had solemnly promised his mother and father to be back by spring. He bought silks, wooden and ivory fancy goods, silver and gold ornaments, bronze and copper trays and bowls for which Hindustan was famous and laden with fresh commercial goods which he hoped to sell at much profit in the markets of Balkh, Bukhara and Samarqand, Izzat Beg began his return journey. He halted at a number of places, especially at Lahore, where he saw some very pretty works of earthen-ware. Especially was he fascinated by the very life-like models of birds and beasts, horses, tigers, elephants, small but exquisitely designed and beautifully painted. He asked where they were made and was told that they all came from Gujarat, which was famous for its potteries, especially as in those days, there was a master craftsman at work there. On asking he was told that this famous artisan's name was Tulla, short for Attaullah. Izzat Beg resolved to see Tulla and his works.

Izzat Beg chose to encamp by the river Chenab. The greenery around reminded him of his home-valley. His caravan was much reduced now as some of his friends and fellow-merchants had stayed at Delhi and a few had stayed at Lahore. Izzat Beg now had his own followers and one or two friends with him. He sent his confidential servant next morning, to find out about this so-famed craftsman and his works. The servant came back in a couple of hours but he was tongue-tied with amazement. Asked why he was stuttering like that and could not give a straight answer, he said: "Master, I have seen Tulla's show

room. I have glanced at his backyard where he and his assistants work but I have also seen a vision".

"Vision?" exclaimed Izzat Beg. "What do you mean?"

"Master" replied the servant " I have seen Tulla's daughter who manages the shop and the show-rooms".

" Well" said Izzat Beg, " what about her?"

"Master" replied the still dazed servant, "I have seen the beauties of our home-land. I have also been with you at your various expeditions. I have seen some very pretty women but this daughter of Tulla, who I learn, is called not by her own name but by the title of 'Sohni which in their language means The beautiful is a class of her own. I just cannot describe her. She takes one's breath away and she looks at you as if you were transparent. Her glance goes through you."

"Nonsense", said Izzat Beg, "You must have been drunk. There can be no such person in a potter's house". And next day Izzat Beg went personally to see Tulla's shop. Clad like a prince, riding a magnificent horse, Izzat Beg looked like a picture himself. Pink and white in complexion, big black eyes flashing fire, his mien almost majestic, Izzat Beg in the prime of his youth, his wealth, and the honours bestowed on him by the Emperor of Hindustan, had disdained the raptures of a mere servant. But as he entered the show-room, he saw a girl of medium height, her complexion creamy, her eyes dark brown, her brown hair long and wavy, her mouth wellcut but full, her nose straight with delicate nostrils, her chin firm, her figure lithe and lissome, her look confident but remote. They looked into each other's eyes and both forgot for a time who they were and where they stood. Time itself stood still for them. A minute passed, but it was as long as eternity. Suddenly, Izzat Beg awoke to the presence of a girl whose creamy face was now flushed and who dropped her eyes and tried to move away. Izzat Beg stammered: "I . . I . . beg . . your pardon. I have only a few words of your language. Perhaps you understand Persian?"

She replied: "Yes I speak a little Persian". Izzat Beg now spoke with more confidence "I have heard of the fame of your wares and I thought I should take home some presents for my family and friends"

Sohni was now more or less normal and she spoke like a salesman: "You are welcome. Take what you like".

Izzat Beg who was not yet steady was again tongue tied. He looked at the wares but his eyes came back to her and he could not look away. It was Sohni who carried on. She smiled with her eyes and asked: "Perhaps you would like to see my father?" Izzat Beg shook where he stood and said "No, no! " and then "Yes, of course", and then "there is no hurry is there?" Sohni said nothing but gave a faint smile in answer.

They looked at things and at each other. Sometimes their hands touched at which Sohni blushed and Izzat Beg was thrilled. They were at this, when a few customers came in. Izzat Beg looked at Sohni who looked back piteously but turned to attend others. Izzat Beg fiddled with the articles for a while, then took out his purse and placed a handful of coins, gold and silver on a counter. Sohni looked at the coins, then at Izzat Beg. There was such a reproach in her eyes that Izzat Beg stammered and said: "I am sorry . . . . . I am very sorry. I really don't know the prices of the articles I have chosen. Please take what is due". She picked a silver coin and turned away. Izzat Beg lingered for a few minutes more, then approached Sohni and said: "I shall send my servant for the articles". Sohni did not look up but she nodded. Izzat Beg then whispered: " I shall come tomorrow. Shall I?" Sohni kept silent but she looked up with speaking eyes. Izzat Beg whispered, "then Khuda Hafiz". She whispered back "Yes". Izzat Beg repeated: "God be with you". She gave the answer with her expressive eyes only, and her eyes followed the young Mirza Izzat Beg as he went out and rode away

One of the customers, a local lady known to Sohni said: "Do you know who he was?" Sohni said: "No". The customer said: "Well the whole town is agog with the caravan of which this princely looking young man

is the leader. Some say he is a prince, some a merchant-prince, some that he is a chieftain from Central Asia. He has many servants. He appears to be very rich. What was he doing in a potter's shop?" The gossiper asked.

Sohni replied: "I don't know. He came to buy a few fancy articles as presents for his family and friends".

"Did he tell you who he was?"

"There was no occasion".

This day's happening and the gossip resulting from it was repeated for days.

Izzat Beg would come and buy a few articles every day. He would just look and say a few words. Neither he nor Sohni remembered what the words were. Their eyes spoke. Their hands when accidentally came into touch, sent messages which were coded by their brains and recorded.

IV

This went on for some time, till one day Sohni asked: "What are you doing with the things you buy everyday, and many of them useless too?"

Izzat Beg replied: "I am setting up as a curio dealer". Sohni whispered Oh no! Izzat said "Why not?" Sohni lowered her eyes but blushed. One day she said: "You will ruin yourself in this way. I hear, you sell or rather give away articles of value for almost nothing". Izzat replied "So what".

One day she made bold to say: "Why are you doing all this?" Izzat replied: "Don't you know?" Sohni lowered her eyes, blushed and said

nothing. Weeks passed by this way. Izzat Beg's friends, the few who still remained with him remonstrated with him, called him crazy and at last left him one by one. Then some of his servants also left on one pretext or other, till his once resplendent caravan was reduced to a few personnel, and money began to run short.

Sohni watched it all with troubled eyes. Many times tears came to her eyes. She begged him to desist and not to beggar himself that way. Izzat Beg looked into her eyes and said nothing. Sohni was miserable. The whole town was talking. Tulla rebuked Sohni but she replied: "Father! I do not call him. He comes, talks little, buys things, pays for them and goes away. What can I do? Many days he does not even talk". "But Sohni, why is he doing this? Is he mad?" "Father ! I don't know. I have even asked him not to ruin himself, but he continues."

This went on for some more time and then Sohni found that the fistful of coins that Izzat Beg usually put on the count was getting smaller and smaller and was mostly silver. She did not see a gold piece for a long time now and the gorgeous clothes Izzat Beg used to wear became simple ordinary cotton-ware. Sohni waited for his appearance with her heart in her mouth and when she saw him no longer a resplendent princely being he first was, she wept. She wept and felt desperate.

This was the situation when Masy Kuby (auntie hunchy) came into her shop one day. This Masy Kuby was a phenomenon. A hunch-back, wrapped in an old chadar (wrap) she was the town's best weaver of charpoys. With jute-cords, even the thinnest, she would weave a cot, so tight that people said, you could spill cooked pulse on it and it wouldn't soak through. She went from house to house and knew the affairs of every family. But she was no tell-tale. She never talked scandal and could be trusted with a secret. So good-natured was, she that there was no street-arab, no vagrant boy whom she did not give something. They all liked her and would do anything for Masy Kuby. Whenever she came

to Tulla's house to do a chore, Sohni treated her like a guest, always gave her a glass of milk of which there was plenty in Sohni's house, as her father, a rich man had a herd of buffaloes, which a herdsman looked after. So of butter, cottage-cheese, butter-milk and other milk products there was no dearth. Sohni's mother being bed-ridden, for some years, after a fall from a ladder, in which she sustained a spine-injury, the management of the house had fallen on Sohni. There were plenty of maid-servants to serve her mother, and of course Sohni being an obedient girl deferred to her mother's wishes, but for Masy Kuby she had a special soft corner.

So Auntie Hunchy or Masy Kuby came sprightly into the shop one morning, early enough so that there would be no customer around. Sohni received her with an embrace and asked "Masy! this early! How good to see you. You have not come to our house for some time. Why?"

"Sohni, leave that" snapped Auntie Hunchy, "I ask you. Where is your prince?"

"My P . . P . . Prince?" stammered Sohni, "what do you mean, Masy?"

"Now don't play the innocent with me, my dear! you know how I love you. Even your mother could not love you more. I ask you where is he? He has not come to the shop for a few days. I have watched."

Sohni burst into tears at this and sobbed on Auntie Hunchy's poor shrunken frame, "I don't know, Masy, I don't know. It is killing me. He won't listen to me. He has, I suppose, run out of his money. Masy I shell die ... I shall die ...".

"Now, now, dearie, do not despair. What I do not understand is, if he loves you as the whole town knows now, why does he not ask for your hand from your father?"

Sohni answered through her sobs: "He says he lives a thousand miles away ...".

"Everyone knows that, you goof. His servants have talked. They have been here for quite a few months now. Everyone knows that his father is a very rich merchant-prince, in distant Bokhara!"

"That is perhaps what is worrying him" that his proud father would not accept a potter's daughter for a daughter-in-law, that too for an only son!"

"No! I don't believe that" said Auntie Hunchy, "I have heard that Izzat Beg is a man of honour and has a large property of his own, and his father dotes on him, as do his sisters and his mother, servants talk you know".

"Than why has he not spoken?" cried Sohni, "he had only to say a word and I would have gone with him where he wanted. He should have known that. He knew how I felt. Now he is in some trouble. I feel it, Masy, I feel it. My heart knows. Oh God! what is going to be end of it! It is killing me, Masy. It is killing me". And she wept.

"Be patient daughter. You cannot gain anything by worrying like this". I shall find out. Nobody hides anything from Mai Kuby you know" and Masy Hunchy gave a wry sort of smile and shuffled away.

Sohni was on tenderhooks. She could not rest. She could not stay in one place for long. One foot in the shop, one in the house and then the workshop, from where her father was constantly calling her. He was a very good artisan; he could make any kind of ware: he made wonderful models of birds and beasts, of parrots, pigeons, bulbals, wagtails, or tigers, cheetahs, buffaloes, elephants etc., but his sense of colour was not very good. It was Sohni who was the colour expert. She had made all kinds of brushes from the tails of squirrels, for which she paid the village boys and with varnish she mixed pigments, which made

the models almost living. Now she had been neglecting her job and it was in arrears. Inside the house her mother was calling for her in her peevish voice, for although she had plenty of maid-servants to attend to her, she felt neglected if Sohni did not personally care about her. So self-centered had this invalid become that she did not even notice how distracted Sohni was these days. She only complained. Tulla shouted, and the house had to be run. There was so much milk coming everyday. There was a lot of curd and two sturdy maids had to work at the churn. Who was to supervise all this? Sohni! and Sohni's mind was miles away and her heart a flutter. Her heart was down, miles down, longing, longing, and longing. Where was Izzat Beg? Has he lost all his money? What if he has nothing! what if he is a beggar! What if he is no longer a prince. He is still Izzat! She would serve him if he had nothing, nothing. "Oh! Izzat! Where are you? Don't you know? Don't you know? Nothing matters but you. I am nothing without you ...". This was how Sohni felt. And she went on doing the routine chores of the household, listening and attending to the peevish petty demands of an invalid mother and harkening to the caustic remarks and carping observations of a mean, stingy, selfish and demanding father, even if the father was a master craftsman. Colours, Colours, Colours! he shouted at the distracted Sohni. The pigments were a speciality of Sohni and she did her work so listlessly, giving a foolish excuse like headache. "You" he groused "never had headaches. What has a healthy girl like you got to do with headaches? Get on with those birds. There is such a heap of work to do and we have had orders from Lahore and other towns too. Are you half-asleep. What is the matter with you?" "Nothing father, nothing" said poor Sohni. Two days passed this way and Masy Kuby did not come.

V

The third day, however, was different. Quite early, Sohni, whose ears were deaf to everything except the slip-slop of Masy Kuby's slippers, heard them, though the Masy was quite a few shops away. But Masy Kuby was no longer the chirpy, twinkling god-fairy like she had always been to Sohni. She drooped. She

sighed. She had tears in her eyes. She came up the steps and when Sohni rushed to her, she whispered: "Courage, my daughter, courage. Patience and a stout heart. Allah will be kind. He is very compassionate you know."

"What is all this" cried Sohni "Tell me at once. Is Izzat all right. He is not sick. Tell me at once".

"Oh! that! Yes, he is all right "sighed Masy Kuby.

"Then what is the matter".

"Has not your father told you? Dropped a hint?"

"What hint Masy? Tell me. You are killing me with suspense".

"Well! Your Izzat has been to your father and asked for your hand in marriage."

"Then?" gasped Sohni.

"But your curmudgeon of a narrow-minded selfish monster has refused him, saying you are already betrothed to your cousin and in any case he can not spare you. Your work is essential for the success of his shop. Nobody can replace you. Moreover, it is out of question for another reason, neither he nor his relations would agree to a marriage with a person of another caste, however noble." Sohni collapsed on a settee and began to weep. She wept and wept; poor Masy Kuby consoling her with little pats and cooings.

When the first spell of weeping was over, Sohni raised her head from her arms and asked: "Masy how is he now? Why does he not come to the shop any more?" Masy Kuby said: "Dear Sohni, you know, I love you as if you were my own daughter. I don't want to add to your misery but, dear, life is hard, very hard and we are born to suffer and bear it." At this Sohni opened her swollen eyes wide and cried: "Oh Masy! I fear you have worse news than that. Tell me. Is Izzat all right? What trouble is he in?"

"Yes" replied Masy Kuby, "He is in trouble. You see he had collected all his jewels and taken the bundle to your father, to offer him the jewels as your dowry. Your father, the offspring of a mule, spurned the offer and instead asked for a reckoning."

"What reckoning?" almost screamed poor Sohni.

"You see" replied Masy Kuby, "Izzat Beg had been buying a lot of stuff on credit from your father, I suppose to please him. And since the whole town knew what a rich man Izzat Beg was, your father let him have what he wanted."

"But what did he want with all that earthenware?"

"Oh! he is crazy. He had set up a shop of his own, what with the goods he had brought from Delhi and Lahore and the articles he bought off you. But he was so besotted with love of you that he charged very little for his wares and even gave things away for nothing and he has bankrupted himself. What is worse, seeing how lost to himself he was, his servants began robbing him and now they have run away with his money-chest and his jewels and he is in despair. He owes your father quite a lot of money and he has even lost his splendid horse, because the scoundrels have ridden away with it and all the other horses of the caravan."

Oh! Masy! what is to do? What is to be done?"

"I don't know myself, dear, but I am prepared to give him my little savings, so stricken he is."

"But Masy! I have my ornaments. I too have saved money from the sale of small birds and other fancy articles, which my father allowed me to experiment on. You can take all this. You must, Masy. You must. Take everything I have, to him. Let him not despair. I will work myself

to the bone for him. Does he not know Sohni is alive?" She exclaimed proudly.

"Oh dear! Oh dear! moaned Masy Kuby. "I will go to him this evening and see what I can do. Have patience, dear and trust in the Almighty. I shall pray, dear. Allah hears the cry of the innocent and the helpless and you are such a good girl, so kind, so tender, so loving." After this Masy Kuby went away.

Sohni spent a miserable day, though she attended to all her chores dutifully. She tended to the needs and whims of her ailing mother, she looked after the shop, checking the taking, reprimanding the boy-assistants, changing articles in the show-windows, dusting carefully the delicate artefacts and listening to the perennial carpings of her father. But her heart within her was like lead. And her mind was away, seeking ways and means of consoling or compensating the forsaken Izzat Beg.

VI

The next morning, her father called her urgently to the workshop and asked her to sit down and listen to him, "Look girl" he said in a hard voice "that no-good came to see me with an offer for your hand. How could I consider an offer from a Turk who lives a thousand miles away. You have been betrothed to Aslam, your cousin. At least there has been an understanding for some years. He is my own sister's son and a good worker. In fact he is quite skillful and would be very useful. What if he limps a little. He is a very handy man. And as for this Mirza, I now hear he has lost all his money. He is such a fool that his servants have run away with all his money and he owes me a lot. He has been getting articles on credit from me for quite some time. And I gave him freely, because I knew he was a rich man and now he is penniless. He has to pay me before he leaves the place. I have posted one of my men, the younger brother of our herdsman to keep an eye on him. I will

sweat the reckoning out of him. What does he think he is" ... And he went on like that for some time.

Sohni could not bear any more. So she got up and left her father with his mouth open. All he said was: "What is the matter with the girl? Why does she take on like that? That Turk is nothing to her. He is a bird of passage. Here today and gone tomorrow. Foolish girl! And she has been neglecting her work too. What maggot has she got into her brain now?" He muttered to himself. He was greatly puzzled. And Sohni went to her room and wept. Another two days passed and Izzat Beg did not turn up. Nor did not Masy Kuby.

Sohni was now desperate. She told her mother next morning that she feared Masy Kuby was ill as otherwise she never missed calling every other day. She would like to go for a short while to her house which was in the next mohalla (quarter). Her mother made her usual complaints that nobody cared whether she lived or died, nobody cared to give her medicine, or proper food. Since this was her normal greeting every morning, Sohni soothed her as usual, attended to her exacting demands and then went to her father and said: "I have had the shop opened, the articles dusted and arranged properly, given instructions to the shop-assistant Natha, and I am just stepping out for a moment to see if Masy Kuby is alive or dead. She has not come this way for a few days." Her father grumbled too, saying nobody was giving him help, the colouring was getting worse. She was using stereotyped colours and her work was getting stale and the shop was going to wreck and ruin. Since this too was the usual complaint that her father had made a hundred times, she answered in the usual way that everything would be all right and left the house. Masy Kuby's house was not far. For an active girl like Sohni, it was a matter of moments before she was with the Masy. Sohni found her prostrate. She had tired herself going to and fro in search of Izzat Beg. She told Sohni that she had seen Izzat and begged him to receive her hoard and Sohni's ornaments even as a loan to pay off his creditors and especially Tulla from whom Sohni learnt Izzat Beg had been buying quite useless stuff at exorbitant rates and lately on

credit. Further that after rejecting Izzat Beg's offer for Sohni's hand and specially after learning that Izzat Beg's servants had robbed him of every thing and ridden away with the mules and horses, Tulla had insisted on payment and Izzat Beg had bonded himself as a herdsman for two years to pay off his debt. Further that Izzat had broken camp and gone to the bela, the green and almost wooded flat ridge in the middle of the river where Tulla's buffaloes and cows were kept for pasture. So now, Izzat was manhiwal, a herdsman and no longer the merchant-prince who had come riding on a magnificent horse with a big ruby in front of his turban. Sohni fell down sobbing and would not be consoled. She said again and again: "Masy, I must see him. What does he know about herding buffaloes and what will he live on. Where will he sleep? Who will cook for him? Oh! Izzat! Izzat why have you done this? Why? Why?" Why?"

Sohni said: "Masy! But I don't care. I don't care. What are these baubles to me? Or my savings? I would give my life to save him a minute's pain".

Masy Kuby said after a while: "My dear! Izzat is a proud man. He would not accept money from an unknown person. It would look like charity and from you, whom he loves above everything and for whom he has ruined himself, he would be terribly ashamed to take anything. He said he would not rob you of your savings or ornaments".

Masy Kuby said again and again: "I know dear! I know."

And it was decided that Masy should meet Izzat and make arrangements for a meeting, soon.

VII

A few days later Sohni slipped out in the evening for a visit to Masy Kuby who was supposed to be ill. She went instead to the river-side as advised by Masy Kuby and there the Manhiwal was waiting for her. There was no talk between them. Sohni ran into Manhiwal's arms

and there were tears in her eyes, many tears. Izzat Beg caressed her and spoke words of love in her ears. Gradually Sohni's throbbing heart quietened and the lovers sat down to eat some fish which Manhiwal had caught and roasted over charcoal fire in his little hut across the arms of mighty Chenab where Izzat Beg tended the buffaloes and cows of Tulla. The lovers talked as all lovers have done, since the beginning of the world. Much of this talk was wordless, but there were the fears of Sohni and the reassurances of Manhiwal. There were schemes and plans of the future, the golden years of fulfillment, when they would be united. This bondage, Izzat Beg said, would end soon. He would then take her away to his home and Sohni nodded and pressed hard into the arms of Manhiwal saying: "How long? Oh, Izzat! how long?" and Manhiwal said: "soon beloved, soon!"

This went on for some time but the lovers may be blind to the world, but the world is never blind. Word reached Tulla that Sohni was meeting Manhiwal secretly. Tulla was angry. He was abusive. He threatened. And what was worse he hastened the negotiations with his sister's family and it was not long before Sohni was married to her cousin.

The marriage took place. Sohni was seen off to her aunt's house which was not very far. Masy Kuby moaned. She wrung her hands. She shed tears. She clung to Sohni convulsively, but Sohni was calm. She was so calm that it looked she had been turned to stone. She did not weep or protest, but she refused to speak to her mother who was in the know or her father, the family tyrant. She went as a bride, but retained her calm inviolate self. From the very first night, she began to sleep on a separate bed and to her slim and lame husband, she said in a cold, hard tone: "Don't you touch me. I belong to Manhiwal. He is my true husband. If you try to use force I will kill myself and you too. You know I am strong, I would twist you like a wet rag or break you like a sugar-cane. So don't try any tricks. And if you tell aunt or your snooping sister, I will strangle you one night, Beware!" There was no open rupture, no loud words, no strain. Before others, Sohni behaved as

calmly as if she were without a care. Only there was a hard look in her eyes and her heart was like a stone in her bosom. Her only consolation was the visits of Masy Kuby who was akin to Sohni's mother-in-law as she was to Tulla. Moreover, Masy Kuby was a free citizen and she had an entry into every house in the potter's community. And it was Masy Kuby who brought Sohni news of Manhiwal. What is more, it was Masy Kuby who arranged meetings between Sohni and Manhiwal for the future. Sohni would have to slip out at midnight and meet Manhiwal as before. Sohni managed to do that.

VIII

Sohni could not go to meet her lover every night, but she did see him regularly. The lovers talked but little, there was little to talk about, as they both knew each other's hearts, but they thought and talked of the future. How Izzat Beg would be free from his bondage as a man of honour and would then take her away. He told her that the night he was robbed, he has walked along the river bank restlessly for hours and was so tired that he had at last fallen on his bed in a state of exhaustion. Luckily he had slept in his day clothes and his purse and some money was in the safety-belt round his waist. So he was not entirely penniless and he could have paid off her father easily, but there was no other way of being near Sohni and of finding some means of approach to her. So, he said, as soon as he was free of his obligation, he would take her away. They dreamed of a golden morn and a life of rapture and unsullied job.

One night Sohni waited and waited and Manhiwal did not appear. Usually he was there hours before hand. At last he came limping. He had struck something while swimming across, a craggy trunk of a tree or something and there was a gash in his thigh which was bleeding profusely. Sohni tore her head-scarf and first cleaned the wound and then burnt some leaves and putting the ashes on the gash and some herbs, which she knew were used for curing cuts and wounds, boned the leg. She looked around, the moon had not yet set and there was light enough for her to find a branch which should serve as staff.

She insisted also that for some time Manhiwal should rest and tend his wound and she would swim across and meet him.

She said, not only was she a good swimmer, she would bring a well-baked pitcher which would help her even if the river was in flood. So it was arranged after a lot of argument and next night Sohni stole out at midnight as usual bringing a big round pitcher with her and using it as a float she swam easily across and met the very grateful Manhiwal, who could not thank his stars enough to have won the love of such a marvelous girl. Of course, Sohni demurred and said it was she who thanked Allah every hour of her waking life for sending to her such a wonderful, such a noble, such a generous-hearted husband to-be. Nights passed this way. There was glow in Sohni's eyes which only Masy Kuby, who was in the know, could understand. But she warned Sohni to be careful, to be watchful, especially of her husband's sister who was a sneak of the first water. The husband of Sohni knew or suspected but he was afraid of Sohni and dared not to tell anybody, but he may have given some hint. In any case this sister of his, jealous of Sohni's looks as most girls of Sohni's age were. She followed Sohni one night and saw where Sohni hid the pitcher that Sohni used, to help her in crossing the river.

A few nights later, she took an unbaked pitcher and put it in place of the vessel used by Sohni. It was a stormy night and there was only fitful light. Clouds scudded before the wind and the moon was hidden now and them. But Sohni, true to her word, did not brook any such obstacle. She crept out on silent foot and hastened to the place, from where she began her swim.

In the dark she could not see whether the pitcher was the hard ringing pot she used or any other. Taking it in one strong hand, she slipped into the waters. The pitcher bore her along for a few yards, but when she was in midstream, it just melted. Sohni was so bent on reaching the other bank that she was amazed and realized suddenly that somebody had betrayed her. The water had been lashed into waves by the wind, but Sohni was a strong girl. She began to swim with all her

force. She had still some distance to go when a floating tree caught her. She struggled to get free it and leaving part of her shirt and her entire scarf she continued her swim, but the river was swollen and she had yet some distance to go when she suddenly felt a cramp in her legs. She jerked her legs and began to swim harder, but after a few yards felt herself sinking. The waters were too strong for the strong Sohni. She could see the bank now and she raised a cry. The howling wind carried her voice away but she called, Manhiwal! Manhiwal! again and again. It was not in vain. Manhiwal who had been waiting along the bank in a fever of impatience, striding to and fro heard a faint cry. He rushed to the place from where the cry came. His leg was still not sound but he ran and thought he saw Sohni plunging in the waters. He jumped in and began to swim with powerful strokes but when he reached the spot, Sohni was gone. The waters had carried her away. Manhiwal swam wildly over a wide area but could find no trace of his beloved. He went on swimming and calling. The waters echoed his calls, the wind sometimes drowned his voice and sometimes swelled it, but he never found the beautiful, the faithful, the loving girl for whom he had pledged his fortune and his life. The water of the mighty Chenab carried the lovers away in their bosom, but on lonely nights, peoples still hear the voices of Sohni and Manhiwal calling to each other.

SASSI PUNNU

I

The ruler of Lower Sind was called Jam Adam. He had his seat of government at Bhambhore, a flourishing town near the mouth of the river Indus. Jam Adam was rich. Very rich. He had peace in his kingdom and trade flourished. There was riverine commerce as well as land trade. Caravans came laden with goods from Seistan. Makran and beyond. Also from the east, that is Jodhpur, Jasselmir and Gujarat. Jam Adam had moreover a good standing army, officered by expert commanders. He had his chief wife and others too. He was in good health and though in his late thirties looked quite youthful. But he was unhappy. He had fits of depression, when nobody could approach him. He would be angry if disturbed and he was terrible in anger, though usually a mild and cheerful man. The reason for these moods was that he had a number of wives and had been married for over ten years, perhaps more and yet he had no issue. No son and no daughter.

One afternoon he was reclining in his favourite corner in the palace garden, lost in thought. He had many royal gardens but he liked this secluded flowery corner. He did not receive any visitors here. There was however one exception. It was the Vizier, his boyhood friend. One afternoon the Vizier had him announced. He saw his master reclining in a brocaded lounge seat smoking his own brand of fragrant tobacco in a big bowled golden narghile. The flowers bloomed and the fountain played and there was a cool breeze blowing in from the broad basin of the river. Yet he found the Jam silent and brooding.

After a time he asked: "Highness! What is bothering you?"

The Jam replied: "Look Ahmad! I have told you so many times, not to use ceremonial titles when we are in private".

"Many times, Highness! But I would like to observe the least boring of the ceremonial practices. But why this despondency? Why this gloom? Why this settled frown?"

"Frankly speaking Ahmad! I am fed up. I have everything and yet I have nothing".

"I don't understand, Highness!"

"Surely you are not so dense. I have a constant worry, you know. I am past thirty-five and I have neither a son nor a daughter. What is going to happen to my kingdom after me?"

"But Highness!" cried the Vizier "You are young, there is plenty of time".

"No! Ahmad. Time is running short. We must do something".

"Well Highness! if you insist, we will try the time-old remedy".

"What is that?"

"We should seek the prayers of some holy man".

"Are there any hereabouts?" asked the Jam.

"Not that I know of. But I can suggest one thing. Let any old, bedraggled, undemanding, faqir who comes into town by day or night be sought and asked to pray for an heir to the kingdom. Among the hundreds of loungers and loafers who wear strings of beads round their necks and have long dusty locks, pretending to be the favourites of the Almighty, there may be one really holy man!"

"You may be right, Ahmad. Let this be done. We can only hope. And now tell me what is happening in the town or in the other parts of the kingdom, but let it be interesting. I am bored". They talked for a long time.

II

The Vizier Ahmad Mir sent for the kotwal next morning. This man named Diler Khan was a specimen of a peculiar kind. Originally a bandit, he had risen by dint of his resourcefulness and cleverness to be the head of a band of outlaws. One night the band came to the town to rob a goldsmith. They climbed in from the back, found the inmates asleep, bound the goldsmith, reduced to threats his wife to a state of semi-consciousness and wanted to carry away their pretty newly married daughter, especially as they found her wrists, ears and neck laden with gold ornaments. But Diler Khan though a rogue had some decent instincts and forbade the outrage. The goldsmith had heard the altercation and next day reported the matter to the then kotwal. The news reached the ears of the sapient Jam who ordered that the leader should be sought and brought before him. After a time, the Vizier succeeded in bribing one of Diler Khan's underlings and he was captured in a raid. Brought before the Vizier, he admitted he was a bandit and whatever the causes that led him to this way of life, he was guilty before the law and was prepared to accept the penalty. His mien and especially his outspoken attitude, pleased the Vizier, who asked Diler Khan if he would mind facing the Jam. Diler Khan smiled and said: "Sir I have admitted my crime. Give me the punishment as the law demands. Why should I be shamed further by kneeling before the Jam". The Vizier told the Jam all this, who said: "Ahmad can we use this man? He appears to be a strange mixture of good and evil. Perhaps the good may come up with wise treatment". The Vizier sent Diler Khan to prison but would call him once or twice a week to talk of Diler Khan's previous life. Diler Khan hid nothing, boasted of nothing, was ashamed of nothing.

Gradually a peculiar kind of cordial relationship between the robber and the Vizier began to emerge in these talks. After a time the Vizier proposed to offer Diler Khan the office of kotwal of the capital as he could detect, even anticipate anti-social activities and take proper measures, as he knew the underworld so well. Diler Khan thought over the proposal for a few days and accepted the offer on the condition that he not be asked to betray his old comrades. The Vizier agreed but stipulated that if Diler Khan was not prepared to betray his erstwhile companions, he should show them no favour either, if they get caught. On these terms Diler Khan took office as Kotwal of Bhambhore and made a success of his job. His blunt outspokenness often pleased the Vizier.

Now that he was asked to find a holy man, he all but laughed. However, with a twinkle in his eye, he said: "Sir! it is a strange task for a man like me". The Vizier understood Diler Khan's predictment. He said: "I understand, but you come across so many fakes that it is possible that you may come across some one who is the genuine article. After all there must be good men in the world also." "Oh! yes. That is right Sir! I do meet good men too, even if my job is to catch rogues, but a really holy man is a rarity. But why do you want such a person?"

"To tell the truth", replied the Vizier "I am asking you for the Jam. This is in confidence, remember! He wants an heir badly and I have advised him to seek the help of somebody whose prayers may be effective".

"Well! that's another matter", said the kotwal. "I shall do my best. Sometimes one sees a person who is anxious to hide his goodness, but I have some experience in judging people. I shall do my best. The Jam is a good ruler. It will be a pleasure to help him". And with these words Diler Khan took his leave.

After some weeks he appeared one evening leading a ragged old man, who he claimed to be good for the task in hand. The Vizier received the old man with respect, insisted on seating him beside him on the divan, offered him sherbat and gave him his own hookah to smoke, the fragrance of whose tobacco hung in the air. The old man sat down without undue modesty or hesitation despite his rags. The Vizier noticed that the clothes though patched here and there were clean and the hands and feet of the faqir were without a speck of dust. The faqir held his staff in his hands, waved away the hookah and looked with brooding eyes at the Vizier. He did not ask why he had been brought there. His calm was quite impressive in itself. There appeared to be a native dignity in his manner. The Vizier was impressed.

The faqir himself broke the silence. He said addressing the Vizier: "I have allowed Diler Khan to bring me here because I have known him long. He is really not a bad man. I know he has done much good by stealth. He has asked me to pray for the Jam. Isn't that so?"

The Vizier said: "Yes. That is correct. The Jam is worried because he has no issue". The faqir said: "Yes! it is natural, but you cannot interfere with the working of destiny. He may have an issue; he may have many. He may be happy about one and actually unhappy about another. I will pray as Diler Khan has requested. It is possible Allah may be merciful, but I warn you. One cannot guarantee a happy result. One can only hope for it". The Vizier said: "That is right! We request you to pray for the Jam". The faqir got up and said: "Assalam-o-Alaikum" and went away. Diler Khan with a bow to the Vizier followed. Next morning the Vizier reported the whole interview to the Jam, who said: "All right! We shall see! one has to accept one's fate".

III

Days, weeks and months went by. The Jam was heartened to hear of one of his wives that she was with child. Expectations ran high. There were great preparations. A heir to the throne was prayed for. At

last the day came and the Jam was told that he was now the father of an extremely pretty baby girl who looked like a little fairy. There were great rejoicings. Much was given away to the poor and the needy. Food was provided free to everybody who came to the palace grounds for it.

The Jam now asked his Vizier to get the best astrologers and soothsayers and get the horoscope of the baby. This was done, but the findings were not to the liking of the Jam. In fact they reminded him forcefully of the enigmatic warnings of the Darvesh, whom he complained he never personally met. The soothsayers said that the girl would grow up to be a great beauty, whose fame would spread over the entire land, but she was destined to fall in love with a foreigner and die alone, wandering in the desert. This did not please the Jam. In fact he was terribly upset about it. He got so worked up that he decided to destroy the baby, before she grew up to bring shame to his name. He sent for the Vizier and told him what he was going to do. He said: "It is better to smoother the baby now, when we have not had time to become attached to it. Anything was better than that a daughter of my ancient and honoured house, should indulge in extraordinary love affairs". The Vizier answered: "Highness! This is a very reprehensible idea. News will get about, whatever we say about the death of the baby. What will the people say? What will the world think? What an evil precedent it will be. Moreover Highness it is not worthy of you. You are know to be a gracious ruler. It is not befitting that you should so despair of the mercy of Allah and abandon yourself to such a desperate act?"

"Then what do you suggest?" asked the Jam.

The Vizier thought for a while and then said: "Highness leave it to me. We should not loose our faith in the Compassionate One. I think we should put our whole trust in Him. Let me get a box made, a worthy article. We will put the baby in it with enough gold and jewels for anybody who finds the baby and a written account of her birth and parentage in a locket. There should be enough gold to bring her up, to educate her, to marry her off, if she is alive. And I will myself go with it

one night and confide the box to the waters of the river. Allah will decide what the fate of the baby is to be."

The Jam argued against the proposal and it took all the patience and tact of Ahmad the Vizier, to get the Jam's consent. The Vizier set about in immediately. He got sandal wood and the best artisan in the capital, swore him to secrecy, paid him with a free hand and had the box made. The clasps were of gold as also the bands which secured the lid. Holes were cunningly made in the side for air to go in, lest the baby be suffocated. The inside was cushioned and costly silks were used for the little receptacle. Three bags of gold and jewels were put in it. One for the finder of the casket, the second for her education, bringing up and proper care of the baby, and the third as her marriage portion. A detailed account of her parentage and background was written by the Vizier himself and put in a locket which was put round the baby's neck on a gold chain, with a ruby fixed on the lid of the locket. And the baby was put in it and the casket slipped into the raging waters of the mighty Indus. The river was in flood.

IV

Morning came. The sun cast its golden rays on the waters. The medium flood had abated. The level of the current had gone down almost to normal. Here and there uprooted trees brought down by the swift waters, now embedded in mud showed up their branches, still green with leaves. At the washing basin, where an arm of the river made a sort of lagoon, washer-men were already at work. One of them named Atta, short perhaps for Atta Mohammad was busy unloading his donkey-cart, bearing his bundle of washing. This Atta was a man of about forty years. He was the head-man of the washers community and was an upstanding man of integrity. He soon got to work. Knee-deep in the now calm waters, he bent his mind to the work at hand. After an hour's toil he straightened his back and looked at the waters of the river. The flow he noticed, was almost normal. His eyes came to rest on the branches of the embedded tree, some yards away. He fancied he saw

something shining in the tangled branches. He looked more keenly at this shining article. His curiosity sharpened because he thought it may be a prize. The tree was in deeper waters, but Atta was an expert swimmer. It was not long before he reached the tree and steadied himself by holding on to a branch. He reached out and caught the glittering article. It was a casket, a small box of sandal-wood, with bands of gold around it and what surprised him further, there were jewels fixed on the lid. He looked around. Nobody appeared to have noticed him. In any case, his place was an exclusive one and nobody was near. He swam back with the small box and when on the bank hid it in his washing. Excited beyond measure, at finding a treasure, as he thought, he could not concentrate on his work. So shortly afterwards, he collected his washing, loaded his donkey-cart and started for home. When he passed the other washer-men, he told them he had a sudden attack of head-ache and would go and rest. He could come in the afternoon. Nobody paid any heed to Atta's words. They were all busy men.

Reaching home, Atta bolted the outer gate and leaving the rest of the washing on the donkey-cart, took the bundle containing the casket, went into the inner room, calling his wife in an urgent voice "Keeni, Keeni come here at once." Keeni (short for Sakina) was a strapping young woman of nearly thirty, who though married for ten years had borne no child. She came in saying: "What is the matter? Why are you home so early?" Atta asked her to hush and unfolding the bundle took the gilded casket and put it on a stool. "What is it?" asked Keeni. Atta replied: "I have found it in the river, and I think it is a treasure chest, which last night's flood brought down, from God knows where". "Let us open it", said Keeni. "That is what I am going to do", said Atta. "I want a cutter". Keeni went out for a minute and brought him a cutter. Atta cut the gold bands, securing the little box and opened it. What to their surprise when instead of heaps of gold coins, they found a pearl of a baby, fast asleep, with her thumb in her rose-bud of a mouth. "Is she alive?" gasped Sakina the barren wife of Atta, who had been bearing the taunts of Atta's mother and sister for years.

"Yes!" said Atta. "I think she is alive, because see, she is breathing, but she has been drugged". "Oh yes!" said Sakina. "Many mothers mix a little opium in their baby's milk to keep them from crying." "Well!" continued the disappointed Atta, "This is a strange find". The curious Sakina began to probe in the basket and soon brought out three small bags. Atta who had been to the Maktab and knew how to read and write, said: "There is a chit round each of chem. They opened one bag and found it full of gold coins and jewels of great worth. The chit said: "This is for the person who finds the casket and brings up the baby properly." The second bag was as full of gold and jewels, and its chit said: "This is for the education of the girl". The third bag was even richer in its yield. Its chit said: "This is the baby's dowry. It is hers to do, what she likes with it". There was also a locket around the baby's neck on a gold chain, but they did not disturb it.

Keeni now picked up the baby and found it wet. "Oh! Oh!" she cried: "I must change her and I have no napkins." But she looked into the box and found packed on one side a heap of napkins and small kurtas and other articles of baby-wear. Also a few small gold bangles, a small gold necklace with sapphires fixed cunningly in it. She was amazed but glad too. She changed the napkin but the baby continued to sleep. Keeni became afraid. She bared her bosom and tried to put her nipple in the baby's mouth. Atta cried: "What are you doing? Surely there is no milk in your breasts, however round and big they may be". Keeni did not pay any heed to his jeering. She, as a childless woman was by now accustomed to it. She replied placidly: "I am trying to see if the baby has learnt to suck".

"Surely she must have. She appears to be about two or three weeks old." Keeni continued with her efforts and at last woke the baby enough and found that she had begun to suck the breast. She put back the baby in the chest, put its thumb again in her mouth and said: "I must prepare her milk. I know the formula".

"One or two cardamoms, a little aniseed and some cinnamon in a glass of milk, to be boiled and cooled to body temperature. I shall feed her with at bit of clean carded cotton. And I also know what I must do. The people will begin to ask where the baby has come from".

"What have you in mind" exclaimed the quite helpless male in such a feminine matter.

"I shall go next morning early to my village. You need not worry. You must go to the river in the normal manner. I shall carry the baby in the fold of my wrap. Don't worry. Nobody will notice. I shall go to my sister's house. She has just had a baby and she is big-breasted like all of us (she said this with a wry smile). She will have enough milk for our little angel. Atta I am going to call her Sassi. You know Sassi means beautiful and nothing could be prettier than my little angel".

"So you are already calling her yours."

"Well! Allah has given her to me. I have been hearing the taunts and sneers of your family and your complaints too long. Now my prayers are answered. This is Allah's gift to me. She is mine. I will make her mine. She will be my joy. You may like it or not."

Atta was overwhelmed by so much talk, especially from the stolid, patient, quiet Sakina. He said: "My dear! do what you like. After all we are being richly rewarded for her upkeep and upbringing".

I don't care for any gifts. If there had been no money, no gold, no jewels, no reward, I would still have mothered the baby. She is mine. Allah has given her to me." And she picked the baby and hugged her to her bosom.

V

And she did what she had declared. This was a new Sakina, no longer Keeni, but Sakina a fighting, aggressive, possessive mother. Atta

subsided. He agreed to everything. Sakina had her way. She went to the village; stayed there for three months; came back with the baby; and told the neighbors that her sister has had twins and she has brought one of her nieces to be her own daughter. Some people wondered but nobody questioned Sakina, the new matronly, confident wife of Atta, who was already extending his house. He told people that now he was the father of a girl, he must use his savings to make his house worthy of her. People understood this and applauded Atta, the Chaudhry of the washer-men community, who they said, was a good man.

And so Sassi grew. She grew into a pretty girl and an intelligent one. Atta less, but Sakina more, was keen to have her educated. They engaged a widow Sayyadani to come and give Sassi lessons. Sassi took to her studies like duck to water, and as she grew older, had to have more learned teachers. They came, male and female and by the time Sassi was fifteen, she was an accomplished lady, with a grace and a queenly look all her own. As for her clothes, they had become a byword by this time. Nobody had ever seen any girl half as beautiful as Sassi. The fame of her beauty soon grew into a legend.

Another year passed and it added to Sassi's graces. She appeared to have a natural taste for beautiful things, flowers, perfumes, silks, songs and music. She had a number of girl friends, most of them nieces of Atta or Sakina. They followed her around and obeyed her wishes as if they were her bounded slaves. She was not haughty, in fact quite the reverse. She was very kind and friendly, but they sensed that there was something different about her, which they could not define. Naturally, offers for her hand came from many quarters. Sakina who doted on Sassi would not press her to consider any suit, because she loved and almost worshipped Sassi as if she had descended from the heavens. Atta was more worldly. He asked Sassi about some very eligible young men. Many times Sassi kept quiet but once she said: "Abba you know that I am the daughter of the Jam. This locket contains the account of my birth and my being cast on the water of the Indus. I am your daughter too, you have brought me up and cherished me, but I cannot marry any

one of the young washer-men. Leave me to my fate". Atta, an honest man at heart could say nothing to that.

But the frustrated parties were burnt up. They got together and made a plan. They went in a small body to the Jam and sought an audience. The Jam looked at his Vizier, who said: "Highness you are their "Father-mother", you should hear what they have to say". So the leader of the party was summoned. He bowed low before the ruler, joined his hands in submission and said: "Highness, we have in our community a girl, like whom there has never been any maiden. She is like a moon in beauty and her mien is like that of a princess. She is well-educated and has a sense of dress, that we could not dream of. She does not accept any offer of marriage. Her father is the headman of our community and a rich man. The girl is named Sassi and she lives in rooms which in decoration would rival any chamber of your palace. We think she is fit for a king and we have come to suggest that you should make her your queen. Our interest in the matter is that, she so outshines our own daughters that nobody is offering for them. If Sassi is removed from our midst, our daughters will have a chance". The Jam and his Vizier listened to this plea and the Vizier said: "His Highness will consider your appeal and we shall find a solution. Go in peace.

Both the Jam and the Vizier kept quiet for a while, then Jam Adam turned to the Vizier, his old-time friend and asked: "What do you think, Ahmad?" The Vizier took time to answer. He replied: "Highness! You don't need another wife. Do you?" and he smiled. The Jam answered with a smile too, but said: "This is no joking matter Ahmad. Do think a little". The Vizier said after a little thought: "Highness, in view of the situation, that one obstinate girl refuses to accept any offer of marriage, and it is strange that among such a low caste, there should be such a head-strong girl, other girls, prospects are suffering and (this with a smile) seeing that she is such a beauty, you may be gracious enough to make an offer and solve the problems. The Jam said "You are a wag really. But I shall think it over."

Two days later the Jam sent an offer of marriage to Chaudhry Atta with a plate-full of gold coins. Atta was dazed at the offer. He went in and told Sakina, who was overjoyed and rushed to Sassi, who sat gazing out of a window, lost in dreams. When she read the Jam's note, she burst into laughter. It was not a happy laugh, although the sound was musical. She said: "Mother, I shall answer. Don't worry. No harm can come to you or Abba".

She took a day over writing a note. She pondered over every word. She had a very sad smile on her face when she handed the carefully sealed note to her foster-mother. The messenger of the Jam who had been asked to come the next day, was there promptly. He took the message to the Jam, who was in his garden with his friend the Vizier. He asked the Vizier to read it. The Vizier did so, and changed countenance as he read it. He was silent for a while and then said: "Highness! you better read it yourself. I don't feel like reading it aloud to you." The Jam was surprised, but took the letter. As he read it, he was horrified. His face turned first red then pale and perspiration broke on his forehead. This was the letter:

"Your Highness!

May you remain long, and prosper, under the shadow of the Almighty!

What, Highness you proposal would have been a great honour to any girl, but in my case, it is impossible. The reason is the contents of the attached paper. I have had it for a long time. It was in a locket on a gold chain. I still have the locket. May God keep you ever in His Grace.

Your humble subject,
Sassi"

"My daughter! My own daughter! and in a washer-man's house, the object of attention of louts and ruffians! God! God!" cried Jam Adam.

The Vizier wisely kept quiet. The Jam burst forth: "Ahmad! we must have her here. In our palace! A princess in a washer-man's hovel!"

"No, Highness! not in a hovel. I made enquiries yesterday, after the deputation of the washer-men. Atta is a substantial citizen and an honest man. Obviously he has spent the money we put in the casket, wisely and well. His house is almost a mansion and Sassi has her own apartments. She has maids to serve her. She is no drudge, I assure you. They say she has a will of her own and is afraid of nobody. By every account a most accomplished young lady"

"Well, Ahmad that is something, but you should go personally to see her persuade her to come to us".

"It would create a scandal, Highness, if I am seen going to Atta's house. I think you should write to her, inviting her to the palace. She may be enticed by the news that she has younger sisters and brothers now."

"Yes!" muttered the Jam, "You may be right. I shall send a letter tomorrow".

VI

The next day the Jam sent a special messenger with some gifts and a letter. The reply came the day after it ran like this:

"Your Highness.

May Allah be always merciful to you. Your offer is very gracious, very flattering, very benevolent, but it is too late. You discarded me once. I was cast on the waters. My foster mother, the kindest of persons, has showered all the love of the world on me. It would break her heart if I left her. My foster-father has always been fair and considerate. His affection has never wavered. You decided my fate, Highness. Leave me

to it. This is my destiny and I am content. I would love to see my sisters and brothers, but it would create complications. It is a pity, but I must accept this separation. I am the daughter of the river and the waters of the river keep flowing, keep flowing. They never go back. May Allah keep you in His goodwill always.

Your very humble daughter,
Sassi"

The Jam, that stern man wept when he read this letter. He did not even show it to his life-long friend the Vizier.

Next evening a man wrapped in a costly mantle and attended by two armed guards, knocked at Atta's house. Atta himself unbolted the door. The stranger pushed himself in and asked Atta to close the door. The guards remained outside. As soon as the stranger pulled the mantle from his head and Atta saw him he fell on his knees and folded his hands. He began to tremble. He stuttered: "Ex . . . excellency!" It was the Vizier. He asked Atta in a kind tone. "Get up Atta, get up. Don't be afraid. No harm is coming to you. I only want to see the princess". "Princess! Excellency!" "Atta don't pretend, you must know". Excellency! I only learnt it recently. It is my wife who has known about it for some time. But we have always had taken the greatest care of the princess". "Well!" said the Vizier: "That is good. Now go and announce me". Atta went to Sassi's apartments and told her who had come to see her. Sassi said: "All right Abba! admit him".

When the Vizier came in, Sassi rose to meet him. She bowed to him gracefully, smiled and said in a sweet voice: "You are welcome uncle!" Then she invited him to sit in a comfortable chair and said mischievously: "So you have come to check whether the money you put in the casket has been well spent". The Vizier laughed and said: "Princess!" At this Sassi interrupted him and said: He said: "Princess, pardon me for using this formal address but we know each other so little that any familiarity would be rather embarrassing".

"You may be right, uncle, but I refuse to be treated like a foreign diplomat. Obviously you have brought a message or a proposal from his Highness. Tell me frankly. Ever since I opened the locket and read the note inside, I have thought over the whole situation and all the circumstances, which made my father fling his first-born into the flood waters of the Indus. That I am alive is next thing to a miracle or a special grace of the Almighty. I am no longer very bitter about it, because I am now convinced that one cannot struggle against fate. but I am resigned. So let us not refer to that matter". And Sassi gave Vizier Ahmad a very sweet smile.

"Ma Sha Allah" cried the Vizier, "I am right in addressing you as princess. Well let me discuss the errand on which your father has sent me. You have refused to come back to the royal fold. One can understand that. But you must no longer continue living among the washer-men, however Atta and his wife have been good to you. I mean no disrespect to them, especially Atta's wife, who you say, has been the most loving of foster-mothers."

"Then what do you propose? Or what does the Jam wish to do?"

"You must have heard, princess, of the royal garden called the Lakhy Bagh, because the Jam spent a lakh of rupees on it. It has a very fine pavilion, its halls are decorated with the portraits of your ancestors and of many rulers and their heirs. The pavilion overlooks the river. There is a ferry close by. A toll is levied on caravans and other business men who bring across goods for trade. It yields considerable income. The Jam wants to endow the garden and the ferry on you. The gardeners and other servants, from guards to kitchen-maids, will be paid by the royal exchequer. There will be in addition an annual grant for your daily expenses. I shall see to it that there is no financial embarrassment and that you live like a princess, as you have shown you are. I wish Yasmin (that was to be your name) you were my daughter and the Jam, believe me, is cursing himself for having done what he did in a panic. A scoundrel of a soothsayer had said that your existence

would effect the reputation of the Jam. Well! the whole town knows already that you are Jam Adam's long lost child, which they believe, some enemies stole and threw in the river. Well, princess, anything is better than what we did".

"Not you uncle! I am convinced you did your best. Who made that beautiful casket and put all that gold and those jewels in it and best of all who thought of the locket?

It must have been your farsightedness. Everybody knows who runs this kingdom so wisely and so well".

"Princess! please! Don't make an old man blush. Now I take my leave. I am sure you will accept the arrangements made for your welfare."

Sassi laughed and said: "I am not such a fool as to stand on empty pride and what is more, the further I am from the royal presence, the less harm I can do to his reputation. What an idea indeed!" The Vizier bowed and after blessing young Sassi was leaving when Sassi said with a mischievous smile: "Excellency! Please remember, that fate cast me among washer-men, I am to all intents and purposes Chaudhry Atta's daughter and I would sacrifice anything rather than hurt my foster-mother's feelings."

VII

The Vizier stopped, looked at Sassi without speaking for a moment and then said: "What a girl! What a girl!" smiled very affectionately at Sassi and left. But this was not the end. Two days later Sassi received a sealed official note from the ministry. It informed her that the twin house next to where she lived has been acquired for the servants. There would be six male servants and four females. Four of the men would be carriers of the palki, which was being specially built. The palki would be her means of conveyance to Lakhy Bagh and the

river. The other male servants were to do errands for her. Of the women attendants two would be Kalmuk guards, trained in arms and expert riders. The other two would be her personal maids, young smart girls of good family, reliable and active. They would look after her and her apartments. Traders of all kinds, jewelers, goldsmiths, silk merchants have been given orders to bring their goods and wares to you for inspection and purchase. The Lakhy Bagh had its own quota of Kalmuk guardswomen, gardeners, cooks and their assistants, cleaners, washers and house-keepers. There would be maids there too and a band of women singers and instrument players. There would be a munshi stationed at the pavilion with funds for running the establishment. There would be a stable with horses of the best breed and ostlers and stable-boys to look after them. The Kalmuk guardswomen were expert riders having learnt to ride bare back on the fast ponies of the Central Asian Steppes from where these Kalmuk guards- women were imported for service in royal harems all over the sub-continent. The Lakhy Bagh and the pavilion were being made ready to receive the princess. She could go there in three or four day's time. The Jam and the Vizier wish happiness and long life to the princess, who appears to be a worthy descendant of a long line of kings". This long missive pleased Sassi and she rushed to inform her foster-mother, who never tired of showering caresses and blessings on her darling.

A few days passed and Sassi learnt that now everything was in order and she could visit the Lakhy Bagh and take possession. She asked her foster-mother to get ready. Sakina the washer-man's wife was abashed. She said: "Sassi dear! it is all for you and you will fit into it. You were born to live in palaces. You go and enjoy yourself."

Sassi put her arms round Sakina and said: "Mother! What nonsense! Do you think I would go there without you. Get up and wear your best clothes. We must impress those royal underlings, and mind you, you should look down on them (she smiled broadly) and behave like a haughty dame. That should impress them." Both of them laughed and Sakina went to her rooms to get ready. The palki was ordered out.

The Kalmuk women-guards equipped themselves and the procession went out. People looked in wonder but there were a few whispers: "Our beautiful Sassi has been adopted by the Jam. She is to have royal honour." Another voice said: "why not! Did not Atta save a young princess from drowning. This is his reward." "No, No! it is said that once when the royal washing came to Atta, he found a purse in one of clothes. It was full of gold and jewels and Atta returned it. This is his reward" and so on.

Sassi and Sakina found all the attendants, in fact the whole establishment waiting to welcome them. They did Sassi royal honours and the munshi-accountant showed her the pavilion, her rooms, her staff, the view of the river and the ferry from her sitting-room as well as the bedroom, guest-rooms all fully and sumptuously furnished. He then showed the ladies the gardens, the fruit garden as well as the flower-garden and the vegetable (kitchen) garden, the fountains and terraces. Sassi was delighted and she approved of the hole set-up. She gave a fistful of gold coins for distribution among the servants.

She then inspected the stables and was told of the quality and breed of the horses. She was requested to select her own mounts. She knew nothing about horses but she turned to her Kalmuks who were reputed to be excellent riders and knew all about horses. A mare was pointed out to her. A pure Arab breed, fleet as the wind and gentle like the breeze. That was the recommendation. She laughed but agreed to try her. She said frankly: "I have to learn to ride, I must also know how to groom my mare (at this the head-boy of the stables was horrified) and to saddle and unsaddle her. But there is no hurry, so (this smilingly) don't be horrified. We shall know each other better in time". This graciousness won all hearts.

Sassi showed in her dealing with the large establishment placed at her disposal that she had a native graciousness, but also an innate power of command. She was definite in her views and never hesitated when giving orders. All this got reported to the Vizier, who had, as

shown above, a very soft corner for Sassi. He in turn informed the Jam who was very pleased. This news filtered down to the harem and the queen again expressed a desire to meet Sassi. To this Sassi would not agree, but she allowed her younger sister and two young brothers to visit her. She made much of them. Hugged them, kissed them, treated them with every kind of fruit and delicacy, took them on the river in her barge and sang to them. They were enraptured. The sister especially became her slave. She asked again and again: "Apa Hazoor (dear and respected elder sister) tell us how the gypsy stole you and robbing you of all the jewels, put you in a padded basket to float down the river". Sassi told them a most convincing fabrication about it all and they were thrilled. They came again and again and sometimes it was difficult to make them leave Sassi's garden and pavilion, or her company.

VIII

They were always accompanied by a couple of maids. One of them was a Baluch girl of fifteen or so and a very pretty one. Sassi was attracted to her because she was a laughing type. She laughed often, showing her pearly teeth. Her eyes though small, were bright with laughter always. Sassi asked her where she came from. She said from Makran. Sassi asked her how did she come to take service so far from home. The girl said she had been captured in a raid when quite young and sold to the Jam who wanted a young girl as maid for her elder daughter princess Naseem (Sassi's younger sister). The girl told Sassi stories about Kech Makran and the lords of the region. They were she said, all warriors and very brave and she laughed and said very handsome. "Princess" she said: (because being a clever girl she soon learnt that Sassi was really the Jam's lost daughter) "You cannot imagine how handsome our men-folks are" and she sighed. "Especially" she added after a pause the sons of Haut Ali the Chief. She went on: "I was quite young, about eleven when a rival tribe made a night attack and took some of our people especially girls captive. Of course the Chief soon sent an expedition after them and killed many of the raiders, but I

was taken away and sold soon after. But even then I had heard of the handsome and brave sons of the chief, especially the eldest prince Punnu. They say, Princess" she said laughingly, "there is nobody on earth as handsome and as brave as Punnu" and she heaved a big sigh. Sassi was intrigued.

She said to the girl on one visit: "I have a gallery of portraits in a wing of the Pavilion. They are the portraits of the rulers of all the lands near by. I understand a painter from Ghazni painted some of them. Can you point out this wonderful prince's portrait, if it is among them. The girl went eagerly with Sassi and after scrutinizing the portraits, stood long before one, which Sassi had already noticed and seen again and again. The girl said: "This is prince Punnu's picture, but he is far handsomer, I heard. Why! he is said to have a face like the morning sun and such flowing locks!" Sassi took her away, but thereafter spent much time each day pouring over each feature of Punnu's picture. On another visit the girl while talking of her people and especially of Punnu said: "Princess dear, I think Punnu deserves a wife like you. You would both make a wonderful pair; he is so handsome and so gallant and you, who I think, are the most beautiful person I have seen". Sassi soon became a devotee of the picture gallery.

Across the desert strip to the west of the great river lived many Baluch tribes. Some of them were still nomads but others lived settled and well-organized lives. Warriors since generations they admired anyone who besides his skill in arms were good leaders. One such Baluch warrior chieftain was Haut Ali of Kech Makran. He was ever victorious in his raids and so his fame and name went blazing all over Makran. He had five sons: Chuno, Punnu, Hoto, Nakoo and Noto. All were noted for their bravery as well as their looks, but the bravest of them was Punnu. And he was the handsomest too. The Baluch chief levied dues from caravans over a wide area. Traders came with goods from Bhambhore as well as from Seistan and even distant Iran. They told stories of their lands too. The tradesmen of Bhambhore told them of the wealth and strength of the kingdom of Jam Adam. The most

noteworthy thing they talked of, was the finding of the lost daughter of the Jam. She was a most beautiful person and was famous for her grace and charity too. She lived mostly in the pavilion of the Lakhy Bagh, which overlooked the ferry whose tolls were now going to Sassi's exchequer, who pretended to be the daughter of Atta the Chaudhry of the washermen of Bhambhore. Punnu the most adventurous of the Baluch chieftain was greatly intrigued by the mystery as well as the reputed beauty of Sassi, the guardian of the ferry which carried caravans and other travelers across the river. It was the only route to the capital, they said.

IX

One day a Baluch merchant named Babyo came to the Kohistan and went to pay his respects to Huat Ali the Chief. He had brought many attractive articles, swords as well as ornaments, carpets as well as fancy goods. He was welcomed by the Chief as well as his family. He was going to Bhambhore he said. Punnu made much of him and when bidding him good bye made a request. Apparently it was to be news of the capital but really it was to be an authentic report about the famed beauty of Bhambhore, who was a lost princess and at the same daughter of the Chaudhry of washermen of Bhambhore, a substantial citizen it was said, but certainly not a prince. Babyo promised to do so.

Babyo had been a great traveler and he had visited all the neighboring countries. He had tales to tell and all kinds of scandal. He had spent hours telling tall stories to Haut Ali, the Baluch chief and had become a favourite of the chief. Actually this was not his first visit to Kech Makran, but this time he had become quite friendly both with the Chief and his sons, especially Punnu, whom he admired for his looks and easy manner, as also his joyous view of life. He promised to send Punnu all the news he could gather about this great beauty.

When Babyo reached the environs of Bhambhore he first tried every way to get across the river to avoid the toll, but found that the

banks were patrolled by well-armed guards. This he found to be the employees of the mistress of the ferry. So he had to cross by the ferry which plied at all hours. In fact there were a number of barges employed by the ferry establishment. The toll-gate was in the charge of a capable man, who had been specially given this appointment by the Vizier, to safeguard Sassi's interests. Now Sassi who been pouring over the alleged portrait of Punnu and had been fed details, exaggerated no doubt, of Punnu's family and background by the lively Baluch maid, who had been promised freedom by the Queen and who longed to go back to her people in a village near Kech. So Sassi had ordered that if any Baluch party or caravan came to the ferry, the head of the party should be brought before her. This was now done and Babyo was escorted to the pavilion.

Babyo was a man of the world. He had been to many places and had seen much, but he was deeply impressed by the appointments of the audience room where he was conducted by two tall armed Kalmuk women-guards. A costly carpet, in which his feet sank, was spread from wall to wall and all around were divans covered by ved leather stamped in gold. There were silk and brocade curtains over doors and windows, except for the balcony which over-looked the toll-gate and the ferry. In a seat of honour Babyo saw a vision of beauty, which transfixed him where he stood. He a tall well-built middle-aged man who had man who had met kings and warrior-chiefs was awed by the sight of a slip of a girl. But Sassi smiled and Babyo came to himself. He was waved to a seat, offered sherbat and sweets and asked how it was that the toll inspector had detained him. Of course Sassi knew how it had been done. They were her own instructions. Any Baluch party of distinction, not the Bedouin, but men of substance were to be detained on some pretext or another and brought before her. These had been the orders. Babyo explained that it was a technical objection and could be easily settled. Sassi desired to know who he was, where he came from, and what was his itinerary. Babyo, though an experienced man of the world, could not fathom the trend of Sassi's questions. After a while she said, she had a picture gallery which contained portraits of various rulers and their

heirs. Could Babyo who had traveled widely, distinguish some of them. She said, she wanted to know who they were, otherwise there was no point in anonymous pictures. Babyo all unsuspecting went with her. The Kalmuk guards preceding them. Babyo was impressed by the portrait gallery, which had obviously been the work of masters, and many generations. There were old portraits all named but there were some which were labelled. Sassi led Babyo by and by, to the wing where the supposed portrait of Punnu was hung. Babyo was astonished and an exclamation of delight escaped him when he beheld the glowing portrait of Punnu and in fact his entire family. "Why!" he said "here are some friends of mine. I have only recently been with them. Haut Ali, the dignified Chieftain has been very kind to me. In fact I am carrying some goods of his. And this is the brave and delightful son of his Prince Punnu the hero of many fights and a most lovable young man. How is his picture hanging here?" Sassi said: "This pavilion and the garden around it are a gift of the Jam to me and the collection of portraits had been a favourite hobby of the Jam family". After this, there was some small talk and then Babyo was led back to the Guest House, where he was housed with honour. His goods were, wherever, impounded and his followers, servants and slaves were all apprehended. Babyo was informed by the officer in charge of the Toll House that he was suspected of smuggling slaves into the Jam's domains. Asked how they concluded that, he was informed that two of his slaves were wearing iron collars without any name of the owner stamped on them. Obviously those slaves were either stolen property or taken in some raid. This was an offence which was penalized in the Jam's kingdom.

Babyo appealed to the princess. Sassi summoned him, treated him again with honour, gave him a seat, ordered sherbats and other entertainments for him and asked him what he wanted. He told her that the two slaves were lent to him by Haut Ali the Chief of Kech Makran and that Haut Ali did not stamp the iron collars of his slaves, except with the outline of a camel. The Princess sympathized with him, but said that she had no jurisdiction over the laws of the land, but advised Babyo to write to the Chief of Kech to send some dignity to

guarantee the ownership by recognizing and identifying the slaves. Meanwhile he would have to bear with the restrictions imposed on his movements and would be treated with due honour. She was polite but firm, and Babyo had to accept the situation. He was permitted to send a messenger to Kech with necessary instructions.

Babyo went to his well-furnished rooms in the Guests House and wrote two letters, one to the Chief of Kech, the other to Prince Punnu. This was the first letters:

Dear Chief:

You will be pained to hear that I and my people have been detained at the Toll House, on the charge, that I am smuggling slaves into the Jam's kingdom. It is about those two slaves you lent me. Their collars, according to the laws of the land should have been engraved with your initials. There is a faint smudge on them which may be taken as a camel which is your mark, but it is not decipherable. Kindly send some prince with suitable attendants to identify the slaves and guarantee their ownership. Your goods are safe and will fetch a good price here.

Devotedly yours,
Babyo

The second letter was to Prince Punnu. It ran:

Dear Prince:

I have been luckily detained at the Toll House here on a technical point. I have written to the chief about it. For your eyes only, I write to tell you that reality is far, far better than rumour. I have seen nothing like it in all my travels. What is interesting, there is considerable curiosity about it and interest in you already. You must manage to come immediately. You will be happily surprised, greatly surprised indeed.

Your friend,
Babyo

X

When his letter was read out to Chief Haut Ali, he was furious. He raved. He called out to his sons Chuno, Punnu and Hoto. He cancelled his orders. He sent for the head-man of the tribe. Ordered him to get everybody armed. Get horses, he cried. We will go and smash them. We will kill them all. What do they think? It is Haut Ali whom they have insulted. He rolled his eyes. His mustaches bristled; he clenched his fists. He got up and strode about in the compound. All his sons came running. Chuno and Punnu soothed him, pacified him. He calmed down. He had his letter read out to them. Punnu was the first to respond. He said: "Father, this is nothing. No insult is intended. It is only a technical point, a point of law. Somebody should go and identify our slaves and stand guarantee for them. That is all. Nothing to worry about." The Chief said: "Is that so?" Punnu said: "Of course! there is nothing to it. The matter can be settled in half an hour". Then who is to go?" asked the Chief. Punnu replied: "I shall myself go if you permit". The Chief said: "Yes! yes. That's all right, but you are too impetuous. I think your elder brother Chuno should go with you. He is a steady man. All right, take twenty horsemen with you and go tomorrow. Poor Babyo must be rotting in prison". "No! Father. You need not worry. Babyo is not in prison. He is a rich merchant and a man of the world. They don't throw such persons in prison. Moreover he says only that he is detained. That is nothing. The whole matter can be sorted before mid-day tomorrow". And so it was decided. Chuno and Punnu left very early the next morning and reached the ferry before mid-day. There were only thirty miles between Kech and Bhambhore. Punnu and his brother identified themselves to the inspector of Tolls and soon Babyo and his people and goods were allowed to go. But orders were received that the princess would like to see Punnu.

The royal suite in the Guest House had been prepared for the princes. Chuno, Punnu accompanied by Babyo went to it. They were all amazed. None of them had seen anything like it. Not even Babyo, who had been to many neighbouring countries. The luxury of the fittings, the carpets, the curtains, the divans, the bed-rooms were all so richly

appointed that the desert-bred princes were rather taken aback. But Babyo assured them that after all the rooms had been fitted to receive royal guests, before Princess Sassi had been granted the estate. Only the rooms must have been very recently dusted, cleaned and freshened up. A center table was loaded with sherbats sweets, fruits and all kinds of dainties. They partook of some as the attendants passed them.

After a while Babyo took leave. Punnu went with him and they had a private talk. Babyo told about Sassi. He was in raptures when describing her charms and her personality. Punnu hastened back. Had a bath. Put on new clothes and went eagerly but with a beating heart to the audience room to which he was conducted by the majordomo, a richly clad courtier.

When Punnu actually saw Sassi, he was too dazed to speak. He just stood there and looked. It seemed to him that it was not a girl he was seeing. It was blaze of light. It was something out of this world. He bowed before her and still was in a daze when a very sweet voice said: "You are very welcome prince. A maid-servant of my mother, who was taken in a raid from Kech has been singing your praises for months. I was curious and wanted to see you. I hope they have made you comfortable in the royal suite. I also hope you will stay with us for a while."

This woke up Punnu. He said: "Princess! I too have been hearing about you and my eagerness was not just curiosity. It was a longing. I hope . . . I hope you will not be offended if I say I have been dreaming of you."

From this the talk progressed haltingly. There were pauses and words but looks did more than words. In the hour they spent together, they appeared to have known each other for months, for years, for ages. Love came to them in a rush, in a flood. It overwhelmed them. They became dumb. They just looked at each other. At last Punnu said: "It is not a dream, I hope. I have never felt so happy. I feel as if I have been

transported to heaven. Is this how people will feel in paradise?" Sassi blushed, looked as if her heart was in her eyes and was silent.

This went on for days. Chuno was getting impatient. Though he was invited to the pavilion and given every attention, treated like an important person, he was dissatisfied. Punnu he saw, would be gone for hours. He would not tell what he did at the pavilion. Chuno was first curious, then anxious and finally jealous. Plain jealous. The escort had been given quarters in the very commodious out-buildings and were treated like guests. They had never had such a time. But Chuno was afraid of his father's anger and he wanted to go back. So he took the escort back with him and left for Kech Makran, there to make a report to the irate chief, which in no way pleased that wild chieftain.

Sassi, however, was in the seventh heaven. She went riding with Punnu. She raced with him. Punnu was fond of his Arab horse and Sassi loved her mare Bijli. Nobody won in the races. Punnu's Arab and Bijli went neck to neck. There was laughter and love; Sassi grew more and more beautiful.

She sent word to the Vizier, the wise old friend and confidant of the Jam. The Vizier came. Sassi presented Punnu to him. He was kind and gracious and observant. He found in Punnu none of the uncouth characteristics of the Bedouin. Handsome, polite, respectful and obviously oceans deep in love with Sassi, the Vizier approved of him. He invited him to his palace, said the town would be honoured by his visit, all formal and polite, but with now and then a very shrewd glance at Sassi, which she answered with a smile. They understood each other.

Punnu went to the town. The Vizier's people escorted him. A dinner had been arranged. To it some associates (dignitaries of the court) were also invited. There was much polite conversation. They asked Punnu about life in Makran. Punnu answer without any self-consciousness. It was a life, he said, different from town-life, but adequate for the free and easy way in which people of the desert have

always lived. There was no shortage of the necessities of life, there was less formality, but everybody, he said, had his place in that society. It was a time-honoured way of life and people were as happy or miserable there, as anywhere else. The guest were impressed by the confident, proud and yet polite manner of the desert prince. The Vizier sent word to Sassi that as he expected of her, she was a very good girl with a wise head on her shoulders. Sassi interpreted it as approval.

But she told Punnu that there were two conditions one from her foster parents and one from the Jam. Atta her foster-father would insist on customary rituals and the Jam's condition was that Punnu would have to take his residence in Bhambhore, where the Jam would give him a jagir and build a magnificent palace for them along the river bank. That is, Sassi said with a sancy look, if Punnu wanted to marry her. Punnu answered that he was her slave and would do anything in the world for her. Sassi said, she had been informed of all the formalities, by both her beloved foster-mother and the affectionate Vizier. Punnu agreed.

The washer-men brother-hood insisted that Punnu must conform to the age-old custom of washing some clothes suitably, each garment sent by an elder of the brotherhood. A bundle was sent to Sassi and she bade Punnu laughingly to play the man and go and wash them properly. Punnu was taken aback but said that he had not accepted defeat in his life so far and he would not be beaten now. He went with the bundle of clothes to the river-bank and did his best to wash them. Not accustomed to this kind of work, he did not know how much beating a silk garment would bear. He treated the cottons and silks in the same manner and was proud of the work he had done. But when he gathered the dried garments, he found most of the silks in tatters. He had beaten them too hard. He brought back the bundle to Sassi and showed her the result of his labours. Sassi laughed. She said she had expected something like that. She also told him with a mischievous smile that as a young girl she used to go with her foster-father and wash some garments and at first she did the same. But she added: "No great

harm has been done. You should put a gold coin in the packet of each torn garment and you will see there will be no outcry". Punnu did exactly that and everybody approved of Punnu's labour. So the marriage was arranged. It was a simple ceremony as far as the washer-men community was concerned, although Sakina, Sassi's loving foster-mother wept copiously.

The Vizier's formal ceremony was however different. A grand function was arranged. The Chief Qazi of Bhambhore came to perform the Nikah and the presents that were brought by the attending nobles filled a room. What the Jam sent and what the Vizier gave amazed Punnu. Sassi's young sister and brothers and were jubilant. They were the soul of merriment and scrambled all over Punnu. The ceremonies lasted some days, but at last peace descended on the pavilion and the lovers were in bliss. Sassi grew deeper and deeper in love and would not bear to part from Punnu for even an hour. The sun shown for them; there was no cloud on the horizon.

XI

But in Kech Makran, the Chief never a patient man, and fiery like a bull in anger, began to complain; "Where in Punnu? Why is he lagging in that wretched place? That hot-bed of sin! That sink of iniquity! That devil's workshop! That hell of a place! Chuno! Send somebody to find out! What is keeping him there? He said he would stay with the good man Babyo for a few days. And weeks have passed. Let somebody go at once and bring me news, or I shall assemble all my lancers and lay the town waste. They can't do this to me". And his eyes shot sparks, as usual. Chuno sent to the town a confidential man of his, his own man.

The report came in a few days. Punnu has married a washer-man's daughter. He has washed clothes. He has become a washer-man. The Chief saw red.

He shouted: "Chuno! Where are you? Oh here you are! All right. Go at once and bring back Punnu. No! That won't do. Punnu can beat all four of you. Take some men with you. Trusty men. Also take two of your brothers with you. Go and fetch Punnu. They must have bewitched him. These town dwellers are all followers of Satan. Go at once. Go now. What are you gaping for? Oh! You are a wet rag. Oh! Punnu! my gallant son! Chuno what are you waiting for? Go! Go! Go at once". Chuno called Nakro and Hoto and with five very trusty stalwarts mounted fast camels and left for Bhambhore.

Arriving there, he called at the pavilion. Punnu came out to meet his brothers. They were conducted to the guest house and made welcome. He embraced his brothers, passed sherbat and fruits on them, asked after everybody in Kech and made them welcome. He said now that they had come, they must stay for a while. He would see that they have a good time. After some talk, he asked his brothers: "Would you like to see your sister-in-law". When they said yes, he took them to the pavilion and presented them to Sassi. She was very pleased to meet them. Chuno she knew already. She knew he was Punnu's elder brother, so she paid him customary respects but with Nakro and Hoto the young brothers, she was very friendly and affectionate. She passed many presents on them, and seconded Punnu's invitation. They must stay with Punnu a long time and see the town.

Two and more days passed in festivities and then the wily Chuno said that the brothers wanted to have Punnu and the princess in the guest house for dinner. Sassi and Punnu gladly accepted the invitation. A grand dinner was prepared and everybody was happy. There was much laughter, and songs were sung. Chuno had secretly mixed opium in a fragrant drink, which he said was specially ordered for his brother and sister-in-law. My men who you have so generously housed in the adjacent building as if they were men of high birth, have combed the town for such a drink. A drink imported from Persia. Punnu and Sassi drank this sherbat. They thanked Chuno for taking such pains to entertain them. After hours of happy chit-chat, when Punnu & Sassi

began to yawn, Chuno suggested that they may as well rest in the Royal Suite. Punnu who felt suddenly very tired said, that is all right. There are plenty of bed-rooms in the guest house. So Sassi and Punnu retired.

Chuno and his brothers who were in the know, though reluctantly, because they loved Punnu and liked Sassi, now made their preparations. Chuno called his men from the attached house and bade them make ready. The fast camels they had brought with them were quietly led out and tethered near the ferry. A couple of hours passed. Chuno went quietly to the Royal Suite. Punnu and Sassi had been so sleepy that they had not bothered to bolt the door of their bedroom. Chuno found them fast asleep. It was not difficult for him and his brothers to carry away the drugged Punnu. Quietly they left the guest house. Slowly, without making any noise they went to the place where their followers were waiting for them. They secured Punnu on the leading camel on which Chuno himself rode and went to the ferry. The ferry men knew them to be the brothers of Prince Punnu, so there was no difficulty in crossing. Silently the thieves rode away.

XII

When Sassi woke up, it was broad daylight. The sun was half-way up the sky. Her head felt heavy. She could barely open her eyes. She looked about. Punnu was not on the bed. She thought he was in the bath-room. She went there, he was not there. She thought he may have gone to his brother's room. No! he wasn't there either. Nor were the brothers. Now she was alarmed. She rushed back to the pavilion. She stormed into all the rooms. There was no trace of Punnu any where. She called her maids. They had long been up. She asked if they had seen the prince. "No! Princess" they said they hadn't. Sassi called her Kalmuk guards-women. She was now frantic. She ordered them to make a search. She sent for her major-domo. She ordered him to see whether the lancers of prince Chuno and their camels were there. He came back and said: "No! Princess! nobody is there". Sassi was stunned. She murmured: "Oh! the traitors!" She changed into her riding habit, wound

a multi coloured silk scarf round her head. She belted her head-scarf round her waist, took up her whip, ordered Bijli to be saddled at once and told her staff that she would be gone for an hour or so. They shouldn't worry

She was astride Bijli in a trice and went to the ferry. She asked the ferryman if the Baluch party had left. He said: "Yes! Princess they left early". She crossed out and took the road to Kech. It had been described to her often by Punnu. It was well-travelled and quite hard for a few miles. There was then a stretch of desert and further there was hard ground again. She let Bijli go. It was now midday. She rode hard. Mile after mile went by. An hour later she came to the end of the flats. There she found a goat-herd. She asked him if he had seen a party of Baluchs go by on camels. The goat-herd, a strong, stout ruffian, looked at the beautiful vision before him and said: "Yes they went by quite early. But why hurry after them. Come stay with me for a while. I am as good as any other man". Sassi was amazed as well as enraged. She lashed at the goat-herd and cut his face. The man was not daunted. He came at her. Sassi said: "Bijli" and ran the man down. Bijli stamped him into the dust. Sassi wheeled around. and was gone in a flash.

It was not long before she came to the desert stretch. She had to slow down but Bijli was sure-footed. She went on gamely. Sassi had sometimes to use her heels to hasten her but the sand was deep here. She was struggling with it when they sky began to darken. She looked up. The sun was there on top but there was a pall of darkness from the north-west. She feared it may be a dust-storm. It was. The wind freshened. Particles of sand began to fly. Soon gusts of wind brought heavy showers of sand. Sassi pressed on. In about half an hour the storm burst on her. A wall of sand came rushing. It filled her nostrils. It covered Bijli. Sassi persevered. And then a rushing wall of sand fell on them. It staggered Bijli. Sassi steadied her but visibility became poor. Soon she could hardly see and then a terrible buffet felled poor Bijli. Sassi sprang free and tried to cover Bijli. The mare tried to stagger up but she was not half up when another gust struck her. It struck Sassi too. She could not stand. She sat down and covered her face with her

head-scarf. The other scarf she put on the head of the prostrate mare. She tried to shout but she was choked. The wave of sand came rushing. It was a river of sand. It was a flood. It covered Bijli. It soon covered Sassi. She put her head between her knees and tried to breathe, but the sand now filled her eyes, her ears and her mouth. She fell down and rolled over. The sand soon covered her. Sassi was gone. The sands of the desert covered her as it covered Bijli, the gallant mare.

On the other side, Punnu woke up on his brothers camel. He asked in a dazed voice: "What is happening? Why am I here? Where is Sassi? Where are you taking me?" Chuno said: "Father sent for you. He said you must be brought home". Punnu shook himself free and gave one blow to Chuno. He said: "You traitor! You sneak" and jumped down from the camel. Before taking the leap he had snatched away Chuno's sword. He now shouted: "Come down you dogs! You thieves! You traitors! You have perhaps killed Sassi. I will cut you to pieces you curs!" Nobody dared to climb down. Punnu rushed away. He ran like a hound, like the wind, like a tempest". The storm had abated by now. He went as fast as he could in the sandy waste. In an hours laboured walk he came to a mound. There was something suspicious about it. It looked like the outline of a horse. He came to it. He brushed away some of the sand with his hands. It was a horse. He cleaned the saddle. He recognized it. It was Sassi's horse. He looked wildly around. His heart pounded like a hammer. He looked and found a piece of cloth sticking out of a smaller mound near by. He went to it and fell on his knees. He began to burrow. He used his hands like showels. He uncovered a leg, and arm, some clothes that he recognized. Tears came to his eyes but dried quickly. He went on brushing away the sand. It was not long before he found his Sassi. Her eyes, ears and mouth were full of sand. She did not breathe. She was dead.

Punnu emitted one long cry and fell on Sassi's dead body. He tried to take her in his arms but suddenly felt weak. His breathing became difficult. His eyes blurred. He could not dig any more. He heaved a big sigh and fell on Sassi's lovely form. He heard and saw no

more. Soon a gust of sand blew over him. Another wave of sand came rushing and covered both Punnu and Sassi.

They say that when a sand-storm comes that way, they hear Sassi's voice calling: "Pun..nu, Pun..nu" ... And an answering sound saying ... Sas ..see .. Sas ..see ..."

AFTERMATH

The sun ran on unheeding and evening came. Everybody at the pavilion waited anxiously for Sassi's return, but straining eyes became dulled and there was no news. The major-domo, a confidential man of the Vizier went in haste and alarm to His Excellency. He told the Vizier what he had gathered, and how the princess had rushed away distractedly on her mare crying, she would be back in an hour or so, and now more than five hours had passed, and she had not returned.

The Vizier, a wise man, thought for a while and then sent for Diler Khan the old kotwal. By now the two had became friends, and the Vizier knew he could trust him. He told him that the princess had gone in a great hurry in search of her husband, whom apparently his people had abducted. It was a delicate situation, and he had better use both tact and firmness. Diler Khan understood. He was advised to take a strong guard with him, and, the Vizier emphasized, whatever happened, he should bring back the princess and her husband. Diler Khan said: "Excellency! the princess is as dear to the Jam and you as she is to the people of Bhambhore. My life for her, I cannot say more". With these words he strode away, as straight and strong as he was twenty years ago, when he was the leader of a band of outlaws.

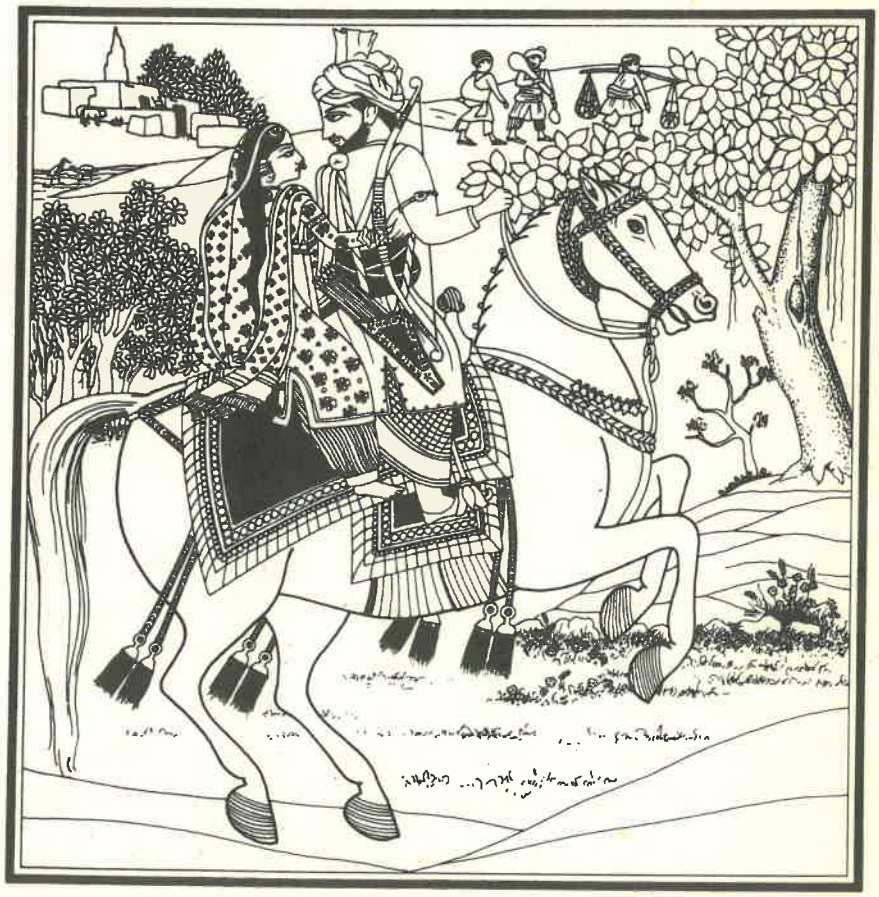
He left in an hour, with twenty-five well-armed guards of his choice. They rode on picked horses and they rode fast. There was still enough light for them to see that the storm had blown itself out. There was yet a stiff breeze blowing, but there was now very little sand on it. In an hour's fast gallop they came to two small mounds. Much sand had

blown away, and they could see the hooves and ankles of a horse peeping from one of the mounds. They alighted. They looked and found a smaller hump very near. From this heap fluttered the end of a multi coloured scarf.

Diler Khan that man of iron almost fell from his horse. He guessed what the hump contained. Reverently, tenderly, slowly, he brushed away the sand. It was not long before he uncovered the forms. There was the gallant prince and in his arms lay the once glorious daughter of the sun, the beloved of everybody, the star of beauty, the soul of courtesy, the pride of Bhambhore, Princess SASSI.

They brought back the entwined bodies of the lovers. and the whole town was plunged in mourning. Sassi's young sister, princess Nasreen did not stop weeping for days.

MIRZA SAHIBAN



I

In the Chenab Valley lived two clans of the famous Jat tribes. The Siyals or Mahnis in the north (mostly around modern Jhang) and the Kharls in the south (mostly around Sahiwal). They were rivals as well as relatives. Very true to the land of their birth, they were given to feuds and friendships. Fierce in love and fiery in hate they had hot tempers which blazed up on the slightest provocation. And yet they were kinsmen. Marriages took place between them and cordial relations were a normal way of life with them.

In the south lived the Kharls. The leader of the Kharls was named Mehr Vanjal. He was married to the sister of Khewa Khan the Mahini Chief, and the two families were on the best terms. They exchanged visits and attended all the customary ceremonies of births, marriages and death of near and even distant relatives. Khewa Khan had two sons Mir and Shamir, both stalwart young braves. Proud of their position as the sons of the Chief, and vain about their skill in arms and horsemanship, famed for their prowess in hunting, Mir and Shamir were really a formidable pair. When they were still quite young, a daughter was born to Khewa Khan, a baby-girl so pretty that everybody made of her. Her winning ways won the hearts of even her rough and tough brothers and they were as fond of her as were their parents or her aunt Beebo, her father's sister. In fact Beebo who had no female issue of her own was extremely fond of the little niece. So much so that the little girl lived as much with her aunt Beebo as at home. Her name was Sahiban, which means "the lady." She was so named because even as a small girl she had a dignity, a poise and confident look which made her stand out from among other girls of the large family. And when she grew up she became famous for her handsome face, and her winning ways despite her wayward manner. But much had happened before that. In fact Sahiban had met her fate.

It happened this way. Away in Danabad, where the Kharls lived, Vanjal the Chieftain of the clan had a son, who from boyhood had a dash, a reckless way, a fearless manner and a skill in arms, especially in archery that was a byword in the south. His name was Mirza Khan. His father Vanjal was worried about him as Mirza was very obstinate. Set upon a task, an enterprise, a daring exploit, he would listen to no advice, pay heed to no admonition, and went his reckless way regardless. These boyish escapades were nothing but the expression of his bursting energy, his pride not to refuse a dare and his triumph in achievement. He harmed nobody, hated no one, and was friendly with all. He loved his elder brothers, was very fond of his sister Chchti and in all manner was devoted to his parents. But his father Vanjal was worried. Mirza had a wayward streak in his nature a wildness, which Vanjal thought should be tamed and disciplined. Mirza he thought, was too proud of his growing powers. Overfond of his mare Bakki, he rode like the wind, jumped over nullahs and mounds and went after wild hogs as if they were mere sheep. Vanjal thought Mirza should be sent away from a place, where he was master and lord over every clansman. In fact it were the young clansmen who adored the gallant young master. His brothers indulged him, his sister worshipped him and his mother rubbed her hands. So Vanjal sent Mirza to his uncle Khewa Khan, the Siyal Chief. He was to be put to school there and kept on leash. But can you make a lapdog of a tiger-cub?

II

Mirza was welcomed by his uncle Khewa Khan, embraced by his cousins Mir and Shamir, who though a little older than Mirza were in build not much bigger. In any case they had heard of the reckless deeds of their younger cousin and both envied and admired him. Their mother a jealous woman did not much appreciate a lad who looked as if he would grapple with a bear without a dagger or spear in his hands. He had that fearless look in his eyes. But the person who took him to her heart was his mother's younger sister Beebo, and it arranged that

he would stay with his aunt and not in the house of Khewa Khan, his maternal uncle.

It was not long however before Mirza was put to school. There were other lads and girls of the clan in the class. The village qazi, the imam of the mosque was their teacher. A venerable man, mild in manner, half the time nodding in a daze, to wake and reprimand the boys if they were quarrelling, or the girls if they were tittering or gossiping. The pupils learnt as much as they wanted and they were not given to study as a rule. Mostly the boys made plans for one outing or adventure or another and the girls either giggled and talked scandal or discussed clothes and ornaments. But there was one girl, who after a few days paid but scant attention to gossip or ceremonies. When she could, without being caught doing so, she cast fleeting glances at the handsome Mirza Khan, her eyes half hidden by the long lashes.

They had first met at auntie Beebo. Not once but many times, laughing and teasing each other. Sahiban the budding beauty mocking Mirza for his supposed exploits and his lean mare Bakki, of whom Mirza was inordinately fond. In fact he groomed her himself and even at his uncle's stable, which contained many stalls, all filled with blood-horses, good at racing and hunting, Bakki must have special attention. This was so, because though lean she ate twice as much as any other horse. It is true she was fleet and feared no obstacle, but Sahiban the spoiled beauty thought it beneath the dignity of a Chieftain's son to groom a horse. And gradually, this teasing began to take another tinge, each becoming more conscious of the other as a person, each finding occasion to be near the other, each becoming tongue-tied when alone and talkative when in company, talking obliquely but always at and for each other and then their looks told them what was happening and it happened. They were in love.

Nobody yet knew. Only the keen and loving eyes of aunt Beebo realized and the sharp and jealous eyes of Mirza's aunt-in-law, Sardaran, Khewa Khan's wife suspected. Sahiban's brothers the

boisterous gallants of the Siyals, Mir and Shamir jollied their beloved sister Sahiban, sometimes for her unwonted gaiety and at others at her strange silences. This went on for months, till other girls and boys began to cast knowing glances at the pair and it was not long before they began to gossip. There was really no occasion of course, for this gossip, because Sahiban had nothing coquettish about her, nor was she a flirt. In fact she was a quiet girl. Small in comparison with the sturdy village maidens, with her very wide big eyes, her short curly hair, her expressive mouth, she was more of a boy than a girl of those open spaces, unlike her bold and boisterous brothers Mir and Shamir, who were seldom quiet or solemn, Sahiban had gradually become a moody girl, who had fits of hilarity now and then and romped about with other girls of her age singing folk-songs and dancing the age-old country dances but by the time she was fourteen, she had left these pastimes. Her mother, a dragon, if anything, the true mother of such brash and blusterous sons as Mir and Shamir, was often heard to say: "After whom has this girl taken? She appears to be a foundling!"

Mirza Khan was really no stranger to Sahiban or her brothers. They had met often as children, at family gathering, but when Mirza now fourteen, and tall for his age, but with the same dash and the same dare-devil look he came to her father's house, ostensibly for further education at the good and well known madrissah of the place, but really to get disciplined, they came to know him better. They also saw that his reputation was well-earned. Everybody had heard of his exploits. How he rode his mare Bakki at break-neck speed; how he had trained her to jump over fallen trees, over nullahs over mounds; how he had grappled with a bear and though scratched all over, his clothes torn to pieces, he had at last succeeded in stabbing it to death with his dagger; how he hunted wild hogs with a whoop and a yell which could be heard for a mile. Sahiban had also heard all that and she had liked it. Now that she saw his gallant figure and his laughing eyes, she felt a strange shyness and she would not meet his eyes, though she was only thirteen at the time, a mere chit of a girl as her rumbustious brothers, Mir and Shamir called her.

Of course they met at auntie (Masy) Beebo's house, where Mirza chose to stay, warmly received as he was by his mother's younger sister. A happily married woman, with children of her own, one or two married and the other agog with the arrival and looks and talk of their already famous cousins. Mirza Khan was already a hero to them. They had heard exaggerated accounts of his deeds and though Mirza received their eager questions about such exploits, with a joyous laugh and a No! No! No! nothing like it you goofs, they embraced him and would not believe him. Sahiban took part in rallying Mirza but shyly and in her quiet manner, but her eyes, wide and deep even at this age began to take on a sombre look when she furtively watched Mirza and she was rather distant than familiar with Mirza for a long time.

It was Mirza's chaffing which changed her interest into a tingling of her nerves and a throbbing of her heart. He called her "Sahib", saying she was a boy-sardar; he pulled her curls. he called her eyes small, because she hid them with the long lashes, although her eyes and her mouth were her most attractive features.

This went on for months. Nobody bothered at brother-and-sister teasings which were a common feature in all families. But when Sahiban entered her fourteenth year and her figure began to fill out and a swing appeared unbeknown in her hips, that Mirza began to look at her with other eyes and since Sahiban had been conscious of Mirza for a long period now, she too was drawn to him. As her nature was not superficial or her manner casual in the routine of life, her feelings always took deeper impression of any emotional reaction. And it was not long before poor Sahiban was miles deep in love with Mirza. It took Mirza months longer to feel the same way and to realize why Sahiban was no longer so familiar with him or was shyer than ever and more tongue-tied when they chanced to be alone.

But this stage of their love could not last long, as they met daily at Masy Beebo's house and Masy Beebo an astute but sympathetic and loving spectator, had watched the gradual awakening of love between

her two favourities. One evening as Mirza was going out, he almost collided with a hurrying Sahiban who was coming in with a message from her mother to auntie Beebo. Mirza grasped Sahiban and though at first she struggled to get free from his clasp, when she heard Mirza tenderly calling her "My love! My heart! My love!" She ceased to struggle and fell on his breast weeping. Mirza was troubled at this and said: "Saibi (his pet name for Sahiban) ! Why are you crying? Don't you like me?" Sahiban almost laughed at this and cried, "Mirza, you simple, silly old Kharl, don't you know?"

"What?" asked Mirza in a very surprised voice. At this Sahiban really laughed and said: "You don't deserve to be told" and ran inside to fall in the ample lap of Masy Beebo and said: "Masy ! what a fool Mirza is. He does not know"!

Masy Beebo kissing Sahiban's tear-stained eyes said, "They are all fools in the beginning, that is if they are any good. Those who are bad know too early".

"But", she added after a while, "Sahiban ! you have to be very careful. Your mother has a hundred eyes and twenty ears. Beware! Don't do anything silly". "But Masy! what is going to happen. My mother hates the Kharls and she has never welcomed Mirza, although he is always polite, and pays her all the respect due to her".

"Well ! that is another story and an old one! Your mother was at one time was engaged to Vanjal's brother Rehmu, that is Rahman, but it came to nothing, because Rehmu said he wouldn't marry such a hot-tempered girl. You know your mother's temper. In looks she is second to none, but in temper she is unrivalled!".

Sahiban whispered: "I know. That is what I fear. Mirza is such a reckless, impatient man. He will brook no opposition and yet he is shortly to go as his mother, my aunt Nasiban, has been sending

messenger after messenger calling him home, and he has just told me that he loves me and will not leave without me".

"I feared that," whispered Masy Beebo, "Mirza is a daredevil, he would gladly fight all the Mahinis to get what he wants and I have been watching him. He has been in love with you for a long time now, though like the decent boy he is, he has, you say, told you just now".

"But Masy if he goes, I shall die, I shall die! you will see Masy, I shall not live long now. He is going and God knows when I shall see him again". And she clung to her aunt and began to weep and weep.

The parting of Mirza and Sahiban was too painful to describe. Sahiban appeared to melt in Mirza's arms and would not be consoled. He vowed and promised and swore. He called Allah to witness. He pledged his honour, he almost lost his temper but Sahiban would not be consoled. And when he had left, Beebo spent hours consoling Sahiban, but Sahiban appeared to have a premonition. She said again and again: "Masy! my heart does not agree. My head is humming all the time; I cannot sleep; my tears have dried up; I hate make-up; I dare not face my mother who has such uncanny perception; my brothers look at me as if I were a stranger, my father does not speak to me; he who doted on me, his only daughter! What is happening Masy? What is going to happening Masy?"

Aunt Beebo, that wise woman side; "Daughter dear, you know the saying: Love and musk cannot be hidden. Only you and Mirza did not know, but we have known for quite sometime that you both were deeply in love".

"Oh! Masy! that is terrible! Does my mother know? Do my brothers know?"

"I am afraid, Sahiban, they must have suspected, because for sometime Mirza was not invited to either your father's council or his

house. And I know Khewa my brother is no fool. But he liked Mirza Khan, his own sister's son. He liked his gallant air; his fearless manner, his directness, his known exploits. Nobody is afraid of Mirza, here, but everyone knows that Mirza is the best archer in the country and in courage he is second to none". And smilingly she added: "As for looks, Mirza looks like a prince. Doesn't he?" Sahiban blushed and hid her face in the ample bosom of her aunt. And they consoled each other. The big broad and fearless daughter-less Beebo and the trembling fawn of a niece, who was more a daughter to Masy Beebo. As she had had more of the upbringing of her than her own tall, lean, vinegarish mother who seemed to have a grouse against the whole world.

And Mirza rode home. He made the journey (nearly eighty miles) in two days. Bakki his lean mare was sometimes impatient for a gallop, but Mirza held her on a tight rein. Trotting fast he covered mile after mile, thinking of the problem of Sahiban, to whom he had pledged his word that he would come when the call came, be it night or day, rain or shine. He also thought of his father Vanjal the mighty, of his two elder brothers Surja the tall lean tamer of horses, the great rider and Gurja the thunderer, whose voice was, like a bellow when he was enraged, which he often was; of his sweet small sister, now small no more and his patient long-suffering mother, who never complained, bore hardships as if they were blessings and always forgave everybody; and his uncle Rehman (called Rehmu) that flash of lightning who dominated the clan, though his elder brother Vanjal was the Chieftain of the Kharls, the indomitable fighters, the avengers.

Mirza reached home towards the evening. He first went to the stables, unsaddled Bakki, rubbed her down with a clean rag, walked her up and down for a few minutes, led her to the water-trough, let her roll in the sand and fire clay shallow in a corner of the stable-yard and then mixed fodder (oats and hay) for her and left her to it. Meanwhile word had reached his mother and she came out with Chchti Mirza's young sister. Nasiban his mother embraced him and Chchti climbed all over him. Mirza stood laughing, the gay rings of his laughter reaching over

the walls to other houses. Uncles, aunts, cousins, nephews, nieces all came to the inner courtyard, till there was a regular throng there. Youngsters clung to him, elders slapped him on the back, till it was raw. Those of his own age shook his hands till he backed away from them and cried. "have pity on a poor, famished traveller. Give me a glass of water, somebody!" At this there was a lull in the storm of welcome and the bellow of Gurja was heard; "How are you whipper-snapper?" Now Gurja was a tall as a tree and as broad as an oak; to him the tall and slim body and whip-cord leanness of Mirza looked like fragility. Surja came over and embraced this young gallant, who had been sent away as a stripling and was now nearly as tall as himself and to his practiced eye, tough, quick and sharp. They all made him at home, his mother pressed sweets on him, his sister milk, thick with cream, his father an affectionate embrace, his uncle Rehmu a keen penetrating look, till Rehmu's wife the handsome Chagan (Chiragh Bibi) came. Though nearly forty and the mother of three boys and a pretty girl, this wonder of the family, looked twenty and continued to be as handsome as she ever was. She has made a favourite of Mirza from childhood and had told Mirza's mother emphatically that Mirza was and would be her son-in-law. Soft as a cooing dove, when in a good mood, she was a tigress when in anger. Everybody stood in awe of her, even Rehmu the fiercest of the Kharls. She came chanting, "Mirza, Mirza my darling" and hugged him to her bosom, as if he were a baby and kissed him on the cheek and forehead. It was a welcome, like which nothing had been seen for a long time. And it did not end in one day. Mirza the hero of the youngsters, the dream-lover of many maiden, the pet of mother, aunt, sister and cousin went sailing on a rainbow for days and days. Only to Chchti his young sister and to his mother he said shyly that he was interested in Sahiban. His mother could not object as Sahiban was her own brother Khewa Khan's only daughter and Chchti the adoring sister swore by anything her dearest brother liked. They murmured however that the "tigress" would take it ill, but hoped everything would work out happily. Mirza rode, wrestled with his friends and cousins, hunted wild boars and shot with his bow anything on the wing as before. He could bring down a bird in the dark

from hearing just a sound. His companions acknowledged his mastery as before. His "gang" was as loyally devoted as ever, and their adulation made his head swell. His brothers watched him. Surja the eldest would say in passing, "Steady, boy, steady". The bull-roarer would shout: "you shrimp! don't climb over the sun" and Vanjal the wise old chieftain would pat him on the back and say "Mirza my son, in this world there is always one better than another. My son! pride is not a very good quality". Mirza would nod, or smile or say yes as the occasion demanded and went his reckless way as before. There was something inside him, which drove him on. Faster and faster. Especially as days passed and weeks lengthened into months and no word came from Sahiban.

But all was not well there. As Sahiban became more and more restless, sicker and sicker with longing, spending more and more time with her loving aunt Beebo, her mother began to object. At first she would give Sahiban some house-work, like needlework, or crotchet-work or just plain sewing bed-sheets and pillow-cases. or she would send her to the kitchen to supervise or cook some special dish. Beebo, who had all these years, been accustomed to Sahiban's daily visits and who had many times kept Sahiban with her for days, was at first puzzled, then annoyed and then angry. And Beebo though normally a placid woman, when roused looked like a charging elephant. She was of big build and yet there was nothing flacid in her body. She had been the fastest reaper at harvest time and could churn ten seers of curd without taking breath. Everybody knew that when angered, Beebo was afraid of nobody. She would face her elder brother Khewa Khan and give him a piece of her mind.

She went into Khewa's courtyard and greeted her sister-in-law quite cordially. Talking of this and that she asked in an innocent tone:"I have not seen Sahiban for some days. I hope she is well?" Sardaran, her non-amiable sister-in-law, who had always a chip on her shoulder, when confronted with Beebo, of whom she was secretly afraid, said in a uncompromising manner:"Sahiban is busy."

"Busy?" asked Beebo, "Busy for days and nights, busy at all hours of the day and night. What do you take me for ? Tell me why you have forbidden her to come to me. (In rising anger) I have been more of a mother to her than you. You have never bothered even to comb her hair, to make any fancy clothes for her. What do you mean by saying she is too busy to come to my house. Which is her real home?"

"Don't shout at me Beebo. It is none of your business".

"Shout! You say" roared Beebo, "I ask you a plain question and you shilly shally".

"Beebo I ask you again and again not to roar like a bull".

"So I am a bull now!" shouted Beebo louder than ever, "you lizard! I have a mind to bend you over my knees and spank your lean shanks".

At this Sardaran raised her own voice so that Khewa Khan who had been having a smoke in his baithak (sitting room) came in and found a red-faced Beebo and a yellow-faced Sardaran standing against each other, arms akimbo. Khewa Khan realized that a royal battle was on. He did not wish to take part in it. He never did, because he had seen such clashes before. But Beebo roped him in. She said: "Bha ji, (dear elder brother) put a muzzle on this lizard of a wife you have, or I will break her into four pieces".

Khewa Khan knew better than to object to Beebo's vocabulary when she was angry, so he said soothingly: "now! now Beebo! What is the matter? Lower your voice, the whole mohalla will come in to find who is being murdered".

Beebo, still angry, but containing herself said: "What does Sardaran mean by shutting Sahiban up and not permitting her to visit me? She is my daughter, not hers. You gave her to me when a baby. I have brought her up. Sardaran or her father, mother and her whole

family cannot stop me". And her eyes began to flash fire again. Khewa Khan pacified her gradually with soft soothing and flattering words. And told her that she was right, that nobody (looking at his wife) could stop Sahiban from going to her. It is true, he added "She belongs as much to you as to us". Beebo who could never be angry for long, laughed at this and called out, "Sahiban! Sahibi, come to me dearest". Sahiban who had been listening to this battle of wills, had known from the beginning who would win and had already got ready to accompany her beloved aunt. So she came out shyly and greeting her father came to Beebo's arms who clasped her to her ample bosom and kissed her forehead. She said, "Bha ji I shall not let her come to you for two whole days now". Khewa Khan, thankful that peace had been made or at least armistice had been declared for the time being at such low cost, smiled and said: "Of course!" Then addressing Sahiban, but winking at his favourite sister, he said, "Now Sahiban don't give any trouble to your aunt". He knew well that Sahiban was the apple of Beebo's eyes and would be treated like a princess in that household. He had yet to pacify his wife, whose frustration smouldered in her angry bosom for hours and hours. And so she began to scheme and scheme. And her schemes boded no good to anybody and was disastrous for every one in the end. But weeks passed before she struck.

A week passed. A month. And more. The ding-dog battle for Sahiban's custody or care continued. Sardaran called Beebo a bull, and Beebo seldom mentioned Sardaran's name. She openly called her a poisoned lizard. She had once jokingly said to Sahiban, "Your mother's face turns yellow like a lizard when she is angry, which she is most of the time." And because Sardaran was lean of figure, the term lizard stuck. Nobody took them seriously in any case. Sister-in-law, everybody said, are always at war. And so poor Sahiban was over-cossted on one side and ridden hard on the other. No wonder her longing and love for Mirza grew apace.

But her mother was not idle. There had been some talk of an offer for Sahiban's hand from the Chadhars, a very prosperous clan.

She sent her maternal uncle Feroze on a supposed errand to bring news of her grandmother, but actually to give a hint to the Chadhars to make a formal offer. It was not long therefore, when there was such a proposal. Tahir Khan's name was suggested. Sahiban's mother told Khewa Khan that her people knew all about Tahir Khan who was an upstanding young man of parts. Khewa Khan said he must consult his sister Beebo who had mothered Sahiban since her babyhood days. At this there was some bitter words between husband and wife. But Khewa Khan insisted and went across to Beebo's house which was almost next door. Beebo was scandalized and passed some nasty remarks about her sister-in-law and declared that she would never agree as in her mind Sahiban's ideal mate was their own nephew the gallant Mirza Khan. Khewa Khan was not unwilling, but murmured that his wife had a grudge against the Kharls as she well knew and would never agree. These talks, with verbal contests between Beebo and Sardaran, went on for some weeks, but ultimately Sardaran won. Khewa Khan could not long withstand the barrage of words flung at him daily by his termagant of a wife and Tahir Khan's match was accepted. The Chadhars were told to make ready. Preparations were set on foot on this side and Sahiban's marriage clothes and other articles were ordered and seamstresses were engaged. Sahiban saw and heard. He heart overflowed with despair. Her only consolation was her beloved aunt Beebo and after long consultation it was decided between them that Sahiban should send a note to Mirza asking him to come immediately. The question was whom to send with the message. Beebo who knew everybody in the village rejected one possibility after another. At last she thought of Karmoo the Bahman, the odd-job man, who was one of the hangers-on of the village, was given enough cereals of each season to live on had been given a cow by Khewa Khan and so lived a quiet solitary life. Beebo suggested that Sahiban should go to him and request him to do this errand for her, promise him an ample reward and I think, she said, he would go. So Sahiban did what her aunt suggested.

She wrote an urgent note to Mirza and went that evening to Karmoo's cottage. Karmoo was sitting on his cot smoking his gurgari (metal hookah). Sahiban greeted him and in a very coaxing manner asked Karmoo to go to Danabad and give her note to Mirza. Karmoo woke up and said: "What! Danabad! That is too far away". Sahiban said, "Karmoo! You have never done anything for me, although I have always been kind to you. If you do this for me, I shall give you a saddled and bridled mare to ride. I shall even give you my golden bangles. Further, if you successfully fulfil this mission, I shall give you a young milk cow and even some arable plot and I shall be grateful to you all my life. Do not delay Karmoo, because in a few days the Chadhars will be coming to marry me. Then nothing will avail".

Karmoo answered: "Let me tell you the truth Sahiban. Danabad is more than sixty miles away. Who can go and come back from there so quickly. Moreover, you don't know, but Mirza may be already married. A second wife is always at a disadvantage. She can at best enjoy half the love and attention of the husband. Leave this stranger Jat and make friends with Karmoo. I am here, at your disposal, why not become my beloved"?

Sahiban was furious at this and cried: "Dust and ashes in your mouth Karmoo. I shall give you such a slap on your face that you will leave whatever wits you have. If my father knew what you have said, he would drive you out of the town. And if my brother Shamir learnt of it he would impale you. And if the boys of the village knew it, they would stone you to death. Shame on you Karmoo, I am like a grand-daughter to you and you dare to propose such an alliance. Let Khewa Khan hold court, I shall have you hauled up and you will see what happens?"

Karmoo fell on his knees and begged Sahiban to forgive him. "I shall go where you ask me" he implored, "I had taken too much opium. That is why I was not in my senses. I am but a poor man and an old one. I am a fool I admit, don't worry. I shall leave this very night and take your message to the stronghold of the Kharls."

He bought the message to Mirza and told him of the marriage arrangements of Sahiban. He said: "Mirza! come quickly. Sahiban is very anxious. Get ready. There is no time for shilly shallying. There should not be a minute's delay". Mirza no laggard, left everything and saddled his mare, the lean but swift-footed Bakki. But his sister Chchti caught hold of the bridle and said, "Mirza! Where are you going? Don't you know, only in a day or two the Bhattis of Sandal Bar are coming to wed me. Come, sit down on this bed and let us all think over what you intend doing. Don't you think my marriage is more important at this time than any other errand?"

Mirza answered: "Chchti, dear! don't stop me. My going is very urgent. It is imperative. You have four other brothers. They will look after you. They will do everything necessary for the honour of the Kharls. No one will disgrace the Kharls. I have to go. I must go. I cannot stop for a minute. Don't stop me now. My own business is of utmost important to me. I cannot spare a minute to anything else".

His mother came up and said: "Mirza my son! you are going to the Siyals. They are a bad lot. Their ways are crooked; their women are all unfaithful, they bewitch men and betray them; they eat up the very hearts of men. Don't go Mirza! I know you are going for the sake of a woman I feel it will cost you your life. Listen to me son! Do not take a step that way".

Mirza replied, "Mother! I have some work to do at the house of Khewa Khan. An urgent message has arrived. Rivals are coming to wed my Sahiban and I cannot bear that. She is your niece too and Khewa Khan is your brother. I am the grandson of that family. What harm can befall me there? Come mother, give me five rupees and some presents for Sahiban. I shall offer them on your behalf". And Mirza laughed.

He had his mare saddled and got on it. He bowed to his mother and started. His mother bewailed: "Khewa Khan's daughter has

snatched your heart, my son! All because she is fair and has long wavy hair. Even if she were to give you a poison-cup you would drink it. And if she were to strike you with a lance, you would not make a moan".

Mirza replied in a temper: "Mother! I alone am responsible for my life. If this will lead to my death, what matter! This is no concern of any one else". But Vanjal, his father now came up and said: "Son! your mother is not making wail for nothing. Nobody has benefited from the friendship of women; they haven't balanced minds. They offer love with smiles and betray you with tears. The wise men say that one should not enter the house where his beloved lives. But if you are going despite everything, do not come back without Sahiban. This I say for the honour of the Kharls".

When Mirza was about to leave the courtyard, his eldest brother Surja, the horse-tamer came in. Finding Mirza in the saddle and the entire family entreating him not to go, Surja said: "Look brother dear! why are you bent on your death? You are breaking our hearts. Don't you know about the Siyals. They are a treacherous people, though our own uncle, the elder brother of our mother is the head of the clan. He may not be as bad as the rest, but there is bad blood in them. We brothers have been so close to each other. We are so proud of you. Don't go for God's sake. I shall get you thousands of girls like Sahiban."

Mirza answered: "Brother! you don't know. You have not seen Sahiban. She is like a rose; her face shines like the full moon; she walks like a waving jasmine bush. There is nothing on earth like her. Don't stop me brother. I have given her my word. It is a matter of honour. I cannot let her down and I couldn't live without her. And she is waiting. The man she is engaged to is on his way. Maybe the marriage procession is already there. I have to reach her before evening and it is a long way. I cannot even stop on the way. Please let me go brother. You would not be dissuaded if you were in my place". His big brother stood silent. There were tears in his eyes. tears were running on the face of Chchti his sister and his mother was sobbing loudly. Mirza

waved his hand and left. His other elder brother, the broad-shouldered big husband-man caught his bridle as Mirza came out. It was Gurja the big-hearted. He said: "Mirza! won't you think again? We have heard no good about the Siyals. Why are you so bent on self-destruction?" Mirza replied: "Brother! I would have given up the idea if Sahiban had been married. But I can't abandon one who is engaged to me. Our aunt Beebo is witness. It is as much a matter of love as of honour. Would you be pleased if the Kharls are disgraced". Gurja could say nothing to that. "All right! young one! May Allah be your safeguard. Go and come back with honour. A brave heart should win". So Mirza went on his lone way.

He had a long way to go the sun was fairly high in the heavens. But he made Bakki go a steady pace. On the way he met Pilo the poet. He stopped and asked: "Pilo you are known as a wise man. Tell me if the omens are good." Pilo thought a while. He then said: "Mirza you know how the Persian wheel works. Wheel work with wheel. Each dependent on the other. Even the cog plays its part. Only then do the pitchers come up full of water. Nobody can live by himself. We are all parts of each other. It is not wise to ignore the conclusions of the wise. They are the collective wisdom of generations. You have been advised. You are going on a dangerous mission. There is yet time to go back". Mirza the hot-headed the over-confident said proudly: "Pilo! you don't know everything. I won't listen to such cowardly words. The world is for the brave. I am not afraid of anybody". Pilo said: "Mirza! we all admire you. You are a gallant young man, but you don't know everything. Those who love women fall into trouble. If you really care for your life, do not proceed. Go back, Mirza go back". But Mirza laughed and spurred away his mare. Pilo could only sigh over the dust that Bakki's hoofs raised.

Mirza went on unheeding. He reached his aunt's Beebo's house towards sunset. She was busy spinning, but she got up at once to embrace her favourite nephew. "So you have come, my bold hero". Mirza laughed. He said: "Masy! what did you think? I would swim across seas and climb snowy mountains to get my Sahiban. How is she? Have

you thought of a plan? I have heard noise of pipes and drums. There is shouting in my uncle's mansion. Is Sahiban ready? Can you inform her?" "Steady! my son! steady. We can succeed if you keep your head. Sahiban is surrounded by dozens of women. They are making her ready for the marriage which is to take place tomorrow morning. I have been to see her twice. She is very restless, the poor darling. But she is brave. She is ready to do anything you want. But you can't go there. There would be trouble. They know Sahiban has sent word to you. Karmoo the fool must have confided in some crony of his, especially as Sahiban had promised him a young milk-cow and other things. So they are a keeping an eye on her."

"Is there no way Masy ?"

"There is always a way my son" said the large-hearted Beebo. "I shall pretend to offer four gold coins as my contribution to the marriage ceremonies. Don't worry. I shall get Sahiban here by some means or other." So Beebo went over to her brother Khewa Khan's house. Everyone was afraid of tackling the formidable sister of Khewa Khan. She found means of taking Sahiban aside and told her that Mirza, the gallant, with the red turban had come and she should be ready. Sahiban whispered: "Masy! how can I come? You see the crowd here. I am surrounded by dozens of my cousins, who keep singing bridal songs to the beat of the dholki. I can't get away to the bath-room even." Beebo said: "Do not worry, girl! Mirza shall come for you after mid-night. He intends to climb over the cow-byre at the end of the compound. After every one has gone to sleep, you should slip out and come away. Mirza, my lion, is afraid of nothing. He would brave an army for you. He will get you out. Now you be near the cow-byre after midnight. Mirza will be waiting for you". And so it was arranged.

On the other hand Mirza went to his friend Jam the blacksmith. He asked: "Jam are you sleeping or awake? Or are you dreaming? Get up you lazybones. You are my bonded brother. Aren't you? But here are some gold pieces. Get me enough staples to enable me to climb over

Khewa Khan's cow-byre. Help me my brother in getting away Sahiban. My honour is at stake". Mirza also prayed to the five Saints and promised to make offerings in their sacred names.

He then took the staples and cautiously fixing them in the mud-walls of the byre, got to Sahiban who was waiting for him. He got her down carefully, still her red ornamental head scarf got caught in the staples. Sahiban said: "Mirza stay, and hold your impatient horse. My costly red head-scarf has been caught in the staples". Mirza said: "Look Sahiban. We have no time to waste. Don't you know we are going to my father's house who is a millionaire. I will buy you enough ornamental gar to make a pile. Come on and sit in front of me".

Sahiban said: "Mirza this Bakki of yours is so lean and thin. Its back appears to have been picked by crows. Were there no better horses in your father's stables? Where have you got it from? If your father had no better horse, you could have borrowed a good one from somebody. My father's horses are all well-fed and fleet. They will catch up easily with an eloping couple. The horsemen of Khewa Khan will catch you in some jungle or other, and they will have no mercy on you".

Mirza laughed and said: "My Bakki has long ears, a slim waist and a black tail. Do not worry about its leanness. Twenty two Dogars sit at the foot of my father's couch. Bakki has been grazing in the fields of that great sirdar. I have fed Bakki on the milk of ten buffaloes. Even angels are afraid of Bakki as the Devil is afraid of me. This mare of mine can go to the end of the earth and climb mountains as high as the sky. I ride her with pleasure. Don't run it down like that".

In Khewa Khan's house, the pipers and drummers began their early morning marriage music. Inside the house, Sahiban's maternal relatives were making preparations. Big platters of sweets were set out. Presentation dresses of gold and silver-work were displayed, gold and silver ornaments were tastefully put out, but they could not find Sahiban. Feroze Dogar, Sahiban's venemous maternal uncle shouted to

Khewa Khan: "Khan! listen to me. I think Mirza, your nephew, has abducted Sahiban. She must have gone weeping with him. He has taken her to Sandal bar. He has smirched your honour. You will never be able to wash this stain on your family's reputation. Let us collect our horsemen, and let us pursue the runaways. Let your footmen take to the foot-paths and the horsemen to the jungles. Everyone should make a pledge to kill Mirza".

It is true, love destroys the peace, joy and life of man as snows kills the life of a tree. A thief cannot sleep and a lover looses his appetite. Sahiban was getting worried, as Mirza riding hard for about 20 miles or so, had reached a dense wood of jand trees and got down to rest. He was so tired that he instantly felt asleep. He had not closed an eye for two days and ridden more than a hundred miles, coming and going back. He slept so soundly that he would not wake even when Sahiban shook him. Sahiban said: "Mirza! Mirza get up. Let us make our love immortal. People will long remember our love but we must not linger. Let us not tarry. Ride straight to your home in Danabad. Mirza, you have had enough rest. Naroo your old friend has left you. It appears the last hours of Sahiban have come".

Mirza who had no sleep for two nights, had ridden breakneck the previous day from Danabad, after a strenuous day of boar-hunting, was really tired. He had lain down for a little rest and had gone to sleep. When Sahiban shook him awake and said; "Mirza! this appears to be the end indeed. You don't seem to realize, but the Siyals must be following us like hounds".

Mirza said: "Sahiban! you are worrying yourself for nothing. I do not see anyone who can equal me in fighting. Nobody dares to attack me. I can send all your brothers to eternal sleep. Just let me sleep for a little more. We will then see what happens. In a short while I shall be up and then we will ride to Danabad.

Sahiban cried: "O Jat! you are asleep under the shade of these jand trees. Forgetful under a red coverlet, and the angel of death is hovering over us. It appears bad luck was to be our destiny. We may not outface this evil fate. Perhaps it is God's will. Who can fight what has been written. Mirza! Mirza! get up. I see horsemen coming from the left. They have swords in their hands and they are shaking them threateningly. Their horses appear to be the mounts of my father's stables. Are they searching for us or are they out on a hunt?" Then addressing thick bearded jand tree under which Mirza was asleep, she asked: "O tree! you be kind and you do justice. May God grant you a double yield of fruit and may your spread be four times as large. Help me in awakening Mirza"

She again shook her beloved Mirza and said: "Mirza! get up for God's sake. It appears Sahiban is not fated to reach her future home. The strands of her life have broken half-way. If you had no intention of bringing our love to a fruitful end, you should not have held out your hand to me. Save me my love, or you will get no peace in the next world. And where is your broken-down mare. She is just a walking skeleton. How can she carry two persons so far?".

Mirza said in his usual boastful vein "Look Sahiban! you are worried for nothing. You think nothing of my mare. Let me tell you. Six mounts were sent down from Heaven. Shah Ali chose Duldul and he took it to the Kaaba. One was taken by Guga Chauhan and he went to Bagar. Raja Risalu selected a roan and filled his quiver with an arrow; a palomino fell to the lot of Jamil Fatta who refused to give his daughter in marriage to anybody; a black horse was annexed by Dullah Bhatti and he rode on it to victory against Emperor's Akbar's forces; the mare Kakki came to Sultan Sakhi Sarwar who was the ruler of all four quarters of the land; the youngest among these horses was Bakki, she walked over to me; and I have paid homage to the five Saints and put a bridle on it, and then saddled it. I didn't bother about good or bad omens. Don't worry my dear! I shall cut off the heads of the Siyals braves, so that I don't humiliate my fleet Bakki".

But Sahiban saw the dust cloud far off. She said: "My father's hounds Sheroo and Kalyar are giving tongue. I know I should be as happy as a pilgrim on reaching the Kaaba if I reach Danabad, but the Siyals are coming in force. I feel as if somebody is sprinkling salt on my wounds. The Siyals will soon cut us to pieces".

Mirza replied: "I see no hero who dares to raise his arms against me. I shall make mincement of the crowd of Siyals. The whole lot is afraid of me. I shall cut them down as a reaper mows down a harvest. I shall make a mound of the heads of the Siyals".

He was speaking thus, when the sun made the earth red like sheets of heated copper. It appeared to Sahiban however that darkness was spreading over everything. She cried: "Mirza! Mirza! you have gone to sleep again after robbing the house of the Jats. Arrows are being rained down on us, as hammers are being struck in a smithy. The Chadhars brought a big marriage procession. They must have joined the Siyals in this onrush. Get up Mirza! and let us mount Bakki; we may yet reach Danabad in safety. Why are you still asleep?"

Then she said to herself: "I know, they will all run away from Mirza when he will attack. The heavens tremble before my Mirza. Mirza is not only famous for heroism in battle, he is also sought by Ranis and young girls. Mirza has told me that when he sits in a court of justice, Rajas stand to attention before him. He raids towns and levies toll on the road to Lahore. "My spear has spared no quarter" he says. "As for danger, why everyone has to die one day and leave this world. "I want" he has said many times "that my name should live for ever".

She was talking to herself when the Chadhars and the Siyals rushed in from all sides. All paths leading to the wood where Mirza and Sahiban had taken shelter were blocked. They surrounded the wood very cleverly and arrows began to fly, but Mirza went on sleeping.

Sahiban cried: "Mirza! Mirza! get up. See my brother Shamir is riding in on his famous horse. He has got a lance in his hand. Get up now. This is an hour of trial. I pray to God that we remain steadfast and true". Mirza woke up and saw Sahiban's brother Shamir coming at him. He took out an arrow from his quiver. It had a fine and well-honed head. He took aim with the name of Allah on his lips. The arrow flew straight and true and Shamir fell down from his horse.

Then Sahiban said: "Mirza! I beg you. Let us mount Bakki and spur it towards Dañabad. The horses of the Siyals are men-eaters, they bar the passage of any on-comers. Mirza! if you are really brave don't leave me alone. Stand by me to the end". But Mirza was too proud to listen to her. He went to sleep again, saying: "Let me rest a little more. I shall mow down these Siyals heroes. There will be nothing left of them. We shall leave very early at dawn and I shall take you to Danabad".

But an arrow came swishing from the shadows and pierced Mirza. It was a terrible blow. It made an end of Mirza. The fates were against him. Luck forsook him. But though Mirza was bleeding fast and life was ebbing away from him, he stood up with his back to a big jand tree. He groped about for his quiver. He couldn't find it. He cried: "Sahiban you have betrayed me. You have done a very bad thing. Where is my quiver? Have you hidden it? O! it is hanging on that high branch".

"No Mirza! " No!" cried the simple Sahiban. "It is not true. I did it only to save my eldest brother Mir. Shamir you shot down. My people are nothing to me, and I thought we would be gone soon. How can you think otherwise? you are my life, my all. Oh God! Mirza! what is happening?"

But Mirza looked up to the heavens and cried: "My Sahiban has deceived me. She has hung my quiver on a high branch, out of my reach". Then turning to Sahiban, he said mournfully: "I had a hundred

arrows in my quiver. I would have stopped the Siyals with them. I would have shot your brother Mir with the first arrow and with the second I would have killed your betrothed". He pulled out the arrow from his body but he began to bleed fast. More arrows now pierced him but he kept standing.

Sahiban moaned and said, "Mirza listen to me. We can't fight our destiny. Fate does not spare saints or prophets. It is this fate which has brought us to this state. Did the two sons of Ali, Hassan and Hussain not die fighting in vain? Did not their mother Fatima stand weeping in her doorway saying "Alas they have not come back to me again"." Mirza, such great dignitaries, such exalted persons could not escape their fate. How could we mere mortals escape?"

Mirza's eyes dimmed. He could barely see now. His turban fell from his head. His long wavy hair became disarranged. He still leaned against the jand tree and slowly he ceased to breathe. It was thus that Mirza died alone. There was no one beside him.

Pilo the poet said: "This is how the world goes. Many populous assemblies have been decimated and many Kingdoms have ceased to exist. It is true the Angle of Death took Mirza's life but his pride had also something to do with his death".

The Aftermath

The Siyals and their allies the Chadhars were jubilant. They set fire to the tree against which Mirza had died standing and caught the bewailing Sahiban. Sahiban never begged forgiveness or mercy or kindness. She gave no recognition to her family or to Tahir Khan her betrothed. She only asked for death. This they gave her. They hanged her on an adjacent tree and left. They shot arrows at Bakki but she escaped narrowly. One arrow got embedded in the saddle another grazed her side. She disappeared in a cloud of dust. Singing and triumphant the Siyals went home.

Bakki galloped away and by the afternoon reached Danabad. She came to Vanjal's compound, butter at the gate and was admitted. Seeing Bakki with an with an arrow still sticking in her saddle and a wound caked over on the side, the bridle torn in shreds, the whole family thronged about it. There stood Bakki, her head hanging and her sides heaving. They understood. Chchti flung her arms round Bakki's neck and began to wail over the catastrophe. They all understood that Mirza was no more. Surja came and his broad shouldered brother Gurja. They stood silent. There was no tears in their eyes, but their hearts burnt with anger. Vanjal came and saw Bakki. He looked at his sons. He stood frowning for a few moments and sent for his brother Rehman. Rehmu's wife the handsome aunt of Mirza, who had hoped to make Mirza her son-in-law, whatever happened, came. She was not silent. Mirza's mother had collapsed. She was softly moaning saying over and over again: "Mirza my son! I asked you not to go. I asked you not to go". Chchti came to her and embraced her. They mingled their tears. It was not the habit of the Kharls, men or women to waste breath. Nobody went near the women. The men came together. It was Rehman who first opened his mouth. He said, "It is obvious what has happened. The first thing we have to do is to bring back Mirza's body. God! What they will have done to him! We shall look around for Sahiban too". Addressing Vanjal the stricken, he said: "I will get the men together. Brother! you stay with the women. Surja and Gurja and my own sons will proceed immediately. You call together a body of armed men and send them after us. There is bound to be opposition. And if they have maltreated Mirza's body, there will be trouble. No fear brother! We shall meet the trouble. We are quite friendly with troubles. But a strongly armed body must follow us immediately. There is no time to waste". Then addressing the two stalwart elder sons of Vanjal, he said: "Sons! This is war. You know. Come prepared". Surja was silent but Gurja growled in his throat. They went to their rooms and equipped themselves with bows and arrows, with swords and lances. they did not say good bye to their wives. They salaamed their father, bent low before their mother, patted Chchti, said a word to

their sizzling aunt and went. Rehmu had meanwhile called his own sons, a son-in-law, four able bodied house-servants, all riding good horses. Surja and Gurja joined them and this small cavalcade left. Vanjal went out and called his people and in an hour had a fairly large contingent of young and old Kharls ready. All knew what was expected of them. All were ready. It was for the honour of the trible that they rode.

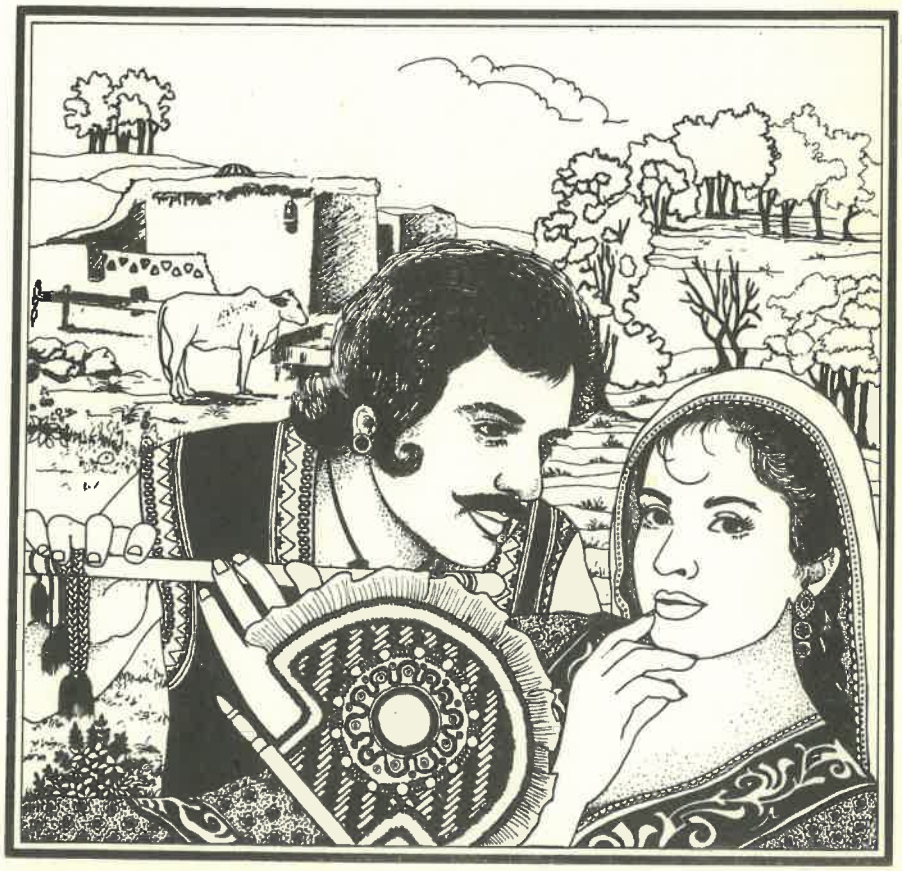
Riding hard the two parties covered the forty odd miles between Danabad and the wood in which Mirza had stopped for a rest. On the way they met a few travellers who had heard of the tragedy and they gave them the details. The wood had been half burnt they said and Mirza's body lay un-attended. They also told Rehmu the leader of the band, that the Siyals had hanged Sahiban and she was still swinging on a tree beside the half-burnt tree under which the body of Mirza lay. All this gave the riders enough cause to spur forward. In a few hours they reached the wood. They cut down Sahiban and wrapped the bodies in sheets they had brought with them. They cut branches of trees and made rough stretchers. They put the bodies on the stretchers and set a guard over them. The advance party now rested and waited for the main contingent. It arrived shortly. All of them rested for the remaining hours of the night in the wood and early in the morning, they marched towards the Siyal stronghold. It was not long before they covered the twenty miles between the wood and Khewa Khan's village.

When they came to the village, Rehmu ordered them to surround it. He with Surja, Gurja and his two sons went boldly to Khewa Khan's house. The order was not to molest Beebo's family or any woman, even Khewa Khan's evil working wife, but no quarter was to be given to the men. And no quarter was given. In a fierce attack, yelling vengeance and calling Kharls, Kharls, Kharls they stormed the house, cut down who opposed them, engaged Khewa Khan's men in single combats, Rehmu taking Khewa Khan himself. So terrible was their anger, so fierce their attack that they cut all of them down receiving wounds themselves which they did not seem to feel. In two

hours they had killed all the able-bodied Siyals and Chadhars who came up to help their allies. Then they set fire to Khewa Khan's house, drove away his cows and horses, which their followers collected and went away. The Siyals as a force ceased to exist for a generation.

They returned bringing much booty with them but fixed between a couple of horses in each case were the shrouded bodies of Mirza and Sahiban. On Mirza's body they placed his red turban, his bow and arrows and his sword. Sahiban's body they covered with her red mantle; her gold worked head scarf they wound round her bruised throat. Thus in sad triumph they returned home long to mourn the death of Mirza the dauntless fighter, and the faithful lovers Mirza and his Sahiban.

HEER RANJHA



PART I

HEER THE PEERLESS

The mighty Chenab, that river of romance takes many a bend as it flows down a green belt. It changes its course quite often and here and there sand-bars appear in its great bed. Some of these sand-bars are wasted away by the next flood. But on some the flood-wastes deposit a thick layer of alluvial soil. As years go by some of these bars, now lush-green become almost little islands. They may be a hundred a hundred yards long or a thousand.

It often happens that waves lashing at one end begin to cut a small channel on the hither side and the channel may become an arm of the river, joining the mainstream after passing round the green islet. The channel may be knee-deep, or waist-deep and in places quite deep. The people living on the near-side of this channel use the bar, called baila, as a pasture for their cattle. Boys and girls wade or swim across and spend the day playing in the green bela, sitting, running, singing, eating and quarreling. There may be a longish depression in the baila in which the river water has exuded making it a pool with a sandy bed.

One long bela belonged to the big landlord of the region, who was named Mehr Chuchak. He was the head-man of a clan of Siyals, an offshoot of the great Jat tribe. These Siyals were at one time quite a large community. So large that they had a kingdom of their own in Upper Punjab, with their capital at Siyal-kot, still existent as Sialkot.

Mehr Chuchak was rich. He had tall stalwart sons and a daughter. A daughter who even in the midst of lissome, high-bosomed long-lashed, dark-eyed maidens stood out as a paragon. This slim-

waisted daughter of Chuchak swaying her way along the village lanes and amidst green fields feasted the eyes of young and old. Strange that so many excellences were combined in one girl. Her voice was a song: her glance a dart and her laugh a melody. Her hair sippling down to her rounded back was a shimmering cloud. She swam into people's hearts and the fame of her regal beauty spread widely. Her name was Heer.

With her companions the budding beauties of the village around, Hir would go bathing in the river or swim across to the bela or wade over for a day, taking with her bundles of house linen and other washing, to wash them in the clean pools of sand-bottomed water in the large baila. There the girl danced their communal dances or sang communal songs or played tricks on each other. Nobody dared to take a liberty with Heer however, as she was like a queen in their midst. She was a girl apart. There was a native dignity about her which, even when she was laughing like a child retained an aloofness, an inward grace, a clear fortitude, a remote centre of inner peace which few dared to challenge. Sometimes she had a look in her eye which even her father could not face or would not. Such was Heer of the Siyals.

But Heer like many of the sister-sirens before had infinite variety. Some time taking a dish-ful of Jasmine flowers (a favourite flavour of her father), her head and chest demurely covered by her dopatta (head scarf), she would trip daintly across the inner courtyard, where in early spring her father would be reclining against a big silken bolster on a day-bed, and smoking his favourite brand of fragrant tobacco in an ornate huqqa. A brother, if he was nearby would smile and say: "Lala! there she comes as if she were a saint, the rogue! I bet she wants something special today".

The father would say: "No! No. My son! she is a good daughter and loves her old father". And Heer would say in her lilting voice: "Baba! see how Bhaji (dear elder brother) is always teasing poor me". The brother would laugh and say: "You witch! I know your ways. You would coax even an angel out of heaven".

Heer would retort, but with an enticing smile: "You are very hard on an only sister Bhaji".

Mehr Chuchak would grin broadly at this usual word-play and say: "Leave her alone son! poor Hir! She has a hard time indeed amid a crowd of elder brothers".

The brother would laugh good-naturedly at this and say: "Heer! my ballo (darling) carry on. Get what you want from poor Lala. He is just wax in your hands".

And in this way, Heer once got a punt to carry her and her companions across the channel but not on the river for a sail. At another time she succeeded in getting a well-equipped barge. It had a well-furnished cabin on the deck, which had a luxurious day-bed and a divan all around. There was a whole-time boatman in charge. His name was Luddan. He kept the barge at a small dock specially built for it. A hut was built for him and his family by the river bank, where he lived with his two wives. Heer would come occasionally with her companions and order the barge out. They would go for a sail on the broad expanse of the river. Eatables and drinks would always be sent before hand. Laughter and song floated on the rolling waters of the Chenab. It meant that the queen and her attendants were abroad.

II

In the upper reaches of this very valley, the valley of the Chenab, lay the large estate of Chaudhry Manjoo. The place was called Takht Hazara. At the time when this story begins, Manjoo was past sixty. He had eight sons and two daughters. He was first married when he was 20. That wife bore him four sons and a daughter, but she died when Manjoo was only thirty five. He married the younger sister of his

dead wife, this second wife bore him three sons and a daughter. This wife had been named Khair-un-Nisa but was called by every one Kheri. A jolly, sturdy big-hearted woman.

When Manjoo was only forty, a nephew by relation, a poorer connection, died leaving behind him a very pretty young widow. Seeing that she was almost destitute, Manjoo's relatives persuaded him to marry her. She was a quiet girl who was blessed with infinite patience. She was a cousin of his first two wives too. This girl called Meedan (short for Hamida) bore Manjoo a son, who was called Deedo (something worth looking at). He was so called because he had a shining forehead and deep dark eyes. He had inherited his looks and nature from his mother. Manjoo loved him greatly. He had such taking ways. At first he was everybody's pet.

Deedo grew into a slim, silent and rather a serious young man. His father sheltered him from hard work, though he was no weakling. He was given the task of taking the cattle to graze. There he got the habit of sitting by himself under a shady tree and playing his bansari, at which he developed an extraordinary skill. In fact he played his bansari so well that his buffaloes and cows would come to him towards sunset when he played a certain tune. He told his mother, who considered him a gift from heaven, that sometimes, when playing his bansari, he saw visions. When asked what sort of visions, he would reply: "Oh! they are a little vague, but sometimes they assume the shape of holy persons all clad in shining white mantles". "How strange! would exclaim his simple devoted, mother. But Deedo did not long enjoy these intimate whisperings as his mother died when he was only ten years old. After that Deedo become more solitary, though his step-mother, his mother's first cousin, that large-hearted, big breasted woman Ma Kheri took him to her generous bosom. And his nephews and nieces doted on him. He was so gentle and he smiled so lovingly and always brought some sweets for them from the bazaar. Moreover they loved to hear him playing his flute. They did not mind whether the tunes were sad or gay. His

favourite however was a little niece, Ma Kheri's grand daughter who came and sat in his lap, without asking.

Deedo was just twenty when his father died. The old man had been anxious about Deedo as he knew that his elder half-brothers were jealous of him and now one and now another would jeer at him for a kanayya (Krishna the Eternal Lute Player) or mock him for his ringlets or his dreamy eyes, calling him a cow-herd or a wandering lover. This Manjoo knew, and always said, he would do something special for Deedo, but he never came to it, and after his death Deedo's half-brothers, the sons of Manjoo's first wife, who had been in charge of cultivation and harvesting for years now, divided the fertile lands among themselves and the sons of their step-mother the redontable Ma Kheri, leaving fallow land for Deedo. Some said they bribed the Qazi, (the local magistrate) some this, some that, but the result was that Deedo had very little good cultivated area allotted to him.

Actually this bias against Deedo had started early. Chaudhry Manjoo's sons by his first wife were all tall, lean and hawk-nosed. They had grown up when Manjoo was in his thirties and had taken up a rather bold attitude early, as being heirs to a large estate. This attitude did not abate when their mother died, as not long afterwards Manjoo married their own aunt, their mother's young sister. This lady turned out to be a contrast to her elder sister, who had been rather close-mouthed and grasping. The second wife was generous in build and in nature. She had a smile in her eyes if not always on her lips and she imparted a good deal of her warm-heartedness to her three sons and her daughter. It was she who persuaded Manjoo to marry and give a home to her bereaved cousin Hamida (Meedan) who was a large-eyed, quiet and firm-lipped young girl, who had loved her husband very much. Good looking and graceful, but not fond of ornamentation, the third wife gave birth to Deedo and doted on him. She touched him with tenderness that Ma Kheri, her elder cousin would laughingly say: "Go on! hold him firmly or you will drop him and he will break as he is made of china". This gentle mother died when Deedo was only ten and it was

Ma Kheri who now began to mother him. She never made a difference between him and her own children and the children did the same. In fact when on the death of Manjoo, the steely-eyed eldest son took a heetoring attitude towards the sleepy-eyed Deedo, she reprimanded him sharply. She was afraid of nobody and her step-sons (also her nephews) were rather afraid of her. But the division of land was done over her head. This was easy as the eldest half-brother of Deedo named Sharif had virtually been manager of the estate in Manjoo's last years, and his three tall brothers upheld his powers.

By the time Manjoo died, Deedo had a number of sister-in-law. All his half-brothers by Manjoo's first wife were married. Their wives were all cousin or second cousins. The first two sons of Ma Kheri were married too. It was a large household and it was a joint family. So they all lived there and sometimes got on each other's nerves. The wife of Sharif the eldest son, took precedence and she was as carping and as demanding as her husband. She would assume the airs of a grand dame, which the wives of the other brothers and half-brothers did not always like, although they were all blood relations and one of them was her own younger sister. There were three of these sisters-in-law who took the lead. One was of couser Sardaran (Sardar Bibi) the eldest daughter-in-law, the second was Mukhtaran (Mukhtar Bibi) the third brothers's wife and the prettiest and vainest of them. It was she who was always finding fault with Deedo. She would taunt him for his looks, his dreamy eyes and his utter indifference to the folks (meaning girls), around him. The third was young Lally the wife of Shera (Sher Ali) the eldest son of Ma Kheri.

Lally was a young woman of Deedo's own age. She was a handsome girl with flashing eyes and pronounced curves. Meedan Deedo's mother had been the younger sister of Lally's own mother, so Lally took up the cudgels on Deedo's behalf whom she treated as a real brother. In verbal duels neither Sardaran nor the vain Mukhtaran were Lally's equal. She usually laughed them to scorn when they went after Deedo but when Mukhtaran who prided herself on her good looks went

too far, Lally would say: "Mukhtary, easy! easy! If you go too far with my veer (brother) I will take you by your thin (not slim) waist and break you in two!" Lally had beauty, brains and brawn and she was a fearless champion.

The atmosphere was fairly tense already, before Manjoo's death. The elders were either doubtful about Deedo or treated him with good-humoured tolerance and mild contempt. Shera and Siraj his younger brother among men and Lally among women defended Deedo on all fronts. Of course nobody dared say anything about him in Ma Kheri's presence. As for the youngsters, whether children of the elder half-brothers or Shera and Siraj or the sisters, they all adored Deedo. They left every thing when he came home and followed him about. They clung to him, jumped all over him and took possession of him. As mentioned earlier Lally's little daughter considered him her own property and her favourite seat was Deedo's lap. Deedo would come home for his evening meal and the children flocked to him. Ma Kheri would laugh and say: "Here comes a pot of honey and look at the flies". One demanded a story, another asked for a tune, a third an account of the visions he saw. One would say: "Chachuji (dear uncle) which tune brings up the holy, white-robed Khwaja Khizr".

A niece would say: "Mamaji please play the tune which brings the buffaloes to you". At this there would be a loud altercation, even a tussle, which sorted itself out at the loud laughter of their grandmother (Dadi) Ma Kheri of whom everybody in the house stood in awe.

The division of Manjoo's lands and other assets had evil repercussions. It was not that ostensibly any injustice had been done to anyone. All the brothers, that is including Deedo and Ma Kheri's sons had been given an equal number of killas, two buffaloes and a horse each. The plough-oxen were common property, but the most fertile areas, which had been cultivated for years by the elder sons went to them. Deedo as has been mentioned earlier got comparatively poor land. It is true that he had done his share of toil by looking after the

buffaloes, but the elders said he had enjoyed that task as it had given him time to practice his bansari. The elders also said they had broken their backs in making their own acres fertile. Let Deedo do the same.

In the courtyard of the big haveli (mansion) allotted to Ma Kheri's family and Meedan the third and now deceased wife, there was a sort of meeting. Ma Kheri was openly abusive. She was afraid of nobody. Shera her eldest son and Siraj his younger brother tried to pacify her but she was furious. She asked Shera who was himself very close to Deedo and an open partisan like his wife Lally, where was he when the land was divided so unfairly. Shera said "Deedo's land and mine or Siraj's would be held as common property and I shall not let Deedo suffer. But Deedo must give up his dreamy manner and show his mantle". Ma Kheri asked: "What do you mean? Deedo is not strong like you, or Sharif or Barkat?" Shera laughed at this and said: "No Ma! you are wrong. Deedo is no weakling and he is afraid of nothing. I have seen him go to two fighting bullocks without hesitation and calmly take one away by the halter, which I would't do. And the cattle follow him as if there was magic in his voice". At this Ma Kheri said: "But this bansari or his voice cannot make the land soft to the plough. Can he work in the sun the whole day as others have done and you have. Shera and his brother Saja said: "Of course he can. I tell you Ma he is capable of any thing. I know him better than anyone else".

Deedo listened to all this and then said to Ma Kheri: "Maji! I do not really like this kind of work, I confess, but I am not afraid of hard work, and I am not happy about the distinction that my elders have made. I would have even liked it, if the entire land had been held in common under the management of Bha Sharif and Bha Barkat the two eldest".

Ma Kheri said: "But son you must show them that you can do as well as they plough".

Deedo replied: "Maji! do not worry. I shall try, but somehow I feel that my bread and water is doomed in this place".

Ma Kheri cried: "No son no! you must not say that. Shera and Saja and in fact all of us would lay down our lives for you. I could not bear to see you going away, God knows where, "and she began to weep. At this all of them tried to console her. The little ones took possession of Deedo as usual and gradually the entire household became cheerful.

The next morning Deedo was persuaded to go to his fields with a yoke of oxen. Ma Kheri's second son Saja a close friend of Deedo went with him. Ma Kheri was still anxious. She said to her eldest son the bold broad Shera, "Oh! Poor Deedo! can he toil in the sun? He is not strong enough". Shera laughed and said: "Ma! what are you afraid of? Deedo is no child. In fact, I am not sure it he is not the wisest of us all". "But son" cried Ma Kheri. "He is not accustomed to this kind of hard work!" "Hard word! Ma! what do you think is hard work? You know our village pond. It is quite large and deep at one end. We used to dive into it for a swim when we were children and Deedo could stay longest under water. Well! on the western side is the cow-ghat. The buffaloes and other cattle go there for water. Somehow or other the water cut into the bank and Deedo who had taken the cattle to water found the ghat dangerously steep. When I passed the pond on the way to the fields I found Deedo working with might and main, using the spade like nobody's business making the slope an easy grade. It was the work of four men, but he did it alone. Don't tell me he is tender and weak".

"But ploughing is different, isn't it".

"Yes Ma! it is different, so are many other tasks", but we are all zamindars (farmers) and have to learn to plough, to water the lands, to seed and weed them, to reap and harvest the grain. Deedo has to learn it as we all did".

"Yes son! You are right but somehow I have a feeling that trouble will come out of this". "Maybe, Ma, maybe, but Deedo, I tell you is no weakling. Our elder brothers are mistaken about that and so are our sisters-in-law, who are always either joking about his charming face or taunting him about his bansari-playing. It is true Deedo has dreamy eyes and there is a far-away look in them at times but he is so made. There is deep stillness, inside him, but no weakness".

"I don't understand what you are saying Shera" "Well" laughed her son "Ma! I don't understand him too well myself and you knew I am nearest to him of all brothers".

Oh! poor Deedo. What will he do? What will become of him" cried the stricken all-mother.

Later in the day Lally came furiously in and flung the basket in which she had taken the midday meal to her menfolk. Ma Kheri that usually placid woman was astonished and said: "Lally! what has happened? Why are you so angry"

"Ma! what else could I do? I could tear our sister-in-law to pieces. They were baiting poor Deedo because he had broken the blade of his plough on a deeply embedded stone. It could happen to anybody. And Deedo had already driven deep and straight furrows over a large field and was now resting under a tree. They assumed that he had been idling and pitched into him".

"But why?" exclaimed Ma Kheri, "What had Deedo done?"

"Nothing! he appeared to be just fed up. He had worked hard for hours in breaking the hard soil and I am sure he would not have given up, because, you know Ma, Deedo never gives up, when he once takes up a task, but Sardaran and Mukhtari the slinky one, went for him regardless".

"That's very bad Lally! Deedo will not have liked it. He is patient like his mother and uncomplaining but Shera says he has steel in him. He will not have liked the sisters-in-law making a but of him".

"No!" Lally laughed rather hysterically". He didn't. He gave it to them".

"How?" exclaimed Ma Kheri.

"Well! I can't give you all the words, but they were plenty. But tell me something Ma! You know my mother!"

"Know your mother? Are you out of your senses? She is my own uncle's daughter and was my playmate since childhood".

"All right! Ma. Do you think she is good looking?" "Good Looking! Why she was the most beautiful thing when younger and even now, the mother of grown-up children there are few to compare with her".

And her younger sister my massy Meedan. Deedo's mother?"

"Oh! the poor thing! She was really good-looking" "So if Deedo inherits his good looks it should be no surprise".

"Who says so?" exclaimed Ma Kheri, up in arms where Deedo was concerned.

This is what our snake-in-the grass Mukhtari was taunting him with".

"How?".

"She began by saying he saying he spent all his time dressing his curly hair or playing his bansari and admiring his looks".

"Nonsense!"

"Of course it is nonsense, but they have never liked Massy Meedan or Deedo, especially as Lala Manjoo made a pet of him. And there was never a less offensive person that Massy Meedan. She was a regular angel".

"Well! What did Deedo say to that. This was not the first time that those jealous cats have flung his good looks at him".

"He kept quiet for some time, but there is a limit and when one of them said he had no backbone in him; he was a wet-rag like his mother, he just blew up".

"Do tell what he said".

"He said. It is you who are my real enemies you snakes! It is you who have turned my brothers against me. They all loved me once, but gradually you poisoned their minds. You have made my life difficult here. I think you really want me to go away from here".

"Then?"

"Our sisters-in-law now poured out all their venom." They said: "you eat the best food and do nothing. All the heavy farm-work is done by our husbands and our relatives laugh at us. They say we are all in secret love with Deedo, that like flies we go to our honey-pot, that is you. You are the cause of this vile calumnly, you good-for-nothing".

"Surely Deedo did not keep silent at this?"

"No! he gave them tit for tat. He said: "You have all this poison in your own hearts. Nobody bothers about me. You have made sheep of my manly brothers. Women have always been the cause of the fall of men. What did you do to Raja Bhoj? You are responsible for the bad blood

between Kurus and Pandus and it was a woman who caused the destruction of Lanka".

"Well! Deedo is no longer tongue-tied!"

"No! just the reverse. He surprised me. He must have been keeping all this in his heart and it just burst out. The sisters-in-law now began to abuse him".

"How?"

"It was really the eldest. She said "You rascal! How dare you call us names? Sunk into deep water are those women who have such brother-in-law. People are already talking about it. They say you are a waster, that you do not care a paisa for us. That we are nothing in your eyes: that you think nobody but the Heer of the Siyals is a fit mate for you".

"And what did Deedo say to this?".

"Well! Ma, he was no longer dumb or dreamy. He said: Sister! those with evil minds can see nothing good in anybody. In what am I dependent on you all that you take that tone with me. You are the persons who pull away the ladder after helping
have inherited this poisonous tongue from your own people. My people are all decent folk". "This must have burnt up your sister-in-law" chuckled Ma Kheri, "I did not know Deedo had it in him to outface those two dragons. What did they say in answer?"

"I think it was Sardari our eldest sister-in-law who retorted, "You better be good, you unruly rough-neck and take your meal and do not behave like a ruffian. Women talk of you at the village well as at the sewing circle. They say girls appear to be in love with you all over and you encourage them. But let me tell you, you Krishan Kanayya, those who go in for a life of love, lose both hearth and home. Love-locks

become hooks which dig deep into the heart and suck away one's blood like leeches. Indeed women who have such young brothers-in-law meet nothing but disaster. We know where you go ogling among women with your long hair waving over your neck and shoulders. And when eating with us if the dish is not to your taste you throw it away. You idler! you do so little work and demand the best, bringing shame to us all". "This is too much" cried Ma Kheri, "Poor Deedo is the least demanding of persons and he eats with us, lives with us. When does he go to Sardari's hearth for a bite. The wretch! What a monster!"

"Well ! Ma" said Lally, "Don't worry, Deedo was no longer quiet. He addressed Mukhtari who is so proud of her looks, I don't know why, she is nothing special, thin as a rake as she is. . . "

"All right! all right" laughed Ma Kheri". We know your views about her, though I admit she is nothing beside you, but what did Deedo say?"

"He said: "I am sorry I came within your view. Please forgive me sister! I know all you think about me. I have heard it said so often. Frankly I am about fed up completely. You have been after me with your tongue like sharp scissors. You blame me for everything. You talk of my looks of which I know little but what about you? You are always made-up and dressed-up as if you were going to a wedding, so proud of your looks, swearing at everything. In fact your vanity knows no bounds!"

"Well! this was straight talk" chuckled Ma Kheri "but where did this wordy war lead to?"

"Ma! this was the end really. It made our sisters-in-law really flare up. They shouted: "So this is what you think of us you rowdy. What do you think of your own self? If we are nothing in your eyes, let us see you win for yourself Heer of the Siyals. Go play your bansari before her and bewitch that proud daughter of the Siyals. You will have to wander

for days and nights, without end to get a word with her. You seem to think you can win over any women. You think you could cozen even Rani Koklan with sweet talk. In fact no body would let you in from the front door, you braggart! you would have to climb over the backyard wall to approach anybody".

"What furies!", exclaimed Ma Kheri. "As if poor Deedo ever looks at a girl. Why he is actually girl-shy!"

"Well! you are right there Ma. But Deedo was really angry now. He said, "All right! you may mock and swear but it is Heer of the Siyals that I shall go to win, and women like you will be her hand-maidens".

"Then?".

"Our sister were not slow to answer. They shouted: "You rowdy! What boastful talk! As if a beauty like Hir will look at the likes of you. Go now. Go immediately. "Don't waste any time and cast your spell on her". At this Deedo flung away the plough and the yoke, his pick and spade and said: "Keep these ornaments for yourself. I can't and won't stand your baiting. And Deedo swung away. The sisters-in-law were really taken aback. They called after him but he would not stop or stay".

"Then?"

"Our brothers heard of the quarrel, and who wouldn't? There had been such shouting. People had heard and had run to tell them. They came up fast and caught Deedo on the way. They said: "Little brother! What has happened? Why are you so angry? And why are you leaving home? These are your own sisters-in-laws, and we are your brothers. You know we have always loved you. May be your sisters-in-laws have been a little hard on you, but we think it was for your own good. Please forgive them and us. Who is without fault in this world? Please give up this idea. What will the world say?

Deedo replied: No my dear brothers! I have loved you all my life and looked up to you. But I feel that food and drink are now denied me by fate in this household. Moreover are you really sincere in what you say? I think in your hearts you never gave me a place. Perhaps you are glad within you, now that I have decided to leave home. Any yet you would blame me for what you have done yourself to bring it about. I know the family, the community and the whole of mankind are stronger for the love brothers have for each others, but that is for the lucky ones. It was not to be my fate".

"At this our hypocrites of sisters began to beg Deedo to forgive them". They had come up to where the brothers were talking. They pretended to be Deedo's slaves. They even said that at the thought of Deedo's leaving them, their hearts wept. They were ready to lay down their lives for him. They declared that they would have no rest in life any more if Deedo went away like that".

Deedo replied: "Sisters! my fate now lies elsewhere. You have yourself pointed the way. Why do you now pretend to feel my going away so strongly? At first you treated me like dirt and blasted me with your contempt and now suddenly I have become your precious brother. I was the wretched scamp a minute ago, an ugly contemptible beggar and you were angels of goodness. Let us stay like that. I am sure this is no longer my home. You have made it a hostile camp for me. Don't pretend any more. I am ashamed of you.

Ma Kheri began to weep. "Oh! poor Deedo! My own sweet lamb! Was there nobody to defend him and stand by him? What were you doing Lally and where was Shera? Shera would die for him. He would have fought an army for my Deedo?"

Lally began to weep too. She said: "Ma! do you think I was a quiet spectator. I gave them more than they could bear. I could have killed that hip-swinger Mukhtari and as for paunchy Sardaran I have said things to her today, which she will not forget all her life or forgive. All

mounted bansari. With a staff in his right hand, his bansari stuffed in his waistband, Ranjha took long steps on the way down south. He did not look back, although he knew that his brothers and sisters-in-law and a number of relatives were looking at his receding figure. It was not the loss of his patrimony which hurt him. It was his loss of faith in his brothers, who were so much elder and whom he had always admired for their hardihood, their command of the whole world of agriculture and whom he had always trusted. As to the sisters-in-law; he did not brother about them. It was a habit with them to pet him one day and scold him the next. To be true, everybody had made much of him, when he was young. He felt so old and so alone now.

Shera went with him for a few miles in silent and brotherly communion and only left him at Ranjha's earnest request. He told Shera: "Brother! wherever I am, whatever happens to me, I shall bear you, Ma Kheri, Lally and my nephews and nieces in my heart. The little ones will forget me by and by, but I shall remember you all. Your affection is all my heritage now. So good bye and God bless you all".

But strange as it may seem, the more he walked the less heavy his heart grew. He felt free. It appeared that there was some force in him that was awakening. He felt that there was nothing that he could not do. And if his sisters-in-law taunted him about his good looks, let them. He did not care. He had now an object. His life had a purpose. Formerly he just existed. Now he was alive. He had of course heard of Heer. Who hadn't? She was supposed to be a nonpareil. His sisters-in-law always flung Heer's name at him, when he did not pay any attention to their looks. Why should he? They were his sisters. They were all right in their way but why should the name of Heer come up in their conversation? They were not bad-looking. Lots of girls have good looks. Lally, his own sister was very good looking but she never flaunted her looks. His own mother, he remembered was very good looking. Very, quiet, unassuming and tender, her beautiful eyes always brimming with love. Now! she had looks! But she never made a show of them. He never saw her tittivating herself as some of his sisters-in-laws did. Lally was

she said was: "Be quiet you viper! We know he is your cousin-brother and you see no fault in him. In fact it is you who have spoilt him so".

"But Shera?" cried Ma Kheri.

"Ma! Shera heard the noise from his distant field and came running. He knew his brother Deedo, who is like a twin to him and did not dissuade him. He went with him. I watched them going till they were out of sight. But even he will not succeed in bringing back Deedo. Deedo, Shera said has steel in him. I think there is a adamant in Deedo. I don't know what adamant is, but Shera says it is something very hard. He is really inflexible. Nothing will daunt him. Shera swears by him, you know he knows him best. He will go his way to the world's end, Shera tells me."

"And our big sons and daughters-in-law?"

"They were really crestfallen, especially as most of our neighbors came up. They pretended to be heart-broken and our hypocrites of dear sisters-in-law, actually wept. Ma! actually wept! There is no end to wickedness in this world, Ma!

I

Ranjha steps out

Having rejected the hypocritical pleadings of his brothers and spurning the remorseful coaxings (perhaps momentarily genuine) of his sisters-in-law, Deedo shook the dust of his home from his feet. He also shook the vestiges of his adolescence and with it his pet name of Deedo. He decided to call himself Ranjha now as that was the name of his caste.

He had a suit of good clothes on, he was always well-dressed. This was another point which irked his brothers, and annoyed his elder sister-in-laws. He had some silver coins on him as also his silver-

different. She never bothered about such things. She said always, "Deedo do not pay any heed to Mukhtaran or any one else. We will get my veer (brother) a really beautiful wife.

And when, (he recalled) his sisters-in-law joined to taunt him and say "Let us see if you will get Heer for your brother", Lally would laugh and say: "Sisters! why not? Deedo is the handsomest man here or anywhere and I will get my brother Heer or anyone better than that famed beauty".

All these memories thronged his mind as he walked away and he walked firmly. To the south! The south, where Heer lived. To get Heer if that is to be his fate. He was a good walker. He neither dawdled nor hurried. Going at a steady pace he covered the first ten miles in about three hours. It was past mid-day. He found a well under a shady tree, a popular resting resting place for way-farers, as well as locals.

Taking a drink of water he sat with his back to the pipal tree, whose shade spread over a large area, and began to play his bansari. That was his only way of relaxation when alone. Gradually he lost consciousness of his surroundings and with eyes closed and a rapt expression on his face, he went on playing a soft and lilting melody. As always happened, people began to gather around. When after some minutes Ranjha looked up he found a number of people sitting or standing near him. There were young men among them and old, Muslims as well as Hindus. The Hindus were mostly sitting with folded hands and murmuring: "Radhay Shyam" "Rathay Shyam". One old Hindu got up and touched Ranjha's feet and stood before him with folded hands, as if Ranjha was something holy. Ranjha was embarrassed. He said to the Hindu peasant: "Babaji! why do you pile sins on my head? I am a very ordinary man and you are old!" The peasant replied: "Maharaja! the Lord has many ways of showing Himself". Permit me to bring some food for you". Ranjha bowed his head and food was brought for him. This was how he was fed that day. So passed an hour or two and

then Ranjha resumed his journey and he reached the river-side towards the evening.

A kind villager offered him a bed and some food and he took a well-earned rest. Next morning he took up his pilgrimage again. The more he thought of his quest, the more un-real it seemed, so after walking for an hour or two he stopped and seeing a green bank, sank down and began to waters of the mighty Chenab. Then he took up his bansari and began to play his pipe like the goat-footed Greek God Pan. His bansari was now becoming more and more of a solace to him. This day he played a soulful tune. It was a favourite of his as it took him out of himself. When deeply sunk in his music, he always felt as if he were floating in the air, and even above the clouds; that he was in a world of shimmering lights, deep but strange as it may seem almost luminous shadows, and that in these shadows were figures floating about. It was this sort of experience that he used to tell his innocent audience of young nephews and nieces. Ah! he thought, what a glorious world a child lives in. When one grows up one loses that vision. One no longer lives in or wanders into this world of light. Shadows as well as lights become thinner and dimmer, till they finally disappear.

Ranjha was musing in this way, while playing his bansari and gradually the world of enchantment of which he felt he was really a genuine resident, become alive. He fancied he saw shapes which gave off light. They came to him and started to listen to his music. He played on. His eyes were closed but he saw the vision clearly. They were such holy figures, and they smiled on him. When for a minute he stopped playing, the oldest among them asked him to play on. Ranjha took up the tune again, giving it many marvellous turns. In fact he put all his soul into it. Then the oldest and the holiest among them, and they were five of them, said: "Ranjha you have given us great pleasure. We bless you. We know the quest you are on. If you remain pure of heart, as you have been, you will get your heart's desire. There will be difficulties but remain steadfast. Allah will be merciful". And then Ranjha heard a

shout. A cow-herd was bringing his flock to the sloping river-bank. Ranjha was jolted out of his trance and the vision faded.

He took up his journey and walked away, a little disturbed, but also somewhat exhilarated by what he had seen in his vision. He had walked some more miles when in the distance he saw the minarets of a mosque. So he thought he was coming to a big settlement. Soon he saw the dome. So he resolved to spend the night here. When he neared the village, he found it was almost a small town. There were many people around and there was a main street with plenty of shops. He was hungry now and he asked for a baker's shop. It was pointed out to him. But he said to himself: I must have a wash first, perhaps a bath, at the mosque.

He found his way there and found it to be really a splendid building. It was well-decorated with blue tiles and appeared to have a seminary attached to it, as he found boys of all ages sitting on mats on one side and reciting their lessons. In fact there was a regular din in that corner. There was however no teacher around. Ranjha first went to the baths. There were lavatories attached. Having refreshed himself he resumed his clothes after dusting them properly and then went to the bazaar for a meal. He had enough money with him to get a good one.

He returned to the mosque and after lying on his back for sometime he got up and looked in at the madrissa. He found all the minor Persian and Arabic classics there, even some books on serious topics. There was Saadi's Karima as well as Pand Nama of Attar, Akhlaq-i-Jalali as well as Gulistan and Postan and even Kimiya-i-Saadat of Imam Ghazali. Also poetical works of many famous Persian Masters. He was impressed. He talked to a senior student or two and then went to the other corner of the mosque's open yard and as usual took up his bansari and began to play a soft tune. Soon he lost himself in his music and changed the tune to a solemn melody. His tunes as always happened, attracted first one, then another village scholar, and it was not long before there was a circle around Ranjha. All the students now

forgot their lessons and gathered round him. Ranjha like the eternal flute player went on playing. His eyes were closed and there was as usual a rapt look on his face as if he was communing with the Infinite. But this did not last long.

There was a roar, and a big pot-bellied bearded man, obviously the mullah, blowing fire from his nostrils shouted: "What is this? What is going on? Who is this man? "What does he think he is doing? Is this place a mosque or the singer's quarter, or does he think it is a faqir's dera? Who is this man? With his curly hair and the looks of a rascal?"

Ranjha stopped playing and looked up calmly at the furious warrior of God. He asked in a mild tone: "Maulvi Sahib! What is the matter? How have I offended you?" "Offended me? You rascal! You have offended Allah. Playing love tunes to an audience of wastrels, and that in a mosque? In a house of God?"

"Does God prohibit music maulvi sahib? I was playing no love-songs. I was only praying to Allah with my bansari. That is my way of praying. What harm is there in it? I thought I could stay the night here as I am a way-farer and Allah enjoins on all to help way-farers".

"Way-farer! you a way-farer! You have already taken possession of my mosque. You have disrupted the madrissa! Look at the people around you!"

"Maulvi sahib" replied Ranjha "I have looked into your book-room. I have seen the boys at their lessons. You have all the Persian and Arabic classics and the boys were reciting Saadi's Karima, and singing Attar's Pand-Nama. The elders were reading Gulistan of Saadi and one or two Akhlaq-i-Galab. All these books teach tolerance and love of mankind. Does it matter if I say my prayers in music? Would it matter more if I lie prostrate for hours?

The mullah's temper rose higher. He shouted "It is people like you who deserve to be hanged. You ignore the strict rituals enjoined by Muslim Law and make your own interpretation of Allah's Commandments. Mansur al-Hallaj was one of your kind and they did a good thing when they hanged him".

At this Ranjha got a little worked up. He retorted "You hypocrite! you slave of meaningless superficialities! Do you have any real faith? Is there any similarity between your empty words and your real deeds? Who does not know that your inner and outer selves are poles apart. Outwardly you assume a mantle of holiness but what do you do in your closets? The world knows that your eyes get riveted on the rounded buttocks of boys and no girl with rippling thighs can escape your greedy eyes".

Seeing that an audience of young and old had gathered round them, the mullah was taken aback by this bold attack and he changed his tone. He said: "Well! let that be. Dogs keep barking always. You can't stop them. And what we do and what we don't do is known to Allah. He is the best judge. I don't deny that a mosque is the House of God and is open to all, night and day. You may sleep here, but you can't make it a home. You must leave early tomorrow morning. I can't afford to see my students clustering round you like flies round a pot of honey. And please do not disturb the sacred silence of the mosque by playing your bansari. You can play all night and all day when you are outside my mosque".

And with these words the mullah escaped, though with a face glowing with embarrassment. Ranjha resumed his playing but in a very subdued way. He then composed himself to sleep. He had walked many miles that day and was tired. Next morning, after a bath he went to the bazaar and spent some of his money on a good breakfast and then set out for last lap of his journey.

II

Ranjha Comes to the Ferry.

It was a cool morning. A breeze blew across the wide river. The trees on the bank waved their leaves gently, birds flew about. There was a hum of insects too. Nature was in a genial mood and Ranjha after a night's rest, a good breakfast and the memory of his encounter with the pompous maulvi, felt happy. He hummed one of his tunes and cast appreciative eyes on shrub, man and beast. He greeted the peasants who were going to work in the fields, and other travellers seeing his tall, elegant figure with shining eyes and bright smiling face were as eager to have a word or two with him as they passed. Ranjha himself a friendly type was as willing to talk, because he wanted to know what he could, about the Siyals, about their way of life, and about their chief, Mehr Chuchak, the father of Heer

He picked up a word here, a point there and learnt that Chuchak was a big landlord. He had a large estate a few miles down, but across the river. They told him that after a few miles he would come to a pattan (the ferry) and if lucky may meet the Siyal's boatman, a crusty fellow who was usually in a surly mood. He, they told him, plied the ferry and if he was going to the Siyals he might offer him a boat-ride, but he was told by more than one chance way-farer, that Luddan the boat-man was a reserved sort of man and he would have to offer him a bribe or be very tactful if he wanted to cross over.

But even these tit-bits of news did not dampen Ranjha's spirits. He was really a bit excited. He had realized that he was now to enter an enchanted land and should be prepared to meet some terrifying guardians of the land. But he said to himself: "My quest is after all a unique quest as I am alone in the world, I have no wealth, no retinue of servants, no noble ancestors, no reputation for valour. I am an ordinary Jat and all I know is how to play my bansari and thereby get a sort of

rapturous calm, a serene blessedness which somehow attracts people. I have done nothing great in my life; I have helped others whenever and wherever I could and have never demanded anything from anybody; I have not even hated my elder brothers for their jealousy and meanness. And as for my sisters-in-laws, well! they were women after all and I hear all women have queer fancies. If they petted me one day and stormed at me the next, it was just their way and could not be helped. That is all the good I have done. Is that anything to be proud of?" And thinking this way he went on.

What worried him a little was the account of this surly guardian of the "fairy" land, he wanted to enter. And this burly boat-keeper was so hag-ridden, they told him, having two young wives that people had seldom seen him smiling.

In spite of this Ranjha was exhilarated. The murmur of the leaves overhead was a melody to him as it whispered tidings of joy to come. The waters of the Chenab rolled away silently. They sang no song but they were a source of comfort however. So Ranjha did not feel alone. The future beckoned to him with a smile. He felt as if he had wings. In this mood he came to the ferry and there he found Luddan the boat- keeper, no whit different from the description given of him by strangers.

He saw the boatman from a distance. The man was sitting on a log of wood smoking his hookah. There was a cottage nearby, with a compound at one end of which there was a cow-shed. A dog barked, but Ranjha was not afraid of dogs. They loved him or his smell and this one came out barking but when Ranjha whistled softly to him and swapped his fingers the dog came to heel, snuffed at him and began to gambol about him. Luddan was watching this display and was not pleased. Ranjha went to him, greeted him, but that did not melt him. He asked in his harsh tone: "What do you want?" Ranjha answered in his normal gentle voice, "I want to be carried across". Luddan said: "This boat is not for hire". Ranjha persisted and asked: "Are you not Mehr Chuckak's

man"? Luddan answered: "Yes! I am. So what? Ranjha said: "I am going to Mehr Chuchak", Luddan said: "All right! go. I am not stopping you".

"I have to cross the river and you are the ferry-man. Isn't it your duty to carry guests across?"

"Not, unless the master sends me word. If you are so keen, give me a rupee and I may help you.?

"Well!" exclaimed Ranjha "It is strange! I have come from Takht Hazara. I am the son of the Chief of the area, but at present I have very little money on me".

If you haven't" replied the surly boat-keeper "You can bide here. You may be anybody's son and you may be a loafer, but I am not anybody's slave. I don't give service to every wanderer who may be a wolf in sheep's clothing, a thug or a killer. You go your way; I am not going to give service for nothing".

This altercation took place outside the door of Luddan's cottage and his wives heard it all. They glued their eyes to the chinks and approved of the handsome young gallant who to their youthful eyes looked like a prince. But at present they said nothing as Ranjha went away and sitting on the out-thrust of the big trunk which served as a dock, began to play his bansari. He had not been prepared for this rude reception and was disturbed. To soothe his bruised spirit he took up a soft lilting tune and soon began to add trills to it. Gradually he lost himself in this melody, so much so that he lost count of time and space. He did not know that Luddan's entire family had come out and now stood around, some with mouths agape, some with a finger in their mouth, some with sighing breaths, but all transfixed.

When at last he stopped playing and opened his eyes, he found Luddan's wives at his feet, begging him to carry on, but Ranjha said: "Sisters! I have had a long walk, I have had nothing to eat and I have to

get across. Luddan refuses to carry me over, So I have to get ready to swim across."

There were men now around him by now and they were shocked. They said: "Young man! you don't know this river. It is deep, it is wide and there are under-water currents. Very few can swim across". Ranjha replied: "But since there is no other way, I must try it" and with this he girt his loins, stuffed his bansari securely in his waist-band and stepped into the water.

But the people who had gathered around and listened to his enchanting music, would not let him risk his life. They rushed after him and pulled him out. They cursed Luddan for his manner and his wives went at him like furies. They said: "To deny a little help to such a nice man who plays such heavenly music and is so gentle, is a crime. They would in his place give their lives to serve him. It would be a task of great merit. Shame on you Luddan. How can you deny this wonderful man?" The men too urged Luddan to do the needful and at last, what with the scolding of his wives, the urgent appeals of the neighbours, Luddan called his oar-men and carried Ranjha across.

On reaching the other bank, Ranjha looked around, There was another hut on this side for Luddan, so that he could stay or rest therein, when the boat was on this side, but except for an ornamental big boat moored nearby, there was no place in which he could rest, or where he could find anything to eat. He did not know where Mehr Chuchak's village was, nor was Luddan in a mood to help, or guide him. So as usual he sat on the bank and took to his bansari.

III

Ranjha Meets Heer

He started playing and as usual soon forgot his surroundings. But others heard his magical notes and stopped to listen. Many went on their daily tasks, and some wandered back to the village. They talked of

a very handsome stranger, almost a fairy-prince, who had had a clash with Luddan and whom people and Luddan's wives had befriended and brought over to our side. He appeared, they said, to be a holy man. He just sat on the riverbank and played his bansari and birds and beasts, they said, stayed to listen to him. Such an exaggerated report began to circulate in the village.

Some time later another batch of villagers came and said that the stranger had stopped playing and was now inspecting Heer's pleasure craft and admiring its appointments. And then somebody went and informed Heer that the stranger had got on her boat and was now fast asleep on her gorgeous bed. This was just the spark needed to blow up anybody, much more Heer who could never brook any impertinence. She got together her close companions, especially her lieutenants Zainab (Jambi) and Phati (Ghulam Fatima) and taking her whip marched towards the boat-house.

It was not a gay throng that Heer had with her. It was a band of fire-eaters. Each one of the high-bosomed, taut bodied, flashing-eyed and fierce looking friends of Heer were eager to pull the intruder to pieces and leading them was the very goddess of war, the daughter of generations of warriors, and she strode with conscious pride, her big black eyes shooting sparks. So angry was, she that she cracked her whip at every step. And only a divine painter could do justice to her lissome figure or could paint those delicately moulded nostrils, those well-cut and full lips, luscious like some heavenly fruit. It was not a girl walking, it was all beauty turned into imperishable flesh and blood. And with the rush of a wave she fell on the poor oars-men and began to give them a beating for bringing over an unknown loafer and loading him on her boat.

They cried: "Hold on Bibi! hold on for God's sake. Why are you beating us? What have we done?" Heer answered: "Who asked you to bring over a wanderer, a good-for-nothing fellow and give him a chance to pollute my virgin bed?" They said: "Bibi! he is a sant (saint) a holy

man. He plays his bansari as if the god of music was himself breathing into his pipe. A very harmless man, who was so tired and hungry and yet asked for nothing. He was still playing his bansari when we left him. He must have gone into your boat and fallen on your bed in sheer fatigue. We don't know that, we did not help him on to it."

Not entirely satisfied with the abject pleas of the oarsmen, yet appeased to a certain extent, and certainly curious about this strange person who had made such an impression on crude persons like the oarsmen and not finding Luddan anywhere, Heer went to her boat. There she found a young man asleep, his curls plastered on his shining forehead with sweat, still holding a bansari with silver bands. A strange contrast it was, a peaceful sleeper and a raging beauty. With her whip swinging in her hand, determined to make mincemeat of the offender, Hir burst on the unconscious intruder. Her companions at her back and her hand raised to lash at this ravisher of her virgin bed, Heer gazed on the sleeping Ranjha. She gazed and stood as if rooted to the floor. It was not a curly-headed, handsome young man she saw, it was a vision. It appeared to her that she had perhaps seen such a face and such a figure in her dreams. Words of wrath froze on her lips. Her delicate nostrils ceased to flare. She stood entranced. Her friends came from behind her, astonished at Heer's silence. They too stood as if lost. Surely they said to themselves, they have never seen such a handsome face and such a tranquil smile which twill played on the lips of the sleeper. They were standing in such a tableau when Ranjha opened his eyes, and the look he cast on Heer was full of wonder and he smiled openly and said: "Sweetest vision! why this anger? I seem to have heard some very angry words, words which could not have come out of such a sweet mouth? Are you a vision or reality? or are you really the person whom I have been seeking"? And with these words Ranjha got up from the bed and said, "Are you really angry because I have used your bed without permission? You see, I have been looking for you for so long and I was a bit tired and then I said to myself, if it is the bed of one for whom I was prepared to go to the ends of the earth, who else in the world deserved to lie on it but myself"? Then he addressed Heer in a coaxing tone: "You

sit on it as on a throne and I shall sit at your feet as your subject. Will that please you more?" Heer stood staring. She who was so full of words, of wrath, of threats, was tongue-tied. She just stared at Ranjha, her heart pounding in her breast and her head in a whirl. She did not know what was happening to her and it was Ranjha who made bold to take her by the whip-hand and lead to the bed. He himself chose a cushioned reed-chair and Heer's companions, at least some of her favourites stood against the walls of the cabin.

Ranjha smiled his usual genial, heart-warming smile and said: "Princess! why these threats? I woke up and heard some of them. Why beat a poor way-farer, why cut to shreds a pilgrim who has been in quest of you all his life? Why? I have been dreaming of you God knows for how long. Is this a reward for my devotion?"

At this Heer could not contain herself. She was no dumb creature by any means. She opened her eyes wide and flashed an angry glance at the mock-heroics of Ranjha and said: "Now be quiet. I am no fool. You are adding insult to injury. First you force your way into my boat, and spread yourself on my bed and now you blame me. I have never heard such nonsense in my life".

"Not nonsense sweetness! Not nonsense! God's truth. I could picture you in my mind, when I played my bansari. I had only to add perfection of face, figure and a living vibrant personality and you stood before my mind's eye. Believe me it is true. I am true devotee, a real worshiper of beauty?

Heer smiled at this brash speech and her friends tittered. Ranjha looked at them and said "You pretty companions of this Queen of Beauty, say something on my behalf? Surely you realize that I am telling the truth. I am a pilgrim who has come to the shrine of the goddess of beauty in whose search I have spent a life-time. Can't you see that?" This caused a laugh and even Heer was amused by Ranjha's extravagances. She said: "All right! Mr. pilgrim. All right. Tell us who

you are and what you are doing here. Where is your home? Who are your people and why are you mad?" At this there was another giggle from her companions and Ranjha replied: "I may be a culprit and you a Qazi, but let your friends cease laughing at me and I shall explain. After that they can use their sticks on me, if they like." And he smiled at them. There was such charm in his voice and in his smile that they hid their sticks behind them and smiled at him in a very friendly manner and trooped out. They said: "All right you worshiper of Heer, we leave you to worship her".

Heer too smiled and said: "Now tell me the truth. "The truth is" said Ranjha: "I have come in quest of you. I have been promised you by the Five Great Pirs; I am fairly well-born; I am no beggar by birth or inheritance; I have a family behind me and I have at last found you". "And now?" asked Heer, a puzzle on her forehead on which a vagrant curl was playing. She was disturbed and frankly puzzled. It was all so sudden and so strange. But Ranjha was ready with an answer. He said: " And now remains the task of winning you."

"Do you think that will be easy" teased a Heer who even surprised herself at such a query.

"All I know is "replied Ranjha, "that you have been promised me and I shall move heaven and earth to win you".

Heer looked all eyes at Ranjha's eager, pleading handsome face and was lost. She found that she was herself drowning in a sea of ecstasy. Something, unthought of, unheard of, impossible was happening to her. She was bemused. She murmured: "Yes! the fates are working in your favour."

"Is that enough" asked the eager pilgrim of love. "It should be enough, you have bewitched me. I heard your charmed people by playing your bansari and now you have made a conquest by honeyed words only. You must be a wizard!"

"Do you really mean it?" asked the surprised Ranjha. Heer replied: "I never say anything without fully meaning it. You will know me by and by. But you are a stranger here and my problem is what to do. I must think", and Heer bent her graceful head in thought. It took her some minutes, and meanwhile Ranjha went on feasting himself on her face and figure. At the end Heer smiled and said: "I must go back immediately and catch my father in a good mood. Do you know anything about herding buffaloes?" she asked.

Ranjha smiled wistfully and said: "I have done nothing else all my days. The cattle like me. I don't know why. I must be a low kind of creature!"

"Never mind that" said Heer "You and your bansari! don't show off Ranjha!"

"No! No" replied Ranjha hastily "it is true. They somehow like the strains of my bansari and follow me around".

"Who doesn't?" retorted Heer "I hear your charmed the young and turbulent wives of Luddan with it". "Oh! That was nothing. "The girls were just kind to me. I am grateful".

"Let it remain a gratitude then" said Heer and added. "You remain here. I shall send you some food. Poor fellow! you must be famished. I shall go to coax my father. Remember! my father is a good judge of men. I am sure he will like you. "After all", she added with a mischievous smile, "You are a magician" and Heer casting a ravishing glance at Ranjha sailed out. But Ranjha was not satisfied. He went after her and said: "I suppose I shall not see you again?" Heer answered: "Ranjha! you do not know Heer. I admit you have cast your spell on me, but I think it will last. Heer does not give her word or her heart casually. The world will end before Heer forgets". And then, "We may have to wade through rivers of fire". she added, "before we are united, but Heer will remain yours to enernity".

IV

Ranjha becomes a buffaloe herd

It was no siren, no fury, no-warrior-maiden who approached Mehr Chuchak, the lord of many acres and many cattle and horses. It was a soft-spoken, dewy-eyed, demure maiden who came shyly and salaamed her father. Mehr Chuchak though a proud and fond parent, looked with a shrewd eye at this model of innocence. He always indulged in an inward smile when he saw his darling bud of April playing her seductive arts on everybody. He knew at once that she was after something. So he tried his best to fight off the effects of her winsome smile and her soft coaxing way. He knew that in the end she would win but he resolved to give a good fight.

So he said: "Heer dear! tell us frankly and fast what you are after. Every hair of your well-combed hair tells me that you are riding one of your whims. Now let us hear the worst". Heer tried to be the humble, obedient daughter for a while but Mehr Chuchak chuckled and said: "Heer dear! don't waste your wiles on an old man. Remember! I have dandled you in my arms. You have a scheme, an idea, a proposal and it will cost me something. Havn't you? All right, tell us. I know all the preliminaries, I am the lord of the manor and all in the skies, and on earth the birds and the beasts obey me, but if any one does not do so it is my darling daughter and she has a proposal. Isn't it?

Heer cried! "Lala! it is too bad of you. What can poor me say or propose when you are so prejudiced", and she pouted and pretended that she was about to shed a tear or two. Her father knew all these tactics but even then he knew also that he would agree in the end, so he said: "Dear! tell me. Have I ever denied you anything? Has any of your brothers refused any request of yours? And as for Malki, your mother, we know you can twist her round your little finger. It appears you have a special something to propose. Come, out with it".

"Well! Lalla! it is like this" began Heer "I went to the boat-house with my girls this morning to see if the boat has been kept clean and fit and I found crowd of people along with Luddan's trouble-some wives listening to a young man who was playing on his bansari and believe me Lala! he played well. I stopped all that nonsense and asked who the young man was. I myself asked him many questions. I found that he was well-born, being the youngest son of Manjoo the late chief of Takht Hazara. It appears he has quarrelled with his brothers over the distribution of land and has left home in disgust.

"But his mother, brothers, sisters, nephews and other relatives, what about them?"

"His own mother is dead but his aunt who was Manjoo's second wife, a very good woman brought him up and he has many step-brothers, some good, some bad, as also sister-in-laws, some who made his life miserable by nagging and complaining that he was no good as a farmer and could only herd buffaloes. So he left home to try his fortune elsewhere".

"But what is that to us, daughter?"

"Lala! I learnt that he has for years tended the cattle of his family and is an excellent keeper. The cattle as well as horses and dogs follow him about. You know Lala, we have had trouble with our cattle. We are always missing some calf or other. Our herdsmen are so lazy and incompetent. Why not do a good deed, help a homeless man of good family and get a good buffalo-herd".

"But Heer dear I don't know him, He may have deceived you. You are after all a girl. What do you know about men?"

"Oh! that is all right, Lala. You can send for him and have a talk with him. Employ him if you approve. I am not concerned in the matter. I am suggesting it for the good of the family".

Chuchak pondered over the proposal for a while and then said: "It is true we do not have a good herdsman and we have had losses, the yield of milk had decreased too, perhaps the buffaloes are not taken to some good pasture in the Bela or bexten. Send for the man dear and I shall see".

So Ranjha was sent for, interviewed by Mehr Chuchak, Heer's mother Malki, her elder brother Sultan and they were all impressed by Ranjha's poise, his self-confidence, his straight-forwardness, even by his birth and antecedents. This last element appealed most to Mehr Chuchak and his wife. Malki was touched by Ranjha's simplicity and politeness; Sultan approved of Ranjha's manly looks and his knowledge of buffalo-herding. There was no mention of his bansari, terms were settled and he was accepted. He was taken to the guest-house and treated well. A room was allotted to him in the vast haveli (mansion) of Chuchak and he was told that there was a comfortable hut with a shed and verandah in the bela where he could stay when he did not want to come across in the evening with the buffaloes. The next day the herd was shown to him and the boy-assistants who were to take orders from him. If he chose to stay in the Bela some night food would be sent to him as it would naturally be sent across during the day. It was not long before the boy-assistants were his worshipful slaves, and as for the buffaloes they recognized his voice and the tune of his bansari when when he called them.

V

Trouble raises its head

Two days later, Heer accompanied by her close companions, the daughters of uncles and other relative, went over to the bela with a lot

washing. They crossed the creek in Heer's punt, Heer another strong girl at the oars. There they spent the day, washing, bathing, sunning themselves, singing and dancing as usual. Only Heer, more than once slipped away to see how the buffalo-herd was managing, also to take to him his usual meal. Only this time the meal consisted of churi (bread kneeded in butter and honey) as also cream and some other dainties. Ranjha was of course over-joyed to see her and they sat and chatted. Ranjha at Heer's insistence played a few sweet tunes for her which transported her with delight. She got so absorbed that Jambi, her closest friend, a cousin of course, coming to find what had happened to Heer, found Heer enraptured and herself stood a long time to listen. In fact she too forgot her errand. Another girl a cousin too, named Phati, came and the same thing happened with her. It was not till Ranjha stopped playing that they came to themselves. Ranjha laughed happily and said: "We have an audience". Heer blushed and raised her proud head and addressing her close friends said: "You see. It is dangerous to listen to this magician. One so forgets oneself". The girl sighed, made eyes at Ranjha, giggled and led Heer away. They said: "Heer! you don't have to tell us anything. We know and we have seen that your Ranjha is really a dangerous man".

"My Ranjha!" exclaimed Heer."Whose else?" replied her intimates and ran away laughing.

This sort of meeting was repeated every other day or so. On one pretext or another Heer found her way to the Bela and spent a blissful hour or two with Ranjha, bringing for him churi and cream and other dainties. And days lenghthened into weeks. But this sort of thing could not be kept secret for long. The girls knew and others began to suspect. The worst of these others, a sneak and very malicious person was Heer's uncle, Kaidu, the lame bird of cirl omen. Everybody was afraid of his poisonous tongue. He found nothing good in anybody. Children were afraid of his dark frowing visage; the girls avoided him. He found out the weaknesses of his relatives and stung. They hated him for his

viperish tongue but he was a senior member of the community, and they had to bear him.

It was he who become suspicious of Heer's frequent visits to the bela. He spied on her and her intimate group and found them carrying dainties to Ranjha. So one day he watched her return and assuming the guise of a beggar waded across, at the ford, and went haltingly to the midst of Bela and saw Ranjha eating his churi. He whined and begged and said how hungry he was and that he had never tasted churi being so poor. Ranjha's heart was touched and he gave a generous portion of his meal to Kaidu. This pittance Kaidu took with him and showed to Mehr Chuchak and Malki,Heer's mother, sneering in his malicious whine: "See what your wonderful daughter Heer is doing. She is making friends with a menial, with a servant, taking him churi and what not. Look at this churi which I got today from Ranjha in the guise of a beggar. It is a shame and a disgrace".

Heer had her own spies everywhere. She was told by a slavey, what Kaidu was doing. This was enough. Heer took her favorite cousins Jambi and Phati and went to the Bela along the ford where the water was only knee deep. She guessed that the wicked Kaidu must have gone the same way. They asked Ranjha how he was deceived. Ranjha said: "I don't know about Kaidu. I had never seen him. A lame beggar came to me, clad in rags and said he was famished. I gave him a portion of what I had". Heer said: "Well! you are not to blame. How could you know? only you should have asked him, why he had come begging to the bela, when there was a flourishing village from where he had obiously come".

Ranjha was chagrined and said: "Yes! that's true, but it did not occur to me. He looked so miserable that I didn't like asking him any question".

Heer said: "I understand, I don't blame you dear, but the fat is in the fire and Kaidu is bent on mischief. We shall have to do something ourselves". Then addressing her companions she asked: "How about it

girls?" They replied "Kaidu had deserved a lesson for a long time. We think the time had come now, that he should get his". And back they went. Zaibi (Jambi) the quick one was asked to get an old blanket and come to Kaidu's hut. The girls came on silent feet and found Kaidu's resting on his charpoy, smoking his hookah at peace with the world. Eyes-shut, he was enjoying the fruit of his mischief when a blanket was thrown over him and sticks-began to rain on him. Over head, over shoulders, over legs, over body the blows fell in a regular stream, wielded by vigorous young arms. No word was spoken, no respite was given and the beating did not stop till Kaidu fell from his charpoy and lay like a sack full of grass. No one interfered as no one was near and the girls went their lightsome way, fully satisfied.

VI

Heer takes a stand

A demure, soft-footed, properly wrapped Heer entered the inner courtyard to be called peremptorily by her mother. Innocent of any worldly and humdrum concern Heer said: "Yes! Ma". Malki who knew her daughter's ways as did her doting father said: "Come here". "Come here". Heer tripped daintily across and sat on the cord-woven seat of a foot-high stool. Her mother was seated on a broad wooden settle covered with a thick carpet. She daid: "Heer! what is it that I hear?" "What is it Ma?" asked in turn her innocent daughter. "What is it? you ask, your shameless baggage? Do you think we are blind or deaf. The whole village is already humming with your doings. Kaidu says you are seen very often carrying dainties to Ranjha and having intimate talks with him to the neglect of everything else and Jambi and Phati your boon companions, your slaves, are covering your doings. And you ask what is it?" "But Ma! what harm do I do. Sometimes I take some good food with me and give it to Ranjha. Surely we did not calculate to feed him as if he were a menial. And when I am in the Bela the girls are with me. Ranjha also has a room in this haveli, has anyone ever seen me going over to his room? Kaidu is a poisonous reptile, Ma! you know that. Hasa't he said

bad things about your family? He has no good word for anyone. He enjoyes mischief-making. You shouldn't believe him".

Malki was non-plussed. Instead of feeling guilty Heer in her usual way getting the better of the argument. Malki assumed a very angry mien and said: "You shameless creature! You are treading our name in the mud and soon women will taunt me with your doings".

Heer answered: "Ma! you should not get worked up. It is not good for your heart. You will have palpitations if you are not careful. As for Kaidu and his scandal mongering mates, the busy-bodies, let me deal with them. Those who are pure of heart have nothing to fear".

"But you should not be seen so often in the company of a good-for-nothing". Heer flared up at this and retored: "No Ma! he is not a good-for-nothing. He does his job very competently. Already the buffaloes obey his least gesture and the yield of milk has increased. We have lost no calves and no animal has broken its leg. As for birth he is as well-born as any body else in the land. He is not poor, nor is he friendless. As for churi, I made more than I needed and I took it for him. Zainab (Jambi) brings churi sometimes and so does Fatima (Phati) nobody blames them". "But you wretch! are you not in his company every day?"

"No Ma! Not every day. Ranjha is an angel. He does not look at a women. He plays his divine pipe and we listen to him. You should do the same. It will cool your temper Ma! We all sit around and listen to him. Even the buffaloes listen to him. What harm do we do? I have done nothing to bring shame to my father's name. And I am not going to give up meeting him. Ranjha is God's gift to us. I don't care what Kaidu or any one else says. I will not give up seeing Ranjha, if the whole world is arrayed against me. So do not get worked up Ma!" And with these words Heer went his proud way to her rooms.Malki was stricken dumb at Heer's attitude. She had thought that she would cow down Heer and take her to task and she found that it was Heer who had silenced her. Still at parting,

she said "If your brother Sultan heard you, he would cut you to pieces". "Let him" answered Heer. "Is that all you would do to me. Do your worst. I am doing nothing wrong, Ma! So do not threaten me".

"But . . . but . . . your father! If he were to hear you, he would throttle you, even if you are his pet. It is he who is responsible for all this. He has given you this freedom, so that you have become brazen".

"Ma! you are mistaken. I am no child now. You threaten me, but I don't care. When I do no wrong why should I be afraid? Don't tell you will kill me. I am not afraid of death. As for Ranjha! you don't know him. He has the purest heart in the world. He likes me and I like him. And if you want to hear the truth, I think we were made for each other from the beginning and we shall belong to each other till the world ends". And with this challenge, with head uplifted proudly, Heer finally went to her rooms to fall sobbing on her bed.

That same evening Malki told Mehr Chuchak that Heer would not listen to her and had openly decleared her liking for Ranjha. Chuchak was shocked and said: "Malki, you should have strangled her when she was a baby. What should we do now? If we take any harsh measure, our rivals will take it up and explode the event all over. Do you think she would listen to her brother Sultan. She has respected him always".

Malki shook head dolefully and said "No! I tried that too, but she says, she has done no wrong, that Ranjha is a saint and was created for her only and she belongs to him".

"Oh! Oh! cried the distressed father. Then he thought for some moments and asked Malki "What about our Qazi Shamas. He is a venerable man and very learned. He used to teach her at one time. May be she would listen to him".

"I don't know" said the despondent Malki, "I fear, she would listen to nobody to nobody. But you can try".

So the next day Mehr Chuchak brought the Qazi over and the learned Maulvi did all he could to convert Heer to his way of thinking, that is, to respect conventions, to obey her parents as God ordained, to avoid wayward attachments; because all women from Laila, Shirin, Sassi or Sohni who had been wilful and errant, had woeful ends. Moreover such doings brought shame to the parents and all relatives. He tried to put the fear of God into her but Heer did not budge from her stand. She remained unconvinced and answered back in a cold manner. She asserted her right to choose her mate and declared firmly that love was God's gift to man and nothing was holier than true love".

The Qazi threatened her with hell-fire, with the wrath of God, with the ill-will and reprobation of all her near and distant realatives, as they would feel the shame of the scandal, that the only daughter of the Chief of the clan was in love with with a servant! "Shame!" he cried. "Shame!" but the Qazi went away muttering angrily in his beard leaving Chuchak and Malki aghast.

The two now put their heads together and Chuchak said: "But what is all this? Heer has long been engaged to Saidu the Khera chief's son. Heer should be satisfied. The Kheras are not a bad people. They have been visiting us and Heer has seen Saidu many times. In fact she had become quite friendly with Sehti the sister of Saidu. Sehti I learn is a very lively girl and Heer and she would make a good pair. They went to the bela together and many times on Heer's boat too. What has happened?"

Malki said: "She appears to be bewitched. She says now that she does not care if she had been betrothed ten times. She belongs to Ranjha. She says Ranjha has the blessings of the Great Five Saints".

"Nonsense" fumed Chuchak, "Nothing but girlish tantrums. I think we should get rid of this Ranjha. Once he is gone, Heer will come to

her senses". "May be" returned Malki in a doubting tone. "You will see". retorted Chuchak the lord of many acres.

VII

(Ranjha is dismissed)

In the evening when Ranjha brought over the buffaloes for milking, Chuchak sent for him. He said to him: "Ranjha! I think the buffaloes and the other cattle are now quite orderly. You have done a good job. We think the boys whom you have trained can carry on by themselves now, and you must be feeling homesick too. We think your people must be getting anxious about you. Don't you think you should pay them a visit. It would good thing. Here is the money we owe you for the time you have been with us. I am sure you will send us news of you from Takht Hazara".

Ranjha stood looking at Mehr Chuchak. At first he did not understand. Then he asked in his usually direct manner: "Mehrji are you dismissing me?"

"No! No! Not at all" stammered the flustered Mehr. "Only we feel that you done a good job, a very good job; the yield of milk has increased, the cattle are healtheir looking, but we don't want you to waste your life looking after buffaloes. You are a chief's son and are worthy of much better, much higher work".

Still surprised, Ranjha said: "After all this time? And without a claim? Even banias offer a better deal. Is this how honourable people behave?"

"Well Ranjha" replied, "We have nothing against you. Nothing. You are an excellent man. You have done a wonderful job, but frankly speaking we do not need you now, and it is for your own good too. You are wasted here. Have a good meal and rest. You can go in the morning"

and Chuchak went away in haste. He could no longer face Ranjha's strangely shining eyes.

Ranjha left without accepting food but hesitated about the money. Finally he decided to take the coins, as he felt they were his right. There were two gold mohurs and a few silver coins. Ranjha put them in his belt and was for going away without any good byes when Malki who was really ashamed of the way they were turning away Ranjha, asked him to have a glass of milk at least. Ranjha refused very politely and said "Khuda Hafiz" (God protect you) and went away to the river-bank. There he sat under a tree and began to play his bansari. This was his usual way, when disturbed or unhappy or even when very happy.

But something strange was happening in the cattle-pen. When the milk-men began to milk the buffaloes, they found the buffaloes and the cows lowing in a peculiarly distressed manner and refusing to yield. Many experienced cattle-men tried, but it appeared that there was no milk in the apparently full and heavy udders. And when people tried hard to press the udders the buffaloes and the cows kicked. There was first surprise, then panic in the cattle-yard. Mehr Chuchak was informed. Malki came running and they watched, coaxed and petted the buffaloes, but no milk flowed. Not a drop and yet the buffaloes shown no sign of any malaise. Chuchak, Malki and their elder son Sultan, all tried but there was no yield. They were all greatly puzzled.

It was Malki who exclaimed: "Oh! I know. The cattle are bewitched. It is that wretch Ranjha's doing".

"No Malki" cried Chuchak, "There is no wilching here. The cattle have been accustomed to the voice and hands of their keeper Ranjha and they want him to do the coaxing and the patting. After all Ranjha has been looking after them for months. They are naturally familiar with his voice and have become attached to him. It happens that way. And we must admit he was an excellent herdsman. I have known none

better. I fear we shall have to find him or the cattle will sicken and die. God knows where he is gone. I was rather rough with him". Then after a few minutes he said: "We must send somebody after him and request him to come back".

This was done but Chuchak's men came back in an hour and said that Ranjha was sitting under a tree on the bank-side and playing his bansari.

"Curse his bansari" shouted Chuchak, "Is he coming or not?" "No", replied the errands-man. "He refuses to come. He says Mehr Chuchak was finished with him. He is not needed, he said. Well! he is right perhaps. He says! "I should go home. I think the Mehr is right. I have been too long away from home. I am going back in the morning".

"Well! what an obstinate jat he is" exclaimed the exasperated Chuchak. "I suppose I must go myself or the buffaloes will get sick". And he went. But he too came back without Ranjha. He said to Malki: "The man is mad. He continues to play his bansari. Does not care for food or money. I offered him a few gold mohurs even. He would not look at them. I think Malki, perhaps he would listen to you. You always made much of him". So Malki went and begged Ranjha to return and promised higher terms, a well-equipped hut in the Bela and better fitments in his room at the haveli. But Ranjha refused politely the churi and cream Malki and brought with her saying, he was not hungry and that he was sorry he was causing trouble, so he had better leave immediately rather than in the morning. He said, it happened sometimes that milch-cows and buffaloes withheld their milk, but with proper care they let the milk flow, so there was nothing to worry about. He said all this in a soft voice without any grudge or annoyance, but excused himself saying that the Mehrji said very definite that he had no need of him any more and should go home. "Well Maji!", Ranjha added "Thank you for all your kindness, but the Mehrji was right, I have been too long from home". And Malki came back sobered and distressed.

There was no an impasse. The buffaloes and the cows were lowing and there was much talk among the herders and cowmen. So Chuchak said to his wife: "Malki, there is nothing else now. I was rather tactless with Ranjha. I forgot that he was no commoner. He comes of as good a family as ours and is proud. Moreover he has given no offence. Heer is attached to him. That is all. Heer is already betrothed or we could have married her off to Ranjha. I think we should send Heer to Ranjha. He will listen to her. I think we should re-engage him and keep him for a time. Once Heer is safely married, we will kick him out. Send Heer quickly to the obstinate fellow. We need him now. Let us not stand on ceremony at this time. We shall deal with him once Heer is safely off our hands". So Heer was persuaded to go. Her mother adopted a different tone now and begged Heer top make Ranjha come back or the buffaloes would sicken.

Heer was neither deaf nor dumb. She had heard all the hullabaloo and knew the predicament in which her parents were placed. But when her mother came hesitantly to her room, she found Heer busy at some crochet work, unconscious of what was happening. But Malki knew her daughter. She also pretended that Heer would be ignorant of the situation and she broached the problem in a round-about way. First she asked how Heer was. Then she tried a few words of appreciation about Heer's domestic virtues and especially her needle-work. After that she asked innocently whether she knew where their buffalo-herd was, as she had not seen him that evening. When Heer would not pick up her cue, she said they had sent for him but he was not to be found and they needed him in the cattle-yard, as it was milking time. She then asked Heer to go for a little walk, as she has been cooped up in her room for quite some time and if she came across Ranjha to bring him along.

Heer needed no bidding, but she also took her time. She folded her needle-work neatly and put it away in her cupboard. Then she took a comb and tidied her hair, seeing from the corner of her eyes that her mother was turning and twisting on the straw cassock, where she had dumped herself. At last Heer took a fresh head scarf and said leisurely:

"All right Ma! shall go for a stroll and if I come across Ranjha, I shall ask him to come. I don't know whether he will agree, because Jambi came and told me that he had been turned off. Perhaps the lazy-bones is sitting somewhere playing his bansari".

Once ouside, she flew to the river, her feet hardly touching the ground. It was a gust of wind that passed. She heard the strains of Ranjha's pipe from a distance and went straight to him. Ranjha was still absorbed in his music with eyes closed but he seemed to know that Heer was there, although she had approached the tree under which he sat, on silent feet. After a minute or so he stopped playing and pulling Heer to him, kissed her hard, and said: "So my saints have sent you to me". Heer nestled closer to him and there was no talk for sometime.

He then said: "I prayed very hard and the saints appeared in a vision. I saw them clearly even if my eyes were closed. They asked me to play on. They then again promised you to me. They asked for you so that they could bless you. I said, how can I bring her here, they have thrown me out. They intimated that you would soon be here and that whatever happens, you will remain mine. They were just fading out when you came. Now what do you think?"

"I don't know Ranjha. Life is not so simple. It is not so easy as you say, your saints promise. My people are threatening me with marriage, although at this moment they need you badly as the buffaloes have refused to yield. In fact my mother came to me almost with tears in her eyes, she who was abusing me an hour or so back and begged me to get you. So come along. As to other matters, we shall think of some way". And then she smiled and the evening became bright. She also said: "You know Ranjha, there is always a way. Allah will be merciful".

The buffaloes heard Ranjha's bansari, when he was coming back with Hir. They stopped lowing and when Ranjha came and called: "Kalo" "Bhuri" and "Peeli", the names he had given to some favourites, they came towards him and when he patted them, the milkers found no

difficulty in getting the milk. The milk-men bowed low before Ranjha with folded hands as if he was their pin and everybody had smiles on their faces. Chuchak patted Ranjha on the back and said in a gush: "You deserve Heer. My dear Ranjha I was mistaken about you. I hope there are no hard feelings in your heart. You are like a son to me. You carry on. We shall attend to the back-biters". Ranjha went to his quarters and a rich meal was soon sent to him. There was peace in the household, although Chuchak and Malki talked in whispers for a long time before they went to sleep, that night.

VIII

New plans and kaidu's villainy.

The next day, Heer and Ranjha met to work out a plan for meetings, which would escape notice. Heer said that she was friends with Mithi the wife of the village barber, who did all the work of marital negotiations. Everybody knew Mithi and she was a redoubtable gossip. So every body was afraid of her, therefore her house would be the safest place for secret meetings. Ranjha had no objection and a gold mohur changed hands. Mithi agreed to provide the necessary cover and Ranjha began to meet Heer in Mithi's house after sunset. As to the bela, there Heer managed to go with her many loyal companions. So for some weeks the lovers had a good tune. But Kaidu the artful was now in dead earnest to blast this romance. He was a vindictive man and could not forget the beating he had had. So nosing out the dodges the lovers made, he began spreading the rumour that Heer was carrying on with Ranjha in the village itself. He even went up to Mehr Chuchak, and made pointed hints. Once bitten twice shy, the Mehr refused to listen to Kaidu, called him a malicious tale-bearer and a poisonous rumour-monger. Being repulsed here, Kaidu increased his sneaking tactics and began to jeer at Heer loudly and openly before Heer's allies, the daughters of the village notables. He called them Heer's go-betweens and worse. So they decided to teach him a lesson.

This time no sheet was used, or any blanket. He was set upon by the village furies openly and beaten up. With hands and legs, with sticks and rakes, Kaidu was thrashed till he crawled before them and cried for mercy, but the relentless maidens would have no pity on him and pulled down his hut and set it on fire.

After Kaidu had regained his breath, he dragged himself to the house of the chief of the village panchayat (the council of the Five Elders) and cried for justice. He showed the village elders, who were called, his wounds and wept. He told them that the friends of Heer had nearly killed him and burnt his hut.

The village Council met the next morning, with all the men-folk attending. The head of the panchayat was Mehr Rooldoo, an uncle of Mehr Chuchak. As it happened Jambi (Zainab) the closet friend of Heer and a regular imp, was the youngest daughter of Mehr Rooldoo and she had been the spear-head of the attack. Other alleged culprits were either the daughters, or nieces or grand-daughters, of the Elders. So there was great embarrassment and even suppressed laughter among the members of the Council. What was worse Jambi and Phati the two alleged leaders of the miscreants turned the table on Kaidu. They boldly faced the Council and said: "We are innocent. It is this scoundrel who has been chasing us, making improper suggestions, pawing at our breasts whenever he passed us, pinching our buttocks and trying to sniff at our Lungis (wraps). Now he puts on the covering of the Quran and pretends to be a victim. The elders put their fingers in their ears and cried: "Hush! Hush! you shameless creatures! Are these things to be said in public?" But the girls cried: "If no one is prepared to save our honour from this depraved lame-bird, what can we do? We have to protect ourselves". And looking the elders in the eye they cried with one voice: "Do you want us to be deflowered by this rascal one night?" The Council was horrified. and though kaidu cried himself hoarse by saying that it was all lies the Council would not listen to him. The members did not want to say that their daughters and grand daughters and nieces were brazen liars, as obviously they were, nor would they believe in the

guilt-lessness of Kaidu, whose reputation they knew. So the Council dismissed the case with a reprimand to the girls and advised Kaidu not to aggravate the hostility of all the young girls of the community, who, they added, could not all be wrong. Jambi and her crowd went away jubilant. Heer did not even appear at the meeting.

But this discomfiture only sharpened the salacious zeal of Kaidu. He only changed his tactics. He used nights now in his sneaking pursuit. He would go to the ford, wade across and hide in the bushes around Ranjha's hut. He saw the girls playing half-naked or dancing freely with prancing bosoms and ample display of their charms and he reported to Mehr Chuchak that he had seen Heer clinging to Ranjha or lying in intimate contact with him. At first Chuchak would not believe him, but Kaidu was so insidious that at last he began to pay heed to him so he said one day: "All right Kaidu! I shall believe you if you show me the two lying together".

Kaidu redoubled his vigilance and one summer came rushing to Chuchak and said: "Brother! come with me now, and I will show you what I have been telling you. I have seen not half an hour ago Ranjha and Heer sleeping together". Chuchak got on his horse and with his lance ready to pin down the culprits to earth, went with Kaidu. They took the ford but when they crossed over, Chuchak was not careful in his handling of the horse. The hooves struck a stony patch and woke up Heer. She looked around for her friends, but they had wandered away. She tidied herself and began to collect the utensils, in which she and the girls had brought some food. She rose to meet her father when he appeared and said: "Lala! you here! We were just coming back only the girls went for a last swim in the pool. I shall call them. Ranjha has not been well and we came with some food and sat with him for some time". Chuchak was taken aback, but he was not entirely deceived. He did not say anything to Heer or Ranjha, especially as at that time the girls trooped in and greeted him loudly. He muttered something in his beard saying he had come for a ride in the balmy night and thought he would look in at the bela. But on his way back he said to himself again and

again, she must be married off soon. Kaidu for fear of Jambi and Phati who had come shouting made himself scarce.

IX

A new Element

A letter arrived from Takht Hazara in which the elder brothers of Ranjha expressed great surprise at their brother, the son of a chieftain and by no means landless, had become a mere herdsman. And they begged Mehr Chuchak to send him back. Mehr Chuchak considered this call from Takht Hazara a god-send and replied that: "Ranjha was by no means a servant. He was an honoured guest and he was looking after the buffaloes as a pastime. We have however no objection to his going back". And he told Ranjha about his brother's letter. But Ranjha replied that he was happy where he was, and would return by and by. Chuchak added this reply to his letter.

But obviously Ranjha's family was not satisfied with Chuchak's answer. The social pressure must have been great, the gossips, the collaterals, the maligners must have been active. The news that Deedo, whom every one except his elder step-brothers and their wives liked, had been forced to become a herdsman, had made the community very uneasy. It was great dishonour, they said that a son of Mehr Manjoo should become a menial. Especially so when Ma Kheri, Manjoo's own widow and her family joined the others in blaming the elder sons of Manjoo and their wives. So it was decided that the wives of the elder sons who at one time almost hounded Deedo with their sharp tongues, should send a letter to Ranjha requesting him to come back. They made a strong sentimental appeal and said: "They were heart-broken to hear that Deedo had chosen to become a herdsman; he who was a jewel of a man; how their life was darkened by his absence and very much more of the same type of pleading". But Ranjha laughed when he received their life was darkened by his absence and very much more of the same type of pleadings". But Ranjha laughed when he received their letter. He told

Heer that this was mere show, because when he was at home, his sisters-in-law seldom had a good word for him, especially when he had grown up, and more so after his father his father's death. And Ranjha sent his excuse, saying there was no hurry; and he would come back when God willed.

So the wily sisters-in-laws were prompted to write to Heer, appealing to her womanly heart, saying they would die if they did not get Ranjha back as he was the light of their days and without him life had lost its joy for them. In fact, they said, that the whole house was plunged in gloom and if she would take pity on their desolation, they would be eternally grateful to her. Heer showed this letter to Ranjha who was greatly amused by this extraordinary warmth of feeling, which his elder step-brothers and their wives now showed for Deedo. He told her further that he was sure that Ma Kheri, her sons Shera, and Siraj, as well as his cousin Lally, the wife of Shera, who was like a sister to him, were at the back of this concern. He was also sure that his nephews and nieces would be missing him, but he said the die was cast now and he would abide by his fate. So Heer wrote back that she had no control over Ranjha's plans or movements and that he was staying at the Siyals with his own goodwill and as an honoured guest and further that Ranjha spent most of his time playing devotional hymens on his bansari, which he says is his kind of prayers and that his patron saints continued to favour him. And she added that in any case Ranjha was not disposed to do anything under compulsion; he was so independent. He acknowledged only Allah as his supreme Master and believed in His mercy and grace. So they need not worry about him. Moreover, she added, if they said their life was darkened without him, how could she live without him, who lived only for Ranjha.

These letters were sent through the maulvi of the mosque who read them out to Chuchak and Malki. Chuchak's reply and Heer's answer were also penned by him so the whole community was aware of the situation. Everybody now realized that Ranjha was no vagrant, no unwanted or discarded member of low caste, but the scion of a rich and

honourable family and that a whole clan was behind him and valued him. So Heer's attachment to him, which was no secret, was no blot on the Siyal's reputation, but that Heer should spend nights with Ranjha as Chuchak suspected could not be tolerated. So Chuchak and Malki had long and earnest consultations about the affair and decided that something must be done or Kaidu the malignant fiend would make their life unendurable with his innuendoes. The decision they took at last was that, Heer should be disposed of at the earliest. Once she was went to the distant stronghold of the Kheras, they at least would be free of blame.

After a few days Chuchak sent for a few elders and asked them whether it wasn't better for all concerned if Heer was married soon to Saidu the Khera chief's son or should he honour the promise he had made to Ranjha when the buffaloes withheld their milk that Heer would be married to him, especially he said as Ranjha was their equal in birth and worldly possessions. Some of the elders objected firmly that the Siyals had never given a daughter to the Ranjhas in the past, and that the Kheras were good allies, and it would strengthen their own positions if relations with the Kheras were promoted by this marriage. There was a long discussion but the majority of the elders advised that the Khera suit should be accepted and negotiations should be started at once. Chuchak was not happy over the Ranjha imbroglio and so he agreed and it was decided that the next day the barber (the negotiator) would be sent to Ranjpur, the place of the Kheras.

This news could not be hidden. Heer was informed by Jambi, who ferreted it out of her father Mehr Rooldoo the head of the village Council, who was a secret sympathizer. Heer on learning it flew in a rage to her mother and asked her bluntly whether she was a party to this infamous project when she had told her positively that there was no man in the world for her better than Ranjha and she belonged to him. And she again declared emphatically that they may do their worst but she would never agree to marry anyone else. She maintained that she

had been given to Ranjha by the Five Pirs and nothing could separate them and she would allow no other man to touch her.

She then went to Ranjha and said: "Ranjha this is the time when we should do something. Let us go away from here. Take me to your home. My people will not dare to seize me from there, and we shall be free of all our difficulties". But Ranjha maintaining his faith in the Five Pirs said: "No dear! this is neither honourable nor desirable. Girls of good family do not elope, or set up secret relationship, and so earn a name which clings to them all their life. It reflects on their children too. You have been promised me by the holiest persons and even your father gave me his word. Remain true and loyal and patient. I am sure God will show us a way. Only remain steadfast and Allah the compassionate will show His grace to us". Heer had to be content though she was not so sure of promises and pledges. Her woman's realistic mind told her that things did not always happen as one prayed for.

Her friends the bold Jambi and the impulsive Phati were loud in their condemnation. They called Heer a coward and Ranjha a spineless flute-player, and though Heer protected they rushed to the Bela and confronted Ranjha. They asked him what sort of a man he was, when his beloved was being shunted off like a bag of wool from right under his nose. Why does he not take her away? A girl in a million who was also dying for love of him, foolishly, and he siting in the shade and playing his eternal bansari. "Where are your solemn pledges", asked Phati, "You old woman?" "Where are your pirs" shouted Jambi, "You false dervish?"

Ranjha listened to this diatribe calmly and said: "There is no use in talking big. I could take away but will that be good for her reputation? Moreover, certain promises have been made to me by the Holy Ones and I have been asked to be patient. I am not going to run away. You wait and see. I trust in God. I am sure everything will be all right". The girls were bitterly disappointed in him and said so. Ranjha took to his bansari.

The girls however came back to Heer pretended that Ranjha was heart-broken and was preparing to leave with his staff and his bansari as he saw no way out of the complicated situation. They insisted that Heer should take the initiative and compel Ranjha to take her away. They even said they would bring Ranjha to her but Heer replied: "No! don't do that. Ranjha can be very obstinate. He has his own views of right and wrong and will not budge from his stand. I have begged and begged but he is mad. He says: "Wait. Something will happen". "Now tell me Jambi and Phati, you are very sensible girls, what will happen? The Kheras will come and do what I can and I will fight to the last, but my parents and the elders will bundle me into the palki and wash their hands off me".

The girls were not yet beaten. They rushed away and dragged Ranjha back with them. Heer welcomed Ranjha and said ironically: "Blessed is the place which is honoured by my holy lover. I suppose you have come to see with your own eyes, how they confine a girl to her rooms just before marriage. Well here I am. I suppose Heer was not a fit mate for a divine buffalo-herd. These girls still believe that you will do something. Perhaps you wish to see with your own eyes, the wretched Heer bound in nikah to that Khera! And you think a miracle is going to happen at the last minute". And she burst into heart-rending tears. The girls embraced her and wept with her. Ranjha stood dumb for some minutes and then stole away.

X

Heer is married to Saidu

On the other side preparations were in full swing. Needle-women were busy night and day preparing Heer's troussean (bride's marriage garments). All kinds of household articles were obtained. Goldsmiths were called to make the ornaments and professional women-musicians kept singing for hours on end, Malki playing the grand dame.

While all this was going on and the bridal procession expected any day, Jambi and Phati the indefatigable partisans of Heer, began to collect all the money they could lay their hands on. They being both the daughters of very rich landlords had their own mounts. These they got ready with saddle-bags amply provided with every necessity, hoping that at the last minute Ranjha would decide to take Heer away, whom they could easily smuggle out of her rooms. They had planted other eager confidants at strategic points to tell when Ranjha was coming, but no Ranjha appeared and Jambi was disgusted. When she was told that Ranjha the dreamer was seen playing his bansari, lost to the world, she cursed idealists.

The day came at last. The Kheras arrived with great pomp and show. The Qazi was summoned and he began to recite the Quran and then went inside the house with two witnesses to receive the consent of Heer to her nikah with Saida son of Ajoo the Khera chieftain. Saida had already given his agreement before witnesses. But judge of the Qazi's chagrin, that when he asked Heer whether she agreed to accept Saida as her husband, she said loudly "No! No! Never". And when the Qazi persisted and said that if she did not conform to the tenets of Islam and the customs and conventions of her society, especially as her parents had authorized the marriage, she would incur a great sin and would merit Hell fire. Heer answered him witheringly: "Qazi Sahib, you may try till doomsday. I will never agree to this nikah. I belong to Ranjha and nobody else shall have me as his wife. Do what you like. And don't jabber about conventions. If people conform to them outwardly and curse them in their hearts, you people force them to be hypocrites and Allah condemns hypocrisy". The Qazi went on arguing and Heer went on rebutting and said again and again "I am pledged to Ranjha; I asked for him from Allah and he was given to me under divine sanction. I am betrothed to him, so don't go on quoting authorities like a parrot". Then addressing her mother Malki, she said: "I warned you, but you wouldn't accept my word. Now do your worst I wont agree to the nikah. I have given the butter, to Ranjha and you are churning only butter milk". The

altercation with the Qazi went on for sometime but Heer was adamant. At last Chuchak and Kaidu and some of the elders (but not the fathers of Jambi and Phati) advised Chuchak to hand Heer over to the Kheras as the entire community was a wilness to the fact that you have received the barat (marriage procession) and have given away your daughter to Saida as his wife. When Heer is among the Kheras, they said, she would see the error of her ways and would be forced to submit. And this was done. Heer was picked up by her brother Sultan and placed in the palki; the Kheras were given all the articles provided for the use of the bride and amidst shouts and loud tunes of the village minstrels the Kheras were seen off the village.

Before leaving, however, Heer sent Jambi to Ranjha. Jambi and Phati brought Ranjha and managed to hide Ranjha in the palki and when Heer was bestowed in it, she found Ranjha putting aside the mantle in which Jambi the resourceful, had wrapped him. Phati and Jambi stood on guard, pretending to bid a lingering farewell to their bosom friend. Being the daughters of the village's chief elders and big landlords to boot, and knowing what they had done to Kaidu, nobody dared to interfere. Inside the palki Heer flung herself into Ranjha's arms and sobbed. Ranjha was himself nonplussed. He had hoped for some unseen help but he saw that the world was too strong for him. When they were consoling each other, some curious Kheras became suspicious. They came towards the palki. Heer tore her necklace and scattered the pearls. She said: "She had sent for her life-long friends Jambi and Phati and they had brought Ranjha the honoured guest of Chuchak to help in finding the pearls". When they made threatening gestures, she cried: "If you touch Ranjha I will first kill the person who lays a hand on him and then take poison myself. I won't be insulted. I am yet in my father's house". They were over-awed and stepped back.

Heer had told Ranjha that she had tried hardest but the circumstances were too strong for her. "The Qazi" she said. "My parents, my brother and some elders have tied me in a knot now and I don't know how I can unravel it. But rest assured the Kheras will repent the

day they take me home. It is Heer they have captured; it is not a bride they are taking home. They cannot force me and whenever we meet again, you will find me as untouched as now".

Ranjha replied: "I know that dear, but there are certain things you cannot fight against. One is fate. It it is the will of God that we are to be united, no power on earth can stop us, God will show us the way".

Heer said: I shall send you word about myself somehow. Do not worry too much, and I suggest that you should go to a holy jogi and become his disciple. Forget your present self, loose yourself in a new indentity and come to me clad in this new personality. Show yourself to me if you want me to live. Put on a disguise which can deceive others. I shall know you, never fear. I shall be waiting and now goodbye my dearest and do not despair. You have great faith in Allah, keep it up. He will help. I understand He helps all true lovers". And they parted. Ranjha left with a sinking heart, wondering at the falsity of man. He remembered vividly the fatherly solicitude of Chuchak, when he had said in a gush: "Ranjha I am converted. I realize you have some hidden power in you and you are so kind to man and beast. You deserve Heer. I promise you that no one else will have her". And Ranjha said to himself: "Here is the same man who asks me without batting an eyelid: "Ranjha my son, you carry on. Consider yourself a member of the family. We all love you very much". And yet he has given away his daughter without a proper nikah. What wretched creatures men are!"

XI

Heer in captivity

Some time later Jambi received a letter from Heer. Heer said: "Jambi dear! The whole world has turned traitor. People, even father and mothers say one things promise something and do the opposite. Who is to be trusted in this world? What is the use of living? But one still hopes. Remember me to others and send me word of their welfare".

Jambi understood and took the letter to Ranjha who still lingered at the Siyals. They were ashamed at heart and were unusually nice to him. Ranjha said: "Jambi you know that Chuchak promised Heer to me. Are all the Siyals cheats? I know your father and Phati's were not in the conspiracy, but look at the others. They all have such venerable beards and have no shame. These jats are a disgrace to their name".

Such remarks of Ranjha reached Chuchak's ears too and he was embarrassed. He could not deny the accusations. He went to the Qazi and made a moan. The Qazi that arrant diplomat said: "Mehrji why worry? You are well rid of a troublesome girl. She is no more your problem". But the Siyals as a whole were cast down, whereas the Kheras were jubilant. Nobody dared to approach Ranjha and talk about the affair, but word had reached Takht Hazara and Ranjha's sister-in-laws, whose belated appeal Ranjha had rejected with scorn, now had a letter sent to him saying: "Now come back, dear brother! You have tried your best but the fates were obviously too strong for you. Do not hang on over there any more. The house you have been building in your imagination has been looted by the Kheras. The place which you were guarding has been ravished by tigers and leopards. There is no faith in virgins; poeple go after them in vain. You have worked day and night for something which God Almighty has denied you. Do not waste any more time in jungles; put not thy trust in virgins. We shall offer a golden pinnacle to the dome of our mosque when you come home. We have vowed this to Khawaja Khizr your patron, if he sends you back to us".

Ranjha replied: "Sisters! There is no use lashing me with scorn or taunts. The devotees of true love to bear sufferings, but they are not afraid. My life is now dedicated to one purpose and I shall dare all to achieve it. You will never hear that Ranjha has run away from danger or difficulties".

Jambi, Phati and their close friends came to Ranjha and they said: "Ranjha! What are you doing here? Wandering and spending your days in useless moans. Do something. Heer is lying on a bed of thorns and

wasting away, longing for you. Do you want her to die in bondage? Be a man Ranjha. Sometimes later Jambi and Phati came running to him with another letter from Heer in which Heer had poured her heart's agony. She said to Jambi and Phati but really to Ranjha: "Come to me by whatever means; only show your face to me. Every things is dark before my eyes and there is no colour, no fragrance, no beauty and no goodness in my world. I am looking in all directions with wide, wide eyes but see nothing except your face. Do not prolong my sufferings".

What could Ranjha say? He said to Jambi and Phati who were always consoling him blaming him by turn, with sisterly freedom, "You know sisters, I am in no better condition, but I gave my word to Mehr Chuchak to continue at this work for some time more. And though the Mehr has gone back on his word, I shall fulfill my pledge. I shall soon be free of this bond and I shall go. Tell Heer I shall never fail her and I live only for her and my life is devoted to one purpose only, and she should know it. Be patient. It will not be long now".

XII

Ranjha becomes a Jogi

After this Ranjha made preparations for departure. He decided to go to Guru Balnath, a renowned Hindu saint, who everybody said, had great spiritual and mystical powers, but Ranjha thought the Guru had his own principles, he would insist on renunciation. Ranjha had a struggle within himself about the ordeal of renunciation and severe asceticism, but then he said he would be doing it for a purpose sanctioned and sanctified by Five Great Pirs, so any thing he did would be justified. Becoming a jogi and going about with a shaven head and a begging bowl and with ashes all over exposed body should be no trial. One did not succeed in Love or any other enterprise without effort or sacrifice. So he went to Tilla Balnath and fell at the feet of the holy man. Jogi Balnath, a venerable, white-bearded and white-browed, white-haired old man was sitting cross-legged and with his palms resting on

his knees, but though his eyes were closed, he seemed to know what was happening around him. His disciples were for pulling Ranjha away silently from before the Guru, when Guru Balnath murmured: "Leave him alone". Even his murmur had a ring of authority in it.

When his chelas (disciples) went away, the Guru opened his eyes, looked long at Ranjha and said: "Son! why are you bowing like this before me? You are not a vagrant, or a destitute and you are neither an unworldly person. You appear to be well-born, thought your clothes are now dusty. Your face is not coarse and you are really a very handsome man. Your place should be in the world of men. What has brought you to the ashram (hermitage) of us jogis. These chelas of mine are landless, they are sworn to chastity and poverty and have renounced the pleasures of the flesh. You are not of their breed. What awful fate has driven you to this solitary refuge?"

Ranjha was amazed to hear all the Guru seemed to know about him. It appeared that the holy man had second sight and he would not be deceived. Moreover Ranjha was not given to lies. Only one idea was driving him, but it was a secret between him and Heer, who was to him the promised fruit of life. Moreover he was pursuing no worldly gain. He was trying to obtain what had been promised him, first by the Five Great Pirs and only lately by Mehr Chuchak. All this passed through his head, but he felt the Guru was reading his mind all the time. He said: "Guruji! you are quite right about me. I have sought you with an object. There is nothing ignoble about it. I am seeking something I have lost. This thing was bestowed on me by some sacred powers, but the world has been too much for me. I am sick of mankind. I have been betrayed by my family; I have been played false by persons who had promised something to me in the name of God. I was foretold that I shall have to make a tremendous effort to obtain it. Some power has guided me to your feet. Accept me as your chela in the name of God and I shall do my utmost to prove to you that I am not false. I too have something in me which you will recognized sooner or later".

The Jogi was himself astonished at the frank avowal of the suppliant. But he said: "My dear man! joag is a very rare state of mind. Not many persons are capable of earning it or are worthy of it. People who have had a soft life like you cannot bear the hardship and the loneliness that a seeker after truth has to endure. There are long and severe periods of self-denial, including fasting, long vigils, prayers with deep concentration and meditations lasting days. One has to forget food, sleep and any kind of pleasure. One has to forsake the warmth of human company. Look at you. You have a bansari with silver bands and you have gold rings in your ears. Is there any place in the world of selflessness, which you say you are seeking, for such a person as you?"

Ranjha raised his head at that and looking the Guru in the eye said! "Guruji, if you forgive me I should say that birth and upbringing cannot hinder anybody from seeking the ultimate. Did not Gautama Siddharta leave his royal state? Did not Ibrahim Adhham give up his kingship? There have been many such renunciations. I am a nobody in comparison with such exalted persons but believe me Maharaj! what I am doing has been ordained. My appeal to you is for no sordid motive. I have been almost directed to come to you".

The Guru was silent for quite some time. He appeared to commune within himself. Then he opened his eyes and said: "Well! if you wish. But you will find only coarse food here and cold water, and sometimes you will have to go empty. No churis, cream or honey! Sometimes some faithfulls bring something good but we are so many. But if you are prepared to submit to our strict regimen you can join us".

Ranjha replied: "Guruji, it does not matter what I eat. I have had enough of milk and honey. My quest is urgent. A life depends on it. What is food to me?

The Guru was amused. He smiled and looking at Ranjha's bansari said: "There is no room here for love-tunes. But let us see what you can do with this piece of bamboo?"

This was enough for Ranjha. He sat down with his back to a convenient bole and began to play. His first trills were full of a soft melody which was very soothing. Soon he began to play in earnest. His notes rose and fell and in no time he started on his favourite solemn melody which always put him in a trance. It did so this time too. But what was strange it seemed to pull the chelas, who were muttering against the new-comer, to the place where Ranjha sat. They stood for a time and then seated themselves. Soon they forget where they were. A spell seemed to fall on them all. What was strangest of all, Guru Balnath himself was transported. He sat with his eyes closed and appeared to have lost touch with those around him. Ranjha played on and on and after a time stopped. Nobody stirred. The first to awaken from a sort of dream, was Guru Balnath himself. He looked at Ranjha with a strange look and then said: "I understand now. You are not what you appeared at first sight. You speak not to the head but to the heart. All right! stay on. I agree with you that you must have been sent to us". Then turning to his chelas he said: "You were whispering among yourselves that here was an interloper. You have now seen for yourself that he is no stranger. He is a true seeker. He belongs here. Accept him as one of you".

And so Ranjha was inducted into the brother-hood. The chelas who were at first inclined to be jealous, soon grew fond of him and often begged him to play some music for them. They even liked the soft lilting melodies which Ranjha extemporized. The Guru, though hesitantly, began to favour him with special attention and so engaging was Ranjha's behaviour, so selfless his conduct, so patient his attitude that he undertook the harder tasks of others with a smile and never refused or evaded a difficult chore. When sent out with the begging bowl, he went out with utter humility. In a short time there was left no trace of the gallant son of high birth in him.

After a long and severe apprenticeship, the Guru who had watched every look, every gesture, every word of Ranjha, began to give

him sessions of silent communion, and each time Ranjha felt cleansed and uplifted. The Guru often asked Ranjha to play his bansari, which Ranjha did gladly and put all his soul in his melodies. He played with such absorption that every listener was entranced. The Guru always felt transported to some heavenly region and himself began to see visions of white-clad persons who floated before him and wanted to say something to him.

A day came when Ranjha who had been in the ashram for months now begged for a special audience and when granted one, begged very humbly and earnestly to be given joag and some power to help him in achieving the object to which he had been dedicated and directed. The Guru promised to seek some inspiration. And the Guru undertook a vigil. He concentrated on Ranjha's problem and sought to penetrate the mystery of the vision which haunted him at times. At last he got in touch with the Holy Five and asked them what they wanted. They told him that they had made a promise to Ranjha and it had gone awry as things do in worldly affairs. They desired that Ranjha should be shown a way and given the help he needed, to reach the goal he merited. What the end of his search would be, they said was only known to God. The Guru greeted them and they faded away.

The next day Guru Balnath sent for Ranjha and said: "Son! you have served the hard apprenticeship required of seekers of joag. I have meditated and have had the desired inspiration. I shall admit you to the inner circle and give you joag. You have very powerful patrons and I think you will not misuse the powers with which you will be invested. Remain true to yourself serve the Truth and be not ensnared by the temptations of the world. I don't need any assurances because I know you have been pure of heart. Remain pure". And Guru Balnath gave him the joag, pierced his ears and put black wax rings in them, had his head shaved, gave him reddish nut-brown livery of the jogis, put a begging bowl in his hands, invested him with some powers and bade him good bye. Ranjha touched the feet of his Guru, bowed with folded hands before him and was escorted down the Tilla by the chelas who had come

really to respect him. And so Ranjha the jogi, took his way to Rangpur the village of the Kheras.

XIII

The Jogi and Sehti

And there, surrounded by hostile women-folk was Heer. On her arrival there were a number of ceremonies enjoined by custom and singing and dancing, feasting and carousing were indulged in for days and very few young girls slept fully for many nights. The leading spirit of these festivities was the handsome Sehti, and amazon with the energy and spirit of ten girls of her age. She headed the choral chants and the dances and yet kept an eye on Heer, the prize, the beauty whose fame had spread over the whole Chenab Valley. And she soon realized that every thing was not well with the coveted bride.

And to Heer the whole affair a nightmare. Girls came and lifted her veil to look at her. They sang; they brought garlands and her bed was heaped with flowers. There were sweets of all kinds on tables in the bridal chamber. Sherbets of exquisite boquet and many other dainties, but Heer did stir. She moved as if in a daze. The music deafened her and the chirping and chatting of excited girls gave her a severe headache. Sehti the luscious came and sat by her, embrached her, kissed her, but got no response. She had never imagined that a ripe young woman like Heer would not be excited and even eager for her nuptials, but here she found a stony faced creature of wood. She had judged by herself. There was nothing of the suavity of Heer in her, Heer was inflexible, but not brash. She was firm but smooth; intense yet self-contained. Sehti was volcanic and fierce, passionate and forthright, indomitable and fearless. She herself was in love with a Baluch chieftain named Murad, whom she had met at the annual pilgrimage to the Multan saints. And her people the Kheras had an age-old feud with the Baluchis, whom they called nomads and barbarians. Sehti knew about Heer's attachment to Ranjha, but she thought that now that Heer was married and so far away

from home, she would forget. Therefore she had a soft corner for Heer, as she herself knew the pangs of love. And she sheltered Heer as much as she could from the overwhelming attentions of the assembled girls.

The day had passed in these festivities and Heer was led on the bridal chamber by Sehti and three or four cousins. Sehti held her by the arm almost clasping her round her slender waist and kept whispering: "Courage Heer! courage. I know it is a difficult situation for you. Saida my brother is not too happy about it all and he is not too confident. In fact every one here is a bit afraid of you, but you need a lot of fortitude and a lot of wit. I cannot help you here. You have to face it yourself". And with this she left Heer and shooed the other girls away.

A little while later, slow steps announced the arrival of the bridegroom. Heer did not raise her head. Saida did not have the courage to either sit beside Heer on the bed or make any advances. When he had stood at the foot of the bed for some time, it was Heer who addressed him thus: "Saida! sit down. I want to talk to you". Saida was surprised, but he took a seat. Heer then said: "There is one thing that I want to make clear. I am not married to you. My people and the Qazi tried very hard and for a long time, to make me say "Yes" to the nikah formula, but I said: "No! No! all the time. I have not accepted the nikah. I was pushed into the palki and forcibly sent here. I do not therefore consider you my husband. And if you force yourself on me, it is either your life of mine. You can take your choice. I was promised to Ranjha by the Five Pirs first. They were witnesses to our solemn betrothal. I therefore consider myself his wife. Later my father promised me to him before my mother. I am here as a prisoner and I accept my fate, but I will not tolerate any force or any pressure. You must have heard of me. I do not say anything I don't mean".

Saida was stricken dumb. He tried to say something, but he found he could not utter a word. There appeared to be some force which was driving him away. He felt himself pushed by unseen hands. It may have been his imagination only, but he got up shakily and stumbled out.

A sort of terror seized him and he could barely see. In this bewildered condition he staggered to his room and fell on his bed. By morning he was in a raging fever which lasted many days. And it left him a wreck.

That night passed, as did other night and days. This state of affairs continued. Days lengthened into weeks and weeks into months. There was no news of Ranjha. Word came from Jambi that Ranjha had gone, she could not tell where. Heer waited and waited and hoped to die. Heer the stout-hearted began to doubt. She suffered silently. She moved about as if she were only half-alive. Except for Sehti nobody knew what had happened. Saida recovered, but he did not approach Heer again. Most of the time Heer lay on her bed as if in a swoon. She ate only when pressed hard. And she became ill.

Ranjha after receiving the blessing of Guru Balnath, came to the environs of Rangpur. He was in appearance a common jogi and jogis are taken seriously by some and ridiculed by others, but Ranjha retained a native dignity, a poise, a sort of commanding look which impressed people. On the outskirts of the Khera village, he fell in with a shepherd. This man, whose name of Ayyali was no ordinary sheep-herd. He was a man of means and a much travelled man besides. He had traded in sheep and wool for a long time. He had been north as far as Takht Hazara and was quite familiar with the events at Mehr Chuchak's place. He greeted the jogi respecfully; but after a long look at him thought the face and especially the general look was familiar. It was not the features of Ranjha, it was a sort of expression peculiar to him which disturbd Ayyali. He asked: "Who are you? You are not a jogi". Ranjha replied in his calm manner: "Baba! what else am I? Look at me. This dress is a gift of Guru Balnath and so are these ear-rings, which he put in my ears with his own hands. This bowl is his gift too and so is this staff.

He rubbed these ashes on my himself. The Lord has approved of my vocation. I am nothing but a poor wanderer in search of peace". Ayyali listened to this, but was not convinced.

Being a canny person, he began to talk of Takht Hazara and a son of Mehr Manj Din called Deedo, who people said, had left home in search of the paragon of the Siyals and become a buffalo-herd, but had not been successful, as Heer the famous beauty was now a captive among the Kheras, who he continued, were a fierce and vindictive people. He then said frankly: "I have recognized you in spite of your new role, but you are making a mistake in going to Rangpur. The Kheras are not famous for their mercy".

Ranjha thought for a little time and decided to tell Ayyali the truth. He said: "You are right. I am Ranjha but this is no guise. It is my true role now. I have come here at the instance of the Five Great Pirs and now Guru Balnath has given me the joag. Heer is pledged to me and I have been promised her. So my coming here is ordained". While they were talking a fierce wolf came creeping towards the sheep-herd and jumping on a sheep ripped it open. Ayyali took fright and ran away, but Ranjha rushed forward and threw his crook at the wolf. When the wolf came at him Ranjha grappled with it and catching it by the throat flung it hard against a tree.

This burst the head of the wolf and it died. Ayyali who had been watching the struggle from a distance, came back and fell at Ranjha's feet. He said: "Deedo, Ranjha or jogi, you are a holy man of God. This wolf was a killer and the entire neighbourhood was afraid of it. I have no more doubt about you now. Consider me your devotee. Now come with me and be my guest. I have ample quarters. My family will look after you".

Ranjha said: "I am grateful. God will compensate you for your kindness". Ayyali replied: "Looking after you is enough compensation for me. There is a grove of trees near my house. My people will build you a commodious hut there in a couple of days.

It is a quiet place not too far from the village either. Stay there as long as you like. Meanwhile you will be our guest and my daughters will be responsible for your food and other necessities."

"But" Ranjha said "It is enjoined on us to beg our food, so I shall have to go to the village with bowl every other day". "That is your affair" replied Ayyali: "I and my family are your servants for evermore. " And so it was settled.

Ranjha stayed a few days with the Ayalis and helped in tending the sheep, sweeping the fold in spite of the protests of Ayyali and his daughters, who had become his devotees. But Ranjha said it was part of his duty as a jogi. In a few days, however, his hut was ready and he shifted over there, and although he said he did not need a bed as he was now accustomed to sleep on a reed matting, the Ayyalis insisted on providing him with the necessities. Ranjha began to spend his mornings in meditation as he had learnt at the Tilla Balnath and then played his bansari. The same routine was observed in the evening. It was not long before people came to listen to his bansari and watch his meditations. They said the very sight of the jogi soothed them.

It may have been Ayyali's daughters, who had relatives in the village, and visited them frequently or some chance listeners, but the village began to hum with the news that a jogi had come and taken his abode in the grove outside the village and was working wonders with his bansari. And it did not take long for a group of the curious to come and sit listening to Ranjha's bansari. The next day some of them brought an offering. Some brought food, some flowers, some fruit. Ranjha looked at them affectionately and smiled and his smile won their hearts. The village girls who now came often to sit at the jogi's feet, went away with a light heart and talked of this strange jogi who did not say anything and yet gave them peace, strength and even happiness. And after a week or so, Ranjha took his begging bowl and wondered into the village. From lane to lane he went making his call for alms, never staying at any place. If anyone put something in his bowl, he took it, but did not wait

long for any offering. Many looked at him with curiosity, some with awe and a few flung a jeer or a joke at him saying he had come to ogle the girls. Ranjha paid no heed to anything, to a cat-call or a salaam. A virago even began to ask him personal questions and rude ones at that but she was shouted down by others and Ranjha stood calmly and returned the rude remarks with such words! "Good luck to you sister or blessings on you kind mother or thank you dear boy" and went back as unruffled as when he came. The next day he spent in prayer and meditation.

He went to the village again a day later. It was not difficult to locate Mehr Ajoo's haveli. Mehr Ajoo was the head of the Khera clan and the father of Saida. It was a large mansion. Ranjha did not yet know how to let Heer know that he had come. So staying here for a minute and there for a moment, he went leisurely towards the grand haveli. And at the portals of the big house he raised his call. As it happened there was no one there at the time, so Ranjha made bold to enter the compound. Here bad luck met him, because the formidable Sehti who was superintending some maids as they were carding wool, was in a bad temper that morning. She had had no word from her lover Murad for sometime and her anxiety made her irritable. Normally she exercised great control over her excitable nature. Now seeing a strange beggar entering her domain unbidden, she let loose her bottled up anger and gave him a sharp dressing.

Ranjha realized that here was a fearsome opponent who had to be tackled tackled tactfully but firmly. Any sign of fear would make her bolder and more aggressive. He said: "Sister! you may be a most handsome person and the mistress of hundreds of maids and men, but is this the way to greet a humble servant of God who had wandered in because nobody checked him or answered his calls for charity". Sehti was not pacified, she went on calling him a loafer, a vagabond and false mendicant, saying she had seen many like him. Ranjha answered as calmly as before that she had apparently great intelligence as was clear from her beautiful forehead and her lovely eyes could easily see through false and genuine beggars but what had he done? He had only

asked for alms as a jogi does and it were the village folk who had advised him to make his call at the generous house of the great Ajoo and some of them had even said he would find the daughter of the house, a very kind and generous-hearted person. "Surely" he added, "you are this handsome giver of alms to way-farers and the poor, I am asking for nothing more."

Even this flattering approach did not make any impression on Sehti. By now a few neighbours, girls of Sehti's age had come in and spoke to Sehti, that it was the jogi who was now living in the grove and was said to be a wonder working man of God. But Sehti was on her high horse and said: "He is no humble beggar. Why! he has been bandying words with me. "He has used no world of abuse, but how dare he answer back to me. I don't tolerate a hard word from my father or brother and here is an ash-smeared, shaven-headed rogue of a false faqir who has stood throwing words at me".

Ranjha heard this abuse too and said: "I am nothing special except a humble faqir of God, but you, a very hoor of paradise should not use such language to poor suppliants". But Sehti though considerably softened by these subtle and even fulsome compliments would not draw in her horns and bade him to quit. She even threatened to have him beaten and thrown out, if he did not depart instantly. But Ranjha would not leave and again repeated his appeals with pronounced praise of her beauty and gracious reputation. But Sehti appeared to be possessed. She carried on with her abusive threats, till Ranjha change his tone a little. He said: "Look here my beautiful fury, why are you going on like this? What harm have I done to you. I only for alms and you began abusing me. If you have an secret sorrow, tell me. Who knows I may find a remedy for you or anyone else, who is a sufferer". Sehti was taken aback at this hint.

But she would not yet be convinced. She asked skeptically: "You boast of your healing powers; Have you studied all systems of medicine"?

Ranjha replied: "I am not surprised at your doubting me. There are many false jogis around. But there may be good ones also. Many women treat us faqirs as you have done. They come like a raging fire, but afterwards need a cold drink to cool themselves. Give up this tearing and rending habit of yours. Do not treat humble people like us faqirs in this way".

Sehti answered: "Women who are kind to such persons as you, always suffer in the end, especially young virgins who melt at the soft words spoken to them by young lechers like you".

Ranjha replied: "Listen Sehti! You have wonderful looks, but you don't use your brains. Not all jogis are false. Some of us may be able to cure even mysterious ills if given the chance. We can even pray that love-lorn people, who sigh for distant beloveds may meet with success. You are mistaken about me. I am no crook and I am not a fraud. If you have faith, I can be very helpful in all your needs".

Sehti was impressed by the confident assurances of the jogi. After some thought she said: "I have no trouble of my own. You are wrong in your hints, but I have a sister-in-law who has some secret malady. She is very sweet-natured, but she cannot bear the sight of my brother who is her husband. All her in-laws have begged her with folded hands to ask for anything, she likes, but she lies on her bed like a half-dead person. You have already built a reputation in the village, perhaps you can cure her".

Ranjha replied! "I can try, if you like. I shall have to examine her pulse, ask her a few questions and I can pray for her. Maybe God will be kind".

Sehti said: "I have heard of miraculous cures; who hasn't? But you are too young to have acquired any mysterious powers. Where have you been schooled. Where were you inducted into holy circles? You

should be humble. You should spend some more years in true worship and perhaps you may then acquire some power".

Ranjha replied: "You too are young, yet you assume such clever airs. And I don't understand why a beautiful girl like you should have to be so harsh. Has something upset you? It appears your a disturbed inwardly, otherwise you wouldn't be so cruel. Tell me what is wrong and it is possible that I may be of some help, not only to your sister-in-law, but also to you".

Heer, who for some had been listening to the contest between Sehti and the jogi, from behind the curtain, sat up and said: "Who is this man who is showing such sympathy for us and claims to find a cure for my heart-trouble?"

And then addressed the jogi himself: "Go thy ways O jogi! How can one laugh when there is no happiness in one's life? What use is there in telling the pain of one's heart to strangers, or crazy wanderers like you? You will cover your ears, when you hear of our sorrows and run away. True joag is granted to people who spend years in devotion, and Sehti is right in saying that many so-called jogis assume this disguise to deceive girls by flattering them and praising their charms as you have been shamelessly doing".

Ranjha ignoring Heer's pointed remarks said: "O mysterious beauty! I am a servant of God. Ask anything of me and see if I do not meet your demands.True jogis can bring together lovers who have been divided by the false world. It is said that if you give ten in this world and will get seventy in the next. Try this formula too. You appear to have suffered greatly among strangers. Tell me your grief and I will help you".

Heer burst into tears at this and cried: "O jogi! why do you tell such lies? Who ever brought together lovers parted for years? I have looked all over for somebody, who could bring back a lover, separated by

fate from a bereaved soul. I could offer the skin of my body to sole his shoes, if anyone could find a remedy for the wounds of my heart. Now tell me, when will God bring back the loved one, who has been gone a long time. I could sacrifice my life for his sake, if I could see his face. But neither separated lovers, nor the dead ever come back. A crow has snatched a heron from a falcon and the stricken one is not expected to cry. The ripe harvest of a jat has been set on fire, but will anyone come to put the fire out? I would offer butter-kneeded sweet-bread to him and burn lamps with butter for oil, if I hear that my beloved is on his way".

Ranjha answered: "As long as the world lasts, as long as the Throne of God, the pen and the Tablet (of fate), Paradise and Hell last, the true lovers will never forsake the beloved. Let me tell your fortune, O hidden one! I see that the one whom used to press to your heart, has become a wanderer, a faqir, a jogi; he has had his ears pierced and become a true seeker of truth. He still plays his pipe, but has now given up herding buffaloes for anybody since you were forced into the bridal palki, he has been wandering in search of you. Perhaps he is now somewhere near. This is what I see in the mirror of fate. But you should not have foregotten that there was a sacred bond between you and him and the witnesses to your true betrothal to him were Five exalted persons".

Hearing this, Heer who had been lying prostrate for weeks, got up and said to herself: "This jogi is a strange fortune-teller. He has told the truth about Ranjha and me". So she said from behind the curtain: "All right jogi! tell me now, where the thief of my heart is loitering after nearly killing me. My heart has been burnt to a cinder, but perhaps it can come to life again if I were to see my run-away beloved".

Ranjha replied: "How can you see anything, with your head wrapped in your scarf and your eyes blurred by tears. Lift your veil, look out and who knows you may actually have a glimpse of your long-parted beloved".

At first Heer hesitated, and said: "Suppose I raise my veil and do not see my beloved, my heart would break, Mian jogi, You are only cajoling me. The fire that has burnt down completely cannot leap into flames by blowing on it". And yet Heer said to herself: "Let me really do what the jogi says says and see what happens". And she raised her veil. As soon as she saw Ranjha, she recognized him and her lips opened in a ravishing smile. But she bent forward and whispered! "Sehti is a very clever girl. Do not let her know. It would be like keeping a goat in the same pen with a tiger. Do not let any one know".

Although Heer's voice was just a murmur, Sehti picked up her ears. She guessed that Heer and the jogi had exchanged a confidence and her mood changed. And she resumed her vicious tone. Addressing Ranjha she said: "You have been making barbed allusions to my affairs. I don't let strangers make any references of that nature. I would like to pull your tongue out for that. We don't want any miraculous cures. You came here for alms. I shall get you some and then you make yourself scarce. There is no place for ghouls like you here".

Heer winked at Ranjha and said: "Hold on Mian jogi. My sister is justly suspicious. There have been quite a few false jogis around and they were nothing but pimps and thieves", and she turned to Sehti and said: "Sehti, dear, do not be so hard. These men of God can be very helpful as God hears them. We should actually bow before the true men of God, because if they get angry they can do us great harm".

Sehti retorted: "Sister! I wouldn't bandy words with him, but he is no humble faqir. He fights back like an equal and throws back harder words. He is a very obstinate vagabond".

Heer said: "Sister! why continue this wordy fight? I think it is best to be kind to such people. I have seen that this jogi is not false. He can really tell the secrets of one's heart. I fell half-cured already and what am I but the dust under the feet of such holy persons?"

But Sehti was not pacified. She asked her maid who had been a witness to the brawl; "Give him some alms and get rid of him". The maid brought some atta and putting it in Ranjha's bowl whispered: "You are not a wise man. Why did you wake a sleeping cobra. Now go thy ways and take care". But Ranjha refused the offering of the maid and said: "Is the mistress of the house too proud to give alms to a poor Jogi herself?"

Sehti got angry again, but she got up and brought some alms and flung it into the jogi's bowl. The bowl slipped from Ranjha's hands and fell. It broke into little pieces. At this Ranjha who only wanted an excuse to stay on, raised a howl crying: "Oh! Oh! Oh! What an outrage! what sacrilege! My bowl which was the gift of my Guru broken like that! Who is going to compensate me for this terrible loss?" Sehti who was really worked up by now began her abusive harangue again, but Ranjha just sat on the ground with the pieces of the bowl in his hands and kept silent.

Heer was upset at this and said in a placatory tone: "Mian jogi! forgive us. We are all neither rude nor violent. I for one fell as if I were like the dust under your feet. I don't think Sehti is vain either. She is not feeling well this morning, or she would bow with me before such holy persons as you?

But Sehti was in no mood to be reconciled. She shouted: "Go away you vagabond. Go and buy a cup from some potter. You cannot be a jogi at all. Jogis kill all self and all pride. You are a wolf in sheep's clothing. Go away or I shall ask my girls to throw you out".

At this Heer began to plead with Sehti: She said "Sehti! the Jogi is not wrong. His bowl apparently meant a great deal to him as it was his Guru's gift to him. Those who have their ears pierced no longer care for cups, whether made of silver or gold. Their own bowls are precious to them. And you have insulted a man of God. Allah knows what effect the curse of such a jogi will have on us!"

But Sehti replied furiously: "I don't care. If I have to suffer I shall first take it out on. As for you I know all about you. You blotted your reputation by falling in love with a servant. Now you are siding with this rogue. I shall deal with you too before nightfall".

Heer lost her temper too. She shouted: "If touch me, your whole village will go up in smoke. May faqirs ravish this so called sister of my alleged husband. If anybody touches me, I shall break her legs and my people the Siyals will set fire to your entire settlement. Let Saida marry you, You demon. I would like to tear your hair and trample them under my feet".

At this Sehti turned with fury on Heer and filed insult and innuendo on her, accusing her of spending all her time on beautification; (although Heer did not even wash her face for days) she blamed Heer for passing hints to rogues and jogis about camel-riders and maligning her. She shouted: "You may display your charms to young jogis and beguile them, but if I really lose my temper I shall break your legs as well as those of this new friend of yours, this ruffian of a jogi". And she called her friends and pushed Heer into her room and bolted the door from outside. Then they all turned on Ranjha. She herself came at him like a mountain cat. Ranjha warded off her flailing arms and pushed her gently aside. She fell down as if struck by a falling tree. The girls went for Ranjha but they were amazed to find that they could not touch him. Some things arrested their arms when they came near Ranjha and Ranjha walked calmly away.

They came to Sehti who was still lying on the ground, moaning like a sick cow. When they tried to help her up, they found that she was limp like a wet cloth. And she moaned saying her whole body was broken. They touched her here and she cried as if deeply hurt, although they found her sound in wind and limb, but she continued to complain. They helped her into the room, where Heer had cried herself hoarse. They laid Sehti on her bed and began to massage her, but however

gentle their touch, she cried that it hurt her. They asked her if the jogi had hurt her, she answered: "No! he barely touched me, but when I fell, I felt as if a wild ram had butted me and now I feel as if wild horses have stamped all over me". "I think", she added after a minute: "It is that jogi's doing though he only touched me, he did not push me, but that touch was like the push of a raging buffalo". And she cried. And it was Heer who rubbed ointments on her bruises and consoled her and spoke kindly to her without blaming her at all.

It was two days later, when Sehti felt like getting up that, she called her intimates and asked them to go and find out what the jogi was doing, and whether he was there at all. They went and found that the jogi was shut in, in his hut and was playing some music on his bansari. They went to the Ayyali house and asked about the jogi. They were told that jogi had not spoken a word on his return from the village, that he had refused all food and was playing on his bansari or saying his prayers or talling his beads all the time. The girls went back with this news and it disturbed Sehti, because she was now afraid of the jogi, whose powers, she felt were genuine. She therefore decided to be friendly again with Heer, who had tended her so affectionately, when she lay, as if mangled, on her bed.

When Sehti recovered, she appeared to have lost her wildness. Superstition now took possession of her. She said again and again to Heer "But the jogi did not push me. He only held me off then why do I feel as if I have been beaten by a flail? This jogi may be a genuine man of God after all. Hir at first did not say yes or no to Sehti, but when Sehti repeated her cry, that she did not fall very hard but she felt bruised all over, why? Why? Why? Heer ventured to say: "Sehti dear! I told you that there was something strange about this jogi. He appeared to have some mysterious power and I think you should go to him with some offering and speak to him nicely. The girls say he is busy either praying or playing his bansari, others go to him. Why not you? I think his mere words will set you right. He appeared to be struck by your looks; I heard him praising your beauty, he only wondered why a

handsome girl like you should be so hot-tempered. He did not abuse you; it is you who called him some very bad names. I think you should go to him".

Sehti was half-inclined to do so already and the unaccountable aches of her body were a potent reason. But being the obstinate girl she was, she said: "Yes I will go but I shall have to test him, before I accept him as a true man of God". Heer quite wisely did not push the argument further. But Sehti would chop and change. She would forget that Heer had tended her so sympathetically after her fall, but the fitter she became, the more she reverted to her intransigent attitude. Heer only put in a word now and then and would hint that the jogi had declared that he could unite parted lovers, may be he could help Sehti too. At first Sehti bridled up at such a suggestion, but after a few days, she changed again and said that there could be no harm in finding out whether this jogi was a fraud like many others, whom she had consulted or whether there was any truth in his boasts. Heer kept discreetly silent.

So one day Sehti took a plate and filled it with cream and sugar. She put a red napkin over it and placed five silver coins on top and taking a close companion named Kolan with her went to the grove.

Ranjha saw her coming and assumed a very solemn manner. Sehti was however humility itself. She salaamed Ranjha and put the offering before him, covering it first with a white apron. But her nature triumphed over her transient mood and she began by calling Ranjha names as before. She blamed men for all the ills of the world and Ranjha retaliated by saying that from the days of Bava Adam and Mother Eve, it was women who was the bane of mankind. This went on for a few minutes, then Sehti swerved again and said: "All right! if you think men are the favourites of God and you are of the elect, tell me what offering I have brought you". Ranjha thought for a minute and then said: "You have brought me a plate of rice with sugar on it and five copper coins". Sehti burst out in laughter and said: "That proves that you are after all as false as many other faqirs". Ranjha kept quiet. At

that Sehti grew quiet angry and snatched away the apron from the offering and was aghast to find five copper coins on top instead of five rupees and when with trembling hands she lifted the red napkin she saw that the plate contained rice instead of the cream and honey she had brought. At this her head began to swim and her eyes were blurred. She felt so ashamed that she could not speak. She felt herself bowing before the jogi with folded hands, through no conscious effort. The formidable Sehti gave place to a humble suppliant. She touched Ranjha's feet and said, "Forgive me. I have been mistaken. My pride led me astray. I have been so bitten that I was more than twice shy. Many jogis have had money and costly offerings from me and promised me my heart's desire and I was bitter, because nothing happened. Please consider me your devotee now. I will do what ever you say. If you have come to get Heer, as I had begun to suspect and you are truly Ranjha, her beloved, depend on me. I shall move heaven and earth to bring you two together. Unless the fates decree against you, I assure you that Sehti will not fail you. I only ask for one favour. You have hinted at it already. I beg you to make my beloved come for me. He promised me he would come but God knows why he hasn't". Ranjha said, "Sehti! I consider you as a sister. I have liked your spirit. You are a remarkable girl and my praise of your beauty was genuine. I am not given to lies. The Great Saints and my Guru have invested me with some little power. I promise you that Murad will soon be coming for you. He is already on his way". Sehti felt herself in the seventh heaven of delight, at this news. She bowed to Ranjha again saying: "If you consider me as a sister, I shall love you as a brother as also my Pir. Do not worry. Sehti is not helpless. She is at your service from now on".

Sehti went home, a different person from the raging girl she had been. She folded Heer in her arms and said: "Heer dear! You were right and I was wrong. I need not say anything more now, but I have given my word to your Ranjha (I know he is your lover) and I shall help you in every way I can. You don't have to worry or pine away any more. I have promised Ranjha that I shall soon bring you to him. In fact I have already thought out a way. I shall go to my mother and tell her that I

am convinced now that the jogi in the grove is a holy person and I should take Heer to him for some remedy, physical or spiritual. I think I can persuade her. My mother is really afraid of my tantrums, (and she smiled mischievously) so we shall go to the jogi openly. I shall take Kolan and Soli, who my mother knows are my inseparable companions, and why shouldn't they be, being my cousins. I shall leave you with Ranjha for an hour or so and spend the time with the Ayyali girls. When we leave you should pretend to be rather weak as you are supposed to have been bed-ridden for a long time, but once outside the village you can prance as much as you like. Nobody dare follow us. They are all afraid of me. So smile. I feel better too as your jogi has promised me my heart's desire also".

And this is what Sehti did. That very evening it was decided that Sehti should take Heer to the jogi to receive his healing breath. And it appeared exactly as organized by the resourceful and intrepid Sehti. Ranjha and Heer met and spent a glorious hour. And when Sehti and her cousins came from the Ayyali house, they found a radiant though a slightly disheveled Heer. But they understood and made no comments. They were good girls and were loyal. They also knew about Sehti's great love for Murad and wished they had similar lovers.

Sehti was no ordinary girl. No doubt there was a lull in her tempestous nature, but it did not impair her drive or her ingeniusness. She and Heer were now in hourly confabulation. They roped in Kolan and Soli too as without their active aid, they could not carry through the plan, that the two had contrived. In fact the ebullient Soli was in ecstasy, and Kolan who was comparatively speaking quite a sober girl, was also carried away and she clapped her hands in glee.

The sister-in-laws with of course Sehti in the lead had devised a big outing. They told their confidants. Kolan and Soli, that they should go about suggesting to others that all the girls of the village should join and go to the cotton-fields for cotton-picking and should have a big do out there, cook their own meal or bring their own food and have great

fun. They were told that the suggestion should come from others. Kolan and Soli who were both daughters of very prominent members of the Khera community and were very popular, said it would take a day or two but it should not be difficult. They would all bring some thing for the feast and have a jolly good time, what with singing and dancing. They liked this item especially as they both sang well and Soli was an excellent dancer and led all the village dances. Every one of the four was happy and Heer's beauty flowered and she looked like a fairy princess. Kolan a great admirer of hers, kissed her in rapture, so good Heer looked. And two days passed. It was Sehti's mother who called her on the third day and said" "Sehti do you ever think of doing any work? The girls of the village have come to me one by one and said that it was time cotton-picking should be started and they hesitate to ask you as some of them are afraid of your temper. Only poor Kolan has been defending you and saying that if I asked you to organize a picking undertaking, they would join. In fact some one suggested that each girl should cook something good and take it along so that you may have a joint meal at midday. And Soli your uncle's daughter even suggested that you should take Heer with you for the outing. Fresh air and the company of these jolly girls, especially the daughters of the oil presser and the Bahmani would do good to a half-dead person. They are both full of joy and fun. Do something about it Sehti. You have been tied to the chores of household too long and Heer needs some jollification". And this is how the joint outing was arranged.

And the next morning all the able-bodied girls of the village, the daughters of cousin and uncles, of the Qazi and the Brahim, of the carpenter and the weaver, of the butcher and the grocer, bringing with them pots and pans, pails and cooking utensils, cooked and uncooked food, milk, honey, curd and cream, whatever fruit was available and with the articles so brought was the exhilaration, the youth, the spirit of joy, of life that they brought in abundance. They came swaying and undulating, and skipping and dancing, and their gay laughter echoed and re-echoed in Sehti's compound and they literally carried Heer away as most of them believed that she had just recovered from a long illness.

It was a very gay crowd which went out to the cotton-field and for nearly half the day they enjoyed themselves thoroughly and then had a meal the like of which had not been known in the village, because each girl had tried to bring of her best and since it was a prosperous community, there was no stint.

It was when they resumed their picking that the catastrophe occurred. Sehti, Heer and the two inseparables, Kolan and Soli, were in a little group by themselves when Soli who had a loud voice shouted! "Snake! snake, cobra! cobra! Oh poor Heer, oh poor poor Heer!" Meanwhile Sehti pricked Heer near her left ankle with a small pair of clean scissors that she had brought with her and a drop or two of blood showed on Heer's gleaming white skin. The girls crowded round her and Heer moaned. Nobody bothered about the cobra which had apparently bitten the poor Heer. After a lot of chattering, it was decided that Heer should be moved to the haveli and as she could not or should not walk lest the poison spread too quickly, somebody was asked to run to the village and bring a charpoy. It took time but the charpoy came and the carriers. Meanwhile poor Heer had fainted. It was therefore a sad procession which returned. Sehti, Kolan and Soli guarded the stricken patient closely and everyone feared that any one bitten by a cobra seldom recovered. So when the girls came there was a great hubbub and some cried for a ved, some for a hakim, some for a mantari and some cried for the Qazi. It was Sehti who tried to quieten the throng. She dispersed most of them and then said in a very agitated tone that it may be fatal unless something was done quickly. And when the ved and the Qazi had done their utmost but could not even bring back Heer to consciousness. Sehti said to her mother: "It was only two three days ago that I took Heer to the jogi. He is a very good man and Ma! I hear he uses the ashes of his fire in which he burns some aromatic shrubs, to cure people of headaches and cuts and bruises. May be his ashes with some mantras or holy spell that he uses, will be useful. Why not send Saida to him and bring the jogi along. This proposal was debated for some minutes, but at last Sehti prevailed and Saida was sent to the holy jogi.

He went reluctantly, because he was afraid of anything to do with Hee, remembering the incident of marriage night, when he was pushed out of the nuptial chamber by unseen hands, but he went. He went gingerly but he did go, although he was deeply concerned about Hee's condition, who Sehti told him was now in a deep swoon. He went and stood before the jogi who was seated beside his aromatic fire lost in meditation. He called "Maharaj! Maharaj! then Babaji, Babaji, then sircar! sircar! but the jogi, though he had seen him coming kept his eyes, closed. After a time, however, he opened his eyes, reddened by smoke and asked: "Who are you?" Sadia answered: "Sainji, my wife has been bitten by a snake, probably a cobra and she is in a swoon. For God's sake come with me and help us". The jogi again asked: "Who are you?" Sadia replied: "Maharaj! I am Saida son of Mehr Ajoo, who is the Chief of the Kheras. My wife's name is Hee. She went out cotton-picking and got bitten by a snake. They brought her home but she has fallen into a deep swoon and is getting rigid. Her breathing is getting slower and slower and she may die. Please come and do something. We hear you have many cures with you". The jogi would not at first answer, because he guessed this to be some ingenious trick of Sehti and Hee and was not sure what they wanted him to do. At last he said" "Mian! go your way. Do not bother us. We are busy with out prayers at this time and in any case we do not go to the homes of people. Get somebody else. There must be lots of veds and hakims around. Or get a Moulvi to read some Quranic verses on her. May be they will do good to the Bibi". Saida went back disappointed and told his mother and Sehti that the jogi refused to come. Sehti began to weep. She turned to her father and begged him to go and said the jogi is a man of God and he will not refuse a venerable old man. The Mehr urged by his wife too went. It was after much supplication and many entreaties including bowing deeply before the holy dervesh with folded hands, that Mehr Ajoo obtained the consent of the jogi, especially when he said again and again my daughter-in-law may die any moment. She is hardly breathing now. The jogi picked up some aromatic ashes from his hearth took up his bansari and without speaking a word accompanied Ajoo.

When he came to the courtyard where he had had a long verbal duel the then exasperated Sehti, he halted. Mehr Ajoo begged him to see the patient. Ranjha said: "There appears to be a crowd in the patient's room. I hear many voices. This is no way to cure a person so stricken. Kindly have the room vacated and let me see the patient at my ease. I hope the wound has been washed and cleaned and some soothing ointment put on the affected area by your veds". Ajoo did not know but he called Sehti, who came out with lowered eyes and stood before the jogi with folded hands. She said the wound had been cleaned. It had bled a little but now the bleeding had stopped but the patient was still in a swoon and her body was quite rigid: Ranjha said: "tut! tut!" and gestured towards the room. Ajoo said to Sehti! "Sehti you take the jogi inside and let no one else be there. Let the holy faqir use his skill and his powers to help us".

Consequently the jogi was taken to Heer and he examined the affected part. Then he asked for some warm water. When the water was brought he mixed the ashes he had brought with him, with the water and applied the paste so made to the wound. He then bound the ankle in a clean piece of linen and began to play his bansari. Soon he was lost in his music and Sehti declared that Heer's breathing was improving, and colour was returning to her cheeks, Ranjha played on. After a while he sent Sehti to fetch her mother, Sehti her brother and Ajoo her father. As soon as Sehti left Heer got up and rushed into Ranjha's arms. Ranjha said: "Steady! persons bitten by cobras do not recover so quickly. You better lie down again and be as still as before, only your breathing should improve slowly. Heer kissed him fondly and lay down again as still as a stone.

When the people of the house came, the jogi said: "For the time being I have done what I could. The poison has had time to enter the blood stream and though I am sure I can get her back to normal she needs constant care. I shall have to put on the paste I have made every four hours and also use a spell which my Guru taught me and it needs great concentration and a very quite atmosphere, which is impossible to

find here. What I propose is that Sehti your daughter should have your daughter-in-law carried to my hut and one or two of her close companions to help her in looking after your daughter-in-law who has to take time to expel the poison. I shall sit outside and keep a vigil using my prayers and the spell I have mentioned. I think in a couple of days or so, she should be all right. The girls can divide the watching of the patient between themselves. Sehti may stay with her sister-in-law, the other girls can come and go. There is enough food in my hut. The kind people of the village keep bringing offerings though I beg them repeatedly not to do so. I think everything will be all right in a couple of day, but I should like you to see that there is no disturbance and no visitors. Heer will be in the care of her sister-in-law and Sehti's cousins will come and go and tell you how Heer is progressing. The rest is your affair. If you agree, I shall do my best. I think there is considerable hope of a recovery. Salaam." And with these words the jogi left the village and went back to his hut. And after considerable thought and Sehti's forceful support, the family agreed to have Heer carried to the grove. Sehti, Kolan and Soli went with her. Sehti's mother came too to see Heer and Sehti installed. Another bed was obtained from Ayyali's house and Heer was stretched on one as Sehti and her mother took their seat on the other. Kolan and Soli stood around. Heer was still unconscious and the jogi had changed her bandage. Sehti's brother stayed for some time, making sure that the jogi was seated outside, beside his aromatic fire and deep in contemplation. So he salaamed the holy man, to which he could not answer as his eyes were closed in deep meditation.

After a couple of hours Kolan went back and Soli and Sehti remained with Heer. Towards the evening Sehti sent back Soli too asking her to rest. When they were both gone an hour, and the shades of evening had deepened Ranjha went into the hut and the three had a good meal. Sehti and Heer both had, brought their ornaments and as much money as they had, with them. Sehti had expressly asked Kolan not to let any one come to the hut till the next afternoon and delay anyone's coming even then. When the three had rested for a few hours, they made ready to go. Each had a little bundle with him/her, what

with provisions, money and a change of clothes. They left the hut before dawn and walked south towards Multan. Being healthy and in haste, they had covered about ten miles by mid-morning. They rested for a while, ate a little and took the road again. They had conjectured that the Kheras would get to know of their flight by late afternoon and would suppose that Ranjha or the jogi had taken both Hir and Sehti to the Siyals, and they would start the pursuit by riding to the north. So they pressed on towards the south. By early afternoon they had covered about twenty miles and they were tired, especially Hir and even Sehti. Even the iron constitution of that intrepid girl could not bear the strain of a march that long. They rested under a tree and Hir and Sehti had a snooze. Ranjha kept guard. They had not slept for an hour when the rapidly approaching hoof-beats of a number of horse from the south awakened them.

At first they were afraid that it might be the Kheras, but when the cavalcade headed by a splendid horseman came near, Sehti exclaimed: "These are Baluchis. Look at their dress" and then she looked sharply at the leader. She jumped up and crying "Murad! Murad!" ran towards him. It was really Murad. He had got down by this time. He stepped forward eagerly and clasped Sehti the brave to his broad chest. Words cannot describe the rapture of this warrior-maiden. She introduced Ranjha and Hir to Murad and told him of their love for each other and how Ranjha became a jogi for her sake. She also told him that Hir had really not been married to her brother and she had been forced into this conventional despatch to the Kheras in spite of Hir's open denial and continued refusal to agree to the marriage and at last after great tribulation they had managed to escape. Moreover since she had been united with Murad through the prayers of the jogi, Murad must help them.

Murad said: "I am prepared to do what you want and I shall consider Ranjha as my brother from now and I shall be glad to take them with me to my place, but are they prepared to leave this valley?"

Ranjha said: "Brother! I am grateful for your offer but all I want at the present moment, so that Heer and I can go to Multan as soon as possible, and get lost there. I am sure the Kheras will follow us, but they won't be able to find us in a big town".

Murad replied: "My dear Ranjha! nothing could be easier than that. Choose whatever horse you like from among these that my companions are riding. They are all good mounts. I recommend that dark-brown one. It is comparatively fresh and can carry both of you easily. It is a present from me to you. Keep it with my best wishes and I advise you to make haste. I know something about Sehti's people. They are a mean lot and very vindictive. Do you need any money?"

Ranjha said" "No! We have enough and I am grateful to you and Sehti for your generosity and good will. Perhaps in better time we shall meet again and I can do something for you".

Sehti broke in and said: "Brother Ranjha! you have done enough". And she embraced Heer and even wept at this parting. Sehti had perhaps a tender heart at bottom, for all her stormy and combative front. So the four parted and Ranjha rode away with Heer towards Multan. Murad and his party of horsemen were a mere dust cloud in a short time.

It was on the outskirts of Multan that trouble struck Ranjha. It was one of the patrols of the town and the havildar in charge was a surly and suspicious man. When he saw a jogi riding in with beautiful girl, who was clad in silks and had costly ornaments on her person, he halted them and began to question them. It was just bad luck. He would not be convinced that a jogi was the husband of a girl like Heer and the questioning became quite acrimonious and long. They were still at it, when a group of horsemen came at a gallop. As soon as they saw the jogi and Heer, they raised a shout and surrounded the patrol and both Ranjha and Heer. They claimed vociferously that this false jogi had run away with this woman who was actually the wife of one of them and

Saida stepped forth, but dared not touch either Ranjha or Heer. The dispute became clamourous and a crowd gathered. Heer declared that she was not the wife of Saida and she was betrothed to the jogi. The jogi said Heer had been long pledged to him. The Kheras denied all that and the crowd joined in, allying themselves with the fierce Kheras and some with the calm uruffled jogi and the very definite and firm Heer who swore by all the prophets that she was not Saida's wife.

There was such shouting, such cross-talk that the havildar was bewildered. He took the contestants to the kotwal and reported to him, what he had found. The kotwal heard the jogi, Heer, Saida and his companions, one or two witnesses and was himself puzzled. The problem was: "Is the jogi Heer, the wrong party or Saida and the Kheras. The jogi looked like a very dignified, well poised man with a look in his eye which was difficult to face and the girl with him was one whose like he had not seen and she was swearing by everything holy, that she was not married to the Khera youth and the Kheras were all shouting that the girl was formally married to their man before a whole village-gathering. The Kotwal was greatly puzzled and after hearing both the parties at length, he declared that he could not tell who was in the right and the case must go before the Adli Raja. He did not know what to do with them for the night, so he led them to the Serai under guard and ordered that they be looked after and brought to the court the next morning.

He reported the whole thing to the Adli Raja early next morning and the Raja ordered that that both the parties be presented before him. They were all brought there, when the session started and the Raja asked the kotwal to present the case in the presence of the contestants, which he briefly did. The Raja first asked the complainant, Saida. Saida said: "Maharaja! this woman whose name is Heer is my wife. We were formally married. These cousin of mine are witnesses to the event. Her father and the elders of her community, the Siyals, gave her away. We brought her home before hundreds of witnesses. Now this man, whose name is Ranjha and who is really the youngest son of Mehr

Manj Din of Takht Hazara and who pretends to be a jogi has seduced her and stolen her away from my home. I beg for justice".

The Adli Raja turned then to Ranjha and asked him: "What is your case?" Ranjha answered "Maharaj! this girl was a gift to me from the Five Great Saints and my Guru, the famous Guru Balnath supported me and guaranted the gift. She has belonged to me and has come away with me out of her own will. There has been no seduction, no coercion, no deceit. Her father Mehr Chuchak promised her to me and went back on his word. All the Siyals knew how we felt towards each other. If there was any cheating, it was done by the Siyals not by me. My joag has been earned by me by very hard devotion. It was given to me by Guru Balnath. This fact can be verified".

After hearing Ranjha, the Raja was silent for some time. He was impressed by the calm and confident and obviously sincere manner of the jogi. But he wanted to hear everybody. So he turned to Heer and asked her whether she wanted to say anything. Heer spoke in a forthright manner. She said: "Maharaj! I beseech you to do justice. You are known to be a just ruler. I am betrothed truly to Ranjha. The Five Great Pirs gave me away to him. This fact was known to my people and my father did actually promise that he would marry me to Ranjha. As to the formal marriage which Saida talks of, that was nothing but a mockery. The Qazi asked me again and again whether I accepted Saida as my husband, before witnesses and I loudly cried: "No! No! No!" They put me forcibly into the palki and sent me away. I have not allowed Saida to even touch me. He is no husband of mine. I belong to Ranjha now as I have belonged to him from the beginning. I shall kill myself if you give me back to the Kheras". The Raja was nonplussed.

He consulted his chief-minister, who said it was a technical point and the chief Qazi of Multan should be consulted. Consequently the Chief Qazi was sent for. He heard the case all over again, thought over it and then said" "Maharaj! According to Muslim law this girl has been married to Saida as she was formally given away before a hundred

witnesses to this man. It is true that she has not accepted him as her husband and declares that she has no intention of doing so, but that is an internal and private affair of Saida and the girl. I cannot advise that she should be permitted to go away with this jogi. That would be against all custom and convention". The Raja had to accept the Qazi's opinion and ordered that Heer should be handed over to the Kheras. But before leaving the court he said to his Mir Munshi "I am not very happy about this case. The jogi appeared to be quite an honest man. He was the only one who remained calm and confident. Saida the alleged husband of the girl spluttered and shook. The girl too behaved well. But it can't be helped. We can't go against the ruling of the Qazi".

The Mir Munshi was also a little perturbed. He ordered the bailiff to clear the court but instructed the kotwal to keep the contestants under his care till the court orders were recorded and issued. The Kotwal marched them all out to the large lobby of the Court Rooms. Ranjha and H... kept together and the Khera maintained a separate muttering group. Saida shook with a mixture of joy and fear.

H... was very greatly upset. She wept silent tears though Ranjha caressed her and asked her to be patient. But she could not contain herself. She raised her hands and cried: "Almighty God! O THOU who hearest the voices of the voice-less, I beseech you in the name of your holy prophets, in the name of Noah whom you saved in the flood, of Abraham whome YOU saved from the fire, of Moses for whom you parted the seas, of Jonah whom you saved from the whale, of the grandsons of the Prophet who gave their lives in Your name, let this city where such injustice is done be destroyed. Let it burn, let nothing remain of its high palaces where Satan rules".

Ranjha joined her and said loudly: "I curse this town and its ruler, its law-givers and law-interpreters, its custodians and its underlings. Let the town burn in the name of the Great Saints who blessed our union. I call on my Guru to help us. He confirmed the pledges given to us. Let the poeple be cursed for everymore who deny

truth and worship custom and false convention". He then fell silent, closed his eyes for a time and then took up his bansari and began to play softly. Gradually the notes began to swell and soon there was heard the vibrations of distant thunder in them.

A little time passed and then was heard a shout from some distance. People appeared to be running about. Some men came rushing in crying: "Fire! Fire!" The kotwal who had heard the curses of Heer and Ranjha was startled. He cried: "Where! Where! More people came in shouting "Fire! Fire!". The "Fire, Fire" shouts continued, till the whole town was in an uproar. The kotwal came back, his uniform singed, his face blackened by smoke, his eyes smarting and cried: "Maharaj! Maharaj! save us! save the poeple! save the town!". The Raja also heard the shouts and the noise in his palace. He came out to inquire and the kotwal all but wept. He said: "Maharaj! These two (pointing to Ranjha and Heer) cursed the town and called on the Almighty to burn the town, where they claimed, injustice had been done and not long afterwards there came reports of fire. I went out to find what was happening and saw fire springing up here and there, without cause. And if you put it out in one place, it bursts out in another. There is great panic in the town and life and property are in very great danger. Look at me Maharaj! fire leapt at me like a tiger and I had to run for safety to the jogi. I have begged him to call off the curse but he does not listen. He goes on playing his bansari".

The Raja was perplexed. He cried: "What to do?" The Kotwal said: "Maharaj! the only thing I can think of is, that unless the orders given this morning are reversed the town will go up in flames and we shall all be burnt".

The Raja did not take long to order his Mir Munshi to cancel the previous orders and instruct the kotwal to hand over the girl to the jogi and then himself went to the Hall where the parties had been asked to stay and standing before Ranjha said: "Jogi ji! I have accepted your contention. The girl truly belongs to you. Take her and keep her and for

God's sake call off your curse. I may be guilty but my people have done no wrong. Save them". Ranjha changed the tune of his bansari and gradually the flash and menace of the notes died down. A soft melody began to soothe the heavens and reports started coming that the fires were dying down. It was not long after this that the Kheras left greatly discomfited and afraid. Saida was shaking as if in agony. The kotwal bowed before Ranjha and begged pardon from Heer. He asked that their horse be brought and himself accompanied them out of the town. As Ranjha with Heer seated before him on the big horse, rode away, he stood looking after them.

Riding leisurely, stopping where they willed, the two lovers, with the court orders safely tucked in Ranjha's waist-band, came to Mehr Chuchak's palace in two days time. The news spread like a fire, like a flood, like lightning that the jogi and Heer had ridden in. Ranjha came to Chuchak's haveli, where Jambi and Soli were the first to welcome them. Everybody was surprised. Chuchak, Malki, Sultan and the Satanic Kaidu were stunned. Ranjha handed the court order to Chuchak, who sent for the Qazi. The Qazi read it before a large audience and the people heard it in silence. Nobody dared to say a word. Chuchak ordered Heer to her rooms and bowed before the jogi. Even the villainous face of Kaidu was blanched. He went away muttering: "Our noses have been rubbed in the dust. How can we face the world now?" This was heard by Heer's brother Sultan who nodded his head.

To save their face, however, however, it was decided that the orders issued by the Adli Raja be read to the panchayat. The village elders were therefore requested to call a meeting. Mehr Rooldoo, the father of Jambi presided. The Qazi read out the "ferman" In the preamble the Mir Munshi (the clerk of the court) told the nature of the case. How the Kheras and Ranjha with Heer beside him, claimed the custody of Heer. The arguments given by both sides were briefly given. The opinion of the Chief Qazi was recorded and the decision of Adli Raga which followed. Then a vivid account of the burning of the town as a result of the curse of Ranjha and Heer and the disastrous effects of

Ranjha's bansari were given and as a result, the Mir Munshi said, Adli Raja was forced to reverse his first decision and hand over Hir to Ranjha, to whom he felt, she rightly belonged.

There was a murmur of astonishment in the assembly. Jambi and Soli who were hearing the proceedings ran to Heer to embrace her. Ranjha had gone to his hut, which had been kept clean and well-provided by the Ayyalis. The Elders either could not or would not say anything. It was the order of the ruler. The Siyals had to submit. Mehr Rooldoo advised Chuchak: "Chuchak, discretion is better than obstinacy or wilfulness. Lest worse befalls our community, you should agree to the marriage of Heer with Ranjha. Once before you had agreed to it. If you don't, somebody will send word to the Raja. Not Ranjha! He can look after himself as should now be clear to you, but news does travel and it has obviously become a famous case. It would be best to submit to orders. Moreover I may say that I have always liked Ranjha. He is a very decent man and you have ample proof now, if any was needed that he has mysterious powers". Chuchak has to agree. So the panchayat declared that Ranjha should be asked to go home and bring back a regular barat (marriage procession) sponsored by his elders. Ranjha was informed of the panchayat's decision and he gladly agreed. He sent word by Jambi and Soli who had come running to him with their congratulations, had embraced him in a sisterly gush of feeling and danced a jig. Ranjha sent his love to Heer and left for Takht Hazara on the fine horse that Murad had given him.

In his absence Kaidu and Sultan who had disagreed violently with the decision of the panchayat and abused Mehr Chuchak for his weak-kneed dotage, went aside and began to discuss plans to thwart this mad and according to them, dishonourable decision. It was an outrage they said, and would be a blot on the honour of the Siyals for all time. It was better, they said that they were all burnt to ashes rather than bear this shameful and abject disgrace. The more they talked, the greater was their anger and the more vicious their view of the situation. At last Kaidu said: "Actually the real source of the trouble is Heer. If she had not

defied her parents and ridiculed the time-honoured customs of her people, this disgrace would not have come upon them. A night's passionate discussion resulted in the acceptance of the diaboic suggestion of Kaidu, that it would be better to do away with Heer before the barat arrived. She should be given poison and buried before Ranjha arrived. It may finish, he said, the nuisance of that singer of evil. They did not tell anybody, but arranged that, a deadly poison, provided by Kaidu, should be introduced into Heer's sherbet and it was so done. Waiting anxiously for Ranjha, hoping for a rapturous union, dreaming of a long life of bliss, Heer died in her sleep. And with her death, died the honour of the Siyals.

A few days later Ranjha came with the marriage procession, clad like a prince and glowing with a beauty which could throw the gilnmus of paradise into shade. But he was met with long faces and a solemn assembly. No pipe was blown and drum was beaten. A gloom hung over the village. Chuchak came forward to receive them but there were tears in his eyes. He was terribly ashamed. He did not know, but he suspected. His uncle Mehr Rooldoo had told him frankly: "Chuchak" he had said" "Heer has not died a natural death and so quickly. It is that devil Kaidu's doing and your unworthy son Sultan is, I think involved in it. My daughter Jambi has not stopped crying and she and her cousin Soli are saying openly that Kaidu and Sultan have killed their Heer". So Chuchak did not have the courage to explain. He only said: "Ranjha! There is sad news for you. Heer is no more. She died two days ago of some mysterious illness. We buried her yesterday".

Ranjha was struck dumb. He could not speak. He looked at Chuchak with unseeing eyes. He could only say: "No! No!

It cannot be! it cannot be!" Chuchak said: "But it is true. I will take you to her grave". He took the dazed Ranjha by his arm and led his faltering steps to the graveyard. There he showed him the flower-laden grave of the unfortunate Heer. Ranjha stood for a minute as if he were made of stone. He then fell on the grave and clasped it with his arms.

He lay there sobbing and it was not long before the sound of his heart-rending sobs ceased. When they lifted him, he was dead.

Ranjha died, and with him died the
Tradition of Ideal Love

EPILOGUE

It is also believed by some people that Ranjha never reported to the Siyals, when he was awarded Heer by the Adli Raja. He rode away with her and went a long long way from the turbulent Kheras, the treacherous Siyals and the false members of his own family. Nobody knew where Ranjha and Heer went and where they lived afterwards, but people said that they sometimes heard the soft tunes of a bansari on the river, and at other times in the dense forests of the Chenab valley. Some people even whispered that they often heard a heart-warming melody in the foothills. It was generally held that the Five Saints found a refuge for the lovers and Heer enjoyed a long and blissful life with her Ranjha, the beloved of the immortals.

PAKISTAN/QUAID-E-AZAM

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