

SA‘ADAT HASAN MANTO

I’m No Good For You! *

A HEATED DISCUSSION about Chaudhry Ghulam Abbas’s latest speech was in full swing in the Tea House. The atmosphere inside was cozy and as warm as the tea. We were in agreement about one thing: we should grab Kashmir no matter what and Dogra rule must end immediately.

They were all *mujabids*, God’s valiant soldiers, who didn’t know the first thing about fighting but were ready to jump into the battlefield at any moment. The common consensus was that if we launched a surprise attack, Kashmir would be in our hands in a blink.

Well, I was among those *mujabids*. My problem, though, is that I’m a Kashmiri right down to the hilt, and no less a Kashmiri than Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, which makes it my greatest weakness. I just chimed along with the other *mujabids*. It was decided that the minute war broke out we would join and fight at the very front.

Although Haneef showed great enthusiasm, I sensed that he was feeling rather melancholy, but I couldn’t figure out the reason for his downcast mood.

Everyone left after the tea, only Haneef and I stayed on. By now the Tea House had become nearly empty with only two boys chatting over their breakfast in a far corner.

I knew Haneef from a while back. He was about ten years younger than me. He had finished his B.A. and was undecided whether to go for an M.A. in English or in Urdu. Sometimes he got it into his head to stop his studies altogether and set out to travel.

I looked at him closely. He was picking up the used matchsticks from the ashtray and nervously breaking them into small bits. As I’ve already mentioned, he was feeling rather blue. It appeared to be a good opportunity to ask him about it. “Why are you feeling so glum?”

He lifted his head, tossed the broken pieces to one side, and replied,

* “Jā’ō Ḥanīf Jā’ō,” from the author’s collection *Manḥōnāmā* (Lahore: Saṅg-e Mīl Publications, 1990), 505–12.

“Oh, no particular reason.”

I lit up. “What do you mean ‘no particular reason’? That’s no answer. There’s always a reason for everything. Perhaps you’re reminiscing about some old event.”

He nodded, “Yes.”

“And that event has something to do with Kashmir?”

He started, “How did you know that?”

I smiled. “I’m a Sherlock Holmes too. My good man, weren’t we just now talking about Kashmir? When you agreed that you were thinking, and thinking about some past event, I immediately guessed that this event must have to do with Kashmir. It’s got to be. Why, did you fall in love there?”

“Love ... don’t know ... God knows what it was. Anyway, something did happen and the memory of it still haunts me.”

I was eager to hear his story. “If you don’t mind, tell me about that *something*.”

He asked me for a cigarette and lit it. “Manto Sahib,” he began, “it isn’t an especially interesting incident. But if you promise to listen quietly without interrupting, I’ll tell you everything, down to the last detail, about what transpired three years ago. I’m not a storyteller, all the same I’ll try.”

I promised not to interrupt. Actually he wanted to narrate his story by going into the depths of his heart and mind.

After a pause he started, “Manto Sahib, it happened two years ago, when Partition wasn’t even in our imagination. It was summer time. I was feeling down, God knows why. I guess all unattached, single men feel gloomy in the summer. Anyway, one day I decided to go to Kashmir. I packed a few essentials and went to the lorry stand. I bought a ticket and boarded. When the lorry arrived at Kad, I changed my mind. What is there in Srinagar, I thought. I’ve already seen it many times; I’ll get out at the next stop, Batut. It’s a health-giving place. Tuberculosis patients especially go there and leave cured. So I got off at Batut and stayed in a hotel, a rather bare-bones one, but all right. I was quite taken with Batut. I went climbing on the slopes every morning, ate a breakfast of toast and pure butter on my return from the hike, and then read some book or other lying down.

“I was spending my days pleasurably in the salubrious environment of the place. I’d become friends with all the shopkeepers in the area around the hotel, especially Sardar Lahna Singh who was a tailor. I would spend hours at his shop. He was a fanatic about listening to and telling love stories. His sewing machine would keep whirring and he’d be absorbed in those stories.

“He knew every last thing about Batut. Who was having an affair with whom, who'd had a tiff, which girls had just started to put on airs, you name it—his pocket was chockfull of such gossip.

“In the evening the two of us went for a stroll on the downward slopes, all the way to the Banihal Pass, and then walked back up slowly. There was a cluster of mud dwellings to the right of the first bend in the road if you were coming from the hotel and headed toward the slopes. One day I asked Sardarji whether those quarters were meant to be lived in. I asked because they had caught my fancy. Yes, they were for living in, he told me. A railway babu from Sargodha is staying there these days. His wife is ill.

“She must have tuberculosis, I concluded at once. God knows why I'm so scared of this disease. From that day on I never passed by those quarters without covering my nose and mouth with a kerchief. I don't want to prolong the story. In short, I became friends with the railway babu named Kundan Lal. I soon realized that he wasn't concerned at all about his wife's condition. He was simply going through the motions of being a caring husband. He visited her only infrequently and lived in a separate dwelling, which he disinfected with phenol three times a day. It was the patient's younger sister Sumitri, hardly fourteen years old, who took care of her sister with unflinching devotion.

“I first saw Sumitri by the Maggu stream. A big pile of dirty laundry lay by her side and she was perhaps washing a shalwar when I passed by. The sound of my footsteps startled her. She quickly joined her hands and said *namaste* to me. I returned her greeting and asked, ‘You know me?’ ‘Yes,’ she said in her shrill voice, ‘you're Babuji's friend.’ What I had before me, I felt, was not Sumitri, but suffering itself molded into her form. I felt like talking to her, to help her with her washing, to lessen her burdens just a little, but such informality seemed out of place at the very first meeting.

“The second time I met her, again at the very same stream, she was rubbing soap into some clothes when I said *namaste* and sat down on top of a bed of fallen apples. She felt somewhat nervous, but her trepidation disappeared once we started talking. She became so friendly that she started telling me all about the affairs of her household:

“It's been five years since her older sister got married to Babuji, she told me. During the first year of their marriage, Babuji treated her sister well, but when he was suspended from his job for allegedly taking bribes, he wanted to sell her jewelry and gamble with it, hoping it would double the amount. She wouldn't agree, with the result that he started beating and abusing her. He would shut her up in a small dark room all day long without food and he kept this up for months. Finally, when she couldn't

take it anymore, she handed him the jewelry. He disappeared with it and didn't show his face for six months, during which time she was reduced to starvation. Had she wanted to, she could have gone back to her parents. Her father was quite wealthy; he even loved her a lot. But she didn't think it was proper to go back. She ended up contracting tuberculosis. When Kundan Lal suddenly reappeared six months later, he found his wife bed-ridden. He had been reinstated. When asked where he'd been all this time, he hedged and fudged.

"Sumitri's sister didn't ask him about her jewelry. She was happy that Bhagwan had heard her entreaties and sent her husband back to her. Her health improved a little, but a month later her condition deteriorated sharply. It was only then that her parents somehow came to know about her illness. They immediately came over and forced Kundan Lal to take her to the mountains right away and said they would bear the expenses. Kundan Lal thought, why not, let's have some recreation. He took Sumitri along for his amusement and landed in Batut.

"Here, he took absolutely no notice of his wife. He stayed out the whole day playing cards. Sumitri cooked the special foods required by sick people for her sister. Every month Kundan Lal wrote to his in-laws that the expenses were mounting, and every month they added extra to the amount they sent.

"I don't wish to let this story drag on. I was now seeing Sumitri practically every day. The area by the stream where she washed clothes was pleasantly cool, just like the water of the stream. The shade under the apple trees was heavenly, and I would feel like picking up the lovely round apples and tossing them into the clear water of the stream all day long. The reason for this rather crude lyricism that has crept into my account is that I'd fallen in love with Sumitri and somehow sensed that she had accepted it. So one day, overwhelmed by a sudden surge of emotion, I clasped her to my bosom and kissed her on the lips with my eyes closed. Birds were twittering in the foliage of the apple trees and the stream was humming gently.

"She was pretty, though a bit skinny. But if you thought deeply, you'd have felt that this is how she had to be. If she had been a bit fleshy, she wouldn't have looked so delicate. She had the eyes of a gazelle, which nature had lined with a dark eye shadow. She was of short stature but infinitely pleasing, and her long, dark thick hair reached down to her waist. A virgin, blossoming youth. Manto Sahib, I was drowned in her love.

"As she was expressing her love for me, I told her what had been sticking like a thorn in my heart for some time. 'Look, Sumitri,' I said, 'I'm Muslim and you're Hindu. What would be the end of this love? I'm not a

libertine or rake that I could take advantage of you and be on my way. I want to make you my mate for life.' She threw her arms around my neck and told me firmly, 'Haneef, I'll convert.'

"The weight on my heart lifted and I felt light. We decided that as soon as her sister got well she would leave with me. But it was not in her sister's fate to get well. Kundan Lal had told me plainly that he was waiting for his wife to die. In a manner of speaking, what he said had a ring of truth to it, though thinking such a thought and then blaming yourself for thinking it didn't seem right. The reality was staring us in the face. The disease being what it is, there was no way to escape from it.

"The condition of Sumitri's sister got worse by the day. Kundan Lal couldn't care less. With more money coming from his in-laws and expenses reduced, or being purposely reduced, he had started going to the Dak Bangla to booze it up, and had even started coming on to Sumitri.

"My blood boiled, Manto Sahib, when I heard about that. Had I not lacked the pluck, I'd have thrashed him black and blue with my shoes right there in the middle of the street. I hugged Sumitri to my chest, wiped away her tears and started to talk of love.

"As I passed by their quarters one morning to take my walk, I had the uncanny feeling that Sumitri's sister was no longer in this world. I halted and called out to Kundan Lal. I was right. The poor woman had expired at eleven o'clock last night.

"He asked me to stay there a while so he could go and make arrangements for her last rites. He went out. As I stood there I was reminded of Sumitri. Where was she? The room with her sister's corpse was deathly quiet. I walked over to the adjoining quarters and peeked in. Sumitri was lying on the bed like a bundle. I went in and shook her shoulder. 'Sumitri! Sumitri!' I called her. She didn't respond. Just then I spotted her shalwar stained with big splotches of blood. I shook her again. Again she didn't answer. I asked her tenderly, lovingly, 'What's the matter, Sumitri?' She broke into tears. I sat down beside her. 'What's the matter, Sumitri?' She said through her sobs, 'Go, Haneef, go!' 'But why?' I asked. 'I know your sister has died. But please don't kill yourself crying.' She choked on her words as she said, 'She's dead, but I can't grieve over her. I've died myself.' I didn't understand. 'Why must you die? You have yet to become my life-mate, remember?' At this she started to cry bitterly. 'Go, Haneef, go! I'm no good for you anymore. Last night ... last night Babuji finished me off. I screamed. Jiji screamed from her quarters. She had guessed everything. The shock killed her. Oh, how I wish I hadn't screamed. She couldn't have saved me. Go, Haneef, go!' She got up from the bed, grabbed my hand like someone mad and dragged me from the room. She quickly went back

in and bolted the door. That son of a bitch Kundan Lal returned after some time with four or five men in tow. I would have stoned him to death then and there had he been alone, I swear.

“This, then, is my story ... Sumitri’s story. Those three words of hers, ‘Go, Haneef, go!’ never leave my ears. They’re filled with such pain, such anguish.”

Tears had appeared in Haneef’s eyes. “Well, what happened, happened,” I said, “you could still have married her?”

He lowered his eyes, threw a coarse invective at himself, and said, “Call it my weakness. Man turns out to be such a coward when it comes to that. God’s curse upon him.” □

—*Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon*