

Dried-Up In M  
& Other Short



Azerbaijan Literature

# MIR JALAL

Dried-Up In Meetings  
& Other Short Stories

A-32538

Literature Series

**AZERBAIJAN**  
INTERNATIONAL



Literature Series



Dried-Up In Meetings and Other Short Stories  
by Mir Jalal Pashayev

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# MIR JALAL

## 90th Jubilee

### Remembering Father

by Hafiz Pashayev

*Since my father, Mir Jalal, died 20 years ago, on various occasions I have been asked to write introductions to books of his which were being reprinted or to pen recollections of my own. For various reasons I have declined—mainly because I didn't think the general reader would be so interested in my own personal impressions. I still feel this way. But because of the ever-increasing interest in his works and personality, now, on his 90th birthday, I have decided to write about a few of the experiences we shared together.*

It's only natural for a child to endear himself to the memories of his father. Though my father died many years ago, I still feel his spirit with me. As time passes, the memories, the conversations and all those events that we experienced together tend to become generalized. At the same time, it seems they take on a rather divine characteristic all of their own.

Many details of my father's life are reflected in the stories he wrote. Whenever he encountered an interesting event or person—whether at home, at work or at a gathering, he would say, “Now, that would make a good story!” or “That's a story in itself!” And I could be sure that the next morning a story that he had penned in Arabic script would be waiting for me to run down to the Writers



Union so that his secretaries Rahima Khanim [Mrs. Rahima] or Sona Khanim [Mrs. Sona] could type it in Cyrillic<sup>1</sup>.

I feel fortunate to have witnessed my father's creativity. Often I was the first person to read his works. When I read those stories now as I'm working abroad, I find that they take me back to my native land and the past. They give me a sense of security and familiarity. They make me feel even closer to my father.

Many people have observed that Mir Jalal was able to combine authorship, scholarship and teaching in a single career. This is very true. Though success in any one of these fields would have secured him a place in the cultural history of Azerbaijan, he succeeded in all three of these areas. Though on the surface, writing seemed to come easy to him, there was more to it. There was his untiring dedication to his work, his active mind and his talent.

During decades of teaching at Baku State University, many of Mir Jalal's students used to ask him about his scholarly and creative works, wondering which one he regarded as his masterpiece. He would reply: "My greatest achievement in life is my family." Mir Jalal had been separated from his own family in his youth when they returned to Iranian (Southern) Azerbaijan and he continued high school in Northern Azerbaijan (at that time Soviet Azerbaijan and today, the Independent Republic of Azerbaijan).

My father had three sons and two daughters and believed that the foundation of a healthy society must always be built upon strong family ties. In this, of course, his wife Pusteh Khanim (who is still with us) was his life-long partner. He once wrote a story called "The Girl who Cared for Flowers" in which the character looks after flowers with incredible devotion and tenderness. This story symbolically reflected our mother's devotion to her children.

Mir Jalal always tried to set an example for his children and students rather than giving advice to them. His friend of many years, the well-known poet Samad Vurgun, used to joke: "Mir Jalal, do you know why I can't always get along with you? It's because you're always so straight and honest about everything."

Mir Jalal chose his friends because of their ideas and outlook on life, not because of their status or Party affiliation. I think the most distinguished qualities of both his life and his stories were his simplicity and naturalness. I believe this comes from his sensitivity to nature. He would face every incident with patience and quietude, even the most critical and traumatic ones. He would analyze the situation and give his own philosophical point of view.

Mir Jalal provided a sense of serenity to those who associated with him. In the springtime, he had a habit of inviting his friends and relatives to what he used to call "white mulberry parties" in the summer homes or gardens [baghs] outside of Baku. He loved nature, especially lush green grass and trees. He had a special love for plane trees. Actually, those trees that line the streets of the dry, windswept city of Baku were only planted in the 1950s. Mir Jalal paid special attention to this occasion and he wrote the story, "I am a Citizen of Baku, Too," and dedicated it to the mayor, Agha Mirza Ahmadov, who had organized the plantings.

In his private life, Mir Jalal was modest and unpretentious. He never wanted to bother anyone or have to depend on anyone—even his own children. He used to always walk to work. When questioned why he didn't drive, he used to counter, "But I have the keys to all the cars in Baku," and would pull out a bill, the equivalent of a taxi fare.

In the summer after completing high school (1958), I often talked with my father about which university field

to enter. Children of some of the well-established writers were pursuing the same careers that their fathers had. And some were becoming quite successful. Though I was inclined towards the sciences, I did have an inkling for writing as perhaps is only natural for someone growing up in a family of writers. I expressed this interest to my father but he discouraged me. For him, the 20th century was the age of science and technology, and those were the people who would hold the keys to the future.

He felt that you did not have to enroll in special courses at the university to become a good writer. What you needed was talent. He would point to great writers such as Chekhov, who had studied medicine before becoming a great writer. He also felt that a country could appreciate poetry and literature too much, hindering advancement in other fields.

Mir Jalal did his best to avoid any involvement with Soviet administrative offices. Whenever it was necessary to get involved, he would ask one of his students to go in his place. One of his students recalled Mir Jalal saying while passing the Central Administration Office of Baku one day, "Thank God, I don't have to do anything with this place." Of course, his satires such as "Anket Anketov" or "Dried-Up in Meetings" clearly point out the destructive nature of the Soviet bureaucracy, especially under Stalin in the 1930s and 1940s.

I'll never forget in 1976, when I returned to Baku from studying advanced physics at the University of California (Irvine). I well remember the day when my father called me into his room and asked me to tell him my impressions of America. At first he listened to me quietly. Then after asking a few questions, he said, "I figured America would be just as you have described it." He cautioned me not to speak openly about my experiences. His generation had lived through

the purges of Stalin and Bagirov [Stalin's representative in Azerbaijan]. It was difficult for him not to be fearful.

In the 1970s, the economic situation in the Soviet Union worsened and its ideological foundation began to disintegrate. Mir Jalal would observe: "We never thought such a situation would ever occur." Then he would pose the rhetorical question: "What will happen to the Soviet Union in the future?" I'm very sorry that he did not live long enough to answer his own question, as he died [1978] before seeing the collapse of the USSR [1991].

As Azerbaijan travels on the road to independence, and as we are in the process of creating a new and able government, we often face the difficulty that individuals filling high responsible offices do not have the necessary high qualifications for their jobs. I especially see this from my vantage point as Azerbaijan's first Ambassador to the United States.

It reminds me of the last story that Mir Jalal wrote only a few days before he died. He called the story "Quality." It was about a man who went into a shop where he found everything for sale but, disappointingly, nothing was of a very high standard. In his own quiet, satirical way, Mir Jalal identified quality as the characteristic most needed in life. As we enter the 21st century and strive to forge a new independent nation, his words are as relevant today as they were when he penned them 20 years ago.

#### Footnote

<sup>1</sup> Azerbaijan has had four official alphabets this century. Up until 1928, the Arabic script was used. Then a modified Latin alphabet was adopted (1928-1937). At the height of Stalin's purges (1937-1938), Cyrillic was introduced throughout Soviet Azerbaijan and remained the official alphabet until 1991. When Azerbaijan gained its independence, one of the first official acts of the new Parliament was to re-adopt a Latin-based script (December 25, 1991).

# MIR JALAL

## The Life and Works (1908-1978)

by Hasan Javadi

Mir Jalal Ali oghlu Pashayev, known simply by his pen name "Mir Jalal," was born on April 26, 1908, in the village of Andabil, not far from Tabriz. It was a turbulent time in the history of both Azerbaijan and Iran, its southern neighbor, which had a significant Azerbaijani population. The Mozaffar al-Din Shah had just granted the Iranian Constitution in August 1906. Soon after his death, his despotic son, Mohammed Ali Shah, revoked the document, and with the help of a Russian brigade, bombarded the first Majlis [parliament] in Tehran in 1907.

A fierce struggle for freedom broke out. For several months, royalists and constitutionalists battled on the streets of Tabriz, as well as in some of Iran's other cities, until the Shah was finally ousted and fled to Russia. In this period, after the 1905 uprising in Russia, the Caucasus was a hot bed of revolution. Its revolutionaries had close ties with activists in both Iran and Turkey. Even some militia groups from the north were fighting in Tabriz.

Political tension increased during World War I. After the demise of Czarist Russia in 1917, Baku was occupied first by the British, then by the Ottomans. Then the Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan was established. Short-lived, it only survived two years, from 1918 to 1920, until the Bolsheviks took over and effectively severed the close ties that had existed between Northern and Southern Azerbaijan.

During World War I, Mir Jalal's family moved to Baku [Northern Azerbaijan], then part of the Soviet Union. Mir Jalal's father was amongst the nearly half a million people who, in the early decades of the century, left Iran in search of work and a better life in the oil fields of Baku:

Some years later his family decided to return to Iran. Mir Jalal was studying at a gymnasium (high school) in Ganja. As he was extremely bright, the principal encouraged his father to let him stay on and continue his studies. And thus, Mir Jalal became separated from his family for what would turn out to be decades. In 1928, at the age of 20, he graduated from the Teaching Training College in Ganja and soon became the principal of a school in the remote region of Gadabey. Mir Jalal was very satisfied with his job at the school because teachers were in demand and well-paid during the early period of the Soviet Union.

Two years later, he enrolled in the Ghazan University in Tatarstan (Russia), where Lenin had studied. Mir Jalal went on to the Institute of Higher Education of Baku where he managed to do research while writing for various newspapers such as "Genj Ishchi" (Young Worker), a publication to which many outstanding literary men of Azerbaijan contributed.

In 1933 Mir Jalal was involved with researching Azerbaijan's literary history at the State University. He wrote his Master's thesis on Fuzuli, the famous 15th century Azerbaijani poet, and it eventually was published. In 1947 he completed his doctoral dissertation on "Literary Schools in Azerbaijan." He placed special emphasis on the famous satirical journal, "Molla Nasreddin" (1906-1932) and its writers. That same year, he became a professor at the State University of Baku. He would go on to devote the rest of his life to teaching and writing.



It should be noted that drama and fiction were new literary genres in Azerbaijani literature at the time. Mirza Fath'ali Akhundzade (1812-1878), influenced by Molière, Shakespeare, Gogol and Griboedov, became an outspoken and liberal reformer and wrote six comedies and a short story between 1850 and 1856. Akhundzade used satire to challenge superstition, hypocrisy, despotism and fanaticism. He regarded satire and humorous realism as the best means to awaken people who had grown accustomed to wrongdoing, repression and corruption.

It was this same tradition that Jalil Mammadgulizade (1866-1932), Sabir Tahirzade (1862-1911) and many other outstanding writers and poets would use in the journal "Molla Nasreddin," which gained considerable influence, not only in Azerbaijan, but also in Iran and Turkey during that period. Mammadgulizade, the editor, further expanded the horizons of realistic prose in the Azeri language with his fascinating short stories and novels. Sabir, with subtle sarcasm, humanism and delightful satire, set the stage for future writers including Mir Jalal.

The most famous of Mir Jalal's novel's, "The Manifest of a Youth" (1938), has since been translated into many languages. Cast in the traditional genre of Soviet fiction that depicts class struggle, it describes the life of a mother and her two sons in the early 1920s in Baku. The repressive measures of a local landowner force the two brothers to flee their village. The older brother ends up with the early Bolshevik workers and becomes a heroic revolutionary; while the younger, a boy of seven or eight years old, is thrown out by his employer and freezes to death during a severe winter. As the mother goes in search of her sons, she becomes involved in revolutionary activities. Apart from ideology, the novel bears a striking resemblance to Victor Hugo's "Les Miserables" and Gorky's "Mother."

His second novel "Achig Kitab" (The Open Book, 1941) created a sensation in Azerbaijan and was criticized by many Party members. It is very different in nature, as its characters look at society from the narrow perspective of their personal interests, never hesitating to sacrifice everything to achieve their private goals. Karim Galdiyev works in the offices of wheat procurement. He steals and cheats and is "corruption incarnate" in Soviet officialdom. Then he gets transferred to Baku, where he prospers even further amidst the corrupt circles of the capital.

In both his novels and short stories, Mir Jalal's prose is extremely lucid, simple and descriptive. As one of the most admired prose writers of Azerbaijan, he was part of a distinguished literary coterie which included Mohammad Sayid Ordubadi (historical novelist), Husein Javid (playwright), Mikayil Mushvig (poet), Samad Vurgun (poet) and Husein Mehdi (writer). Both Javid and Mushvig would later be exiled by Stalin to Siberia, where they died.

In order to trace the background of Mir Jalal's fiction, especially his short stories, one has to look into the development of realistic fiction and satire in Azerbaijan. Mir Jalal did not indulge in Party politics in his short stories.

Akhundzade, with the exception of one dramatic piece, wrote short historical fiction taken from sixteenth century Iranian history. But it was Abdulrahim Hagverdiyev (1870-1933) who introduced the short story into Azerbaijani literature. Mir Jalal knew him personally and was a great admirer. Jalil Mammadgulizade also contributed greatly to the development of the short story in Azerbaijan. The Russian critic Belinsky once said that realistic fiction in Russian literature can be traced to Gogol's "Overcoat." Similarly, Mir Jalal noted that Azerbaijani realistic fiction builds upon the "Post Box" by Jalil Mammadgulizade.

This short story was published in "Molla Nasreddin." As the story goes, an Azerbaijani visits the khan, who gives him a letter to drop in the mail box. But being from the village, he isn't sure whether to stand by the mail box and guard the letter, or to leave. Just then a Russian mailman appears, opens the box and takes the letters out. Thinking the mailman is a robber, the villager attacks him and a fight breaks out. Only after the villager is taken to the police station does he realize how the postal system works.

With Sabir's many humorous and satirical stories, articles, and poems, and the excellent cartoons by Azim Azimzade and two German cartoonists Roemer and Schelling, "Molla Nasreddin" became one of the most influential periodicals throughout the Caucasus. It was in this context that Mir Jalal's satirical fiction developed.

In terms of fiction, Mir Jalal wrote two fairly distinct types of works. His novels are typical of works produced in the Soviet era. However, in his short stories he deals more with the personalities one encounters in every society rather than with ideology. Mir Jalal is always quick to satirize bureaucrats who are hopelessly out of touch with reality and who live in the world of officialdom and regulations.

In the story "Hey Ismayil, Make Him Understand," the sister of a dictator "buys" whatever she wants without paying money to anyone. It is said that the story is based on reality and that the dictator in question was Bagirov who, under Stalin, ruled Azerbaijan with an iron hand from 1928 until Stalin's death in 1953.

In "Used to Scoldings," Mir Jalal analyzes the mentality of people who are used to being bullied. Such types not only seem to tolerate being abused but also consider something amiss if they are not ordered around.

In "Peaches," Mir Jalal criticizes excessive infatuation with everything Western. This is the beginning of what in the Middle East became criticism of "Westomania" or "gharabzadagi" as the Iranian writer Jalal Alahmad calls it in his book of the same name.

Very often, Mir Jalal's stories depict people we know in our own society with all of their idiosyncrasies, aspirations and shortcomings. At the same time, Mir Jalal provides a fascinating glimpse of Azerbaijani society under Soviet rule. As seen in "Rules of Etiquette for Modern Weddings," a society, supposedly atheistic, has not really lost its Islamic roots. In "Matishga" the Russian and Azerbaijani sides of society are compared, especially in terms of their attitudes towards women.

Apart from numerous works of literary criticism, Mir Jalal wrote more than a dozen novels and nearly 1,000 short stories, which have been collected in volumes such as "The Thief in the Garden" (1937), "Congratulations!" (Gozun Ayden, 1939), "Stories of My Country" (1942), "Life Stories" (1945) and "Simple Stories" (1955). Mir Jalal's canvas of subjects and characters is broad. More than complexity of plot, he concentrates on developing his characters. He has an incredible imagination, and the men and women of his stories come from every walk of life, providing a panoramic view of the society in which he lived. As an artist, Mir Jalal should be remembered for his originality, his depth of vision, his humanity and his keen sense of humor.

In this collection of short stories, which is being published to commemorate the 90th anniversary of Mir Jalal's birth, I have tried to provide a representative sample of his shorter fiction. I hope this first book of Mir Jalal's work ever to be published in the English-speaking world will serve as a prelude for further volumes. I would especially

like to thank Ambassador Hafiz Pashayev, Mir Jalal's son, who has assisted me in many ways in the translation of these works and provided many valuable details about his father's life.

*Hasan Javadi*  
*Washington, D.C.*  
*March 1998*

MIR JALAL  
Dried-Up In Meetings  
(1954)

Dried-up figs, dried-up apricots and dried-up wild berries—you often see these things, but a man who is dried up in meetings is rarely identified.

He's the one dried up and mummified from meetings—the one who has lost his zest for life. You know the type even if you don't know his name. You know him well and often pass him in front of his office or on the stairs—he's the thin man, leaning forward, taking long strides.

Where's he rushing off to?

Another meeting.

Under his arm, his gray worn-out attaché case is full of papers and notes thrown together in total disarray.

What are all those papers?

Protocols!

All his life, immersed in thought, frowning, with head bent down, face clouded, unaware of the world—that's the way he goes about his business.

For him, there's no difference between night and day, spring and fall, hot and cold, heaven and earth. None of them have any significance. One is amazed to see this sullen-looking man who is so distant from the sounds of spring, the fragrance of flowers, the songs of birds, or of music and joy! He doesn't enjoy these things.

Do you think this man—the incarnation of bureaucracy itself—acts any differently in his private family life? When he comes home and takes off his hat and meets his

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wife and children, does his personality change? Does a light brighten up his face and a smile appear on his lips?

If you think so, you're mistaken.

No, he is a man of principle, steadfastness and directness. He conducts his own family life like a meeting. He emphatically believes that all of us have been created for meetings. Our heads were given to us for making appointments, our fingers for writing regulations, our voices for making speeches and our hands for applauding at meetings.

To him, the whole universe was created as the result of an important meeting and everything functions according to a single decree. If you don't believe it, take a look at the sky. See how millions of stars are gathered around the moon, which is chairing the meeting. For thousands of years, a heated discussion has been going on up there; occasionally its thunder-like sound is heard on earth.

Catch a glimpse of Dried-Up conversing with his wife, Mayransa. "Comrade Mayransa, it has been suggested that you wash my socks and hang them up to dry."

When his wife does not answer, Dried-Up gets up and taps the blunt end of a pencil against the table, insisting, "An answer is requested, Comrade Mayransa."

Dried-Up's not-so-easy-life, so used to being spent in meetings, appointments and in giving speeches was shaken several times by his own family affairs. Let me explain.

One evening 18 years ago when Dried-Up returned from a meeting, he was surprised to find that his wife was not at home. He wondered what meeting she could be attending at such a time of night. A short while later, the neighbor's wife stopped by and congratulated him.

"Brother Dried-Up, good news! You have a beautiful daughter. Mayransa Khanum is in the hospital waiting for you."

Dried-Up didn't answer. His face only showed signs of anger and fear. It darkened even more when he asked, "Was this necessary? Who directed this order? What will they say at work?"

Then the baby was brought home all bundled up. Dried-Up did not leave his world of papers and notes to even take a look at the child. Mayransa asked her husband to choose a good name. Dried-Up introduced the matter at a meeting of his club. Many names were suggested, but he accepted none of them, insisting, instead, on his own ideas. He suggested, "Ma'aruzeh," which means "Written Report." People in the meeting roared with laughter and then they applauded. And that's how his daughter's name came to be "Ma'aruzeh."

Ma'aruzeh grew up. She began to read. And, eventually, that's what attracted her father's attention. Whenever Ma'aruzeh needed books or writing pads, Dried-Up would observe all the formalities.

First, his daughter would be required to write her father a request. Then the request would have to be sent to school to be approved by her teacher. After that, Mayransa, his wife, would have to sign it. Eventually, Dried-Up would get around to buying the book or the pad from a shop.

After getting his daughter's signature as a receipt, he would assign a date for it, "until the second week of the coming month."

He would then send a copy of this record to his office in order to "keep them informed," and he kept another copy in his own archives just in case anyone should ask him about it in the future.

The principal of the school spoke to Ma'aruzeh several times. "My child, ask your father to come to school, I have something important to tell him."



Dried-Up would always send back the reply, "I have a meeting to attend."

When the girl grew up, Dried-Up's problems multiplied. He would give the same answer to all her would-be suitors: "Fill out a form. I'll look into it." The suitors, on hearing this, would disappear.

Eventually, Askar, a taxi driver who was very sincere in his intentions towards Ma'aruzeh, refused to give up his pursuit. Ma'aruzeh's mother was happy about the prospect of having Askar as her son-in-law so she tried to influence her husband.

"Dear, they're asking for the hand of Ma'aruzeh."

"Be more specific. Who wants her? And under what conditions?"

"The driver, Askar."

"Where's his letter of request?"

"There is no letter."

"Don't be ridiculous. If there is no request, no forms and no guarantee, why are you wasting my time?"

Mayransa pleaded. "Perhaps, whenever you don't have any meetings, you could meet this man—he could come and talk with you."

Dried-Up repeated the name of the man several times and then shook his head at Mayransa.

"His name is very old fashioned, very old fashioned. Whoever wants to marry Ma'aruzeh should have a name worthy of her."

"If you mention it to him, I'm sure he'll change his name."

"I don't need him. If someone wants our daughter, he should send his description and photograph. I could get to know him, and then we could start to talk about it."

Dried-Up repeated his refusal: "I said he should send his job description, and then we could talk about it. There's no need for further discussion."

Mayransa said nothing further. Askar was told what Dried-Up had said. He replied, "If he wants my résumé, let him go get it himself from my office, but I know an easier way so we won't have to bother him needlessly."

That evening Dried-Up was arranging his minutes and official reports. Mayransa opened the closet door and put on some new clothes. When her husband looked up, he saw his wife in a rather festive mood, quickly getting dressed.

"Dear, where are you going?" he asked, surprised.

"Nowhere. There is a small meeting."

"Where is Ma'aruzeh?"

"She's at her own meeting and has sent you a note."

Mayransa took a small envelope from under a book on the table and gave it to her husband. "It seems that the kids have an appointment. Read and find out."

When he read the letter, he became livid with anger.

*Dear Father,*

*We have discussed this extensively. We have thought about it and talked it over. We didn't want to bother you so we've gone to the Notary. Tomorrow is our Wedding Day. It will be in the home of the bridegroom. If you have time after your meetings, please drop by.*

*Your daughter,  
Ma'aruzeh*

Dried-Up dried up even more. He jumped up, saying, "What? What? They've issued a resolution without consulting me? Who certified this?"

Mayransa, without losing her calm demeanor, replied, "You must certify it!"

Dried-Up lost his temper. "But I haven't read his request nor investigated his job. Without having some



discussion, how can I approve of such a decision? What kind of insanity is this?"

Mayransa put on her boots and uttered her final words, "Whether you approve or not is your problem. I will be at Askar's house for the wedding. Look after the house and don't leave the doors or windows open!"

And with those words, she slammed the door and stormed out.

For Dried Up, it was as if the whole house was spinning around and a millstone had been tied around his neck.

# MIR JALAL

## Anket Anketov

(1932)

*"Anket Anketov" is one of Mir Jalal's finest satires ridiculing the Soviet bureaucratic system. Even his title is a spoof. The word "anket" means "personnel folder" in Russian. Here Mir Jalal doubles the first "name" (a fairly common naming practice) and adds the traditional Russian ending "-ov", which means "son of." Anket Anketov means Mr. Personnel File, the son of Mr. Personnel File.*

*Note that the author's satire of bureaucrats pokes fun at those who held some of the lowest positions in society—bath house managers, back scrubbers, cleaning women and accountants. In this way, he successfully distances himself from criticism that he might have received had he described bureaucrats in higher positions.*

*Despite the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Soviet practice of maintaining "personnel files" is still very much part of contemporary Azerbaijan. Mir Jalal skillfully calls attention to the absurdity of valuing a relationship with paperwork more than with people themselves.*

From the first day that Anketov was appointed as Chief of the United Bath Houses, people stood outside his office, waiting to make their appeals to him. Sometimes there was a long queue—someone complaining about his boss, another asking for a raise, another wanting to change positions, another wanting to study at the university while another wanted to go on vacation to a health resort.

Anketov was new on the job. His was an important position with so much responsibility and so few staff to assist him.

Many believed that Anketov would not be able to handle the position and some had even opposed his appointment. But when Anketov heard about the criticism, he said, "Let them criticize me. Why should I care about such people—these dregs of capitalism? They want to continue their despicable work and are afraid that they're doomed to be wiped out. Just leave them to me. I'll get rid of them."

The first thing he did after getting the job was to summon all of the managers of the bath houses, and ask them to bring their "personnel files." "Yes, sir!" they replied, and began pulling up chairs for a meeting.

But Anketov would not allow them to sit. "Yes, sir!" is not the same as "Here they are, sir! I need you to get your personnel files and bring them to me now."

"But Comrade Anketov, if we leave, there won't be a meeting," one of the men said.

Anketov was a bit puzzled by this statement. Opening his arms as if to embrace someone or something, he spoke with a calm voice: "Without a personnel file, what's the use of a meeting, my son? Shouldn't I know with whom I am having a meeting?"

So, the managers got up and left Anketov's office. They returned with their personnel files, some from home and some from the office. And some hurriedly filled out application forms while others prepared résumés and work files. When all the personnel files were piled up on his desk, Anketov apologized to the managers and said, "Comrades, I want to get to know all of you. That's why I'm asking you to wait outside my office. I'll have my secretary call you in shortly."

Saying this, he shut his door and began to page through the personnel files, reading them slowly and haltingly. "Mmmm...Mursal Hadiyev. Born 1911. Father, blacksmith." Anketov underlined this word in red and put a question mark in the margin. Then he examined the rest of Hadiyev's file.

The managers had waited about an hour in the hallway, when, from the adjacent room, Anketov's secretary appeared and announced, "Murad Ahmadov may go home now. Mursal Hadiyev must return with his father's certificate. The rest of you, please come in."

Ahmadov didn't understand, "Comrade, what are you telling me? Let me talk to him and see what he wants of me!" Hadiyev joined in and shouted, "What certificate? My father has been dead for more than 30 years. Even his bones have disintegrated by now!"

The secretary, making fun of him, said, "Why are you acting like such a simpleton? The chief doesn't want your father literally. He just wants to know his profession." Hadiyev pleaded, "My dear, let him look at my documents! He was a blacksmith. All the information is right there in my file."

In order to get away from the complaints, the secretary returned to her desk, but the managers would not leave her alone. Finally, she cried out in exasperation, "Write a letter!"

"What kind of letter?"

"Write a letter so that we can see what you want."

"We don't want anything! You tell us what you want from us!"

The secretary said, "You know very well that the chief is checking the records of his staff. He's been reading your personnel files for an hour. Now he calls me and tells me that your records do not satisfy him."

Ahmadov left in protest. Hadiyev waited until the meeting was over so that he could talk directly to the chief.

Anketov did not keep the managers long. He gave them strict orders to prepare their staffs' personnel files and to bring them to him in three days. After the managers left, Hadiyev came in. Anketov's head was down, buried in the files he had so neatly arranged on his desk. He raised his head, and not seeing any certificate in Hadiyev's hand, asked, "What do you want?"

"I don't want anything. According to your secretary, you wanted to question me about something."

The chief ran his fingers through his hair and asked Hadiyev, "What's your name?"

As soon as Hadiyev answered, the chief found his file. Uttering a meaningful "yes," he put his finger on the question he had written on Hadiyev's file.

"You have written this in a rather vague manner. I read your file. I read all of it very carefully, yet I still don't know you very well. For instance, in one place you say your father was a blacksmith. But there are many types of blacksmiths."

Hadiyev interrupted him. "What type? He was a blacksmith. He shod horses and oxen."

A sarcastic smile appeared on Anketov's lips. Shaking his head, he said, "The question has nothing to do with horses or oxen. The question has to do with their owners. Did your father shoe the animals of wealthy exploiters or those of the poor and helpless?"

Hadiyev began to laugh. "Whoever gave him money—he shod their animals!"

"But surely, during the era of the bourgeoisie when your father lived and worked, the landowners had more money than the poor."

"Of course, the landowners were wealthy."

"So, you would admit that most of your father's earnings came from the oppressor. Isn't that so?"

Hadiyev replied, "What difference does it make?"

Anketov, not raising his head from the papers, raised his hand and ordered Hadiyev to keep silent. He went on, "Just a moment, just a moment. Isn't that so?"

"Isn't what so?"

"Isn't it true that landowners had more horses shod?"

"It's true."

"That will do. You can go."

Hadiyev said, "I don't understand why you're so interested in my father's occupation as a blacksmith. Do you have an animal to be shod?"

Again, Anketov did not raise his head from the papers. He placed his left thumb on the family name "Hadiyev," shook his right index finger at the man standing before him, and taking his pen he wrote, "You are not allowed to have the position. Take ten days at your own expense and clarify your parent's social position."

Because the chief was so absorbed in the personnel files, application forms, résumés, character recommendations, investigations, explanations and requests, he probably did not hear Hadiyev's last words as he left the office.

Anketov could hardly wait until he could get a chance to organize his files. It was as if he believed everything depended on those folders. Some days he would sit in his office from morning until late at night reading personnel files, one by one, like a delightful novel. He would arrange the folders according to the social positions of their owners. The folder of any person he disliked would go to the bottom of the pile, while the folder of someone he liked would be placed on top. In the margin of the letters of request, he would pen, "I gave him another job. Fifty manats added to his salary. As he has worked hard, I am giving him a raise."

Anketov would carry on real conversations with the folders as he occasionally moved them from one shelf to the other. Someone overhearing him might have thought that he was dealing with five or six kindergarten children. It was as if Anketov were taking these children by the hand and guiding them—one child here, one child there, and still another child on a chair. Sometimes he talked to the folders as if they were real human beings, or in his own words, “workers.” To Anketov, it seemed that these folders were actually good and bad workers. The real people—the bath house managers, the cashiers, boiler attendants, cleaners—were mere shadows of their files. The actual things were these folders; their neatness and accuracy indicated the honesty and integrity of the owner. If “Fired” appeared in the margin, its owner would disappear like a phantom. And conversely, the person who had “Accepted” written in his file would be called into work that very same day.

If someone told the chief that one of his workers was ill and was in the hospital, Anketov often refused to believe the news. Immediately, he would go to the files to look up the personnel folder. If there was no mention of illness there, he would say, “I beg your pardon, but he is safe and sound and is doing a fine job.” Sometimes he was so familiar with a particular folder that he would not even open it. He would simply look at the shelves, and seeing the folder number in its right place, nod his head and say, “He’s doing a fine job.”

It was at such moments that his secretary would slap her hand against her knee and exclaim, “Oh, my God, he doesn’t believe me! Comrade Anketov, Gurbanali has been in the army for the last three months! He sent a letter from some far-off region, and I think he’s presently working as a sanitation worker.”

Anketov though angry, would control his rage and say, “Stupid, can’t you understand? Don’t you see his personnel file is right in front of your eyes? How could he go anywhere without it? If he had gone, his personnel file would have followed him to the appropriate place!”

Frustrated by such explanations, the secretary would walk out, not wanting to argue with him. It was useless to do otherwise because the files were, in fact, everything to him. It was as if whatever one did, whatever one believed or whatever one thought immediately penetrated the personnel file and remained there indelibly—until the end of time. In order to evaluate someone’s work, it was enough to bring that person’s file to the chief—almost as if to the Day of Judgment.

One day, in one of the meetings, Anketov stood up and said, “Comrades, we have a tradition here in the bath houses that is really quite absurd. I’m referring to the Complaint Books. Every passerby stops and writes something in them. We don’t know if that person is a friend, an enemy or if he’s neutral. I propose that the person who files a complaint should first fill out a request form and have it certified by us; otherwise, we should not allow his complaints. People write and write, and we don’t know into which personnel file to place their complaints.”

Upon hearing this, Anketov’s boss, the Head of the Municipal Department, interrupted him. “Comrade Anketov, that’s enough! Be sensible. It seems that you are having a hard time listening to the voices of the masses and learning their opinions. You must understand that the Book of Complaints is the voice of the people—our customers’ opinions. Complaints are a permanent record!”

Anketov blushed deeply and regretted what he had said. He asked for permission to speak, and with quivering lips said, “I’ve made a grave mistake. Now I understand



my mistake and I fully accept it. But please, I beg you, don't write this incident in my personnel file." Anketov always guarded his own personnel file fiercely.

Sometimes the managers approached and complained, "Comrade Anketov, the workers want you to come and see them, to see how they work."

Immediately, Anketov would pull out the folders and ask, "Which worker requested that? Let me see..." Then he would point to the shelves and sigh, "Day and night, am I not with them? What more do they want?"



One day the manager of Bath House Number 10 needed some workers. He wanted a bath attendant for the women's section, a cashier and two cleaning women. Since he knew Anketov's style, he had already prepared the applicants' personnel files, put them in a folder and brought them to Anketov. He said, "The applicants are at the door. Do you want to see them?"

"What do I want to see them for? I'm not interested in what they look like!"

"I thought you might want to talk to them."

Anketov slapped his large hand on the folder and said, "Here are the files. I want to talk to these."

The manger left and Anketov began to examine the "potential employees."

One of the personnel files belonged to Nuru Nuruzade, a member of the Young Communist League (Komsomol). The manger recommended that he be employed as a cashier. He had some experience in accounting, and in high school he had received excellent marks in mathematics.

Another file belonged to Nisa, daughter of Gambar, who had six years of experience in Bath House Number 11 in Tbilisi. She was very good and the manager wanted to take her as the bath attendant for the women's section.

Sharabanu, an old woman, and her divorced daughter, Masma, both wanted to be cleaning ladies.

Anketov took his red pen and wrote his comments in the margins. He rejected Masma, asking her to bring an official document pertaining to her relations with her ex-husband. He decided to employ Sharabanu, the old lady. He was really pleased with the personnel file and the account of Nisa, who was the daughter of Gambar. The more he read the more he was impressed, "She is the daughter of a blacksmith. None of her relatives include any suspicious characters. She is a housewife and is enrolled in literacy classes.

"I need an employee with such a clean record." And so he made her cashier. Instead of Nisa, the experienced bath house attendant, he made Nuru, the mathematics whiz and a male, the bath attendant of the women's section. He placed the files in different folders on the shelves and came back rubbing his hands together in satisfaction.



Soon the manager called on the phone and complained that Nisa, daughter of Gambar, did not want to accept the cashier's position, and that she had every right to refuse it because she was illiterate and could barely add and subtract numbers. Anketov was beside himself with anger. "Who is she not to accept? Let me talk to her!"

But he put down the phone, quickly picked up her folder and began to scold. "I really didn't expect this from you, not from you. I had absolute trust in you and that was why I appointed you to this position. Is this a joke? I call it nothing but a joke. Don't joke about such things! Now get to work!"

He put the papers back in the folder and returned it to the shelf. Suddenly, the door opened and in walked a teenage boy. "Hello, are you Comrade Anketov?" he asked.

teenage boy. "Hello, are you Comrade Anketov?" he asked. Anketov walked around the desk as if busily looking for something. Then, raising his head, he asked, "And what if I am?"

The young boy replied, "I have come to thank you. You want to make me the attendant at the women's bath."

"What do you mean 'want?' Two days have passed since I appointed you. You should already be working there by now."

"No, excuse me, but in order to take this job, I'd have to be out of my mind, just like you."

Outraged, Anketov stared at Nuru, but said nothing. He went to the shelves and pulled out Nuru's personnel file. Angrily, he opened the file and wrote, "You're fired! Go wherever you want to go!"

Nuru grabbed the folder from Anketov's hand. Anketov was shocked. "Be careful, the papers might fall out!" he cried.

"Let me see what you've written in my file."

Nuru opened the folder and read Anketov's note. He burst out laughing. "Look at this idiot and his claims! Who are you to fire me? You fool!"

Saying this, he tore the Chief's note into pieces, right in front of him.

"Uff," a sigh escaped Anketov's lips. Shocked, he fainted and collapsed on the floor in a heap.

## MIR JALAL

### Hey Ismayil, Make Him Understand (1962)

They say that a campaign against bribery is underway. That's quite true. But what I want to know is, how do you define bribery? Bribery is receiving a request from an official which isn't legal. I give him some money and he ignores the law and does what I want. That's bribery!

Another example is one in which I might have a special relationship with a minister or a chief, such that whenever we are having a special dish with rice pilaf, I can't eat without inviting him. I ask him to join us and then I prepare a feast. Some scholars believe that this is a different sort of impropriety. But in this case no cash is involved; instead, goods are exchanged as bribes.

There are other situations which can't be considered either as bribe-taking or as showing respect. I don't know what they should be called. When you ask, they say, "No, this is different." But what I'd like to know is, just how is it different?

About 15 years ago, I was a teacher in the town of Khashmaz [in the northern part of Azerbaijan near the Caspian coast and not far from the Russian border]. I used to teach math right in the middle of town, in a middle school that faced the central square.

Now there was a certain woman in that town, or I should say, a certain lady with short hair who used to wear riding boots. Whatever this lady wanted, no one ever refused. Her name was Rutubat Khanim [Mrs. Rutubat]. You would see her point her finger toward a big piece of

choice meat, and say to the butcher, "Cousin, what is that chunk of meat?"

"It's a prime piece of lamb!" he'd reply.

"Put it on the scale!"

"OK, as you wish!"

"Give me a hand!"

When the butcher wanted to weigh half of the piece, the lady would say, "There's no need to weigh it. Just wrap it up and I'll take it as it is."

"Yes, ma'am!" the butcher would reply. Then he'd take the meat, marbled with fat, wrap it nicely and give it to her. Rutabat Khanim would take the meat and leave.

I was shocked. Why didn't she pay? I'd think to myself, "Perhaps they know each other and she'll pay later." But I'd see this same lady in a restaurant, and after eating and wiping her mouth, she'd leave the restaurant without paying. Or, I'd see her entering the grocery shop, and after filling her basket with sugar, tea, rice and butter, she'd leave without paying, leaving the grocer bewildered.

It was amazing! Perhaps we had entered the era of true communism and money was no longer necessary. But if that were true than I was the only one who wasn't benefiting!

I should add that the lady with the short haircut, Rutabat Khanim, never went alone on these shopping excursions. She was always accompanied by a tall military man, who would carry her basket or her suitcase. As she made her rounds in the bazaar, the basket would get heavier, but never did she pay a penny. This was most amazing. Even the chief of the market couldn't do this. At least the tax collector gives a receipt. Even the food inspector doesn't behave in this way!

Once, I saw Rutabat Khanim in a newly opened fabric shop. She had ordered several rolls of fabric, and from each roll she took enough fabric to cut a dress. But this

time, when she started to leave the shop, the shopkeeper called out, "Wait!"

"What is it?" she asked.

"But, my sister, you forgot the money," he replied.

"What money?"

"The money for the fabric!"

The woman turned to her tall companion and said, "Comrade Ismayil, please make him understand!"

Ismayil approached the shopkeeper and said, "Forget about it!"

"What?"

"I said, 'forget about it!' "

"So, what am I to do?"

"She is the sister of 'the man.' Put it on a special account!"

"On what?"

"On a special account!"

The fabric salesman was bewildered. The lady, as if trying to blind him, pointed her finger toward him. "Where has this stupid person come from? Don't you know who I am?"

"No, my sister. I don't know."

"You will know. Go and sit down."

"But, how?"

Again, she turned to her companion and said, "Hey Ismayil, make him understand! From what god-forsaken place have they brought this man? Couldn't they find anyone else in Guba, is that why they brought this guy?"

Ismayil called the store manager, who turned to the fabric salesman and shouted, "Forget about it! Put it on a special account!"

I witnessed this entire scene. I didn't understand. This was neither bribery nor respect for some minister. This was said out of fear. Out of fear, one gives his goods

and his money to a robber, a thief or a highwayman, but this type of thing happens in the mountains or in other places—not in the center of town in broad daylight in front of everyone! In the heyday of the Soviet government, why should a man give away his goods? This is unheard of!

I thought to myself, “I’ll bet that this is a different type of fear. I’ll bet that Rutubat Khanim is a different type of lady.” It turned out that she was the sister of the most powerful man in the country. Nobody dared stand up to her. As soon as she appeared in the market, everyone tried to hide and stash their goods away from sight. But she was too quick and too keen for these people. Like an eagle, she would descend upon them, open their bags, and fly away taking whatever she wanted. For many years, this lady rode her horse unchallenged in that town.

But in the summer of 1953, Rutubat Khanim stopped coming. No one knew what had happened to her. One said that she was sick; another that she had fled. Some said that she had died, but her military man, Ismayil, was still in the bazaar. Standing as though he had just retired, Ismayil would put his two hands behind his back and stand and watch the everyday affairs of the world.

“Hey, Ismayil, where is Rutubat Khanim?”

Ismayil would shift his weight from one foot to the other, look around, but not say a single word. Ismayil, who used to be the one who made everyone “understand,” was now silent. He didn’t want to speak.

“Ismayil, what happened to that woman?”

“What woman?”

“Rutabat Khanim.”

Ismayil was silent. He scratched his neck.

“Where is Rutubat Khanim?”

“Let’s talk about something else,” he would reply.

Rutubat Khanim had disappeared without a trace. At

one time, you could have seen her march through town in her riding boots, followed like a shadow by Ismayil who carried her basket and answered, “Yes, ma’am” to her orders. You might have thought that she was the town goddess. It’s hard to imagine that someone with roots as deep as Rutabat Khanim’s could vanish from this town so easily. But 1953<sup>1</sup> was a terrible year for her. Whatever happened in the summer of that year, the result was that the wield of Rutubat Khanim’s power was broken. Then, she simply vanished. No one saw her; no one heard her ordering Ismayil around again. The townspeople laughed and were delighted to be free of the chief and his sister, the bully.

The only person still associated with Rutubat Khanim was Ismayil. Like an autumn leaf, he became yellow and dried-up. He even shrank in size. He didn’t have anyone he could make “understand”. He had no patience. Whenever anyone asked about Rutubat Khanim, he’d get embarrassed. His face would turn red and he’d say, “Let’s talk about something else!”

“Ismayil, may those days be gone and never return!” And he would just say, “Let’s talk about something else.”

#### Footnote

<sup>1</sup> On March 5, 1953, Joseph Stalin died. He had been the head of the Communist Party and the State Leader of Soviet Union since Lenin’s death in 1924. This story may refer to the powerful and dictatorial communist leader of Azerbaijan Mir Jafar Bagirov whose sister abused his power. Most leaders and their relatives did the same thing. Bagirov was a native of the town of Guba and a protégé of Stalin.



## MIRJALAL

Used to Scoldings  
(1962)

Habits! Some say habits are a good thing; others say, no, they're bad. But who's right?

In the winter our apartments are heated with hot water pipes. In the basement, there are huge boilers that send hot steam up through the pipes.

The person who stokes the boilers and turns them off—the boiler room attendant—is always busy fussing around with them. His name is Ghulam. Everybody knows him. He's a very good guy. He knows everybody and everyone's profession.

Upstairs from us is an apartment which belongs to a government minister. I don't know why Ghulam always used to keep such a close watch on that apartment. He always tried to see that the minister was comfortable by making his apartment pleasantly warm. The minister also paid special attention to this matter.

Every morning you could see him standing down in front of the boiler room, addressing Uncle Ghulam in his husky voice, "Ghulam, the kids are freezing. Why don't you heat up this damn thing? What's the matter?" Or "Ghulam, why is it so hot? The house is almost on fire, man!"

For a period of several years, Ghulam put up with the minister's comments—sometimes raising the heat, sometimes lowering it. Every now and then, he would even go upstairs and check the temperature himself. Then he'd come back down and take appropriate action. He was

so accustomed to these things that he took orders from the minister as if he were in the military, ready to fulfill every command.

The minister realized that Ghulam needed to be ordered around, and so he would say, "Ghulam, that's enough. Don't turn the apartment into a sauna. Lower the heat of the boilers." Or, "Ghulam, why is it so cold? There's no hot water. What's going on?"

Ghulam would raise his hand up to his forehead and say, "Upon my eyes."<sup>1</sup> Then he would rush down to the boiler room.

One day the minister moved out of the apartment and another one took his place. This one was from another ministry. I'm not quite sure where he worked. But it was clear that he was definitely a minister because every morning a car would come and take him to his office. And every evening it would bring him back home. Of course, Ghulam wanted to keep his job, and accordingly, he was very attentive. Again, he would stand at the door waiting for orders. But strangely enough, no one ordered him around. This minister would simply reply to his greeting and drive away. Ghulam expected him to complain. But not a single word. One day, two days, five days passed the same way. Ghulam got bored and rather annoyed.

"How is this? The minister doesn't say anything? Why isn't he demanding anything of me? Is he annoyed? Doesn't he want to talk to me? Perhaps someone has told him something bad about me?"

A few times Uncle Ghulam even waited at the door for the minister and once after greeting him, he dared to ask, "Comrade Minister, how is the heating system? Are you suffering from the cold?"

"We have no complaints! Don't worry. Thanks a lot."

Uncle Ghulam came back downstairs dejected and disappointed. He was puzzled, "What's going on? To be a minister and not order the boiler attendant around? No,

this wasn't right. Definitely, someone has been gossiping behind my back. The minister doesn't even look me in the eyes."

The next morning Ghulam was at the door again. This time he inquired of the minister's wife, "Ma'am, how is the central heating working? Is the temperature of the rooms to your liking?"

Before she could answer, the minister's voice was heard, "It's fine. Thanks a lot, Uncle Ghulam. It's just fine!"

Ghulam was surprised. "My god! this good-for-nothing fellow doesn't understand anything about hot and cold. Last night all of the boilers were working, and it was blazing hot, but he didn't say a thing!"

The new minister, it turns out, was a quiet, patient and orderly person. Whenever it was necessary, he would turn the heating control on or off in the apartment and maintain the temperature at an appropriate level. He didn't demand anything from Uncle Ghulam.

But Ghulam was apprehensive and kept wondering, "What's going on? What has this man heard about me? Why isn't he saying anything? He has heard something bad about me. That's why he's avoiding me."

It was obvious that Uncle Ghulam was used to being scolded and didn't want to give up this habit. While most people who get bashed over the head do their best to avoid such abuse and free themselves of it, there are others like Ghulam who start worrying if they aren't getting bullied around. Ghulam kept wondering what had happened and why the minister wasn't ordering him around.

"What has he heard? God help me!" Uncle Ghulam said to himself.

He didn't have to wait long. One day he was instructed to go to the manager's office. When he heard this, he became worried sick, "Ah, I wonder what's up? I wonder what the minister has said to the complex manager? Is he angry with me?"

When Ghulam arrived there, the manager stood up, shook his hand and told him that he was going to be honored in an upcoming celebration.

"Uncle Ghulam, we're pleased with your work. You've been working here night and day. You try your best to make the people comfortable here. May you live long and always be healthy. I've consulted the Committee of the Workers' Union, and we've decided to reward you with an extra month's salary."

The complex manager smiled and shook Ghulam's hand again.

"Do you have any objections?"

Seeing that the boiler attendant was standing there very quietly, he motioned for him to sit down.

"Please, make yourself comfortable," he said.

Uncle Ghulam was so overwhelmed with joy he didn't know what to do. He was witnessing an unexpected situation and listening to words he wasn't used to hearing. Nobody was scolding him. Nobody was ordering him around. No one had come on the hour to check the boilers or to readjust the temperature. Raising his head, he looked around. He gazed out the window at the clear blue sky overhead. Instead of the badgering and scolding that he was expecting from the manager, there was only bright sun shining overhead.

Smiling quietly, he looked at the manager, thinking, "Wonder of wonders, why couldn't things always have been this way!"

#### Footnote

1. "Upon my eyes" is a common phrase used to express willingness to carry out a command.

## MIRJALAL

## The Cotton Picker Who Knew Everything (1964)

You've heard it many times before—so-and-so has lost the respect of people and now everyone is making fun of him. I wouldn't want that to happen to anyone. Gaining respect and being influential only to have no one pay any attention to you is the most painful thing to endure. It's understandable if the person has committed a shameful act or crime. But the man I'm talking about is a friend you know quite well. He hasn't done anything of the kind. His respect was lost in a very strange way.

I should say that my friend has not committed any shameful act or done anything evil. In his job and duties, as in his profession, he has tried to retain his position and status. But he has lost so much respect in such a way that he himself has been amazed. Let me not hide my friend's name—Medad Ahmadov. Definitely, you all know him. In our district, everyone knows him as a skilled cotton picker, and on many occasions his skill has been demonstrated in the Kolkhos [collective farm] as the finest work. Even now he is the best cotton-picker in the district and is the head of the Cotton-Pickers' Brigade.

Then you will ask, how did such a person lose the respect of others?

Simply by interfering in everything regardless of whether he knew anything about it or not.

To tell the truth, Medad Ahmadov himself was not so much to blame. The Executive Committee of our district was to blame. Medad's name was mentioned with respect everywhere, so the committee started consulting him about everything.

A draft was prepared for building a cultural center for the district. When it was being discussed, the Committee would not listen to a single person. They only consulted Medad Ahmadov. He fingered each paragraph of the draft and made corrections. The Committee agreed with these so-called "suggestions," but the architects were shocked.

A statue to the poet Fuzuli was being erected in our district. The Committee asked Medad Ahmadov about it first. "Comrade Medad, what do you say? Would it be better to have a hat on Fuzuli's head or not? Tell the artists what you think and let them do it."

Medad Ahmadov looked around and said, "It's very hot; but it's better to be without a hat. Wearing a hat is old-fashioned."

Once again, the painters, poets, scholars and sculptors were ignored. The Committee stood by Comrade Medad's suggestion, allowing the leader of the cotton pickers to determine the dress code of the poet. At first, the people who were involved respected the wishes of the Committee and the cotton-picker and voiced their opinions. But later on, when they saw that the Committee slavishly followed the cotton-picker's advice, they became silent.

The Committee undertook other projects. A considerable amount of money was put aside for an electrical station. Again, they asked the opinion of the cotton-picker. But dear friends, whenever the name Medad was mentioned, nobody said anything. People didn't consider him to be a very serious person and turned away from him.

The head of our Committee has a very strange habit. He calls the local cook and asks his opinion about a newly proposed building project. He asks a singer about a dress fashion, a well-digger about a song, a carpenter about a legal case, and consults them on these matters. When you say, Comrade Chief, everybody has his own profession and expertise, he waves his hand in denial and raising his head says, "In the past it was like this. Now our people know about every profession. Don't you see me, I am the master of every profession, you name it!"

The Committee Chief made the Head of the Cotton Pickers almost into a prophet, consulting him on every matter. Of course, this gave him ideas, and made him think he was a great person. Nowadays, when someone gets a boil on his neck, they say, "No need to go to a doctor, just consult the Head of the Cotton-Pickers!"

He has become a laughingstock. Nothing is left even of his mastery at the farm because he is busy with an easily won fame. We have an expression, "Not only did he not catch a fish, he even left his fishing rod at the river." Of course, being sorry later on has no effect. Once respect has been lost, you cannot go door to door in search of it.

# MIR JALAL

## Dissertation

(1944)

"Take one teaspoon of this medicine." "Take these pills." "Place a wet towel over your ear twice a day and come back in two days."

To do what the doctor says is not difficult, but it isn't easy, either. There is neither time nor inclination. But I'm a very patient person. Whatever a doctor suggests, I do. If I don't benefit from a doctor's advice, at the very least I show him respect.

But one recommendation has always been very hard for me. When the doctor finishes his examination, writes a prescription and gives advice, he always adds, "Come back to see me in two days." Of course, the physician always wants patients. Treating patients is his job. But heeding the advice of doctors is not my job. If I spent two hours every two days with the doctor, how would I have time to take care of my family? Who would earn a living for them?

It's true! Doctors ask you to return to the clinic, but who goes back? When people leave the clinic, they go without even looking back. If someone returns, he doesn't return on his own; it's the illness that makes him go back.

So, as is customary, I said good-bye to the doctor and left. He told me to come back in two days. I said, "I will." But I didn't take the prescription to the drugstore, and I don't remember how many times, if at all, I put a wet towel over my ear. I do know that my earache was diminishing, little by little. Sometimes it wasn't noticeable at all.



Two or three days later, at about nine or ten o'clock at night, while I was reading a book, the phone rang. A young, sweet-voiced girl said my name.

"Wait a moment, please. The doctor wants to talk to you."

Suddenly, Dr. Garaguzov, the ear, nose and throat doctor, was screaming at me over the phone, "Hey Mister, I've been waiting for you! Why didn't you come for your appointment? You must come. You cannot leave the treatment unfinished!"

I didn't know how to respond: I couldn't say a word. Hurriedly, I wrapped a kerchief around my head and headed for the doctor's office. On the way I began to think, "Yes, the world is not without good people, and there are good doctors, such as this one. I shouldn't think that he's a doctor working only for his own self-interest. That isn't true at all. First of all, I'm being treated at the government's expense. Secondly, Garaguzov gets his salary whether he treats 50 patients or none at all. The fact that Garaguzov is seeking me out and paying so much attention to my treatment can only be attributed to his devotion and work ethic."

Having these thoughts made me appreciate Garaguzov even more. I felt ashamed that he had had to force me to come in for treatment when all he wanted was for me to be completely well. Instead, I felt lazy and didn't want to go to his office, which wasn't even far from my house.

At any rate, I did go to see the doctor. This time, he looked into my ear even more attentively than he had done before. When he learned that putting a wet towel over my ear had considerably diminished the pain, he became exceedingly happy. He pulled his instrument closer and adjusted his reflecting mirror. He began to examine my ear with the utmost attention.

"Comrade doctor, it seems as if you're drawing a picture of my ear."

Absorbed in his work, Garaguzov didn't answer me; he just continued probing.

"Don't move, don't move!" he said, as he moved around me, readjusting his mirror and the light, sometimes kneeling in order to examine my ear. He handled my ear so roughly that I thought my skin was going to come off. I suffered patiently, waiting for the examination to be over. I promised myself, "If I get away this time, I'll never put myself at the mercy of a doctor again."

When Garaguzov turned the light aside and put his instruments down, I was elated. I heaved a sigh of relief as if I had passed an arduous and dangerous test. I wiped the sweat from my forehead and got up to leave.

"Why are you getting up?" he asked, surprised.

"Aren't you finished?"

"I think I should examine your nose as well."

He examined my nose in the same manner that he had examined my ear. I gathered all my strength and waited for him to finish. Garaguzov asked me some questions and wrote down the answers—my age, profession, address and family situation.

"Comrade doctor, they ask such questions when you are getting a job. How does one's family situation or profession affect an earache?"

"Why are you so concerned?" he said. "These questions shouldn't scare you. We need these for scientific research. We want to know who our patients are, to which social class they belong. This knowledge will enable us to be useful to the people. Without such information the medical profession cannot advance. If you were the only person with an earache, we'd have no problem, but this damn sickness is looking for ways to get into a thousand ears. It's our duty to fight it!"

I was in no mood to listen to what the doctor had to say. Sensing my impatience, he stood up, shook my hand and stated emphatically, "Come back in two days. I'll be waiting for you."

"But Comrade doctor, there's no pain left in my ear!"

"You can't feel it now. For five days there's no pain, but after five months it comes back and bothers you in such a way that you feel as if you want to die. I know your symptoms. I know them very well. You need treatment. You must come."

I went home disappointed and vowed to myself that I would not go back. That was it! Forgetting about my earache and about Dr. Garaguzov, I went to work.

I don't know whether two or three days passed. It was around eight o'clock one evening, and I was at the open-air summer movie theater with my youngest son. I was at the counter getting a glass of water for the child when I saw our neighbor's daughter hurrying toward me.

"Uncle," she pleaded, "there are guests at your house and they want you to come home."

I thought it unfair to take the child out of the middle of the film. Fortunately, he didn't make a fuss. Hearing that we had guests, he said, "Dad, let's go. We can come again tomorrow, but today we have guests."

When we arrived home and went inside, I saw Garaguzov sitting at the dining table with a young girl on one side and a young boy on the other. I welcomed them.

At that point, Garaguzov stood up and said, "You think that you're the only one too lazy for treatment? Not at all! Everybody's like you. As soon as the illness dissipates and the pain is gone, no patient wants to return to the doctor. But it's our duty to follow the case to the end. The Peoples' Doctors work that way. Please sit down and let us examine you."

Once again Garaguzov adjusted the mirror on his forehead, turned on a table lamp and began to fiddle with my ear. Witnessing this examination didn't seem to be a pleasing sight for my guests, so I said, "Kids, prepare the table and let's take our guests into the dining room."

But Garaguzov said, "Please don't bother. The guests are concerned with your treatment also."

Both the girl and the boy got up, approached me at the table and stared into my ear while Garaguzov opened my ear with his instrument and explained, "Look, look! Now you can see clearly!"

He positioned the instrument closer to my ear and continued his explanation. "There's only a bit of shade in the way. All right now...See, that's it! You can see perfectly! The infection is right in front of your eyes!"

Then I realized that the girl and boy were Garaguzov's students and that he was training them to be doctors like himself. I also realized why he had asked for my address. I grew suspicious that he was going to teach his students using my ear as his example. I wanted to protest about the students observing me, but I felt shy. The guests did not even have tea. When they were leaving, Garaguzov looked at me and said, "Don't take this lightly. Don't leave the treatment half-finished. When you have time, come to see me."

After they left I thought for a while. "What can I do to make sure that Garaguzov leaves me alone?"

It had been about 10 or 15 days since I had last seen the doctor, and I was feeling relieved. One day, I came home and saw an invitation on the table. I had been invited to the House of Physicians. It seemed that Garaguzov was going to present his new method of treatment to his colleagues. Neither for Garaguzov nor for his work did I want to spoil my evening. But at the bottom of the card there was

an announcement for a concert, which made me pause, "Why does Garaguzov's work end with a concert?" In fact, my curiosity was aroused. "I'll go, but I'll arrive a bit late. Perhaps I'll have a chance to hear the singer Zulfi singing a famous ghazal (poetry selection) of Fuzuli's."

I had just finished lunch when the telephone rang. Yes, it was the familiar voice of the doctor, asking about my health.

"I'm fine, doctor! Thank God there's nothing wrong. I couldn't be better!"

"Good, good."

There was silence. I didn't want to say anything, hoping he'd leave me alone. But he was just getting to the point.

"My friend, surely you've received the invitation I sent you. This evening there's a small gathering, and I'm going to speak. Please, do come. Exactly at eight. I'll send a car for you!"

As this was a special favor to him, I could do nothing but agree.

When I entered the building where Garaguzov was to speak, I saw him standing at the podium. He was talking about the effectiveness of the wet towel method. Garaguzov talked and talked until he saw me, and then he pointed in my direction and said, "This is the patient who's been cured and is now absolutely healthy. He himself can talk about this particular earache from both the physical and psychological point of view. Mr. So-and-so, please stand up."

Everyone in the hall turned and looked at me. I blushed. Hesitatingly, I stood up. Fortunately, I didn't have to say anything. Garaguzov, with his analytical questions, was speaking for me.

"Is there anything left in your ear? No inflammation remains, none. It's amazing. Please be kind enough to walk along this row so that everyone can see the results.

I wanted to close my eyes, open my mouth and say whatever came out. I wanted to swear at the doctor, the audience and everything else. Again, I restrained myself. I sat down and Garaguzov continued, "Our comrade is shy, but whoever would like to, can come and examine him. You can see the results of my two months of experimentation with the wet-towel method on this patient—er, rather, this former patient."

Then, another physician got up and talked about the wettowel method being a true scientific discovery. Another doctor, after congratulating Garaguzov, asked his colleagues to consider using this new method at the hospitals.

I was so enraged by Garaguzov's outrageous behavior that I could sit quietly no longer. I got up and walked out.

"I don't want to say anything to his face," I fumed, "but I have to teach him a lesson. I'll call him. I can't let him think that he's dealing with some common fellow who doesn't understand anything!"

The next day I found Garaguzov's number and rang him up. Never in my life have I cursed anyone or quarreled with anyone. I don't even know how to complain. But this time, I had made up my mind. I thought, "I must teach him a lesson. Who does he think he's experimenting with!?"

A lady's voice answered the phone. "Who is it?"

"Can I talk to Dr. Garaguzov?"

The lady hung up.

"Perhaps it was the wrong number," I thought. "Perhaps the telephone information center has given me the wrong number."

Again, I called the Center and gave the operator Garaguzov's name, the middle name (which is his father's first name) and his home address. Again, I was given the same number. Once again, I called.

"Excuse me, I want to talk to Dr. Garaguzov."

This time the lady shouted at me, "There is no Dr. Garaguzov here! Professor Garaguzov lives here. Please don't telephone people that you don't know well!" And saying this, she hung up.

It wasn't appropriate to call again. I decided to take up the matter with the doctor at another time.



Yesterday, when I was returning home from work, I saw my cousin in front of the clinic. He was standing with a small towel placed over his mouth.

"Why are you here?" I asked him.

"I've come to see the professor to show him my nose," he replied.

"What professor?"

"Professor Garaguzov."

Hearing this infuriated me! I wanted to take the lad to the doctor and take up the entire matter with him, but I saw that my cousin had come with great faith and wouldn't be dissuaded from seeing Dr. Garaguzov.

At last I said, "Go, let him look at you. He looked at my ear and became a professor. He'll look at your nose and become an academician!"

# MIR JALAL

## Rules of Etiquette for a Modern Wedding (1934)

My half-brother worked in the Cooperative. His mother was employed as a salesperson in a store for many years. She was a busy woman, and I rarely saw her, until one evening when I ran into her.

"Where have you been? You've forgotten all about us," she reproached me for not visiting them. Then she told me that the following day was Bulbul's wedding, and that I had to attend. I excused myself, saying that I had something very important to do.

"Tomorrow is Sunday. Why are you lying? Don't tell me you have to work. You have to come. End of discussion!"

(I used to call her Bibi—Auntie). "To be honest, Bibi, I haven't been to a wedding for a while, and I don't know the etiquette. I don't want to be embarrassed in front of the guests."

Closing my mouth with her finger, Bibi said, "What nonsense! You can learn everything in the world. Wasn't Bulbul himself a child of the village? He was just like you, shy and introverted. But he came here, got out and mixed with people. Thank God, he's not like that now. The day will come for you, too. God willing, my child, tomorrow you will find a lovely girl and will want to marry her."

I dared not disobey Bibi, so I got up in the morning and took my pants from under my mattress [where I kept



them pressed] and put them on. I borrowed my school friend's shirt and was looking for a silver pin to wear when my friends found out about the wedding.

"You lucky devil!" they told me.

They helped me get dressed. Soon I looked just right for a wedding. I arrived at the house at 7 o'clock.

There was such a commotion! One person was putting wood under the pot, another was bringing water, a third was carrying in his shopping from the bazaar, and a fourth was noisily cutting blocks of sugar into cubes. Bibi took me to her own room. The groom had returned from the public bath house and fresh tea was being brewed for him. Someone was slicing lemon for his tea.

Bibi didn't like my appearance. She put one of Bulbul's scarves around my neck so that its tassels covered my chest like a horse's mane. She took off my boots, and made me wear a pair of red silken socks. She added a belt with a bone-buckle and a pen for my pocket. She put a silken handkerchief into my upper-left breast pocket, folded in a triangle, so that only one corner showed. She combed the tassels and arranged them on two sides. Looking in the mirror, I imagined that a beautiful lady had parted her hair and was leaning her head upon my chest. Seeing this, out of either bewilderment or embarrassment, I didn't do a thing. I'm supposed to be an educated person, but obviously Bibi knew more than I did.

And as if this were not enough, while everybody was out and we were leaning against brocade cushions, Bibi sat next to me and said, "My poor darling, what have you seen of the world? Books have robbed you of your personality. You're dried up like a piece of wood. That's why I beg you to come to our house. You'll cheer up."

At the beginning of each sentence, Bibi nudged me with her elbow, and at the end she pressed my knee.

"Listen! What a wedding. You'll be seen among the people. This is a great new style wedding. Pay attention to what's going on!" She enumerated the etiquette rules of modern weddings to me one by one:



1. Yawning, hiccuping, shouting, coughing, sneezing and stretching are forbidden.
2. Sit politely.
3. Don't slurp your tea.
4. Don't let any grease from food show around your lips.
5. You can laugh, but not loudly.
6. If you tell a joke, tell a polite one.
7. Talk, don't shout. Whispering is often sufficient.
8. Your comments should be relevant to everyone—all the time and on every occasion.
9. Say hello to everyone and get to know them.
10. You can kiss, not on the cheek, but on the mouth.
11. Set your cup down gently on the saucer. Hold the handle with two fingers and stir the tea quietly with a spoon.
12. Don't wipe your plate clean with a piece of bread.
13. Don't dirty the tablecloth.
14. Don't let your chair squeak.
15. Don't pick your nose.
16. Don't scratch yourself or squirm in your seat.
17. Take off your hat and button up your shirt.



I didn't wait for Bibi to finish, but got up. I wanted to leave. "Good-bye for now."

"Wait, where are you going?" She held onto my arm.

"Bibi, on the soul of your dear son, on your conscience, let me go. I can't do all these things. I'm sleepy

and I have class tomorrow. Don't keep me. I hope it's a happy wedding. I hope you see many such weddings."

Hearing my voice, several people emerged from the other side of the house. Holding onto me, they made me sit down.

And so with fear and trepidation, I waited for the wedding to begin. I begged to be taken to the wedding hall before the people arrived so as not to be conspicuous.

"My dear, poverty is a sad affair—we've taken the hall of Khanimnegin for tonight! The men haven't prepared the tea yet. Wait awhile. I'll take you there myself."

The groom had returned from the public bath. His face was flushed and red. Frowning and upset, he looked like a person who was ready for a fight. His sad face lightened with a smile. He was silent. Looking into his eyes, the groomsmen seemed to understand what he wanted. The tea was brought and he poured some of the hot liquid into his saucer and slurped it down. I whispered to Bibi, "It seems Bulbul doesn't know either!"

Then I added, "I mean the etiquette. Bulbul is making so much noise. Look at him."

"My child," she said, "among ourselves, it doesn't matter, the wedding hasn't started yet. He's making such a noise now so that he won't do it then."

I felt very shy and sat in a corner. Guests arrived. Hearing footsteps, my heart started to race, and I reminded myself of the etiquette rules of the wedding. It was as if Bibi were sitting next to me or looking over my shoulder, whispering in my ear, "Do this, do that!"

The guests entered. I got ready to shake hands and greet the guests. The guests said "hello" to everyone else and sat down. Like a child who is afraid to go to the barber, I was apprehensive. When they came toward me, I told

myself, "Be careful not to break the rules of etiquette." But I didn't know whether to stand up or sit down when saying "hello." It was all Bibi's fault. She hadn't told me.

I saw some people get up, but others greeted the guests while sitting. At a glance, I compared the two—it seemed like those who got up to shake hands were the more important people. Following their example, I also stood up. Taking the white, soft hand of a lady, which was adorned with a ring, I squeezed her hand in mine. I wanted to kiss it, but was afraid of Bibi. "You're very welcome. May Nature smile upon you!" I said when I dropped her hand. It hit her leg like a mallet, and her crepe-de-chine dress undulated like the sea.

The groom had arrived. There was a commotion, and a place for three people opened at the front of the hall. Bibi, waving her silken head scarf in the air, came in and told the groomsmen, "When I motion to you, bring him in."

The musicians were ready. The music began and what music it was! A man with a yellow Bukhara hat held his tar and played it so passionately that he almost went into an ecstasy. There was no dulcimer.

A young man with big ears, bareheaded, with a scarf like mine and dressed in short pants, put a drum between his legs, and began beating it like mad. Another was playing a zurna [traditional wind instrument], and everyone was amazed at how long he could play without taking a breath! But somehow he managed to breathe. The music was intoxicating.

A breeze came in from the windows and songs floated out. The drummer occasionally looked at the audience, who shouted to him, "Bravo, bravo!" and "That's my man!" He was beating the drum so hard that I felt sorry for it. People sat in rows on both sides of me, but I didn't know

a single person. I sulked like a stranger in a corner. Afraid to break the rules of etiquette, I dared not speak to the people sitting next to me. I suddenly saw the groom, taking long strides as he entered the hall. They made room for three people, he and two groomsmen. As soon as he sat down, he asked for "Khankishi."

Like a stealthy cat, wiping his mouth with his hand, a tall, bareheaded man entered. (He was bareheaded like me.)

The groom told him in a rather brusque tone, "Friends are counting on you. They want you to start."

"Yes, sir. Upon my eyes!" [Right away].

Khankishi, wiping his hands on his apron, looked around. "Friends, why are you so quiet? Is anyone keen for a game of dominos? Who wants to play cards? Let's keep ourselves busy. When the musicians get tired, we'll play the gramophone [record player]."

Bibi shouted from the other room, "Everybody dance! Khankishi, make them dance!" People laughed. Khankishi joked, "What can I say? Whatever the mistress of the house says goes. Let's dance."

The groom banged on the table with his hand and complained to Khankishi, "What is this strange behavior? Why are the ladies sitting on one side and the men on the other? They should mix immediately. 'Death to Mullah!'"

Everyone applauded. Khankishi began arranging the guests' seats so that the men and women would sit next to each other. Some men had come without their wives, and women had come without their husbands.

Taking all of this into consideration, he organized the guests' seats in such a way so that there was enough women for the men. He made one woman sit in the middle with a man on either side. Since I was one of the shy ones, I was the only man left without a woman. Khankishi looked at this arrangement and exclaimed, "Look, now this is civilized!"

His eyes were laughing. Pointing at me with his finger, he said, "Look, the poor boy is all alone!" Everyone laughed. I was embarrassed.

Bibi shouted from the other room, "I'll sit next to him myself."

The room was decorated like a store during a festival. The men looked like "bad bargains" that had come along free with the ladies! The men's noses were shining and the women's fingers were sparkling. The women's faces and the men's teeth looked white. The women's eyes and the men's hands looked black. The ladies' lips and the men's necks looked red.

The zurna player sucked the air from the room and blew it back out through his instrument, sending a waft of air against the colorful dresses in the varied crowd. Suddenly, a song was played that was full of drunken sadness: It was called, "The Song of the Cock."

*My hen is speckled,  
Her wings are speckled,  
She is not a hen, but a nightingale.  
May you burn in fire, stealer of my hen!  
May you scorch in hell, stealer of my hen!*

Khankishi dragged a stout woman to the middle of the hall. The people next to me whispered, "She's the cashier at Department Store 21." What a dancer! In her every movement, you could sense the fear of a person on a ship about to sink. The floorboards under her feet were moaning, the glasses were trembling, and the sides of the chairs were quivering. When the music sped up, she got confused. She didn't know what to do—she was falling down and getting up like a drunkard. Everything was exactly opposite of what a modern wedding was supposed to be. I expected Bibi to shout from the other room to stop

her from dancing. But nothing happened. She behaved like an elephant that was being poked by an awl. People played it safe; they didn't clap.

Then—as if it had been calculated—a thin, frail-looking girl, exactly this woman's opposite, stood up to dance. Dressed in taffeta pants and red boots, her eyebrows and nose looked like a parenthesis and a question mark. As soon as she got up, she began wiggling around. Her swift, varied movements reminded me of a person who is in the last throes of life. Like a fish on land, she was flipping from side to side. After galloping around for a while, she sat down and stayed glued to her seat for the rest of the evening. Her chest heaved, as if she were having difficulty breathing. She was the new cashier of the store. A broad-shouldered, chubby lady got up immediately after her; she was dressed in a black crepe de chine Charleston shirt. Khankishi raised his voice.

"Let's all dance! Comrades will dance with their wives!"

A man came from the upper side of the hall. His collar was awry, and he was smoking a cigarette in a cigarette holder. He began to dance in circles around his wife, like a hovering hawk. His wife was stout and heavy—her lower lip hung down like the tongue of a cow. While the husband was whirling around, the lady stood her ground and swayed back and forth like an accordion.

Most of the ladies who followed after these two went around flapping their wings like birds. Only one (and she was a relative of the bride) danced so beautifully that even the zurna-player was astounded. Instead of taking in air, he wanted to take in the girl. In her red dress, she glowed like the setting sun and she amazed everyone with her drunken eyes. With her harmonious movements, her beautiful hair kissed her breasts and fell like silken tassels behind her back.

After tea, the food was served. Dishes of rice pilaf—how wonderful they looked! Mounds of white rice, with turmeric-colored melted butter cascading, as if off the sides of a mountain. People dashed for the food. An incredible sound of food being gobbled filled the house. Very soon it was obvious that neither the rice nor the stew would be enough. By way of encouragement, Khankishi said, "Don't worry, eat as much as you want. More food will be found."

But I got worried. As I watched the people eating with their greasy lips, and their dark hands descending on the dishes of white rice, I looked at Bibi who sat next to me.

"Bibi, it seems like the etiquette rules of the wedding are a little bit..."

Her mouth was full with soup and stew. She only spoke with her eyebrows, saying "No!"

Everyone was given tea glasses and Khankishi filled them with wine. From the other end of the hall, the cashier slowly raised her head, "Comrades, please. We are very fortunate to have comrade bridegroom, Bulbul bey, as a worker of Department Store No. 21. I propose to drink this round to his health."

At that moment, Khankishi shouted, "Just a moment!"

Everyone looked toward the door. An old lady with bad makeup and too much powder on her face entered. Khankishi introduced her as the mother of the bride.

"Long live our groom's mother-in-law! May the unseen forces of Nature bless us all! May Nature give everyone a mother-in-law!" The mother-in-law was taken over to the groom.

Bibi, expressing the respect of the people, said, "May Nature give you a wedding. May the unseen forces of Nature be happy with you." Glasses were filled and emptied to the health of this and that. Interesting talk went on.



When the groom spoke, everyone listened. I was so attentive, I wanted to borrow an extra pair of ears to listen.

“They shouldn’t say that Bulbul hasn’t finished university or anything like that. You know that cashier, everyone here is my colleague. They understand...That cashier is such a son-of-a-bitch that even the university cannot cope with him. They’ve really ruined the university. Don’t you see the students coming and timidly hanging around and learning from us? I say, let’s drink to the health of that cashier who has made this possible. (He held his glass up almost as high as the light hanging overhead.) The world does not turn without this. I’ve never seen such a delicious thing in my life. Let’s drink to the health of the cashier.”

The sound of glasses clinking filled the hall. When the groom’s glass touched that of his mother-in-law’s, he looked surprised and said, “This can’t be! Khankishi! Say something to this lady!”

Someone said, “Why are you fighting?”

Khankishi filled the glass of the mother-in-law.

“Whoever refuses to drink, we’ll empty the glass on their shirts. We propose that they should kiss each other. The bride and bridegroom should kiss each other. But since she’s not here, for the time being, he should kiss her mother. We propose that they should kiss each other.”

Khankishi put his arm around the mother-in-law and brought her to Bulbul. He kissed her noisily and drank up. The woman was embarrassed and sat down in her place. Her brother left the room in protest. As soon as Bulbul heard about it, he swore, “Whoever doesn’t like me, a curse on him! Let him go!” Everyone returned to the food. Mouths were busy; spoons made noise.

Suddenly Khankishi shouted, “Who stole mine?”

“What?”

“Who took it?”

“What?”

“You took my meat!”

A glass shattered on the head of Khankishi. The wine glass struck the buffet and glasses broke. A half-filled jar of marmalade broke, spilling its contents. The mother-in-law became very irritated, and pulled her son-in-law aside, saying, “You’ve gotten yourself all dirty!”

The fight picked up. The gathering divided into two sides. Something tragic could have happened, but Bibi threw herself into the middle of it, screaming and crying.

I whispered in her ear, “It seems that the wedding rules of etiquette are a little bit...”

When things quieted down, I opened my scarf, and took off my boots and pin, got dressed back in my student’s clothes and started to leave. At the expense of making my Bibi upset, I said, “I apologize that I yawned once and broke the etiquette of modern weddings.”

Bibi held onto me and wouldn’t let me leave. When everyone left, we went to the other room. She was bringing all sorts of things from the window sills and other places: boxes of chocolate, sweets, dishes of marmalade. I thought that these had been saved for us to eat, so I started to take a chocolate from one box. Bibi took it from my hand and wouldn’t let me eat it. There were all sort of things: socks, shawls, a bouquet of artificial flowers, silver spoons, a sugar bowl, a box of makeup, face powder, a handkerchief and a collar pin.

In short, the contents of Store No. 22 were there. I waited. Bibi took her time, and holding each item, announced, “This shawl was brought by Mammad’s wife. How wonderful: six silver spoons. Mina Khanim brought them. A box of cosmetics—how nice. I should say worthy of the name of Mashdi Rahim!”

Bibi held up each gift, and after learning the groom's opinion of it, put it aside. The groom seemed pretty mild-mannered at first,

"Well, it's not bad—next."

Bibi said, "It isn't a joke! I have created a source of income for her husband. If it is too much, leave it."

Bibi showed him a bouquet of artificial flowers and said, "This is from the family of your friend Ayyub."

The groom whispered, "May I bury such a friend! How shameless!"

Bibi showed him a pair of socks. "These were brought by Hizmet."

"Who?"

"Mirsaad's wife, you know, Hizmet! She made a mistake to send such a gift, and you made a mistake to accept it! She has made a mockery of us. When I was still single, I spent 40 manats on the daughter. Now on the most precious day of my life, why is she so cheap? Damn her gift! Come on, take it back to her! I'm not so desperate. Trashy people! Socks! What socks!"

Seeing this, I realized why my half-brother wouldn't talk to me. I was the one who had broken the rules of etiquette more than anyone else because I hadn't brought anything.

Afraid of being beaten up, I left on the pretext of getting some fresh air, and headed straight for the student dormitory in Armenikandi. I vowed never again to go to a new-fashioned wedding. Never again.

# MIR JALAL

## Matishqa (My Dear Lady)

(1931)

Mashdi Hanifeh lived in a village near town. In the summer he worked as a farmhand, in the winter as a well-digger, and in the autumn as a worker in the brick kilns. After crossing the Araz<sup>1</sup> river [into Soviet Azerbaijan] all his anxieties and worries vanished. No longer would he have to deal with khans and village headmen [of Iran] who would make him toil for months without pay and who would lash him if he dared to complain.

Rarely did he visit any city. He had never seen Baku except on one occasion during the "disturbances."<sup>2</sup>

Mashdi Hanifeh got off the bus and put his satchel over his shoulder. Inside his bag, which he occasionally used for shopping, were bread and meatballs.

Baku! What a wonderful place it was—teeming with life—where cars flew by like birds in the air and where shopkeepers didn't make fun of villagers. There were no crowds gathering around dervishes and no noisy caravans. Here, modern buildings reached to the sky and trams sped away like lightning. Mashdi Hanifeh could not recognize anything. He stood there in awe.

Just then a young woman waved at him, "Come here!" She was not wearing a veil [unlike women he was accustomed to seeing in Iran]. Mashdi Hanifeh was beside himself with joy. "Besides," he told himself, "it has been a long time since I've enjoyed myself. The breath of your wife can make you shrink away, but illicit sex is wonderfully delicious."

Mashdi Hanifeh followed the lady. She was young and beautiful, and she didn't appear to be Russian. Her black hair and thick eyebrows suggested that she was Muslim. He looked at her once more, then at himself. He didn't have the appearance that would attract women, and he was wondering what had attracted this beautiful Matishga.

"Skorei!"

Mashdi Hanifeh did not know Russian, but he knew that "skorei" meant "hurry up" or "don't delay." The word entered into his heart like cool water quenching a deep thirst. "What a delectable thing is this unbeliever's<sup>3</sup> daughter."

They walked past tram lines and crowds of people without looking at anything. Mashdi Hanifeh felt in his pocket. He was thinking, "These women have no shame. God forbid, that they embarrass you in front of others." From the money he had in his pocket, he put ten manats into a side pocket and thought, "Matishga should not see the rest of my money. If she makes a scene, I'll only give this amount and tell her 'money—nyet.'"<sup>4</sup>

He wanted to take hold of her arm, but realized that she was walking rather fast. Not many could have kept up with her.

"They're all the same," he thought. "They want to get there fast. But why hurry?"

Then the lady turned and said something to him. He didn't understand. Laughingly, he just managed to say, "parusqi niznaiem."<sup>5</sup>

Matishga managed to convey by gestures and by speaking half Russian and half Azeri, "Bed, blanket, sleep?"

Mashdi Hanifeh took this statement to mean—"There's a bed and blankets. Do you want to sleep?" He was beside himself with joy. He wanted to grab Matishga and kiss her.

"Da<sup>6</sup>, my dear Matishga, skorei, skorei, I sacrifice my life for you<sup>7</sup>. Kharasho<sup>8</sup> lady. Malades<sup>9</sup> Matishga."

The way seemed to get longer and longer. But Mashdi Hanifeh was walking with such vigor that the earth almost seemed to tremble under his feet. Finally, they reached a very tall building. The windows on the fourth floor were covered with colorful drapes. On the balconies were flower pots and lemon trees. The sound of tar music could be heard. Mashdi Hanifeh's heart was beating fast. He was in a hurry. "If I had the money, I would never leave this lady."

They went upstairs and entered a well-decorated room. There, in the middle of the room was a pile of blankets and quilts, wrapped and ready for the road. There was also a suitcase. Matishga took one of the bundles and told Mashdi Hanifeh to bend over so that she could lift it onto his back. He was dumbfounded.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

Hearing the word "train," it finally dawned on him what was happening. Matishga had brought him to her apartment so he could carry her things. But this wasn't what he was expecting. He wasn't a porter.

"What do you mean, 'Go to the train?'" he said. "Your father is a porter, not me. Your grandfather is a porter."<sup>10</sup>

He kicked the bundle of blankets and started to leave. Just then, a pot-bellied man in a white suit entered the room. He looked closely at Mashdi Hanifeh.

"Haven't I seen you before?" he asked.

"You look familiar, too," Mashdi Hanifeh confessed.

"Are you from Ardebil?"<sup>11</sup>

The pot-bellied man opened his arms and embraced him.

"Oh! Aren't you Mashdi Hanifeh? I can't believe my eyes! How did you get here?"

"My God, Agha Rahim, when I saw you in Iran, you

didn't look like this. You've put on weight. You look like one of those governors. What are you doing here? What are you doing in a lady's house, you rogue?"

They embraced again. Agha Rahim pulled up a chair and Mashdi Hanifeh sat down.

"My dear Mashdi, this is my own house. The factory has given it to me. It has its own bath, kitchen and gym. In the evenings the wireless<sup>12</sup> talks, giving reports from every corner of the world. Whenever I want, I can open the window, look out and see all of Baku lying here at my feet."

Changing the tone of his voice, he asked, "So, Mashdi, how did you happen to come here to Baku? Where are your wife and children?"

Matishga stood there bewildered. Everyone was feeling strangely embarrassed. Mashdi Hanifeh was ashamed in front of Agha Rahim since he had looked at Rahim's wife desirously. Mashdi Rahim was feeling embarrassed that he could not entertain Mashdi Hanifeh, as they were getting ready to leave the city. And Matishga didn't look up because she felt embarrassed in front of both of them.

Agha Rahim continued, "Please, let me introduce you, this is my partner-in-life, Sima Khanim. She is going to the dacha<sup>13</sup> today."

Then Mashdi Hanifeh realized that "partner-in-life" meant "wife."

He started wondering if he called his children's mother "my partner-in-life" whether it would be all right.

## Footnotes

- 1 "Matushka" means "dear lady" in Russian; "Matishga" is a general term used by Azerbaijanis to refer to a Russian woman.
- 2 The Araz River separates Northern and Southern Azerbaijan. At the time this story was written, Northern Azerbaijan was part of the Soviet Union, but in 1991 it became the Independent Republic of Azerbaijan. Southern Azerbaijan is still part of Iran. Azerbaijan was separated by a treaty signed between Russia and Persia in 1828.
- 3 "Disturbances" probably refers to labor unrest and strikes in Baku in 1907.
- 4 Unbeliever. refers to a non-Muslim.
- 5 "Parusqi niznaiem" is Russian for "I don't know how to speak Russian."
- 6 "Da"—"Yes," in Russian.
- 7 "I sacrifice my life for you"—A common Azeri expression that means "I'll do anything for you." An exaggerated promise in most cases, but used very often nevertheless.
- 8 "Kharasho"—"Thank you," in Russian.
- 9 "Malades"—"Fantastic," in Russian.
- 10 "Your father is a porter, not me. Your grandfather is a porter." A traditional pattern of swearing or insult.
- 11 Ardebil—A major city in Southern Azerbaijan (Iran).
- 12 Wireless—radio.
- 13 Dacha—the Russian word for a summer cottage or home outside of the city.



## MIRJALAL

Peaches  
(1962)

Some of our specialists have been struck with a strange disease. You ask one of them, "How is such-and-such book?"

"Wonderful," he replies.

You ask, "Why is it wonderful?"

"It was printed in Poland."

You ask, "How is such-and-such song?"

He says, "Excellent."

"Why?"

"It is sung in Austria and Bulgaria."

"What do you think of such and such a painting?"

"Excellent, because it's being exhibited in Marseilles."

At first this disease infected only a few, but it is spreading slowly to many people. Yesterday I read an article by an agriculture specialist who had come to our office. He writes that the peach is a "type" of nectarine that was discovered in America at the end of the 19th century. In 1897 it was brought to the Soviet Union, and from there it traveled by rail to the Caucasus and Azerbaijan. Then our agriculturist friend writes about its color and taste, and tries to prove that the agriculturists of the world, particularly those of Azerbaijan, are greatly indebted to the American scientist who "discovered" the peach.

At the end of his article, the specialist reaches this sad conclusion: "Unfortunately, our good people do not pay their dues to this great scientist of the world of fruits and

vegetables. They do not praise him in their books, newspapers, radios and meetings from morning until evening. We eat the peach, but never remember its genius inventor and the man who produced it. See how backward we are. How far we are from advanced nations!"

After reading the article written by our esteemed agriculturist, I gave it a great deal of thought. Of course, I have no doubt about his "scientific" competence or the "originality" of his writing, but I still have a few questions for him.

I would just like to ask the esteemed specialist if there are more different types of peaches growing in America or, say, in the gardens of Ordubad, Ganja, Guba, Batum, Gori and other cities of the Caucasus? I also want to ask him if the color and taste of the peaches or nectarines described in the article that he wrote, or to be more exact, that he has translated, are different from ours?

I also want to suggest to our specialist friend that, rather than picking a peach from a tree, its real source, and learning about it, he has learned about it by painstakingly reading about it via a foreign language article.

Furthermore, I want to say that the author, rather than making peaches popular among his countrymen and gardeners, wants to advertise the grafter.

He wrote this piece, it seems, not for the sake of fruit specialists, students, researchers, or simply to do a service for his readers. Rather, he has written it in order to impress the members of the Central Agricultural Institute for his future articles. Fourth, fifth, etc.

This author doesn't know that many things come here from America, but not nectarines or peaches. Chewing gum, cocktail-drinks, nylon panty hose, plastic and many other things come from there, but not nectarines, not figs, not grapes, not the watermelons of Shamkhor, not Jorat

melons, not the seedless white mulberry, not Guba apples, not the sweet pomegranates of Shirvan, not the tomatoes of Lankaran, nor the onions of Hovsan.

If this agriculturist had spent five or six years among the people, he would not have written such an article, or if he had, he would have written it differently. We've seen that such articles are published for the sake of workers and agricultural laborers. It is said that in ancient Greece, some writers would draw pictures and hang them in public places in order to see what the people would say. Now some authors write their articles and turn them over for translation without bothering to determine about what their own readers' reaction will be.

Another thing I don't understand is why some of our institutes get all of their advice from abroad. It's really strange that when they want to do research on figs they leave the orchards of Bilgah and go to California. A student who had gone to Mexico in order to learn about apiculture was asked about the characteristics of the honey of Gabagtapeh and the bees of Dastafur. The student had to return to these villages to get some honey and a few boxes of bees because he did not have any experience here—he had gone abroad with his eyes closed.

Perhaps our esteemed agriculturist friend will have the time to read the writings of men of letters, and perhaps this one, too. If he reads, he shouldn't think that we don't want to look at the outside, at other horizons, or that we are against learning from neighbors, or even from strangers. We are only against those who look at their own things and their own existence from the balcony of the West, and for that matter, look at them negatively. We want agriculturists, physicians, teachers, engineers, artists—all of them—to first learn about the bounties of their own city and their own homeland with care and love. After learning, they should speak about these things without fear and make them known to the world.

# MIR JALAL

## A Foreign Illness

(1960)

When I refer to an external illness, I don't mean the physical symptoms of an illness. I use this term in the geographic sense; that is, meaning diseases that originate outside our country.

I think that in our city, no professional is on duty as much as the medical profession is. Being a doctor, more often than not, I'm on duty. I continuously must keep an eye on my patients, noting their prognosis and watching the progress of their treatment. Duty never leaves me.

When I'm on duty, it's not just my own patients that I'm concerned with. Suddenly, the door of the hospital swings open, and a Volga, Pobeda or Moskvovich car or, for that matter, even a truck arrives with wailing and complaining patients.

It's true that our hospital is in the most distant corner of the city and doesn't have enough beds. We don't allow patients to be brought in every hour, but whoever does come will not be turned away. One has a stomach ache, another has been in a car accident, a third is an alcoholic. Another has been stabbed and yet another, bitten by a dog. In short, this is a big city and therefore, many unfortunate things happen. You can't lecture patients on this or that principle, nor can you quote municipal regulations. Besides, the law doesn't allow it! Here, neither doctor nor nurse can close the door on a patient. A good conscience won't allow you to say, "Look, comrade, we don't have room. Go somewhere else!"

The patient who arrived this evening didn't fit any of the above categories. She had not been bitten by a dog, nor was she drunk, nor had she been stabbed. She was very quiet, very well-behaved, and didn't moan or complain. It seemed as though she had received special permission to come to a sanitarium. She was lying on a couch in the reception room. I asked the driver who had brought her, "What's wrong with her?"

"I don't know, doctor," he replied.

I turned to the nurse. "What's wrong with her?"

"Nobody knows."

"Perhaps she's not sick at all, and they've brought her here by mistake."

"How could that be possible, doctor? She had fallen on the pavement and was lying there surrounded by people."

I went to the patient. As a matter of fact, she did look pale and sallow. I observed a weak, slender girl who had no strength left in her. If it weren't for her large, very sunken eyes under her black eyebrows, I would have taken her for a corpse. Her face was sickly yellow, and she appeared to be at the end of her rope. She didn't speak or move; just painfully turned her large eyes to watch those who were passing by.

"My daughter, what has happened to you?" I asked her.

I held her frail wrist to take her pulse. It was weak.

"What's wrong with you, Miss?"

The patient turned her face toward me and managed to say, with great difficulty, "Is there a cinema here?"

"A cinema?" I asked.

"Do you have a TV?"

"Are you sick or are you looking for entertainment?"

I asked, confused.

"I'm not looking; I'm just asking."

I repeated my question once more. "What's wrong with you? Do you have any pain?"

"I don't know, myself."

"How long have you been like this?"

"Today, I fell down near the boulevard."

"Were you hurt?"

"No, not at all."

"Perhaps something hit you?"

"No, nothing hit me. While walking, I just fell down." Immediately, I took the patient to a comfortable ward and ordered a preliminary medical examination.

Before long, the patient's mother appeared. After thanking me and expressing her gratitude, she approached me and, as if seeking a personal request, whispered, "Doctor, please keep Ophelia here as long as you want. I beg you."

The mother's strange request surprised me. It surprised me because such a request has never been made of us. On the contrary, as soon as treatment is finished, mothers and fathers want to take their children out of the hospital.

I asked her mother, "Has she been sick for a long time?"

"Yes, for a long time."

"How long?"

"It's been a few months."

I was surprised. It was amazing for such a weak body to bear such an illness and not seek a doctor or go to the hospital for such a long time. I asked her mother, "Aunty, why didn't you bring this sick girl for treatment before now? She has no record with us. How negligent can you be?"

The mother shook her head, then looked up at me as if she wanted to open her heart to me. She spoke with great sincerity, "Oh, Doctor, today's youth, do they ever listen? Do they take advice? Do they confide in you? Would they take time from their movies and concerts to go for treatment? You know very well that all the girls want to stay thin!"

Now I understood why the mother was glad to have Ophelia hospitalized. Of her own accord, a child would

not have allowed any kind of treatment, nor would she have wanted to be subjected to regulations of the hospital. Ophelia's admission to the hospital was a consolation for her mother. Obviously, in treating any patient or any sickness properly, the doctor must first make a diagnosis, or to use the words of the poet Sabir,<sup>1</sup> "find the pain," that is, find its source.

It's true that there may be some old people who are ill or who never seek treatment and thus further weaken their bodies and make their treatment more difficult and complex. However, with the help of modern medicine and pharmacology, even the most complex ailments can be analyzed. Nothing has to remain dreaded. Where is there an organ that X-rays cannot penetrate?

Discovering the malady of a young, 18-year-old girl didn't require a complicated and extraordinary process. The slender, almost semi-transparent body of this girl displayed all the outward signs of sickness. After examining Ophelia, except for her weakness and lack of strength, I couldn't discover anything wrong. Her young body had not been adequately nourished, and as a result it had gradually weakened, until it finally reached a state of collapse.

I criticized the girl's mother. "You're from a well-to-do family, why don't you pay attention to the eating habits of this young school girl? Why have you allowed her to become so weak?"

Ophelia's mother seemed fed up with these eternally-asked questions, and slapping her hands against her knees, said, "Oh Doctor, if you could make Ophelia eat a second meal in a single day, I would be eternally grateful to you. My dear sir, she doesn't eat, she doesn't touch anything!"

"What do you mean?"

"My dear, she doesn't eat!" she repeated.

"Her 32 teeth are absolutely healthy, there's nothing wrong with her digestive system and her stomach is working normally. Why doesn't she eat?" I asked.

"Doctor, in spite of all that, she doesn't eat!" she repeated again.

"If there are specially prepared, delicious meals, she will eat," I insisted.

"Whatever is the most delicious food in the world: chicken, very nice pastry, dolma<sup>2</sup>, any well-prepared dish of whatever you can imagine, we give to her, but she won't eat it. She leaves the table, saying that she'll get fat."

I wanted to laugh. Someone with a twig-like body afraid of becoming fat! That's funny! How could she get fat, when in all her body there wasn't even five kilos of meat!

"She's afraid," her mother said. "Her world is full of magazines and movies."

"I'll make her eat! You'll see!" I said.

As a matter of fact, by boasting about what I would do, I reassured Ophelia's mother, but she wasn't satisfied with our hospital's food. Every morning and every evening she would cook all sorts of foods and place them on nice dishes and bring them to her daughter. I soon discovered that making Ophelia eat wasn't an easy matter.

"Ophelia, what's the purpose of starving yourself?"

"What are you saying, doctor? Do you want to make me lose my shape and become the laughing stock of everyone?"

"What is this you're telling me, my girl? Whoever eats becomes a laughing stock?"

"Doctor, don't you see what incredibly huge ladies we have among us? Europeans are all thin and shapely. One has to have a nice figure!"

"What have you seen in Europe? Have you been to Europe?"

"I subscribe to Screen."

"Screen is a magazine of stars. Do you want to become an actor?"

"No, not an actor, an actress."

"For acting, your body has to have strength."



"I don't want strength. I want a good figure."

"You want to be slender?"

"Yes, if I'm not slender, I'll kill myself."

I pointed to her weakened body and said, "Even weaker than this?"

"I want to be slender, Doctor. Instead of these dishes, give me a medicine to keep me even thinner than I am now. And at the same time, I want to be able to fly like a bird—like a bird, you know!"

It was obvious that Ophelia was not sick. She was only a victim of the movies.

Ophelia didn't stay in the hospital longer than a week. She wasn't taking advice, nor taking any medicine, nor eating any of those nice foods her mother had prepared for her. She sat in front of the TV and watched foreign movies. If there weren't any foreign films on TV, she'd bring the magazine *Screen* from the library and look at it. Or, she'd fashion her body and clothes according to the magazine and look at herself in the mirror. When her mother came to see her, I said, "Don't let the driver leave." The lady called the driver and asked him to stay. She must have thought that I needed the car for some reason.

"Please, Doctor, it is your car."

"It's not for me. Ophelia wants to go for a ride."

"A ride?"

"She wants to go to the cinema."

Overhearing this, Ophelia hurried to the courtyard and called to her mother, "Mom, bring my clothes. Quickly! "His Love"<sup>3</sup> is showing at the Nizami cinema, and I'll die if I don't see it!"

I sent Ophelia along with her mother and asked her not to bring Ophelia back to the hospital. "Her illness can only be cured in the Club."

"But what's her illness, doctor?"

"This illness has come from abroad. We don't have it among us, Auntie!"

"I've heard of foreign goods, but this is the first time I've heard of a foreign sickness. How has this damn thing come and gotten hold of Ophelia?"

"Auntie, she's gotten it from the movie theaters. She'll be all right; don't worry. This is typical of foreign goods. It's a new arrival."

### Footnotes

- 1 Sabir (Ali Akbar Sabir Tahirzade, 1862-1911) was one of the greatest satirical poets of Azerbaijan. He published most of his poems in the journal "Molla Nasreddin."
- 2 Dolma - a traditional dish of the region made of grape leaves stuffed with rice and meat.
- 3 "His Love" or "Yevo Liyobov" was the title of a well-known movie.

# MIRJALAL

## Mirza

### (1930)

There are two Mirza Shafis. One is a famous poet and the other is someone I would like to make famous.

“Listen, child, I’m telling you to look up; lift up your head. Why are you frowning like a donkey? Recite your lesson.”

Mirza almost wanted to eat the child up. His shriveled face was red as a beet.

“May Allah take you or save me from you all! You’ve wasted my precious life. Instead of giving birth to you, would that your mother had given birth to a piece of rock!”

Putting his hands in his pockets, he started raving like a mad dog and emptying his heart. Like a mule exhausted and on its last legs, his lips were hanging. His mustache, stained and straw-colored from smoking, was getting into his mouth. The tips of his boots were scuffed and his trousers were sweeping the floor. His collar was loose, and his tie was swaying back and forth. His neck, which seemed to have become thinner, was red because of the heat of the day, and his skin was peeling.

Clearing his throat, Mirza continued, “It’s not your fault. It’s the fault of those who have stopped you from watching the herd and have brought you to school. What business does a herdsman have in school? You ought to be cleaning the stable and feeding the cattle. You have to have something in your genes, otherwise, it’s impossible to change someone by force. Sa’adi, may you turn over in

your grave.<sup>1</sup> How true it is what you said, ‘A man of base origin will not be lit by the light of the pious.’ The effect of education on the intractable is like water on a duck’s back.”

Mirza Shafi grimaced. He remembered the time that he used to curse and swear at his former wife. Waving his arms, he shouted, “If you beat him up, it’s no good. If you don’t beat him, it’s no good!”

This was not the first time. These robust-looking peasant boys who were sitting quietly on the benches had already figured out their teachers and knew how to deal with them. They knew to come quietly and go away quietly.

They didn’t say anything in front of the teacher. One student’s father had said, “My son, your flesh belongs to the teacher and your bones to me.”<sup>2</sup> The only people who tested Mirza Shafi’s patience to the extreme were members of the Komsomol (Youth Communist Organization). They made life hell for him by criticizing his drinking habits, exposing him for beating up on students and pointing out his other “insignificant” shortcomings. The greatest blow came when they drew a cartoon on the school’s wall newspaper. Mirza was shown up to his neck in a barrel of vodka with drink spewing out of his mouth.

It was night. On the slopes of the Alchajig Mountain, along the dusty lanes of Soyudli village, contented cows were licking and scratching themselves in the shade under the sheds made of branches and twigs. It seemed that the village cattle were slumbering. It was unlike any ordinary night. There were no sounds of carts transporting goods to and from the village, nor greetings and pleasant chattering of people returning from the city, nor the whistle of the guard of the woods. Faraway beyond the mountains, the moon as if rising after a swim, was glowing like a copper furnace.

Inside the house, village ladies wearing long trousers were scurrying about in the light of the burning lamps, preparing the evening meal. The sound of horse carts and

plowing had ceased. Occasionally, dogs barked at frogs croaking in nearby waters.

Mirza Shafi could not breathe because of the big chunk of food that was lodged in his throat. Rising on his elbow, he leaned against the white embroidered pillow next to him and then he swallowed. The beams of the well-decorated white-washed room seemed longing to partake of the food. Aunt Parizad was checking the cattle outside, looking inside the window every once in awhile. Since they always ate her food so quickly, she realized that in spite of being a novice in many things, she was an expert in cooking rice and pouring water over the hands of people after the meal was finished. This was her expertise, not the Nazbare dance that the teenagers knew.

"I raise this cup to toast the health of Mirza Shafi, who, for the past twelve years, has looked after the dead and living of the village and who has enlightened our children!"

The cups clinked against each other.

"To you, Mirza Shafi, long life! Mirza, my dear, you have taught me, too! I kiss you! May your sorrows fill the hearts of your enemies! Long live Mirza Shafi as long as the world turns."

Mirza twisted his mustache and replied, "My brothers, may we live long, stay healthy, eat and drink well. May we be like nightingales but not the ones in a cage. A cage is a terrible thing."

The glasses were filled to the brim for a second round. It was Mirza's turn to speak. While chewing a piece of onion, he slumped down like a camel on its knees. His body was sweating and smoke came out of his mouth. Mirza spoke a bit about history.

"The people gathered here today are among the most learned in the village. Gentlemen, I am sure that among us there is no one who has reached manhood just this afternoon. Haji Aghakishi, Mashdi Gurban, Jahan Bey, Mohammed

Agha. From the beginning, Allah be praised, we have not suffered in any way. If we are united in words and action, we will not suffer in the future either. When I came from Iran..."

Here Mirza pointed to Haji Kishi and said with a smile, "I came from Iran with nothing but the clothes on my back. By the grace of God and the help of men like you, I have been able to make a good living now. But that's not the point. I want to say a few words about life. I am known not only in this village but in other villages as well. How I teach, how I make the kids understand, how I deal with good and evil—I don't want to discuss these things. Let me get to the point. The head of the Executive Committee does not get along with me. Three or four members of the Komsomol are in my class. You know their character well! They have bothered everyone."

Haji Kishi said, "That's Luti Karim's son and Abdu Balakhan's grandson. May God strike them."

Mirza continued, "The other day they disgraced me on the wall newspaper. I came out and drove them away. The head of the Committee and Party Secretary came and said, 'You have no right to do this. The regulation is this and self criticism is that.' But I'm not afraid. I can take ten such committee heads and secretaries to the spring and bring them back thirsty. It is true, nowadays such people have positions, but it isn't for no reason that people call me Mirza. Whoever they criticize, it is not right to criticize a teacher. Nowadays children don't listen, even to their parents."

Everyone replied in unison, "God save us! Nowadays who takes care of his father? Yesterday's baby sparrows have shed their first feathers. They've become starlings and are teasing the teacher."

Mirza was encouraged even more. "I have written several times about them to the place that I should write

to. But because of my feelings towards them, I didn't want to go too far. I know what to do! If you are a Komsomol, be a Komsomol. What business do you have at school? I haven't been appointed by a Komsomol that interferes in my affairs. Let the 'white-bearded ones'<sup>3</sup> of the village judge my work. Whether I drink or not is none of their business. As to the question of beating the kids, there's a famous saying, 'When you fasten the plow to the cow, it will try to get away.'<sup>4</sup> If you take it easy, education is impossible. You have to beat them, you have to pull their ears. One does not become a learned man in a moment. Take me, for example. I have been bastinadoed<sup>5</sup> several times. Otherwise, how could I have become a teacher? I am not the village teacher, I am the father of the village."

Jahan Bey put down his glass which was still full and interrupted Mirza, "This is very true! Mirza Shafi is our master. May we not live one day without him!"

Mirza again was encouraged and thought it necessary to list a few of his achievements. "In other villages, clubs are being opened. Not a single girl continues to wear a veil. Shariat<sup>6</sup> is absolutely gone. But I have somehow succeeded in securing the virtue and chastity in this place. My point is—I am very grateful to those real men who do not sell Mirza to such unruly kids. I have sacrificed for their sake and I will continue to do so. Long live the men who value honor and chastity!"

Glasses were emptied.<sup>7</sup> The people around the meal leaned forward and waited. Mirza Shafi, opening and closing his reddened eyes, coming forward a bit, like a reciter of the Koran beside the dead, sang in a husky voice, "O Saki, may I be a sacrifice to your eyes..."<sup>8</sup>

One month after these events, the following conversation took place between Mirza Shafi and the Director of the Office of Education.

"You have taken me away from my favorite village."

"Yes!"

"So where have you reassigned me?"

"To your home."

"But I've been a teacher for the last eight years. I am still teaching."

"This is why you need rest. You've worked enough."

"Can't you send me to another school?"

"No!"

Various teachers and students were coming and going to the Office of Education for their jobs. Everyone passing by looked at Mirza Shafi who was sitting motionless, like a stump of a tree, near the wall. His face was red and his wrinkles had deepened. His eyelashes were thinning out and his sunken eyes shone like two beads.

### Footnotes

- 1 "Sa'adi, may you turn over in your grave." An expression denoting that Sa'adi (a poet) would have been shocked by such an idea.
- 2 "My son, your flesh belongs to the teacher and your bones to me," meaning "You have to obey your teacher and your parents."
- 3 "White-bearded ones"—(agh saggal) refers to a mature man who is esteemed for his wisdom and judgment. The equivalent for a woman is "one with white side-burns" (agh birchak).
- 4 The expression, "When you yoke the cow to the plow, it will try to get away" means here that a disciplinary approach is necessary to educate children.
- 5 Bastinadoed—beaten on the feet. Considered one of the most severe and painful methods of torture.
- 6 Shariat. Koranic law.
- 7 Glasses were emptied—signifies agreement with what has been said earlier. They drank to the idea.
- 8 "O Saki, may I be a sacrifice to your eyes..." indicating that he is completely drunk.



# MIRJALAL

## The Shade of the Willow Tree

(1937)

Everyone has his own obsession. This was true of Uncle Salman the gardener, too. If he felt sympathetic toward anyone, he tried to help them in every way possible.

One day, he stood deep in thought in front of the garden next to the road. The sun had risen high in the sky and shone against his bronzed, shiny brow. As he raised his hand to shade his face from the sun, a thought suddenly passed through his mind. He looked down at the earth, as if looking for something that was lost. He walked back and forth along the road, his boots furrowing into the earth.

The next morning before sunrise, Uncle Salman dug a ditch in the same place. Soon after, he brought a willow sapling and planted it there. He put some bushes with thistles around it to protect it from the cattle.

During the summer when Uncle Salman had worked in the vegetable beds, he would become breathless from the heat and would go to his hut to rest. When he would be walking down the road and he felt that there was a need for shade, a quiet voice within him would say, "Plant a tree here."

About five miles from the village where the road divides to go to the gardens and orchards, there was a place called "Dashlija." Fields stretched out to the horizon from there, but there was no shaded place to rest.

Now near Uncle Salman's orchard, there was an underground spring called "Saz Bulaghi" (Singing Spring), and

during the hot summer, no traveler would pass by without drinking from the stream and washing his hands and face. But as far as resting for a while, there was not even the shade of a stone. With this in mind, Uncle Salman planted a willow tree there where the road separates.

For five years, he did his utmost to take care of that tree. The young, lonely tree spread its branches. Its roots had already reached water. It drank the stream water and received light and warmth from the sun. It grew tall and spread its green foliage, like clusters of beautiful white jasmine, over the heads of the travelers. It cooled the dry desert-like air and its shade greeted the passers-by. Even people who didn't know about the stream would come and rest under the willow tree. Seeing this would gladden Uncle Salman's heart, making him feel very proud, like a father who had raised a wonderful son.

"I have to see," he thought, "if people appreciate the shade of this tree. I wonder what they are saying about it?"

Whenever there were people gathered under the tree, he pretended to be passing by so that he could find out what they were saying. He would linger there, hoping to overhear their conversation.

One time two men on horses stopped there. From their appearance, they looked like teachers or physicians. They seemed somewhat intellectual. Holding a spade in his hand, on the pretext of getting water from the side of the stream, Uncle Salman moved closer to the riders and listened to them.

The men fastened their horses to a bush, and went down to the spring and drank from it. Then they went over to the green grass, to lie down.

Uncle Salman was very happy because he believed that they were the talkative type. One of the riders brought out a small box from his pocket and rolled a cigarette for

himself. The other, a rather short young man, continued a discussion which seemed to have been left unfinished from a while before.

"You're mistaken, you don't know people," the man who was smoking answered coldly. "At a single glance, I know what kind of nest this bird comes from. I won't be suckered in by sweet talk."

It seemed that the riders were arguing about someone. One spoke and the other answered. One proposed an idea, the other rejected it. Giving up hope of getting anything out of their discussion, the gardener returned to his hut disappointed and dejected.

The second day, Uncle Salman listened to the remarks of a man from the city. The man, not accustomed to long walks, had become very tired and seemed to be lying there without moving or talking. After waiting a long time, Uncle Salman wanted to leave, but the man from the city started talking.

"What is this thing, uncle?"

Uncle Salman turned to him.

"What did you say, my son?"

The man from the city sat up.

"I mean the man who planted this tree. I say, you 'son of a cursed father,' you spent time and money, so why didn't you plant a fruit tree, like a mulberry or a pear tree. Would that have been too much to ask?"

Uncle Salman was hurt by the city man's words. He didn't answer at all, and he hung his head as he went back to his hut.

The third day, a strong, muscular cart driver came to the shade. Knife in hand, he climbed the tree. Uncle Salman came forward anxiously, but seeing that the cart driver was looking for a shaft for his cart, he became less anxious.

"My good man, if someone hadn't planted this tree, how would you find your shaft?" asked Uncle Salman.

The cart driver, with his head down, busy cutting the wood, said, "Damn the man who planted this. Couldn't he have planted something sturdier here, like an oak tree or an elm? How can you make a shaft out of this willow? I know it's useless, but what can I do? There's nothing else available."

Uncle Salman didn't answer him either.

On the fourth day, during the heat of the day when one could hardly breathe, a group of farmhands came to Saz Bulaghi. They were working in a farm nearby and had come to eat lunch under the shade of the willow tree. As soon as they arrived, a big lunch bag was opened. They brought out yogurt, and mixing it with the water from the stream, made "ayran."<sup>1</sup> They cut bread, cucumbers and onions and prepared everything. Then, getting out their wooden spoons, they ate with great gusto.

At first, Uncle Salman wanted to invite them to have some fruits from his garden, but he decided to stand aside and listen to them. He said to himself, "First let's see if they appreciate good work."

The farmhands packed up what was left and putting their hands under their heads, lay down to rest.

"May you rest in peace, the man who planted this willow."

Uncle Salman looked carefully and noticed who it was who had spoken. He was a dark-haired young man who was resting in the far corner.

"In the midst of this wilderness," another joined in, "the shade of a willow tree is better than anything in the world. Blessed be the hands that planted it!"

Uncle Salman could not contain himself any longer. Moving from his garden toward the willow tree, he said, "Thanks, all of you young men who appreciate my work." The harvesters recognized that it was the man who had planted the willow.

The young man with black hair sat up. "Uncle, please forgive me. A moment ago, thinking that you were dead, we asked for God's blessings upon your soul."

"My son, I don't mind. Blessings are necessary for the living as well. You know the value of my work and appreciate it. No blessing is better than this."

With one hand on his buckle, Uncle Salman pointed to the shade of the willow tree with the index finger of his other hand and poured out his heartfelt feelings.

"Many people have come here. Many people have sat here. Many have even cursed the man who planted this tree. I've heard them with my own ears; they were only thinking of themselves. My son, it takes all sorts of people to make the world. But I knew that people would come who would appreciate this shade and praise me for it. There are good people in the world. Now when I see you resting and talking about this place, I feel rewarded. I feel as if a new life has been given to me. It's as if I have paid my debt to the world."

A farmhand interrupted Uncle Salman, "The goldsmith knows the value of gold. We laborers appreciate your work."

"My son, I believe in good work. A dog also leads a life. We humans should leave something—a good work or a trace of ourselves."

Uncle Salman looked out and opened his arms, as if to embrace someone. He continued, "You see, down there as far as you can see, orchards and gardens extend to the horizon. Our forefathers planted them; they sweated and prepared all of this for us. We have to do the same for our children. If everyone thought only of eating and enjoying himself, the world would be left in ruins in a few years."

The farmhands all agreed with Uncle Salman. As they got up to leave, the willow tree waved its young,

green, clean leaves and, as if whispering in the breeze, seemed to be saying "yes, yes," to Uncle Salman's words.

### Footnote

- 1 Ayran (pronounced I-rah) is a refreshing beverage made from yogurt, water and salt. Dried mint and other herbs are added for flavor.

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## er Short Stories

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