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Gurjant Kalsi Landey's 'Saraape Hoye Lok' (Punjabi)

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The Cursed Ones

“Setha, hurry up and give me a dose of zarda* and these other items - gur, tea etc.” Gura said, entering Gullu’s shop.

“If you were in such a hurry, you should have come earlier. Which dose do you want? Peacock brand or Elephant brand?” said Gullu.

“Gimme the Elephant globule; first tell me how could I come? The Jats have only just freed me from work.”

“And only the Jats can set you right. You don’t give two hoots for Mahajans like me.” Gullu said cuttingly.

“What harm did I do you that the Jats should set me right?” Gura said in a harsher voice.

Gura was already at the end of his tether after an entire day of exhausting work. On top of that, it was nearly eight in the night. For a moment, he felt angry at Amar as well. These Jats are never satisfied, however much you do. Even if a person dies, working his arse off. His palms were red after passing bricks and cement mixture to the mason all day. His skin had peeled off with the

wet bricks and ashes. It had been almost six in the evening when Amar had said to Gura, “Guriya, mix another sack of cement. In the ratio of nine is to one. Just a couple more layers are left. Let’s finish it off before calling it a day.” With Amar’s Tuglaq-like* decree, Gura rolled an eye towards the mason, Shinda, but Shinda was already busy setting bricks. The sun was about to set; in just about half an hour’s time. On top of this, the cold was bitter. Just the previous day, it had rained. It had even hailed in some places, making the cold even more severe.

Early in the morning, as soon as he had had his tea and had been about to set off for his day’s labour at Amar’s house, Gura’s wife had said, “I say, listen! Today come back in good time. Neetta has fever. He’s such a tiny baby. Misru the weaver in our village has a charm. In the evening, before the disc of the sun sets, and just as the day is turning into night, take the boy to Misru the weaver and get the charm for him.” The moment he had heard Veeran’s words, Gura had grabbed a shallow bowl and tucked it under his arm, and folding the khes around his body, had hurried to work with long strides.

Reluctantly he picked up the shallow tray and a shovel and walked towards the pile of sand. For a moment, he thought of asking ‘even after skinning him bare all day, they were not satisfied?’ The day’s wage will be, at the most, a hundred rupees. But he couldn't say anything. He needed the money today; there was no gur or tea leaves at home. He had to buy rubber boots for the boy as well. Neeta had caught a chill and his fever was shooting very high.

“Can’t you hurry up and empty the tray; the day’s about to end and you are dragging your feet.”

Simmering with anger, Gura began to fill tray after tray of the sand and throwing it down. One, two, three... he gathered a full twenty-seven trays of sand and then, opening a sack of cement, began to mix it into the sand. A few shovels, and he had the cement mix ready.

“Guriya, here this tea is for you; kept on the wall. Have it after you’ve added water into the mixture.”

Gura asked Shinda the mason once, “Mistri, shall I make half the mixture wet or....” The next words were on Gura’s lips when Amar said, “Why half, moisten the entire lot. It only needs a couple of layers of brick; it’s a long wall. And its cold as well. If the mixture is kept lying, it will spoil.”

The mason felt resentful but said nothing. After adding water to the mix, when Gura reached for his tea, it was cold as water. He took one gulp and tossed the rest of the tea into the fresh soil near the wall and kicked some sand on it with his foot.

Seeing that the sun was about to set, Shinda began to set bricks in the wall more rapidly. The disc of the sun was the only thing remaining; there was no sunlight anywhere. More than half of the mix was yet to be used.

Relaying the mix and bricks quickly, Gura thought he would take Neeta for the charm. It might get a little dark, but so what. I’ll tell Misru, ‘I was not able to get free from work so it has got late.’ And on my way back, I’ll take gur worth twenty, tea leaves worth thirty... ten for mustard oil, and Neetta’s boots should be about thirty. And the rest for Veeran....

As soon as he thought of Veeran, an ember seemed to ignite in his heart. Even last night, just like that.... The moment he thought of the night, his face lit up. The darkness had begun to descend and the string tied to both sides of the wall to ensure it was straight was also fading from one’s vision. The mason was hurriedly setting brick after brick, mostly by guess work.

“Mistri, you are with stiff with cold. Here, take a sip. The chill will vanish. And see how brick after brick will set itself, and also see how it will make you see stars as soon as it runs through your body. It is first class.” Amar Singh poured about three quarters of home-brewed alcohol made with liquorice into a steel tumbler and filled the rest with water. The mason, took one swallow with eyes shut; the entire tumbler was tossed inside. The first class alcohol streaked through the very core of his being. For a moment or so, the darkness seemed to recede.

“Here, you also take a sip or two, oye. Otherwise you’ll say the Jat has turned out to be makhichoos*.” Karnail Singh said to Gura, handing him a tumbler, about half filled with alcohol and half with water. After a couple of sips, Gura’s hands began to move faster. The pain in his palms, raw with wet bricks and ashes, seemed to abate for some time. His entire body seemed to become warmer. He couldn’t even feel the cold anymore. Slightly intoxicated, both the mason and the labourer began to work at a faster pace. As if they wanted to bind Time to one spot.

By the time the mix was finished, stars had appeared in the sky. But the one thousand watt light bulb had spread light far and wide.

Gura rinsed the mason’s tools and put them in the durrie bag. He washed the tray and shovel and kept them on one side. As soon as the entire work got over, Amar Singh took the mason, Shinda into a sitting room on one side.

After washing his face and hands, Gura squatted on his haunches in a corner. Amar Singh put some moong dal in a saucer lying on the floor and threw some chapatis in Gura’s hand as if he feared defilement.

After gulping down his meal, Gura took his wages from Karnail Singh and sped off towards home. As he walked back, Gura felt the hundred rupee note several times with his fingers as if afraid he would lose it or drop it somewhere. Many good and bad thoughts began to enter his mind. As soon as he reached home, he kept the rations and other things bought from Gullu’s shop on the low wall in the house. On the other side of the wall, Veeran, making chapatis, threw a baleful glance at Gura and said, “I told you ‘come home on time’. You don’t care a mite for the child. The poor thing fell asleep, wailing.”

“How could I come on time? I could come only when the Jat let me go. You speak as if we are the rulers.” The tired and weary Gura wanted to give Veeran two across her face. But though raging inwardly, he quietly went inside to lie on the cot.

The silence spread its feet in the tension-laden atmosphere. After taking care of the meal, Veeran tied the animals in the shed and spread some straw under them. She left some fodder for them and shut the panel of the door so that the cold could not enter.

After completing all her chores, when Veeran took Neetta's pulse, she found his body to be burning with high fever. Then she slowly pulled the quilt over Neetta's body.

Then she glanced at Gura's cot. The quilt of coarse cotton had half fallen from the cot. She straightened the quilt and covered Gura with it properly and sat down softly on the side of the bed. Gura was fast asleep. She felt like shaking him awake to chat lovingly with him. To clasp him to herself as tightly as possible.

Then she thought 'poor fellow must be exhausted after an entire day's labour. Let him sleep; tomorrow he has to go again for another day of work. If he doesn't get enough sleep, he won't be able to work properly.' Veeran switched off the light and gently nudged the quilt aside to lie down with Neetta.

When the sleeping Gura turned to the other side, then the moonlight glinting through the wide gaps in the old, worm-infested keekar planks on the broken window, dazzled his eyes. He stretched his body and got up to go outside to answer the call of nature. He looked around. The moonlight was spread on all sides. The moon went about slyly, snooping on sleeping folk. A ripple bubbled in his heart and a tumult rose in his mind. He came back inside and went to sit at the edge of Veeran's cot and gently moved the quilt away from her face. The moon rose higher and Veeran's face grew more alluring. He felt as if Veeran was the most beautiful woman in the world. Her radiant beauty made him want to take her in his arms and clasp her tightly to his bosom. He slowly brought his face closer to Veeran's face. For a long time, he went on gazing at her.

A ray of thought came into his mind from God knows where, 'the poor wench worked and toiled in people's houses all day. Goes two miles to bring fodder from people's fields. Goes to hillocks

to fetch chaff and straw. And works till ten in the night doing other sundry tasks. Must be tired.
Why wake her up; let her be.'

Tomorrow, maybe

..... No

All right, once....

No....

.... You are a man.... But she is a woman....

God knows when this dilemma made him fall into his cot and God knows when he fell asleep.

Pind te Daak. Landey Tehsil Baghapurana (Moga)

Glossary:

bui: Plant, *Pandaria pilosa*

makhichoos: Miser, literally one who will suck a fly that falls into his meal so as not to waste it.

Tughlaq-like: Like the Sultan, Mohammed bin Tughlaq, who was notorious for illogical, unilateral decisions in history.

zarda: scented tobacco taken with betel leaf