

SATISAR

Kashyap drove his brand new car himself. He never liked the idea of having a chauffeur. Driving alone in Kashmir's countryside was a spiritual experience and he was almost in a mood of meditation, sitting quietly behind the driving wheel. Travel around in the charming surroundings of Kashmir he often did, and this evening he was returning after three days of hassles at his sprawling apple orchard near the apple city, affectionately nicknamed the *chota* London of Kashmir by the locals.

He had to see off the last consignment of fragrant sweet apples bound for the markets in the vast and sweltering plains of India. He also attended to the last rites—yes, he called them last rites as he believed that with autumn, every tree in his orchard entered into a state of suspended animation, to be draped gracefully in its white snow raiment for its annual burial a little later, and then reincarnated again the next spring.

Doing some pruning here, burning some dried leaves and dead twigs there, setting right a patch of fencing here,

a bit of earth work there and, finally, spraying all the trees with a pesticide to prevent deadly scab which ate into his profits. Kashyap was happy with this year's returns; a good harvest, he thought.

He accelerated his apple red Maruti-1000 to full speed. He wanted to reach home before darkness fell, take a hot bath and then hit the bed to sleep off the day's labour. Finally, he took the turn off the main road and entered his estate, situated on the periphery of Srinagar city. The long driveway cut his estate into two and the tall poplar trees stood like guards in full attention as his car sped towards the mansion situated at the other end. There he was. At the first honk, his wife appeared in the porch and, as usual, she was at her charming best, ready to receive him. One of his servants ran behind the car and, even before it came to a halt, opened the door to help him out. He entered the porch, put his arm around his wife and both went inside to the warm comforts of their luxurious life.

He heard the ringing of a bell. It was the ringing of a telephone. Suspended in that luminal state between sleep and wakefulness, he ignored it for a while, and drifted back into oblivion. But it was there again, persistent and nagging. He could no longer ignore it. Someone wanted to reach him. He sat up in his bed, turned on his bedside light, reached for the telephone, and called out in a sonorous voice, "Hello."

For quite some time, there was no response and then, just as he was about to hang up, there came a deep voice, speaking in measured tones, pronouncing each syllable clearly.

“I am Jaladbhava...I am Jaladbhava...I am Jaladbhava...Kashyap cannot be spared...Kashyap cannot be spared,” and then the line was disconnected.

Kashyap did not understand a word. “Hello...Hello...” He continued to speak into the mouthpiece.

His wife, sleeping beside him, had got up by now. “Oh, come on. Must be some madcap not able to sleep and disturbing others. Darling, it is 2 o’clock; come sleep,” she said, yawning.

They had hardly stretched their bodies when the phone rang again. Kashyap again went through the motions and listened to the taped message from the other end. Again, he stretched himself and sat up. It continued like this till finally he disconnected the phone and both of them snuggled close to each other and entered the valley of bliss.

Five days later, an innocent looking letter sent by post lay on Kashyap’s table. By then, he had totally forgotten about the mysterious phone call he had received in the middle of the night four days earlier. The letter read:

Dear Kashyap

Our *Tanzeem* has learnt from highly dependable sources that you are trying to create hurdles in the ongoing

movement for freedom. We have earlier also warned you but it appears you are bent upon mischief and determined to continue with your activities. It is therefore ordered that you be punished with death.

Yours Sincerely

Jaladbhava

Commander- In-Chief

The same day Kashyap and his family crossed the Pirpanchal range.



The announcement over the public address system at Jammu Railway Station about the late running of Jehlum Express sent a wave of indignation among the scores of passengers who were waiting for the train. Sitting on the bench at the platform, both heard the announcement and, for the first time, the elder seemed to take notice of his very robust and extremely handsome companion who was dressed in jeans and denim jacket, and was clutching a black briefcase with his hands. The young man seemed to be the sales representative of some company and appeared to be gazing at a point far beyond his immediate neighbourhood, unattached, unconcerned. Turning, the elder one addressed him, “Where are you going?”

He too seemed to notice his companion for the first

time; with a start, he turned his gaze and replied briefly, “Delhi.”

The elder wanted to strike a conversation, so he continued. “The train is delayed.”

“Yes and you too go to Delhi?” was the response.

“No, young man, I am going beyond Delhi,” said the elder and stretched out his hand, “I am Maqsood Shah, the carpet dealer.” the young man shook the hand held out to him and replied, “I am Budshah.”

The elder was dumbstuck. “Budshah”? When he was a child, he had heard about “*Budshah*” and...and that was all. The young man seemed to read his thoughts and continued with a royal grace, “Yes I am *Budshah Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin*, the Monarch of Kashmir.”

The elder was totally swept off his feet. How sad, he thought! What a fine looking young man, but nuts. The young man understood, “You do not believe me. Listen, I had come to visit the migrant camps at *Geeta Bhawan* and *Muthi* and now I go to Delhi to see for myself the plight of my people.”

The elder was now sure that the man was crazy but he had to pass time, so he decided to play on. With a lot of reverence, he submitted, “Well, my lord! Will you please tell me—in what condition did you find your people when you visited the camps?”

Budshah thought for a moment and declared in a voice choked with emotion, “I am in search of my people but alas! I have not so far found even one person from my nation, neither here nor beyond those mountains.” Having said this, he got up and, walking briskly, disappeared into the crowd of passengers on Jammu Railway platform No1.



Mulla Tahir Gani Kashmiri sat in the open window of his house, which overlooked the Mar waterway. The exquisitely latticed wooden windows were wide open and a pair of pigeons sat perched on their top, basking in the morning sun. It was a usually bright autumn morning. Outside, Mar was beginning to come to life. Boats carrying merchandize of all sorts were arriving at the opposite *ghat*. The buyers would soon flock to the *ghat* and the normal hustle and bustle would commence. Within an hour’s time, the boat bazaar would be at its best. those boats brought fruit, cloth, earthenware, copper ware, sliver and even gold jewellery and ornaments. Gani sat there in his little window watching the *ghat*. It somehow pleased him—this traffic on the waterway with boats of all shapes and sizes. the bigger ones carrying rice, timber, fodder, or the charcoal from far off villages and the smaller ones, the *doonga*, with the boatman’s entire family on it, and the *shikaras*—the multi-

coloured, delicate boats moving about like butterflies on the crystal clear water of Mar.

Gani had an important appointment for lunch. He had been invited by one of his admirers, none other than the Mughal Governor of Kashmir himself. Should he or should he not go. Gani considered. He led the life of a recluse and shunned the wealthy and mighty. He lived in his own world of poetry and was a happy, contented man. He had not married, had neither longings nor belongings and it did not matter who came to see him. For him, nothing mattered. He spent most of his time in seclusion, detesting any intrusion into his privacy. He had not many visitors to his house. Only some obstinate pupils who would not let go of him. But right now, he pondered over one thing only; should he go for that lunch? He looked out; the bazaar had picked up. the men with the merchandize on boats were shouting at the top of their voices, advertising their ware, calling out to the buyers; the buyers too had started pouring in from all the adjoining *mohallas*. Traffic on Mar was at its peak. Gani had no ear for the noise. He wanted to get up and close the window, but looking at the pigeons, he decided against leaving his post as his movement would surely disturb them. He waited.

He looked out again. Beautifully decorated *shikaras* followed by a dozen *doongas*. He heard the notes of music flowing to his window from one of the *doongas*. Yes, he

could make out—a party was on inside it. the *ghat* now reverberated with a milling crowd—men, women and children; the hawkers, the women selling vegetables and fish, the boats selling fodder for the cows, tobacco for the *hookah* and fabrics for clothes. In this hustle and bustle, two boys appeared from a bylane. One of them carried a grenade, which he aimed at the passing security vehicle but the vehicle sped away. The grenade landed on the road and there was a big explosion. People ran helter skelter, hawkers' calls gave way to cries and shrieks and alarmed voices. Soon, everything at that spot seemed dead. Only a few injured men and women lay on the ground. The crowd had vanished! The pigeons perched on Gani's window had flown away. He stood up, stretched out his hands and shut his window.



They had long and heated discussions on every subject. Kashyap had always been curious, inquisitive and restless, whereas his companion, Arjun, was serene, composed and calm. Kashyap did not take anything at its face value, not even the exalted word of their guru. He always questioned. the ultimate aim being: to perceive the reality—Om. But he always failed to comprehend the ultimate reality. Shakti? Shanti? Vibhinta? Power? Peace? Diversity? What was it really like?

Arjun, on the other hand, accepted every word of his guru as the ultimate revelation. For him Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva were realities. Roles were assigned to each. Brahma was the ultimate fountainhead of existence, Vishnu sustained it, and Shiva caused all the upheavals.

Kashyap was never satisfied with this sort of dispensation. He thought of other possibilities. Why three? Why not one? He always objected to set theories, challenging them. His guru was always patient, ignoring his outbursts of suspicion and doubt. One day, after a really heated debate in the *pathshala*, Arjun remained behind even after all the pupils had taken leave of their master. He reverentially fell at the guru's feet and said, "Master! forgive him for he does not know what he says."

The guru lifted him up by his shoulders and with a luminous smile said, "Arjun, I am proud of Kashyap. He is the last hope of the Gurukul."

And now the last hope of the Gurukul was leaving the Gurukul in search of an unknown world. A world hitherto concealed from the human eye. A chaste, pure and virgin land. It had all begun with a discourse by the guru. He had talked of accounts he had studied in ancient texts that there lay a country to the north of the plains, surrounded on all sides by lofty snow clad mountains and all lush green, dense forests, shimmering waters, vales and dales. The Guru had depicted it as *Swarg* (heaven) on earth. Beauty personified.

The Lord having assembled everything beautiful, and then concealing it from the human eye. Kashyap at first thought that it was a myth. How could such a country remain hidden from the greedy human eye? But the more he questioned the guru, the more he was convinced that it was true. Such a land did exist! Beauty! That was it! Kashyap began thinking of a new concept. Couldn't the ultimate reality be beauty with all other attributes flowing from it? *Sundarta*, yes, *Sundarta Bhagwan hai. Satyam Shivam Sundaram!* The more he thought, the more convincing the concept appeared and more appealing too. Shanti, the peace, flows from beauty. Shakti, the power, attends on beauty with folded hands and Vibhinta, the diversity, is but a shade of beauty. Arjun and the trinity are misconceptions. Yes. *Satyam Shivam Sundaram.* As this new thought took hold of Kashyap, a new resolve began to grow inside him. He would go to Sundar Desh and see the lord in all His glory. that would be his moksha—to become a part, even if a miniscule one, of Sundarta, a shimmer, a wave of sweet breeze, a drop of dew, a petal of a flower or a particle of fragrant clay.

His friends, especially Arjun, tried to dissuade him. His Guru warned him of the impossibility of his mission, the existence of Jaladbhava, the demon king, who with millions of demons guarded the country from intruders. The long unending battle between Shiva and Jaladbhava

and the stalemate that continued, but Kashyap listened to none when he listened to himself. He set out on his journey.



The entire population had assembled outside the village, awaiting the arrival of the maharaja's officials. The old men with creased brows, each line depicting the pain and misery of centuries, young men and women in rags. The women trying hard to cover their bodies, a little flesh revealed through a hole in the garment here and some through a gash there, some with emaciated infants clinging to their dry and shrunken breasts; the children, the urchins with white fungus on their heads playing in the dust. This assembly of starving, half naked humanity was led by a flowing pheraned and immaculately turbaned Peer sahib and the equally well-groomed nambardar of the village.

The petty officials in the maharaja's service were there for the annual grain collection. This year, the villagers seemed to be fortunate as the officials had arrived on time. Last year, the entire produce of the village had remained stacked and had perished during the winter. The officials were to collect the maharaja's share (the lion's share) and if they so pleased, would leave a few bushels for the villagers. That was the procedure; they were, after all, at best tillers.

All rights of ownership were vested in the person of maharaja whose forefathers had purchased this country for a sum of Rs 70 lacs. the deed implied that all lands, mountains, forests, waters, skies, wild game, the fish in the pond, the chicken in the coup, the lamb in the pen, the cow in the herd and men, women and children were the personal property of "His Highness, the Maharaja Bahadur." He was a kind man because in spite of the deed, he did allow a few morsels of rice to his subjects and regularly dispatched his men to every village to collect his share.

The riders could be seen from a distance. Yes, here they were. A sudden silence fell on the assembly of wretched souls. Shrieking infants too smelt the approaching authority and stopped shrieking. The playing children suddenly froze. The entire assembly huddled closer. Children clung to their parents; women took refuge behind their men. By and by the riders came closer, and finally reached the place. The Peer sahib and nambardar took a few steps, held the reins of the horses and helped the riders dismount.

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