

BABOON

By: Abdullah Hussain

IT is rather difficult to make a living in the village. It is not possible to work in the padi fields as I do not own any land. The wage for tapping rubber trees is not worth the effort. Only once a year is there something lucrative, that is, during the harvesting season. The wage for harvesting padi is rather good. But it happens only once a year. The money received cannot be saved to sustain living expenses for the months to come before the next harvest. There are three months to feed. The tiny one needs the most money.

Money! Money is number two God, I heard the Chinese say, because with money anything can happen. I wonder who invented money? A piece of paper can have all kinds of face values. To buy paper of that size would only cost a few cents. Even if the fee for drawing is added, it would not have cost that much. But strangely everybody gives ridiculous values to these pieces of papers, just because of the differences in colours and names. These papers eventually spark off a kind of craze for people to chase after them. To get such papers, people are willing to kill each other, to break off family ties, to swindle, to sell their honour. Needless to say, my family and I are looked down upon for not having such papers. Oh, why should I be thinking of all this? It is none of my business. The intellectuals have arranged it as such, you are a "nobody", you just have to follow. I have to look for that paper. Paper! Paper! Money!

I cannot bear to say in this village much longer, I must get out. Allah's earth is vast. I must get out. Oh my wife, I hope you will understand this action that I have taken, I do not mean to desert you. Oh my child,

I hope you will forgive your father. I have to go and leave you. My going is intended to bring us closer not to push us further apart. One of us or maybe the three of us, may die of hunger. If it were to come to that, then that would be the most painful parting. So, before the separation happens, allow me to leave you and your mother. This separation is only temporary. We can still exchange news. We will be out of sight but close at heart. I hope you will understand, my wife, I hope you will understand, my child.

Ow! How my heart hurts to think I will be going far away. I will be leaving my wife and child. I feel as if my feet cannot bear to leave this old house. This old house share the same destiny as I. Here I was born and have ... was raised and it was from here that my father and mother were taken to their journey to the here after. In this house too we spent the first night of our wedded bliss. In this house too, the first cry of my child broke the silence of the morning. Ohhh!

I must not allow my emotions to overcome me. It was because I was so emotional that I failed in my life. When I was about to register my name for a land in a government land scheme, my neighbour came begging me to give that opportunity to his son. Its or me, he said, I could still wait for another turn. His son was rather lazy and would be useless to remain in the village. With that sacrifice, he said, I would have save a life, I would be rewarded by Allah Almighty.

My wife was rather angry when I made that decision, but I soothed her anger by saying that: the patient is loved by God. Everybody in our village is keen to seek God's blessings. Whatever we do, we leave to God to decide and maybe it is because of this that those slightly smarter, exploited our weakness for their benefit. I am not too sure about this. But I guess life is like that. The drought that struck our area caused us much hardship. Many domestic animals died, crops would not grow and there was widespread cholera. God gives life and God takes it away. God will make known His decision to you. Many would not follow the doctor's advice. Because our ancestors never knew doctors. Doctors are powerless against God's Will. I want to rebel against this believe, but my emotions, you might say, would not let me. I could not defy the norms that have found roots in the lives of the village community. I kept my patience. My father and mother departed from us.

Now living conditions in the village are no longer bearable. I will not be able to sustain our life for much longer if I were to stay on here. God's earth is vast. This is the voice that reverberates in my head. God's earth is vast. But which direction should I take? Many of my friends turned in the direction of the cities. Some joined the army, to defend the country, it seems, but I know that is not the main reason. To look for money is the real reason. I cannot join the army, I have cataract in my eyes. Should

I, too, go to the city to follow their footsteps? What job can I take in the city with only a lower secondary or SRP qualification?

One of our neighbour's children, who lives to the north of the village, has just graduated from university. He has a general degree. He says it is difficult to get a job. If someone with a qualification as high as a degree finds it difficult to get a job, how about me with only my SRP qualification? What job can I do?

Shortly after I left school, I tried to find work in an office. The SPA job application form is so familiar to me. I can fill it with my eyes closed. Whenever a job that seemed to fit my qualification appeared, I would apply. Everyday, I would be applying for a form, filling it up and sending it off. Fifteen cents for a form, Fifteen cents for the postage. I have to stick a photo too. I lost count as to number of photographs I have sent. But I never felt bored and I never gave up. I would faithfully send the forms, having filled them up as I should. It got to the stage where, when a reply arrived, I could tell what the content would be; there is no need to read it. Underconsideration, Regret to inform application unsuccessful. I was never called for an interview. It is difficult to get a job now, said our neighbour who has a university degree. We have to know influential people, if we do not have high-ranking relatives. Advertisements are just to fool the public, as candidates have already been lined up for the vacancies. I do not really believe this explanation. It is just the words of one who has despaired. I do not care, I will keep applying for the SPA forms and keep sending them in. I keep on getting the same reply. I keep on sending. I receive more replies. Only last year I stopped asking for application forms and sending them, and getting replies. I ran out of money to buy stamps and I have no more photos. Whatever little money left, I saved to buy milk for my newborn baby. His mother, my wife, produced no milk as our food is both vitamin and protein deficient.

Now I have to look for work. But where? Jobs as labourers in plantations are no longer available. Not as easy as before. I want to go to the city. But I will need money for that. My wife's only ring, has been on her finger for too long. That ring I can sell or pawn. That will be money for my expenses. For their expenses too, while I am away. And then they can sell the chickens or eggs for daily expenses. That rooster is my favourite. In the mornings it crows. Two or three times. I like to hear it crowing. It is as if there is a bond between the rooster and I. Ah, if my wife were to sell it, I would lose a friend. I would be lonely in the early mornings. But by that time I would no longer be here. I would be long gone. No more emotion. Yes, sell, sell it. As long as it can sustain the two lives. It is the way of the world, hardship on one party brings ease to another. Only the strong will prevail.

Forgive your father, my child. He did not mean to leave you. But Fate decreed thus. Forgive me, my wife. I did not mean to leave you. But circumstances dictate. I will love you more, when I am far away. You, too, will love me much, much more when I am far away. To love your wife, leave her occasionally. To love your child, spare not the rod. But you are too young for that my child, how could I ever cane you.

Oh, how I miss you my child. Just look at his smile. He does not know that his mother and father face hardship. He just smiles. If I could still smile like that how wonderful that would be. But how can I smile? I do not know what the future holds for me and for him. Look at his hands stretching out, waving, as if he is saying goodbye to me. At night, his mother would probably have a problem as he would wake up and cry. Maybe he is hungry. But what can we feed him with? His mother gives him cold water. After a few sucks he would throw the bottle away. He knows it is not milk. Tiny as he is, he already knows how to choose. Oh, my beloved child! I miss the touch of your body, my wife. Last night I slept at the mosque. Not inside, but outside. At first we were chased away. I said, we, there were many of us. But the guy who chased us away did not come again, he came just that once. Maybe he, too, missed the touch of his wife. Or maybe he was bored with his job? We slept. I curled up feeling cold. I placed both my hands gripped between my thighs, so they will be less cold. I fell asleep quickly, because I was too tired walking, looking for a job. To get lunch I washed cars, I got two to wash. Two ringgit. It is rather easy to find money in the big city. Washing cars too can bring in money. The friend next to me is a car parking tout. He said he got three ringgits. He asked me to be a car parking tout like him, but I did not like to do that. The job is a sort of scam. Conning yourself and conning other people. Conning other people might be considered an excusable art, but to con oneself is what I loath to do. These people do nothing. Wherever people park their cars, they are waiting there waiting. They help to open and close doors. Just give the screen a wipe and you get 10 cents. I do not like to do that. I like to work, to use my four limbs. Four? Not four, eight. I prefer to wash cars. I get paid for what I do. But car washing is not easy either. Everybody wants to wash cars. Today I merely replaced my friend who was not feeling well.

In the city, a circus is now in town. I want to look for work there. Even throwing out elephant shit would do. Or feed grass to horses. I just hope he would not ask me to clean out tiger shit. I would be scared. But my friend said it would be easy to get work there.

“Salute sir!”

He did not answer. Curse be on him. But he was the owner of the circus. Once again.

“Salute sir!”

I did not like to look at his face. He had a sour expression. His nose was what I hate most.

“What do you want?”

Eh, his voice had a note of sadness in it, incongruous with his face. His face was still morose, like someone whose wife had just died. I was at a loss for words, not knowing how to reply.

“What do you want?”

“I ... I would like a job.”

“Looking for a job? What job can you do?”

“To clean up elephant shit, sir. Feed grass to horses, sir.”

He kept nodding his head. There was a light in his eyes. There were ripples now in both his cheeks. I prayed that I would get the job of throwing out elephant shit or feeding grass to the horses.

This lad is a good lad. I have not met anyone who wanted to clean up elephant shit! People looking for job usually want to be elephant grooms, horse riders, acrobats, clowns, drummers. This one wants to be a coolie throwing out elephant shit. But there is no such job. The elephant shit is chucked away by its keeper. Hmmm. What job?

Ah! What is going through his mind? Is there a job or not? Maybe he is thinking I am crazy to be wanting to handle elephant shit. Has anyone ever applied for this job before? Curse be on my friend, he kidded me. He was the one who asked me to apply for this job. He was ragging me. I will twist his head. Just wait.

The man's expression became sour again.

“No job!”

Pangggg! I felt as if a green coconut had fallen on my head. I felt faint. I bit my lips, holding back the tears about to trickle out. I was so sure there was work for me. But bad luck. Damn. Even here there was no job. I did not realise it, but I had reached the doorway.

“Hey, wait!”

Wait for what. If there is no vacancy for me, why should I wait. Wasting my time for nothing. But he got up from the chair. Jumped towards the door and pulled back my arm.

I wanted to struggle free. But could not. His grip was too strong. I was told to sit on the chair in front of his desk. The chair was so big and beautiful, that diminutive me drowned, swallowed up by it. I knew this chair was not for someone like me. There was no chair like that in our village. Even the village chief could not afford to buy something like that. But that was the chair I was told to sit.

“I have a problem,” he said.

I wanted to laugh when I heard that. But my voice would not come out only a mocking smile creased the skin on my face. I had come

looking for work, begging I could say, and he talked about his problem. Why should I care. I have my own problems.

He knew my smile was cynical, mocking.

"This is for real," he added. "I have a problem. I reckon you are the only one who can solve it."

Ha, ha, ha. I guffawed when I heard that. Oh my child, I am sure you will be impressed when you hear this. Your father, a village yokel, uneducated, will solve the problem of a circus owner. You do not know what a circus is yet. Wait till you grow up, I will take you and your mother to see the circus. I am sure your mother has not been to one either. Just wait. I will take you both. The circus is a big show, a very big show. Besides human beings, big animals too take part in the show. Elephants, tigers, horses, snakes, dogs, monkeys and many others. To be a circus owner is not just anybody. He must be knowledgeable not only about human beings but also about animals. He must be able to control mankind and he must be able to tame beasts. And a man like this is now asking me to solve his problem.

"I do not want to know your problem, sir, I have come to ask for work. If there is no work, that's alright. I want to look for work somewhere else."

"But this also has to do with the job. I will give you a job if you can solve my problem."

"Eh, you seem to be talking riddles to me. But if there is a job as you said, then let me have the riddle."

I became bolder. But I still dared not sit back in the chair and relax. I just sat up straight.

"My problem is this," he said with a serious expression on his face. "My circus is famous because it has a big baboon. Do you know what a baboon is?"

I shook my head. A big snake, maybe. The name of his elephant maybe, or maybe the name of his tiger. Very nice name that is.

"The baboon is a big primate from Africa. This is his picture."

Hey, it is big. As big as me. Its skin is covered in long fur. Pitch black. Its face, ah its face is like a dog's. I really dislike it. Ugly and fearsome.

"This baboon is very smart. He is the star attraction of my circus. People come to see him because he is extraordinarily big. You see how frightening his face is, but he has a kind heart. Children can stroke his fur and he loves to carry small children. That is why people like him. Children love him. They ask their parents to bring them just to look at the baboon. My circus is known everywhere ..."

He fell silent. He put his head down at the edge of the table. I saw myself, his teardrops falling. He sobbed. Something terrible must have happened to his baboon. Sick? Dead? If it is sick, what can I do, I am

not a doctor. I tried to think of all the herbal recipes for folk medicine that we gave to our cattle and buffaloes, but I could not remember anything. If it died, it would be a calamity indeed. I pitied its master. I could not do anything. I kept quiet. Finally his sobs subsided. He blew his nose.

"Two days ago the baboon died," he said. My guess was right. The baboon died. I pitied him. I really pitied him. "My circus will be ruined unless I can find a replacement."

I do not know where really, I will be useful. I cannot help look for a new baboon. There are no baboons here.

"You can help me," he said.

"How?"

"The public, in fact the circus workers also do not know yet that the baboon is dead. So if you can replace the baboon, I will be saved. And you will get a job."

I was really puzzled. Shocked too.

"Replace? How to replace?"

"You be the baboon. I will pay you well."

I jumped up. I was really furious. How dare he asked me to be a baboon. "You are raving, you are mad!"

I walked towards the door.

"Wait, wait first," he pleaded.

I stopped and turned to look at him. He was slouching over the table. His hands slapped the table top, asking me to wait. I stood fixated at the door.

"You do not want to help me?" he asked pleadingly. His voice was so soft that my heart, too, softened.

"I do not want to be a baboon," I answered tersely.

"What's wrong with that? You want a job, right? This job pays well. Twenty ringgits a night."

"No way," I said.

But twenty ringgits a night. A month would fetch six hundred. Where can I get wages that high. "No way!"

"Why not?"

"I do not want to be a beast. I do not want to con people. I am not an animal."

"But we are all animals. Animals that can talk," he said gently.

Where hard I heard those words before, I forgot. But that was what he said. We are animals.

"But that is only figuratively speaking, not actually." I argued.

"Who said? Look at my face properly. Look!" He pointed a finger at his face.

I looked at his face. His nose. His nostrils turned upwards.

"So, what does my face look like? Don't be shy. Don't be embarrassed. Just say frankly."

I was not shy, but I was afraid he might get angry. I do not like to put people down. I just kept quiet, my lips twitching to get the word out.

“So, what is it like? If you are honest you will say it.”

Shucks! He was daring me to be honest. Let me answer. “Like a pig.”

“Right, like a pig,” he said. “You are really an honest person. Many other people dare not speak the truth. I don’t care. I am a human being wearing a pig’s face. Many other people are like that too.”

I recall the eyes of Mak Ngah, our aunt. Her eyes are like snake eyes. She really likes to throw slander here and there. Our uncle Pak Long, who lives in the lowland, has a face like a monkey, and he behaves like a monkey.

I remember the Siamese priest who came to our house. He once said that, we who died will live again and enter the bodies of all kinds of animals depending on what sins we have committed. Is he the reincarnation of a dead person? Ah, impossible. We Muslims do not believe all that. But his face looks like a pig’s. Mak Ngah’s eyes look like a snake’s. While Pak Long is like a monkey.

“You will be more noble if you were just wearing a sarong. People will say that you are a baboon, behaving like a human being, whereas I, people will say, am a man, with a face like an animal’s.”

“But I do not want to pretend!”

“Who does not pretend? You tell me. Everybody pretends. The face, the face of a human being, the behaviour is that of an animal. Isn’t that pretending?”

“But that’s other people, not me!”

“You too must pretend. Look at me, I pretend, I do well. You are honest, where are you? Destitute!”

“Hey you listen here, you cannot walk straight along a crooked road. You, too must walk crooked to be safe!”

He is right. I am too straight. I only see the straight, the tapering narrow. “I don’t want!”

I started to walk.

“Wait! I have not finished talking!”

It’s as if there is a magnet holding my legs. I waited.

“People who are too honest, people who always obey rules and regulations are the ones who loose out it. Just think about this carefully. Why? Because human beings including you and me are all wearing masks. If you see people looking like me, it is easy for you to recognise them. Face like a pig, behaviour like a pig, but if the face is pretty, would you be able to tell if the behaviour would be pretty too?”

“But you are a good man. You want to help me.”

“There you are mistaken. I don’t want to help you. I want to help myself. Everybody is like that. Nowadays people who help only because of their own self interest. I am no different.”

Eventually I accepted the job. I got into the baboon costume, became a baboon. The real baboon we buried quietly one quiet night. We did it just between the two of us. The public, in fact, even the circus hands, would never ever think that the baboon that they were watching now was not that famous baboon, but me, the village yokel who came looking for work in the city.

During the day, I was placed in a big cage, close to the tiger cage. When the tiger roared at me, I would bare my sharp fangs at him.

Once a week I was given a day off. Only we two knew how I escaped from the public eye. On my day off I would organise attend to my personal chores. I sent money to my wife. I sent my hugs and kisses to my child. I bought clothes and send these to the two of them. The rest of the money I saved.

The circus flourished. Wherever we went, we received overwhelming response. My pay was raised to twenty-five ringgit a day. I became my master's favourite. He looked after me himself. He took care of my meals. I too preferred it that way. There was no fear of our secret being exposed.

I had been seven months on the road. Eventually our circus reached the city in my own state. That was when I could no longer wait to go home to see my wife and child. But my master would not allow me to go, except on Sunday. I waited for the day, but that day, due to popular demand, I had to give a matinee show. My frustration knew no bounds, I could not contain my anger and vexation at my master. Gone was my rationality. Especially when I saw that several people from my village came to see the show. I cradled the child of my next door neighbour, I cradled him as if he were my own child. I almost whispered in his ear, that it was I who was carrying him and ask him to deliver my message to my wife and child, asking the two of them to come and watch the circus.

But my instincts forbade me. I did not do it. I asked my master to allow me to go home for just a while. He refused. And so an argument ensued.

That evening I gave another matinee show. I had to be an acrobat, leaping from one swing to another. Because my mind was not focused, my catch missed, I could not grab the rope thrown to me and because I was swinging too high, I fell into the tiger cage.

"Helpppppppppp!"

I crashed heavily and wet my brief or underpant out of extreme fear of the tiger waiting in its cage for me.

The tiger jumped onto me and I screamed again for help. The audience in their thousands panicked and then were just dazed. They were amazed that I screamed for help. The baboon could speak. Strange!

My urine flowed. The tiger was on my body. Strangely enough he did not grab my head in his mouth as most tigers would.

“This is what happens to people who live in pretence,” the tiger whispered in my ear.

“What? You can speak?” I asked in surprise, although my fright had not subsided.

“I am a human like you,” it said.

Holy is Allah! God is great who created this universe.

(Translated by Hasnah Ibrahim)