

JANUARY NIGHT

Prem Chand

Dhanpat Rai (1880 - 1936), born in Varanasi on July 31, 1880 was a prolific writer of both Hindi and Urdu. He changed his pen name to "Premchand" after his book "Soje Vatan" was banned by the then British government. He wrote about the realities of life and the various problems faced by the common man in a turbulent society. He focussed chiefly on rural India and the exploitation faced by a common villager at the hands of priests, landlords, loan sharks, etc. He also emphasised on the unity of Hindus and Muslims. Some of his well-known works are Godaan, Gaban, Karmabhoomi, Pratigya, etc.



A. Answer these questions orally :

1. *Have you ever heard stories which deal with the life of animals or birds? Who told you those stories and what lesson did you learn from them?*

PART - I

HALKU came in and said to his wife, 'The landlord's come! Get the rupees you set aside, I'll give him the money and somehow or other we'll get along without it.'

Munni had been sweeping. She turned around and said, 'But there's only three rupees. If you give them to him where's the blanket going to come from? How are you going to get through these January nights in the fields? Tell him we'll pay him after the harvest, not right now.'

For a moment Halku stood hesitating. January was on top of them. Without a blanket he couldn't possibly sleep in the fields at night. But the

landlord wouldn't be put off, he'd threaten and insult him, so what did it matter if they died in the cold weather as long as they could just take care of his calamity right now? As he thought this he moved his heavy body (he gave the lie to his name) and came close to his wife. Trying to coax her he said, 'Come on give it to me. I'll figure out some other plan.'

Munni drew away from him. Her eyes angry, she said, 'You've already tried "some other plan". You just, tell me what other plan can be found. Is somebody going to give you a blanket? God knows how many debts are always left over that we can't pay off. What I say is, give-up this tenant farming! The work's killing you, whatever you harvest goes to pay up the arrears, so why not finish with it? Were we born just to keep paying off debts? Earn some money for your own belly, give up that kind of farming. I won't give you the money, won't.'

Sadly ! Halku said, 'Then, I'll have to put up with his abuse.' Losing her temper, Munni said, 'Why should he abuse you — is this his kingdom?'

But as she said it her brows relaxed from the frown. The bitter truth in Halku's word came charging at her like a wild beast.

She went to the niche in the wall, took out the rupees and handed them over to Halku. Then she said, 'Give up farming this time. If you work as a hired labourer you'll at least get enough food to eat from it. No one will be yelling insults at you. Fine work, farming someone else's land! Whatever you earn you throw back into it and get insulted in the bargain.'

Halku took the money and went outside looking as though he were tearing his heart out and giving it away. He'd saved the rupees from his work, paisa by paisa, for his blanket. Today he was going to throw it away. With every step his head sank lower under the burden of his poverty.

PART - II

A dark January night. In the sky even the stars seemed to be shivering. At the edge of his field, underneath a shelter of cane leaves, Halku lay on a bamboo cot wrapped up in his old burlap shawl, shivering. Underneath the cot, his friend Jabra, the dog, was whimpering with his muzzle pressed into his belly. Neither of them was able to sleep.

Halku curled up drawing his knees close against his chin and said, 'Cold, Jabra? Didn't I tell you, in the house you could lie in the paddy straw? So why did you come out here? Now you'll have to bear the cold, there's nothing I can do. You thought I was coming out here to eat puris and sweets and you came running on ahead of me. Now you can moan all you want.'

Jabra wagged his tail without getting up, protracted his whimpering into a long yawn, and was silent. Perhaps in his canine wisdom he guessed that his whimpering was keeping his master awake.

Halku reached out his hand and patted Jabra's cold back. 'From tomorrow on stop coming with me or the cold will get you. This bitch of a west wind comes from nobody knows where bringing the icy cold with it. Let me get up and fill my pipe. I've smoked eight pipefuls already but we'll get through the night somehow. This is the reward you get for farming. Some lucky fellows are lying in houses where if the cold comes after them the heat just drives it away. A good thick quilt, warm covers, a blanket! Just let the winter cold try to get them! Fortune's arranged everything very well. While we do the hard work somebody else gets the joy of it.'

He got up, took some embers from the pit and filled his pipe. Jabra got up too.

Smoking, Halku said. 'If you smoke the cold's just as bad, but at least you feel a little better.'

Jabra looked at him with eyes overflowing with love.

'You have to put up with just one more cold night. Tomorrow I'll spread some straw. When you bed down in that you won't feel the cold.'

Jabra put his paws on Halku's knees and brought his muzzle close. Halku felt his warm breath.

After he finished smoking, Halku lay down and made up his mind that however things were he would sleep now. But in only one minute his heart began to pound. He turned from side to side, but like some kind of witch the cold weather continued to torment him.

When he could no longer bear it he gently picked Jabra up and patting his head, got him to fall asleep in his lap. The dog's body gave off some kind of stink but Halku, hugging him tight, experienced a happiness he hadn't felt for months. Jabra probably thought he was in heaven, and in Halku's innocent heart there was no resentment of his smell. He embraced him with the very same affection he would have felt for a brother or a friend. He was not crippled by the poverty which had reduced him to these straits at present. Rather it was as though this singular friendship had opened all the doors to his heart and brilliantly illuminated every atom of it.

Suddenly Jabra picked up the noise of some animal. This special intimacy had produced a new alertness in him that disdained the onslaught of the wind. Springing up, he ran out of the shelter and began to bark. Halku whistled and called him several times. But Jabra would not come back to him. He went on barking while he ran around through the furrows of the field. He would come back for a moment, then dash off again at once. The sense of duty had taken possession of him as though it were desire.

PART - III

Another hour passed. The night fanned up the cold with the wind. Halku sat up and bringing both knees tight against his chest hid his face between them, but the cold was just as biting. It seemed as though all his blood had frozen, that ice rather than blood filled his veins. He leaned back to look at the skies. How much of the night was still left! The Dipper had not yet climbed half the sky. By the time it was overhead it would probably be morning. Night was not even three hours gone.

Only a stone's throw from Halku's field there was a mango grove. The leaves had begun to fall and they were heaped in the grove. Halku thought, 'If I go and get a pile of leaves I can make a fire of them and keep warm. If anybody sees me gathering the leaves in the dead of night they'll think it's a ghost. Of course there's a chance some animals hidden in my field waiting, but I can't stand sitting here any longer.'

He ripped up some stalks from a nearby field, made a broom out of them and picking up a lighted cowdung cake went toward the grove. Jabra watched him coming and ran to him wagging his tail.

Halku said, 'I couldn't stand it any more, Jabra. Come along, let's go into the orchard and gather leaves to warm up with. When we're toasted we'll come back and sleep. The night's still far from over.'

Jabra barked his agreement and trotted on toward the orchard. Under the trees it was pitch dark and in the darkness the bitter wind blew, buffeting the leaves, and drops of dew dripped from the branches.

Suddenly a gust carried the scent of henna blossoms to him. Where's that sweet smell coming from, Jabra? Or can't your nose make out anything as fragrant as this?

Jabra had found a bone lying somewhere and he was chewing on it. Halku set his fire down on the ground and began to gather the leaves. His hands were frozen, his bare feet numb. But he'd piled up a regular mountain of the leaves and by making a fire out of them he'd burn away the cold.

In a little while the fire was burning merrily. The flames leapt upward licking at the overhanging branches. In the flickering light the immense trees of the grove looked as though they were carrying the vast darkness on their heads. In the blissful sea of darkness the firelight seemed to pitch and toss like a boat.

Halku sat before the fire and let it warm him. After a while he took off his shawl and tucked it behind him, then he spread out both feet as though challenging the cold to do its worst. Victorious over the immense power of the winter, he could not repress his pride in his triumph.

He said to Jabra, 'Well, Jabra, you're not cold now, are you?' Jabra barked as though to say, 'How could I feel cold now?'

'We should have thought of this plan before, then we'd never have become so chilled.' Jabra wagged his tail. 'Fine, now what do you say we jump over the fire? Let's see how we manage it. But if you get scorched I've got no medicine for you.'

Jabra looked fearfully at the fire.

'We mustn't tell Munni tomorrow or there'll be a row.'

With that he jumped up and cleared the fire in one leap. He got his legs singed but he didn't care. Jabra ran around the fire and came up to him. Halku said, 'Go on, no more of this, jump over the fire! He leaped again and came back to the other side.'

PART - IV

The leaves were all burned up. Darkness covered the orchard again. Under the ashes a few embers smouldered and when a gust of wind blew over them they stirred up briefly, then flickered out again.

Halku wrapped himself up in his shawl again and sat by the warm ashes humming a tune. The fire had warmed him through but as the cold began to spread he felt drowsy.

Jabra gave a loud bark and ran toward the field. Halku realised that this meant a pack of wild animals had probably broken into the field. They might be nilgai. He distinctly heard the noise of their moving around. Then it seemed to him they must be grazing; he began to hear the sound of nibbling.

He thought, 'No, with Jabra around no animal can get into the field, he'd rip it to shreds. I must have been mistaken. Now there's no sound at all. How could I have been mistaken?'

He shouted, 'Jabra! Jabra!'

Jabra went on barking, and did not come to him.

Then again there was the sound of munching and crunching in the field. He could not have been mistaken this time. It really hurt to think about getting up from where he was. It was so comfortable there that it seemed intolerable to go to the field in this cold and chase after animals. He didn't stir.

He shouted at the top of his lungs, 'Hillo! Hillo! Hillo!'

Jabra started barking again. There were animals eating his field just when the crop was ready. What a fine crop it was! And these cursed animals were destroying it. With a firm resolve he got up and took a few

steps. But, suddenly a blast of wind pierced him with a sting like a scorpion's so that he went back and sat again by the extinguished fire and stirred up the ashes to warm his chilled body. Jabra was barking his lungs out, the nilgai were devastating his field and Halku went on sitting peacefully near the warm ashes. His drowsiness held him motionless as though with ropes. Wrapped in his shawl he fell asleep on the warmed ground near the ashes.

When he woke in the morning the sun was high and Munni was saying, 'Do you think you're going to sleep all day? You came out here and had a fine time while the whole field was being flattened!'

Halku got up and said, 'Then you've just come from the field?' 'Yes, it's all ruined. And you could sleep like that! Why did you bother to put up the shelter anyway?'

Halku sought an excuse. 'I nearly died and just managed to get through the night and you worry about your crop. I had such a pain in my belly I can't describe it.'

Then the two of them walked to the edge of their land. He looked: the whole field had been trampled and Jabra was stretched out underneath the shelter as though he were dead.

They continued to stare at the ruined field. Munni's face was shadowed with grief but Halku was content.

Munni said, 'Now you'll have to hire yourself out to earn some money to pay off the rent and taxes.'

With a contented smile Halku said, 'But I won't have to sleep nights out here in the cold.'

GLOSSARY AND NOTES

calamity (n) : great, distress, disaster

tenant (n) : one who pays rent for the use of land, building etc.

- muzzle (n)* : the nose and the mouth of an animal
whimper (v) : moan, whine
torment (n) : extreme mental suffering
furrows (n) : long narrow cut in the ground
cripple (n) : damage, to harm, lame person
stalk (n) : the stem of a plant
trot (n) verb : to talk with quicker
beast (n) : an animal
coax (v) : talking in kind and gentle way
blanket (n) : a large cover, made of wool
pierced (v) : affecting you very strongly, causing pain
drowsiness (n) (abstract Noun) : state of being sleepy.
flattened (v) : to be destroyed
niche (n) : small hallow place on the wall

Exercises

Let's Discuss

1. Suppose you are Munni, the land lord comes to your house and asks you to pay the rent. What will you do then?
2. Animals also possess the ability to understand human feelings. Elaborate this statement keeping in view the role of Jabra in the story.
3. Halku didn't go to the field even when he knew that animals were devouring the crops. Had you been there what would you have done?
4. How many characters are there in the story? Who (m) do you like most? Give reason for your choice.
5. Give the main idea of the story.
