

ing! A man with a military helmet and three or four men in turbans emerged from the school yard. The live tiger showed his bravery—everyone bolted, running every which way, falling all over each other. What happened to all the flags and banners? And where was the 'live tiger' then?

"The police inspector arrested Tewari and carried him off. Then they made a thorough search, house to house, leaving no corner untouched. All the so-called 'live tigers' had slipped away into their lairs.

"When the word got out about the Congress Party taking control, once again there was the growling of militia men in every house. Then... again 'Inkilas Zindabagh!' When the police came into view, they all shouted even louder, "Come on, brothers, shout! Now we're in charge!" The police inspectors swallowed their rage and stayed back. In the last uprising, the 'live tiger' got worked up into a frenzy and set fire to the distillery and ransacked the brewery.

"The very next day, four truckloads of white soldiers came in, ransacked the village, and burnt it to the ground within an hour. They arrested fifty men, and beat two unconscious. They stabbed one with a bayonet.

"These youngsters were trying to measure up to the English soldiers. It was like a circus pony watching a big stallion drown and then asking if the water's too deep. The English were giving us some slack yet, so everybody was causing a ruckus. If we had our patience, then—as in the folk tale—"the whole flock of pigeons would have been wiped out..."

"No, Uncle Jyotkhi! That can't happen now!" Baldev couldn't stand to hear any more. "Those government maneuvers failed in the last uprising. And as for Simmerbani, have you gone there and seen it lately? No? Do you know what you'd see if you did? Just go there, and see for yourself—they've got a hospital, a school, a girl's school, a handloom center, a library... What don't they have there? And in every house, the people know the alphabet. You know Shivanand Babu? His son Ramanand was with us in jail. Now he's going to become a lawyer, for sure!"

Khelavan was about to put in a remark when the herdsman called out, "The calf is drinking the buffalo's milk!"

Khelavan went off to milk the buffaloes. And it wasn't as if Baldev had so much spare time to stand around gabbing, either—there was a victory celebration going on in the village!

"Jai Mahatma Gandhi!"

## SEVEN

The villagers completely surrounded Pyaru, the doctor's assistant.

"When is Doctor Sahab coming?... What's your name?... Which caste are you? Not a *Dusadh* I hope; you're a *Gahalor*, right?... Don't you have a *sacred thread*?..."

Baldev extracted Pyaru from the crowd. "Brothers, haven't you ever seen a human being before? Go on about your business! Isn't anybody going to keep an eye on the sweetmaker-ji?" Baldev always added a respectful "ji" to everyone's name. That's what all the officials did in the Ramkisan *Ashram*—Driver-ji, Contractor-ji, *Harijan-ji*!

After all their questioning, everybody knew that Pyaru had come to work for the doctor. For the past five years, Pyaru had been working for the homeopathic doctor in Rautahat Station, but that doctor left the region. Pyaru had heard that a Doctor *Babu* was coming to Maryganj, so he came to work for the new doctor.

After a light snack, Pyaru asked Baldev-ji, "Where's the doctor's luggage? We'll have to set up a table and chair, sweep, and scrub the cupboard. We'll need a basin to put near the water keg, and a cake of soap, and a towel. The first thing Doctor *Babu* will do when he comes is wash his hands..."

Without a doubt, Pyaru had been a doctor's assistant for a long time. He knew just where to put the table and chair. He placed the water keg on the iron tripod, and on the ring below it he set the aluminum bowl. The keg had a tap. When you turned it, water flowed out. He pulled a towel out of a box and hung it up. It was bristly—like the hairs of a sacrificial goat when they stand on end out of fear.

"Soap. No soap?" Pyaru asked. "Arey, not washing soap for clothes; he needs sweet-smelling soap!"

"Where are you going to find perfumed soap in Bhagat's shop?"

"You can get it in Katihar."

"The *tahsildar's* daughter, Kamli, has perfumed soap. . . The whole village smells of it when she takes her bath."

The *tahsildar* told Pyaru to get some soap from Kamli *Didi*.

You could certainly tell Pyaru had been a doctor's assistant. And he had shown up just in time, too. Otherwise, who would have made all these preparations?

The hours were slipping by. Soon the doctor would be coming. The *tahsildar* had sent the ox carts to fetch him, even before sunrise. Agamu, the *chowkidar*, went along with them.

There was such an aroma rising from the village! It smelled just like a fair. The sweetmakers had been making *puris* and *jalebis* in the *tahsildar's* barn since daybreak. There was a heaping stack of *puris*. Since daybreak, all the village children had been milling around it. But the *Kayasth* and *Rajput* kids saw to it that none of the other children from the other quarters got close—"Get away! You'll pollute them!"

Ramkiral Singh himself went and got Khelavan and brought him along with him to the *tahsildar's*. "Look, *Tahsildar*," Singh said. "Khelavan has got gas in his stomach. Even before he ate, he got indigestion. *Arey*, Brother Khelavan, what good does it do to pout like a woman? . . . I want to hear it from you, *Tahsildar*. Am I not right? You fight, you quarrel—and then you're friends again. Why should he hold a grudge? I found out about his illness from Baldev; when I went to see him, I saw the exorcist chanting a mantra in his ear. . . Hey, Baldev, listen! When the doctor comes, have him look after this fellow first. Tell the doctor that he's in his eighth month. . ."

Ha! ha! ha! ha! . . . ha! . . . ha!

"Ramkiral, Brother, how can you make fun of me like that in front of the kids?" protested Khelavan. "All right, now! Let go of my hand. Everyone else is here. What harm would there've been if I hadn't come?"

Singh-ji was a fun-loving man. He had had people laughing since daybreak. He had managed to bring Khelavan along to the feast, even though he was sulking. Jyotkhir-ji didn't come. He said he had a toothache. Singh-ji said, "Who knows? Maybe he's got a

toothache in his stomach! You know, they say that nowadays, doctors make false teeth of stone. Let's have the doctor make some for Jyotkhir!" he joked.

"Oh, come on! It isn't as if a girl's relatives choose her a husband by wiggling a man's teeth."

"Doctor *Sahab* is coming."

"Coming? Where?"

"The bullock carts have come as far as the *Pachiyas* quarter! Agamu the *chowkidar* is running on ahead of them. Doctor *Sahab's* wearing a hat."

As Agamu arrived, the villagers tried to figure out what it was on his shoulders. Some kind of box? Everyone dropped whatever they were doing and crowded around.

"Make way!" said Agamu. "Doctor *Sahab* told me to take good care of it. Don't knock it around. It's a wireless news!"

Baldev spoke up. "It's a raydi, a raydi! Now we'll be able to hear the songs from Bombay and Calcutta every day! We'll get news about Mahatma-ji, and the price of jute—it'll all come out of there. If you bang it, it'll get irritated and call you an idiot. And in the morning, if you sit by it before you brush your teeth, it'll say, 'Haven't you brushed your teeth yet today?'"

"Outrageous!"

Doctor *Sahab!*

They all stood with palms brought together in a respectful *namaste* greeting. The doctor, smiling, likewise made the greeting gesture. Baldev-ji said, "*Jai Hind!*" Kalicharan, too, following Baldev's example, was saying "*Jai Hind!*" these days. Pyaru brought a chair and placed it in the shade of the canopy. He took the hat from the doctor's hands. The doctor's face was absolutely red. "Scarlet! Doesn't he even have a moustache? It was all shaved off!"

Baldev politely asked, "You didn't have any trouble on the way, did you? . . . Everything's ready, so come and eat. . . This is Vishwanath Prasad; he's *tahsildar* of Parbanga. And this is Ramkiral Singh, the *Sepoy*—er, *Rajput* leader. That's Khelavan Singh Yadav, head of the *Yadavs*. And this is Kalicharan, a every fine gentleman. . . And all these here are school children. . . Gentlemen, come here and introduce yourselves to the Doctor *Sahab*. . . Today the village is giving a feast for everybody in celebration of the completion of the hospital."

Doctor Sahab again brought his palms together and *namasted* to everyone. But he said, "I won't have anything to eat right now. Let everyone go ahead and eat."

That Pyaru sure knew what he was talking about! Just look! The first thing Doctor Babu did was wash his hands with soap!

Mahanth Sahab, Kotharin Lachmi Dasin, Ram Das, and two devotees arrived from the *ashram*. Preceding their ox cart came a *sadhui*, blowing a bugle—Dhuh-tuu-tuu-tuu! . . . Dhuh-tuu-tuu! At the sound of the bugle, all the dogs in the village started barking in unison. Even the little newborn puppies, who had just learned how, were barking their heads off.

Before anything else, they offered *puris* to the goddess *Kali* at the temple. After that, two *puris* were tossed in the direction of the jungle, for the gods and demons who live there. Then, the *sadhus* and Brahmins were fed. Baldev repeatedly urged the doctor to eat, but he wouldn't listen. Pyaru was right; doctors don't eat the *puris* and *jalebis* made by village sweetmakers. Pyaru was busy at the kerosene stove, cooking some rice for the doctor. They should all hurry up and get the eating and drinking over with so that they could hear songs from the wireless news. What? There won't be any songs today? . . . That's right, Brother. It's a matter of reception. You'll never get anything this early. The trains and mills at Kathihar are still making such a racket: the news could never get through!

"Amen! Amen!"

"Everybody sit in separate rows, according to your quarter. Put an extra plate next to yours for the women in the house. There's plenty for everybody. . ."

The *Yadavs* all started teasing the old cowherd Raudi. Raudi and did everything just like a woman. And if his uppercloth slipped from his shoulder, he'd get embarrassed and adjust it, like a young girl. He'd get flustered when he had to talk to men. But women never even bothered to cover their heads when they were around him. And he would always go to the bazaar and shop with the women. . . Now they were all ganging up, teasing him—"We'll send your serving to the women's quarters. See. . . Latchan has already served your platter."

"Get lost, you bums! Making fun of an old man like me. Aren't you ashamed? Now, would you ever make fun of your grandmothers like that? The kids in this village are becoming rotten. It's all Singh's fault. If the old folks are degenerate, what can you expect from the young? Mark my words! . . ."

Mahanth Sahab never ate in the evenings. He approached the doctor. "Satguru ho! Doctor Sahab, how much is your salary? Two hundred rupees? . . . Hmmm. And of course you must get other things on the side. That's the income that counts. . . It's good that you've come. . . That Gandhi-ji is really a saint. . . Doctor Sahab, you know, five years ago, my eyes got infected one time, and they were red for almost two months. I went to Purnea and paid fifty rupees to see the civil surgeon. He treated me for days, but it didn't do any good. Now that you've come, it will be like having a doctor in the family! . . ."

Lachmi Dasin kept staring at the doctor. . . How handsome he is! How could the poor man feel at home, out here in the village. No matter what kind of work you did, a job was still only a job. He must be homesick. He probably misses his wife and children. . . But in a few days he'll start to feel at home. Then he'll send for his family. Suddenly, she asked the doctor, "Who else is there in your family?"

"Hub?" The doctor stammered. "I'm sorry, uh, I don't have anyone. My mother and father died when I was a child."

Lachmi realized it was hardly an appropriate question. She wondered why in the world she had asked such a question. . . No family!

"Lachmi! Call Ram Das," Mahanth Sahab said. "Well then, Doctor Babu, let me leave you now. Go and eat, and then get some rest. Come to the *ashram* some time. In the words of *Satguru* 'The sight and feel of good company whisks the cobwebs from the mind.'"

Lachmi placed her palms together and bid him *namaste*.

The *Brahmins* went to Baldev with their question: "It seems the doctor's assistant is a *Dusadh*. So, what caste is the doctor? Will he eat food cooked by a *Dusadh*?"

But Baldev only said, "Say it with feeling. . . *Jai Mahatma Gandhi!*"

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