

The feast was over. Nothing had run out. Everyone had had their fill, and there was enough for anyone who had missed out to get their serving the next day.

Baldev, along with Agamu the *chowkidar* and Biranchi, would sleep that night in the hospital. After all, it was the first night!

### EIGHT

Lachmi, too, was all alone in the world. "... I don't have anyone'... Why am I so soft-hearted?" Lachmi thought. "Why did my heart melt when I saw the Doctor? It isn't a good sign at all... *Satguru*, give me strength!"

Except for the Lord *Satguru*, she had no one to call her own. Lachmi didn't remember her mother—just their hut, next to Pasraha *Ashram*. At dawn, Papa would put her up on his shoulders and they would go to the *ashram*. The *mahanth* there, Ramgosai, used to be so fond of her. "So you've come, little Lachmi! Here, have some candy. Do you want some tea?" The cook would give her tea and a *chura* snack in a bowl. Her father would sit and get the *ganja* ready for the *mahanth*. One pipeful, another, and a third... The *mahanth's* eyes would get red from the *ganja*. Sometimes her father would begin to tremble. Then the cook would bring curds for them. "Eat some, Ramcharan. It will clear your head, brother."

*Mahanth Sahab* used to think highly of her father. He hardly had to do anything—just sit by the *Mahanth Sahab's* sacred fire all day, prepare *ganja*, light the pipe... They used to eat right in the *ashram*.

When the cholera epidemic hit the village, *Mahanth Sahab* told her father, "Ramcharan, stay right here in the *ashram*!" In those days, the pipe never had a chance to cool off. But one day, the *mahanth's* prayer book caught fire. Somehow or other, a spark from the pipe fell on it. The *mahanth* tearfully said, "Ramcharan, the Master has expressed his anger. We will have to pay for this. It must be an evil omen..."

The very next day, one of the *sadhus* in the *ashram* began to

vomit and had diarrhoea. On the third day, when that *sadhu* left his body, the *Mahanth Sahab* fell ill. Lachmi's father served the *mahanth* loyally. Just before he died, the *mahanth* said, "Ramcharan, just let me smoke one last pipe, my son." Papa-ji was getting a spark to prepare the pipe when he, too, was seized by a fit of vomiting—right into the sacred fire! The *mahanth* left his body in the evening, and Papa-ji followed in the morning. The cook viewed her father's body from a distance, warning, "One must not go close to a dead man"...

"Lachmi! Oh, Lachmi!"

"Coming!" Lachmi got up, irritated... She remembered the day this *mahanth* had laid his hand on the *Bijak* and made a vow of renunciation; and now here he was calling for her again. "*Satguru ho!* When will You call for me?" she murmured. "Call this poor *dasin* to Your side."

"Lachmi!"

"*Mahanth Sahab*, calm yourself. Meditate upon the Lord. Illusion..."

"Everything is illusion, Lachmi. Just come close to me, one time."

A blind man's grasp has the strength of a crocodile. You could try with all your might, and you couldn't pry that fist open at all. Was it a hand, or an iron pincer?! The stench of that toothless mouth!... And drivell!... "*Mahanth Sahab! Mahanth Sahab, listen!*"

Ram Das was over by the fire. "*Mahanth Sahab! Arey, Ram Das! Ram Das! Come here, quick! Something's wrong with Mahanth Sahab!*"

The Lord *Satguru* had called the *mahanth* to His side.

The next morning, all the villagers gathered together... The *Mahanth Sahab* was a true saint! Willing his own time of death like that. He treated the whole village, young and old, to a feast last night, and then he just cast away his earthly form. It's not just anyone who can die such a death. He was a wise, great man.

Ram Das told everyone, "After he returned from the feast, and took up his meditation, his body began to glow. I was about to get the mosquito net, but he stopped me with a gesture. As I sat by the sacred fire and gazed at him, the glow from his body got brighter, like a child glowing with vitality. The light was so radiant

I had to shut my eyes against it. I fell on my face, beside the sacred fire, and didn't come to my senses until I heard Lachmi's cries. . . ."

Lachmi didn't say a word. . . . Don't these *sadhus* even know the rite for burial? What do they think—being a *sadhu* is just having matted hair and a begging bowl? . . . "Charan Dasi" she spoke out. "First there should be a reading from the *Bijak*, and then the burial. After that, a handful of earth should be thrown on every *sadhu's* grave. Don't you even know that?"

Behold the saintly *guru* who shatters the net of illusion and drives away sorrow,

Through whom the whole world sees the Highest Truth. . .

. . . I bow to *Satguru Sahab*

And humbly touch His lotus feet!

Ram Das tossed the first handful of earth, and after him, Lachmi tossed her handful onto the white sheet that enveloped the *mahanth*. Then the garland of flowers was dropped in, and the *sadhus* took up shovels and filled the grave. Charan Das said, "Including the *mahanth*, this is the tenth burial of a *sadhu* I've attended! How could I not know how to do it?"

The village *kirtan* singers started off the group songs:

. . . Oh yes, a parrot was raised with tender devotion  
And fed on milk and cream.

Oh yes, he flew away and perched up in a tree  
And left the cage behind on earth.

After the burial ceremony, Ram Das played his tambourine and sang "Nirgun":

From whence came the swan, and whither went he,  
O *Ram*?

O *Ram*, what citadel did he choose for his abode?

And how was he adorned? O *Ram*!

Dima dimika dimika. . .

The swan\* came from the city of God, and entered the city of man, O *Ram*.

\*The soul or the spirit

O *Ram*, he made man's body the citadel of his abode  
And he was adorned with the robes of illusion. O *Ram*!

"Jai ho! *Satguru*. . . Jai! *Mahanth Sahab*. . . Jai! All the saints. . . Jai!"

The *ashram* seemed empty. Today, for the first time in her life, Lachmi realized the real value of *Mahanth Sahab*. . . He'd gone blind, and was so helpless he couldn't take a single step without Ram Das. But the *ashram* had always seemed busy. An *ashram*: without a *mahanth* was like a body without a soul.

The cage of raw bamboo is dark and deserted.

*Arey*, the swan has flown away into the sky, alone.

. . . One thing was sure, the *mahanth* loved Lachmi more than anything else in the world. Throughout his budding youth, by the grace of God, he had resisted temptation, remaining an ascetic. But in old age, a man's self-control weakens, and can't save him from the strong assault of temptation. That's why *sadhus* and ascetics fall prey to worldly temptation in their old age. It was not the *mahanth's* fault, but that of his destiny. Had Lachmi not existed, *Mahanth Sahab* would never have strayed from *Satguru's* path. It was an unquestionable truth that Lachmi was at fault, she decided. The sin of corrupting the faith of an ascetic was hers alone. And now who could she call her own? No one! . . .

"*Mahanth Sahab! Mahanth Sahab!* Where have you gone, leaving me behind? Forgive this *dasin's* sins, O *guru!* I wouldn't serve you cheerfully. Even as you died, I couldn't please you. . . . Forgive me!" It was as if all the pent up tears of a lifetime wanted to escape that day, and Lachmi could not hold them back.

"Jai *Hind*, Lachmi *Kochar-in-ji!*"

"God bless you, Baldev-ji! Please sit down."

Baldev forgot everything. All along the way, he'd been thinking of things to say to console Lachmi—couplets, poetry. . . . He forgot them all. He thought of *Maye-ji*, of that image. . .

The waters of the Ganges and of the Jamuna  
Are flowing from her eyes.

Baldev tried to hold back his emotions, but the dam of his courage was not enough to stem the torrent. His eyes, too, brimmed

ed over with tears, like floodwaters. Floodwaters sometimes come even in the harvest month of *Phalgun*. Baldev pulled himself together and said, "Lachmi ji, all that happens is hardly more than illusion; loss or gain, life or death, success or failure—it's all God's will..."

"I went out with Doctor *Sahab* before daybreak to show him the village," he went on. "We started from the *Santhal* quarter, south of the village, looking in all the alleys and by-lanes, and by ten o'clock we'd only gotten as far as *Dusadh* quarter. That was when we heard that *Mahanth Sahab* had passed away. Doctor *Sahab* was upset, too, and decided to go back to the hospital. We'll see the rest of the village tomorrow... Also, someone has to announce the opening of the hospital at Rautahat Station, so I sent Shobhan the leatherworker with his drum before coming here."

Lachmi stopped crying. Baldev-ji had come just at the right time. The *mahanth* had become quite fond of Baldev. He'd come to know him quite well after only five or six days' acquaintance. "You can tell a silver *rupee* by its clinking, and you can judge a man by the way he talks..."

"Baldev is a gentleman, with a pure conscience," the *mahanth* had said. The *mahanth* had never before trusted anyone as he trusted Baldev. All kinds of *sadhus* and sages came to the *ashram*, but the *mahanth* used to say, "Don't trust any of these vagabonds. It's not good to associate much with such people." He used to recognize the young *sadhus* by just the sound of their footsteps. His sense of intuition was sharp... One day, last year, a young *sadhu* had come and sat in the *satsang*. He had arrived the night before, and was on his way to Varahakshetra. He couldn't keep his shifty eyes off Lachmi, as he sat there at *satsang*. *Mahanth* Sevadas who had been reciting from the scriptures, stopped in the middle of a line and said, "You! The young man from Naugachiya! Pay attention to the words of the Lord, young man! Take your eyes off Lachmi's body. This earthly body is ephemeral. Only the message of God is real!" The poor man got up and left without even waiting to be fed... But the *mahanth* had trusted Baldev-ji. "Lachmi, people like him are the ones who have truly renounced the world," he had said. Now just the sight of Baldev-ji cut her sorrows in

half.

"One is lucky to even get a glimpse of a man like the *mahanth*," Baldev said. "I got a glimpse, but it was my bad fortune that I never had the chance to serve him."

"Baldev-ji, are you a *das*, then?" Lachmi asked.

"Yes. My mother was a devotee of *Vishnu*, too. She wouldn't even touch meat or fish."

"So you were born a *das*. Then why don't you get initiated in the *Vaishnava* sect and start wearing the bead necklace?"

A flicker of a smile crossed Baldev's lips. "Lachmi-ji," he said, "what really counts is what is in your mind, not the bead necklaces that you wear on the outside."

If any of the *sadhus* had been around and heard Baldev say that bead necklaces were superficial, they would have been furious. Ram Dev Gosai would have leapt to his feet, waving his tongs, and sworn at him right and left! But Lachmi replied calmly, "The bead necklace is not just something worn on the outside. It's part of one's bearing. Think about it. You'll see what I mean. It's like your homespun *khadi* cloth. You wouldn't consider a man who wears muslin and foreign cloth a true freedom fighter, even if his thinking was the same as Gandhi's teachings!"

It wasn't easy to counter Lachmi's arguments. It seemed as if every time Baldev spoke with Lachmi, he discovered something new.

"If you think I should, I'll take the vows and start wearing the beads."

"From whom?"

"Why don't you give them to me?"

Lachmi laughed. Her smile brought new life to the mournful atmosphere. Baldev-ji was such a simple man! Imagine! He would have made her his *guru*!

"No, Baldev-ji. I'll have *Acharva-ji* give you the oath. He's from *Kashi*. But I'll let you have my *Bijak*; and you should read it every day. It purifies the mind to read the *Bijak*. And it reveals the inner light."

The *Bijak*. Such a small book! Yet a storehouse of wisdom. Baldev's heart was pounding.

Lachmi told him, "It's all handwritten. Some time ago, a

student from *Kashi* came. He'd written it out with great care. Each letter is like a pearl."

And he could even smell the fragrance of Lachmi's body in the *Bijak*. It was intoxicating. Her fingers had touched each and every page of that book...

No one becomes learned just by reading books,

But he who reads two-and-a-half letters

That make up the word 'love'.

Is truly a *pandit*.

Just the sight of Lachmi purifies the mind! Baldev thought.

## NINE

"Doctor Prashant Kumar."

"What's your caste?"

Immediately after asking your name, people here ask, "What caste?" In his whole life, Prashant had had very few people ask about his caste; but here everyone asked him about it.

Sometimes, Prashant would laugh and say, "My caste? Doctor!"

"Doctor? Doctor-caste? Is it Bengali or Bihari?"

"Hindustani," he would answer.

Caste was a vital thing. Even those who ignored caste still belonged to one; that couldn't be avoided by simply answering "Hindu".

"Are you a Brahmin?... What kind of Brahmin? Which lineage? Where are your people from?..." In the city, no one ever asked a person about his caste. Nobody cared what caste people were in the city. But in the village, without caste you couldn't even draw water!

Prashant kept his caste hidden. The truth was, he himself didn't know his caste. Had he known it, perhaps he wouldn't have hesitated to say what it was. And perhaps he wouldn't have dismissed believing in the hierarchical caste and kinship system. He might have even felt pride in identifying himself as a Brahmin.

Prashant used to have to face the same kind of problem on registration day at the Hindu University. He'd stay awake the whole night before, practicing... "Prashant Kumar. Father's name: Anil Kumar Bannerjee. Hindu. Brahmin." All a lie! Poor Dr. Anil Kumar Bannerjee was probably sleeping contentedly with his family in some village in the foothills of Nepal, little dreaming that some so-called son of his by the name of Prashant Kumar was getting enrolled in the Hindu Academy... But Prashant knew well about his so-called father, Dr. Anil Kumar. When the day for filling out the forms for the matriculation exam came, the name "Dr. Anil" went automatically into the blank!

Ever since he was a child, Prashant had repeatedly heard the story of his birth—the housemaid, the gardener, even the neighborhood candy vendor knew the story. People would all-of-a-sudden point a finger at him and say, "Do you see that boy? Upadhyay-ji, that lady doctor from Bengal, found him in the Koshi River. She fed and clothed him, and brought him up." Hundreds of times, Prashant had seen the expressions of surprise—shadowed by a look of pity—on people's faces... People look at an unclaimed corpse with that very same expression.

Prashant was of unknown descent. His mother had put him in an earthen pot and deposited him in the lap of the flood-swollen Mother Koshi. It was just after the famous Upadhyay family of Nepal, having been expelled by the Nepalese government, had established a model *ashram* in Saharsa district. One day, Upadhyay and his wife took a relief boat and went out to help flood victims. Suddenly, Upadhyay noticed a new clay pot, floating near some tamarisk reeds. It roused his wife's curiosity: "Say, look! I wonder what's in that pot?" As the boat reached the thicket, its motion rocked the pot, and an awesome snake stuck its head out and began to hiss. The snake slowly slithered into the water; then they heard the sound of a newborn baby crying, as if its mother had just stopped comforting it... That was it—the story of his birth. Everyone had his own particular way of telling it.

Living at Upadhyay's *ashram* was an ill-fated young woman, Snehmayi. Her husband, Dr. Anil Kumar Bannerjee, had left her and married a Nepalese woman. Snehmayi had filled the *ashram* with cages, and would spend her days showering her affection upon the baby deer, rabbits, peacocks, and monkeys she kept in them.