

Mazhar ul Islam: *The sweeper sitting in the whispers' shadow*

An extraordinary panic had broken out in the hospital that day. The doctors were taking rapid steps as they crossed the corridors in their white gowns with their stethoscopes round their necks. The nurses were moving so fast that they seemed to be running away from something.

Suddenly the sweepers mopping the floor with wet cloths stopped and stood back against the walls. The chief of the laboratory appeared, holding a paper in his hand, running fast towards where the operating theatre and the intensive care unit were. The head of the X-ray unit came pushing an empty stretcher towards the operating theatre, and turned quickly into the corridor.

The silence in the hospital was far greater than usual. So that when the sweeper quietly lit a cigarette, it seemed to him that even the sound of his taking a drag was echoing throughout the hospital. The doctors did not utter a word. The nurses too were silent, communicating only through gestures. All the doors of the hospital had been closed, and no one was now allowed to go in or out. Phones were ringing in some of the doctors' rooms, but nobody answered them or even had time to do so. Or possibly they were so preoccupied that they couldn't hear them ringing.

This sort of gloom had certainly overtaken the hospital before, but that day it was not even lit by a single nurse's smile. All the doctors and nurses in the hospital seemed to have been struck dumb. It was so quiet that when the sweeper put his cigarette out, not even a leaf could be heard stirring. Stronger than usual, the smell of medicines throbbed as it mingled in the gloom. When the head nurse came out of the operating theatre, she was hardly able to stop herself falling. The ward orderly supported her. Gradually a peculiar sort of yellowness appeared, and the orderly's white gown became yellow too.

By now the sweeper was tired, and he sat down leaning against the wall. He started to feel for a small doll he had in his pocket, which he had taken for his children from the rubbish pile in the ward. The doll was in such a state that the sweeper would have got her into the hospital if he had been able to. But thinking that everyone would laugh at such behaviour, he had stuffed her into his pocket. The doll's clothes were torn, her hair was all over the place, and there was a large hole over her left eye. One of her arms had been bent back, and the other was pushed in at the elbow.

As two or three doctors passed quickly in front of the sweeper, they were stopped by a senior doctor coming towards them:

'Has he regained consciousness?'

The doctors shook their heads and quickly went on.

The atmosphere in the hospital had been like this since early morning. It was now midday, but the doctors and nurses were still as rushed and busy. A particular sort of helplessness had now started to show on their faces. The nurses' expressions were clouded by anxiety, and the orderlies were overwhelmed by confusion.

Arrangements had been tightened up even more. It was as if the administration had sealed the ears of the hospital's walls. At every gap, every window and every door, a member of the hospital staff had been so strictly positioned that not even a puff of wind could come in from outside.

The sweeper felt as if the doll in his pocket had started to sweat. He wanted to stop a doctor and ask him what was going on. What sort of patient had been admitted that day to make the entire staff anxious and preoccupied? But when some doctors did pass nearby him, he didn't dare ask them anything on seeing what a hurry they were in. He did get up from where he was, but sat down again in exactly the same place. He didn't even have the courage to go off towards the main gate and try to find some way of getting out of the hospital. He was unable to stop himself remembering the day he had spent at his father's bedside watching his final moments. Unable to speak, his father had communicated by signs. But he hadn't understood what he meant.

Meanwhile, four or five doctors (whom Sadiq Masih the sweeper didn't manage to count properly) came quickly from the direction of the intensive care unit. Among them, Sadiq Masih recognized the heart specialist. He knew the faces of the others too, but didn't know exactly what sort of patients they used to see. For a moment he wondered if one of the doctors used to treat patients suffering from paralysis. But he hadn't had time to think about him properly when the doctors went on. The sound of their shoes came back from the corner of the corridor and went on past Sadiq Masih.

Sadiq Masih wondered what had happened that day. He had been working in the hospital for many years, but he had never seen anything like this. Previously his father had also been a sweeper in the same hospital and had spent his whole life in the same place. He had been the first sweeper to work in the hospital after the creation of Pakistan, but nothing like this had happened in his lifetime either. He had told Sadiq Masih many other sorts of interesting and rather peculiar things, but he could recall no incident which had caused all the doors to be closed, with no one being able to go in or out. To make even the cracks of the windows and doors in the hospital blind and deaf, to make all the staff and doctors become so anxious over one patient, to make them go around in such consternation, and to dye their pullovers with the sickly yellow of death. Then Sadiq Masih thought hard about the patient on whose account all this had happened, and about whom he hadn't been able to find out properly if he was in the operating theatre or in the intensive care unit. The fear in Sadiq Masih's heart gradually began to pervade his body. He went yellow. From what he had gathered from the few words spoken by the doctors and nurses coming and going past him, he at least understood that the patient's condition was critical. The doctors were trying to restore him to consciousness, but he remained in an unbroken coma. With the aid of all sorts of tests, the doctors were trying to understand what kind of illness he was suffering from. Heart, brain, breathing, or something else.

At that moment he saw a rat which had come along by the wall and was now standing still a little way away from him. It lifted its face and looked towards him, then suddenly turned to go back the same way it had come. Sadiq Masih felt that the rat was moving unusually slowly. It looked as if it wouldn't be able to run away if it had to do so just then. Exactly that happened when a nurse came from the same

direction. Instead of taking itself off quickly, he crouched down by the wall. He realized that it must be a rat from the hospital canteen. For the rats from the medicine stores and the general wards weren't so lazy. Besides, Sadiq Masih recognized that rat. Two nights ago he had seen it moving around the utensils on the counter in the canteen. As soon as it saw him, the rat had got into the box of left-over chapaties and started gnawing them. There were of course rats living everywhere in the hospital, but Sadiq Masih could tell what ward a rat belonged to by looking at its colouring and the way it moved. He was especially good at recognizing the rats which wandered about in dirty, smelly bathrooms with broken floors. When a patient killed bedbugs and flung them into the bathroom, the rats would polish them off in minutes.

Then Sadiq Masih saw that the rat had gone under the door of the blood bank. It was as if even the rat was nervous today. There were lots of cats in the hospital too, but a time had now come when there was an agreement between the cats and the rats, and most of the cats kept playing with the rats instead of catching them. As he kept thinking, Sadiq Masih's shoulders started hurting. His body was racked by fear, astonishment and the oppression of his surroundings. He was terribly thirsty, but his cup was on top of the box for the electricity meter in the children's wards. Plucking up his courage, he got up. In great fear and terror he started moving, leaning against the wall. Once he put his hand in his pocket and felt for the doll. When a doctor passed by him he stopped, but the doctor paid him no attention. He went along slowly. When he passed in front of the conference room, he felt that there were lots of doctors inside, and that the conference room was full of whispers.

Suddenly Sadiq Masih noticed Sohna Masih, sitting resting against the wall of the conference room. This was hidden from the general gaze, and had a wall of the officers' ward facing it. This was where the hospital sweepers used to gather when they came off duty, in the space which lay between the two blocks.

That was also where they kept their brooms, the wet rags they used to wipe the floors, their boxes and wipers. Only a few days earlier the doctors had complained to the administration, asking for the sweepers not to be allowed there, because it smelt and one of the windows of the officers' ward opened on to it. So a disagreeable sort of smell spread into the officers' ward because of which there was a danger of disease spreading too. But when Sadiq Masih saw Sohna Masih sitting there, he went over to him, sat down next to him, and said in a fearful voice, 'Sohna, what's happened today?'

'Some special patient's come in,' replied Sohna in a confidential tone.

'Who is it?'

'I don't know. But I've found out from what I've heard the doctors saying that whenever the patient regains consciousness he looks around helplessly without being able to speak, and bursts into tears. The doctors say his tongue, brain and body have suffered a paralytic attack. He keeps falling unconscious.'

'But there are plenty of patients like this who come into the hospital. Why are there such restrictions today? What are the doctors going about running? Why are the meetings going on?'

'It's a special patient. The doctors are trying to save him,' Sohna Masih told Sadiq Masih, again in a very confidential tone. 'It seems he's got lots of other things wrong with him. From what the doctors say, it seems that the patient has lost his memory. One doctor was even saying that he was suffering from 'sallow septicaemia'. It think that must be some special kind of poison. 'Sepsis' is what they call poison - that's what Sister Martha told me.'

'But why are the doctors talking so quietly?'

'Well, they've been told to whisper everything into each other's ears. But when they disagree, they start quarreling. There was one doctor I even heard saying he was exhausted. Another was saying he should be allowed to go, because it was time for his clinic. But he wasn't given permission, because they were then all waiting for the doctor who discovered seven or eight years ago that if the patient's blood isn't changed, it's difficult for him to be saved. And then he did get his blood changed. Now all the doctors are saying that he's got something wrong with his blood, using some difficult English name for it. Doctors' English really is full of hard words.'

Shifting his position, Sadiq Masih came even closer to Sohna Masih. Raising a cup filled with water, he said, 'Shall I have a couple of sips?' Sohna Masih waved his hand as if to say, 'OK, have a drink.'

Sadiq Masih drank a little water, then put the cup back in its place. Wiping his mouth with the hem of his shirt, he said, 'I don't understand why they're taking such trouble and making so much effort for this particular patient. There doesn't seem to be any hope of his recovery. Who knows? Maybe he's already dead.'

'No, not yet!' Sohna said, cocking his ear towards the conference room. 'I don't understand who this patient is either.'

At that moment the atmosphere was pervaded by the doctors' whispers. Trickling through the cracks of the closed window, they fell on Sohna and Sadiq Masih's ears, where they stuck like wax from a candle. One doctor said, 'Some doctors in Europe are agreed that if there is no chance a patient being saved, he should be given a fatal injection and released from his suffering.'

Another doctor disagreed. 'We cannot play with anyone's life.'

Another said, 'Who knows? Maybe this is what God wills, and the patient's days are already complete.'

Another voice said, 'You bring God into everything. You should treat the patient.'

Suddenly the phone rang. All the doctors immediately started. The most senior doctor moved and lifted the receiver.

'Yes, it's me, put him on.' For a while he stood there silent. Then suddenly he pulled himself together and straightened up. 'Yes sir, yes.'

'His condition is highly critical, sir.'

'Mental pressure.'

'No sir, his heart is not working either.'

'Yes, paralysis too.'

'His speech, sir, is completely blocked.'

'No sir, this is what we don't understand.'

'Yes sir, he ought to be happy.'

'Yes sir, complete justice.'

'Quite. Perfect freedom.'

'No sir, there are no financial worries either.'

'Yes sir, it really does seem like a conspiracy.'

'Yes sir. Yes sir. Yes.'

After taking the call, he turned to the other doctors and said, 'There is no cause for concern. We have tried our best for him. The rest is in God's hands. If He does not want to save him, what can we do?'

A doctor interrupted, 'Who knows if God is going to save him?'

The seniormost doctor brushed aside his remark.

When he heard this, Sadiq Masih looked hopefully at Sohna Masih and said in a voice filled with emotion, 'Sohna, God is coming to save the patient.' But then he suddenly realized that all the doors of the hospital were closed. He got up and started to run towards the main gate. The sound of his running echoed throughout the hospital. An orderly went to stop him. A doctor threatened him in an angry voice and tried to stop him, but Sadiq Masih ran madly on. Crossing the corridors, turning the corner, leaping over angry looks and voices, he reached the main gate, and shouted, 'Open the gate! God is coming! Open the gate!'

The guard threw him looks of mingled astonishment and anger. Then with his back against the gate he stood his ground, saying, 'There is no order to open the gate.'

Sadiq Masih shouted again, 'Why don't you open it? Open the gate, quickly! God is coming!' Advancing, he tried to push the guard aside. The guard gave him a violent shove, and he went and fell some way off.

'He's mad. Grab him!' The staff on duty took hold of him.

He struggled to get free of their grip. 'Let me go! Let me go! Open the gate. God is coming. Why are you so stony-hearted?' His voice echoed throughout the hospital.

They stuffed a handkerchief into his mouth, tied him up tightly, and beat him so hard that he no longer had the strength to get up. Then taking him, they threw him down beside Sohna Masih, who was sitting against the wall. Sadiq Masih looked into his sad eyes and said, 'Sohna, what's happened? Why don't they open the gate? This way the patient will die.'

Sohna Masih did not reply, but his desolate eyes filled with tears. Helplessly he kept looking at Sadiq Masih. Sadiq Masih was overcome by doubt. Anxiously he asked, 'Sohna, what's the matter? Why aren't you saying anything?' Sohna tried to speak, but couldn't. Even his hand seemed lifeless to Sadiq Masih, who said anxiously, 'Sohna, are you paralysed too?'

Sohna Masih burst out crying, and his eyes confirmed Sadiq Masih's question. Then Sadiq Masih burst out crying as well. His limbs too were becoming lifeless. After a little while they had both become completely paralysed, unable to move from their places, just looking into each other's eyes and weeping bitterly. They couldn't even speak, but kept crying and weeping. They wept from their hearts like little children, and the sight of their weeping made the heart tremble.

They lay there like cast off shoes. A pair of shoes that had been taken off and thrown there without any care. Sohna Masih was against the wall, but Sadiq Masih lay on his side. Sohna Masih's mind and speech had been so affected that he couldn't speak at all, but Sadiq Masih managed to say something in a broken voice:

'Sohna - in my pocket - the doll - from the children's ward - in my pocket - my hands and body, lifeless - I can't get the doll out - she'll suffocate - she - will - die - talking - even - is - getting - hard - my - tongue - is - not - working - paralysed'

The conference room was still overflowing with the doctors' whisperings. Now there were some other people there also, who were not doctors. They were getting minute-by-minute reports on the patient. Attention was also being given to the payment of fees, starting at five thousand. But some suggested that in view of inflation, the fees should be increased. At that point, a doctor delivering an up-to-the-minute report stated that the patient was now breathing his last. He had briefly returned to consciousness and wanted to say something, but had been unable to do so. 'He burst out crying, and looked around helplessly. Now even life-saving drugs are useless.'

One of those present who was not a doctor said, 'Complete the papers. Everybody will ask the cause of death and mention all sorts of illnesses. And the death certificate - you will merely record on it that his mind and body were unable to respond to any treatment.'

Heaven knows how the night passed.

But in the morning everyone in the city looked at each other as if they were already dead.

Draft translation by Christopher Shackle