

fiction

The Rains

by Alauddin Al Azad

THE rains will come. The wind from the south, blowing in the spring night slightly touched with drew, will soon have the wetness of the sea in it. It will blow over parched, furrowed meadows and, raising a tremor in the leafless tree tops, will gather in dark clouds on the distant peaks. And then, tearing apart the entire sky in lightning streaks, the raise, amidst deafening thunder, will fall in multitudinous streams like the blessing of God. In place of the dried branches of the trees, tender young leaves will sprout and the whole field will be covered with layers of green. Gleaming in the jute fields under the mid-day sun, one will perspire profusely but with no weariness. For the dreams of the new harvest will entwine themselves with every drop of one's blood like a powerful flood.

Things, however, were different this year. The month of Falgun passed and yet the northern sky did not get even slightly dark. Chaitra too was coming to an end. Faint rumblings were heard in the sky and the whole atmosphere grew stuffy but that was about all.

And then came Baishakh. Still the sun, scattering sparks of fire, continued to blaze with unabated intensity. The young jute plants that had come up from the bosom of the earth slowly withered and grew listless. There was an utter emptiness above.

And below, it seemed, a vast openness stretched from one corner of the earth right up to the horizon. Further below stretched the sun-burnt, baked earth streaked with strange designs. Standing at noon on the border of the field, strange sensations clutched one's heart. The field was a witch stretching out her burnt, coppery tongue. A burning hunger had made her devour the corn-child she carried at her breast. There was no doubt that next year the curse of God would descend.

But why? There must be some serious cause behind it. The question came up for discussion after the Friday prayers. Standing near the pulpit, Maulana Mohiyuddin said, "Dear brothers, I am only a humble servant of God. I don't know what to say to you. You know everything. It is written in the book that when the world becomes sinful, the curse of God will fall on men. And what do we see today? On the one hand, sons do not obey their fathers, women do not observe purdah, and the world is full of thieves, swindlers and scoundrels. On the other hand, people neither say their prayers nor fast, nor go on pilgrimage. Brother, let us all pray to Him today and weep before Him. He is most compassionate and, if He please. He can bestow on us a particle of His infinite mercy."

The resonant voice of the Maulana filled the interior of the mosque. Hajee Kalimullah stood up from the pious congregation. He had a tiny white beard on his chin and a white cotton cap on his head. Long and regular prayers had left a callous mark on the centre of his forehead. He cleared his

throat and spoke, his voice quivering with emotion. "We shall surely do what the Maulana Saheb has suggested. But, along with this, every one must remember that the evil-doer has got to be punished. Have you ever pondered over the question as to why this drought has been visited upon us? To tell you frankly, some woman is surely big with an illegitimate child, she may be one of the women of the neighbouring villages. She may even be a resident of our own village for all we know. We must seek out the sinners or we cannot escape this curse. We must be very stern with them. The scoundrels should be horse-whipped."

Hajee Kalimullah ran the fingers of his right hand through his beard and, trembling with anger, took his seat. Only one thought burnt in the cells of his brain, to find out the real culprit.

It was decided to hold congregational prayers for rain in the football ground under the blazing mid-day sun. But Maulana Mohiyuddin fell ill the day before the special prayers.

The villagers requested Hajee Kalimullah to lead the prayers. He politely refused at first but, later, at the request of all, he consented to do so.

After the prayers were said, Hajee Kalimullah turned from the west and stood facing east, surveying the large congregation with complacency. It was good to see that the world had not yet become completely uninhabitable.

Even now, once the call was given, you could get a thousand people to offer their prayer before the great God. He looked with satisfaction at the sight of the innumerable caps on the heads of the people in front of him. What if they were shabby and torn, dirty and oily?

The helpless people sat close together in the wide open field with hollow cheeks praying for a little mercy. Raising his two hands, Hajee Kalimullah intoned in his deep voice, "O Allah, cast Thy eyes on us, be kind to Thy servants. Thou art the Lord of the earth and of the sky, of the sun and the moon. At the sign of Thy finger the sea swells, the wind blows, the sea rushes forth. At the slightest wish this world can blossom with flowers and crops. O God, give us clouds, give us water, give us shade, give us peace!"

"Allahumma Ameen! Allahumma Ameen!" the entire congregation wailed. Hajee Kalimullah's grey bread became drenched with tears. Overwhelmed with sobs, he finished his prayers with the words, "Sobbanaka Rabbiha Izzate Ammayassemun Assalam Allah Mursalina Alhamdu Lillahi Rabbil Alamin!"

The children, the young men and the old, they gathered in the field like this on three consecutive days. They prayed to God with one eye on the sky and the other on the dying, withering crops. Tiny boys and girls painted the only son of a mother in black, placed on his head a winnowing fan with a frog and the twig of a bishkantil plant on it, and played the game of the cloud and the rain. They cooked rice-pudding on the bank of the river and served it to beggars on banana leaves.

They gazed at the sky hour after hour, developing cracks in their neck, and yet the sky remained as blue as ever. There was not a trace of a cloud anywhere.

Sitting on his prayer-mat after the evening prayer, telling his rosary, Hajee Kalimullah was lost in thought. One could detect signs of weariness and anxiety in his eyes. Well, there were good reasons for that. He had earned a few thousand rupees by black-marketing yarn. With half of that money he had purchased a warehouse at a business port on the river Meghna and with the rest a fair piece of land. If he failed to buy jute and store it in his ware-house, its purchase would be pointless. It was no good getting a monthly rent of a merely one hundred and fifty rupees. It looked as if he would not be able, after all, to use the warehouse for himself this year. On top of it, he had cultivated all his land himself this year. That was stupid. If he had leased out the land he would have got about fifteen hundred rupees in cash. At present he has simply tired to death looking after the land and supervising the work of the hired men. He had already spent a fair amount on the purchase of seeds, preparation of land and other measures. A good deal more would have to be spent in the future, but from the appearance of the sky, there was little possibility of a good crop this season.

It had not been wise to give up the jute business. Last year he had gone to Makkah by aeroplane. He had planned that, on his return, he would not entangle himself so much in worldly affairs. He would leave the warehouse in the hands of his children and would personally look after the land only. But lack of funds spoiled all his plans. He told himself that, after all, business was business; there was no question of honesty or dishonesty in it. Everything was all right as long as one had good intentions and spent something on charities.

The strong fragrance of mango blossoms came through the window. The twittering of the shaliks from nearby bamboo clusters had perceptibly lessened. The beads of the rosary slipped through the fingers of Hajee Kalimullah and he found that his mind was being slowly engulfed in a stupor.

Zaigun came into the room to light the lamp and was surprised to find him sitting there. She exclaimed, "Why sir, I thought you had gone to the mosque."

Looking up at her, Hajee Kalimullah said, "I am not feeling very well. Beside—" he added. "Your lady will be back. I think, any moment now." Hajee Kalimullah, unable personally to go, had sent that morning his third son by the first wife to fetch her. As a matter of fact, he had always been averse to allowing his wives to stay at their fathers' places for a very long time. He had allowed his first wife only ten days and that too in the beginning when she was a new bride. The number of days had slightly increased in the case of the second wife.

But now he was in his declining years. One could no longer afford to be as strict as before in everything. When his second wife died two years ago he had lost all interest in the world and its affairs. But who could predict God's mysterious ways? What was allotted would surely come to pass. Last year, when he was preparing to go on Haj, only a month before the date of his departure, everybody insisted that he should marry again, if only for the sake of the stability of his prosperous and happy family.

But what about the bride? He was going to be sixty and who would offer his daughter as a wife to him?

"How you make me laugh," Maju Pradhan had cried out, running his fingers through his beard. You just say the word and I will find the girl. And not any girl. I will find out such a woman that you will only stare at her, speechless with wonder."

Hajee Kalimullah's eyes had brightened with happiness. His heart had beat with a strange emotion. But outwardly he had remained rather sorrowful and indifferent. It would not be right to forget the memories of his former wives so soon. He had swallowed and said, "Look, I have now grown pretty old and this is no time for merry making. It would be enough if some one were there to attend to the household affairs and my few personal needs."

"That I understand," Maju Pradhan had argued, "You can do with a damaged boat and you can do with a new one. But what do we want? Which one is pleasant to cross the river in?"

After all this, the wife that was arranged in exchange for full seven kanis of land was none other than a granddaughter of Maju Pradhan. She was about twenty-one or twenty-two years old. Women in this country are said to get old at twenty. From that point of view, the match with Hajee Kalimullah was not an unsuitable one.

Zaigun finished her work in the kitchen and returned. With a meaningful solemnity, she drew a stool and sat near the door. Hajee Kalimullah had not yet finished reciting the Quran. Stopping his recitation for a while, he asked, "Any news?"

"Yes, there is," replied Zaigun.

"What is it?" Hajee Kalimullah's fingers paused. He looked at her eagerly. He had engaged Zaigun to collect secret information whenever she was free from her work. And hence this eagerness on his part.

Zaigun said, "I went to Batashi today. She was gathering mango leaves for her goat. As soon as she saw me, she started talking of all sorts of things but I only gazed and gazed at her figure." Casting a glance at the door, she continued, "Her abdomen looked swollen!"

Hajee Kalimullah asked solemnly, "When did her husband die?"

"Seven or eight months ago, I am sure," Zaigun said, after a little calculation, "But it looked as if she had

conceived only four or five months ago."

"Is that so? Then there is gap of quite some time." Hajee Kalimullah's eyes twinkled with hope, as if he was seeing the light of truth at last. He asked in a low voice, "Did you see the man who lives in her room?"

"Yes, I did. He is much better now though not yet fully recovered. I saw from the door that he was lying on his bed in that room."

"Yes, yes," the Hajee remarked impatiently. "What if he were sick? Couldn't one indulge in those activities if one lay sick in bed? What do you say?"

"You speak the truth," said Zaigun and added, "besides, I never liked Batashi's ways. People used to say a lot of things about her even while Rajab Ali was living. Didn't everybody know of the affair when Chamu of Namapara opened the doors of her room? The blame fell on Chamu only because Rajab Ali got wise about the incident. Can any one dare act like that without encouragement from the woman?"

"If this be the truth then everything seems simple and clear. I believe Batashi had done it. Otherwise why should not the rains come?" Hajee Kalimullah resumed counting the beads of his rosary. He said after a while, "Still it is better to wait a little. Let me personally check the matter. Then something will surely have to be done."

Hajee Kalimullah was lost in deep meditation after Zaigun left. The furrows on his forehead grew deeper. His fingers on the rosary moved quicker than ever. Batashi! Batashi! Batashi! None other than Batashi could do this. This was the trouble of being a young widow. For how could a woman, having once lived with a husband, forget that taste? It was like opium. One could give up rice but not the intoxication of sex. Besides, she was in the fullness of youth. Just one man or two were nothing to her. She could make them stumble and fall by a mere meaningful wink. And how clearly she had managed the whole show! A cousin, only a day-labourer, a poor victim to black fever, with none to look after him. And so she simply had to take care of him. Well, no one was going to be fooled by such excuses and more. It was quite clear that the man was taken in because she wanted to share her bed with him at night.

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But who should be punished for this and how? If one were to follow the directions of the Book, they had to be buried in the earth up to the neck and then stoned to death. But could one do that sort of thing in this age? The law and the police were there. What then? A beating with shoes? A social boycott? Banishment from the village?

While Hajee Kalimullah was deeply engrossed in such thoughts, Khaled had arrived with his new step-mother

on the bank of the dying river.

The full moon had appeared in the sky long before they had left the bride's home. It now rose above the bamboo-thickets in shining splendour. Everything was quiet all around. No wind rustled the leaves of the trees.

The shallow river had only knee-deep water in it. Pushing through the mud was a thin stream. The clear water of that stream flowed smoothly over the sand. The tender paddy leaves of the boro fields lifted their blades through the water and embraced each other with affection.

Zohra stopped and took off her shoes with her right hand. She held a young child in her arms. Noticing her inconvenience, Khaled came up from behind and said, "Please let me carry Saju."

Zohra and Khaled were almost of the same age. At first Khaled had felt somewhat embarrassed in addressing her as aapni, the respectful "you" reserved for addressing elders, but he had got over it by now.

Zohra looked at the face of her husband's eldest son, shining in the moonlight. His beautiful eyes under the long-drawn eyebrows seemed more beautiful than ever. Her heart trembled with an unutterable emotion, like the thrilled river in the darkness of the wood. She asked dazedly, "Won't you find it troublesome?" Khaled smiled. "Oh, no it'll be no trouble at all."

Saju's mother had died two years ago. Saju was only five then. Deprived of love and affection, he turned into a constantly whining, weeping boy. But he was different now. He had come to like his new mother so much that he refused to part with her even for a minute. When Zohra left for her parents' house on the first formal return trip after the wedding, he quietly got into her lap and went with her.

In taking his soundly sleeping younger brother from her arms into his own, Khaled felt, for ever so short a moment, the fingers of his left hand touch something warm and soft, like the breast of a pigeon. His fingers trembled like the leaves of the champa tree in a sudden breeze. Instantly his whole body quivered like the passing of lightning in a heavy cloud. For a second he saw the girl blush deeply. Her whole face seemed to be suffused with a flaming red colour. Khaled could not stand there any longer.

Like the vague remembrance of some deep memory of an earlier life, an unknown feeling of pain engulfed his heart. He turned his face away and stepped through the smoothly flowing waters.

To be continued

Translated by Kabir Chowdhury.

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impression

In the Cruelest Month of April

By Andalib Rashdie

Continued from last week

April 17

Basil Bunting, a not so known English poet who described himself as a "minor poet not conspicuously dishonest" died on April 17, 1985. Ezra Pound was a great admirer of Basil Bunting. Known for his occasional erotic verse, Greek poet Constantine Cavafy, also earned notoriety for being too explicitly homosexual in the 19th century. It would not have mattered much if he were born in these days and he could ask for legal action against the heterosexuals for discriminating on the sexual behavioral orientation. Constantine Cavafy was born on this day in 1863.

April 18

Ezra Pound was released from custody on April 18, 1958 after serving 13 years with the charges of treason. Initially doctors diagnosed that he was incurably insane and unable to stand trial. He was held in the custody asylum since his arrest in 1945. On examination the United States Federal Court adjudged him sane and issued the order for his release.

April 19

Poet and historian Sir Henry John Newbolt, famous for his sea song "Drake's Drum" died on April 19, 1938. Lord Byron died in the foreign land of

Greece on this day in 1824. He was suffering from malarial fever. 'Mad, bad and dangerous to know' as described by Lady Caroline Lamb, Byron joined the Greek fighting to liberate their country from the Turkish Empire. He formed a 'Byron Brigade' and donated money to the insurgents.

serious anger for Pope Leo X by writing salacious sonnets was born in Tuscany on April 20, 1492. Alfred Tennyson had his first son born and died on April 20, 1851. Archibald MacLeish, a leading American poet of the 1920s died in 1982. W H Davis wrote in 1878 his famous lines, "What is this life if, full of care, / We have no time to stand and stare?" George Bernard Shaw encouraged Davis to write. Davis began writing poems at the age of 34 and attempted to sell them to amass some money to have a book published. GBS wrote on Davis: "He did not sell as single copy, though he made a house-to-house visitation in the suburbs. Most of the people he called upon were poor. They looked at the poet in amazement when he offered them a printed sheet for three pence. One rich woman, with a servant, gave him a penny, but refused altogether to accept the poems in return.