

NAIYER MASUD

The Librarian*

NO BOOKS WERE EVER PURCHASED for the library, but from the very beginning there were many available. They were books of all kinds because the individuals who donated them were people of all tastes. This was, in fact, a library set up by a large, charitable Trust (*waqf*). A long staircase along the side of one of the Trust's buildings led to an upper storey. There was a small landing at the top of the staircase and beyond that was a large room with three doors. The library was located in that room. The walls of the room were lined with many cabinets and all of them were filled with books that were clean and in good condition. Most of the books had sturdy bindings and appeared to have been bound recently. Two of the doors to this room were always locked, while the third remained half-open for going in and out. There were also several windows, but these stayed closed all the time too. Only one window on the eastern wall was opened. It had an iron grate fastened to it through which the scene outside was visible, just the back sides of houses and a baker's shop, which usually had some dogs hanging around it.

Near the window two or three takhts were set out for reading books inside the library. The light from outside permeated this corner because of the window, but if the window was closed, a person coming inside couldn't see anything for a while—although from the odor of the paper he could guess that it was the room with the books. In no time at all the cabinets became visible and, after his eyes became more accustomed to the light, he could see the librarian sitting off to the right.

The librarian was young at the time he was appointed. Back then the library wasn't in very good condition because quite a few people came there to read and the books were very worn from the constant turning of the pages. The stitching had come loose on some and the bindings were completely detached on others. One old clerk was the attendant of the

*"Kitāb Dār," appeared in the author's collection *Ganjifa* (Karachi: Scheherzade, 2008), pp. 171–79.

library and he would take care of the ordinary mending of the bindings and so on. After taking charge, the librarian, first of all, got proper supplies for the clerk to do the binding and repairing that was needed and then set him to work under his supervision. The clerk was skilled and did his work well. One of his daughters was always ill and he mostly talked about that, but it didn't interfere with his work or slow him down and he was able to mend many books. One day, however, the librarian was notified that the clerk had taken ill and, later, that his prognosis didn't look good. The librarian went to see him. By that time the clerk was barely able to speak, but even in that condition he was asking about medicine and other things for his daughter. Three days later he passed away. His son was hired in his place. He wasn't skillful like his father, but even so his work was acceptable. However, within the space of one month he found himself a job in the Health Department. After that the clerk's post remained vacant. Nevertheless, just by watching the old clerk, the librarian had learned the work himself, so, during his free time he did the book repairs and so on himself. Eventually, the books were all mended and arranged in the cabinets. The librarian had gotten to know every book by sight. He had his own method of cataloging and classifying and could get out any book very easily. Other people had difficulty and couldn't find the book they wanted. But there was really no need for them to even search because as soon as the librarian heard the title he could tell them whether it was available, and if it was available, he promptly retrieved it and placed it in front of them.

In those days, all kinds of people visited the library. Students came often and, as soon as the librarian caught sight of them, he knew they were students. But it wasn't just the students, he also had a fair idea about most other people from the type of books they were looking for. However, one day, a man came in who didn't seem to have any connection with reading or learning. He put a slip of paper into the librarian's hand with a number of titles scribbled on it, one of which was the title of a well-known religious book. Another was a rejoinder to that book. Two dealt with handicrafts. And one was the autobiography of some person with a disolute character who, after passing a shameful, decadent life, had been set right when he dreamed the same dream for several successive nights. These books were available in the library. There were also some other titles. The librarian looked at the list for some time, all the while trying to form some opinion about this man. Then, marking on the slip which books were available, he gave it back to him. The man looked at it casually and said, "Please bring all of them."

When the librarian looked at him he added, "Please bring them all at the same time. That will save you the trouble of making several trips back and forth."

After retrieving the books, the librarian placed them on a takht. As he was going back he noticed that the man quickly started turning the pages of one book. About an hour and a half later he brought all the books and put them down in front of the librarian, thanked him, and went out.

The next day, another man came and asked for those very same books, leafed through them the exact same way, and left. Two students were also in the library at the time. After the man left one said, "How about that, crossword addicts have found their way here too."

The boys started talking to each other. Their voices were very low because talking loudly wasn't allowed in the library—actually, it wasn't prohibited, it was just that when people came there they talked softly on their own. From what the students said, the librarian gathered that a very popular crossword puzzle had been introduced and all the clues were taken from printed books. In order to solve the crossword, a systematic search was undertaken to figure out what kinds of books were being consulted in the crossword puzzle office and then those books were examined to see if perhaps one of the sentences was used in the puzzle. This is what those two men had come there for. They had no interest in the subject of the books or anything; they weren't even interested in the meaning of those sentences. They were only after a sentence in which a particular word was used.

The librarian thought for some time. Then he began to write in bold letters on a rather large piece of paper: "Gentlemen who do puzzles, please ..." Then his pen stopped. He thought for a long time with the pen in his hand until another man came in. The librarian recognized him. He had been coming for many days now and every single day he copied something from one particular book. The book was very large and bulky so, after the man was gone, the librarian just left it lying on the takht instead of returning it to the shelf. Today, when the man came in, the librarian set aside the paper in his hand and watched him. The man went straight to the takht, picked up the book, sat down and started writing. After some time, he lifted his head and said in a weary voice, "There's still a lot left," and resumed writing.

He didn't come the next day or the day after. Eventually the librarian picked up the book and put it back in the cabinet.

Among the people who visited the library there were some that the librarian looked forward to. One of them was even a bit god-intoxicated. His voice could be heard from a long way off. Mostly he talked to himself,

or admonished the dogs not to bark at him. But as soon as he came into the library his voice was lowered. He greeted the librarian very politely, asked how he was, and headed straight toward the cabinet that had the books on spirituality. He would ask for some book or other and read it quietly. Now and then he would write something on a piece of paper, and sometimes while reading he would suddenly be overcome by emotion, but even then he would clench his fists and grab hold of himself, or, at the very most, pick up the book and go over to the librarian. If the librarian wasn't busy, he would look at the man and smile, and the man would briefly give his own personal opinion about the nature of the soul and then go back and sit down. After he left, the librarian would pick up the piece of paper the man had written something on and throw it in the wastebasket. Naami Sahib explained that the man had lost his mind reading about spirituality, and now he was even reading about spirituality as a remedy for that. If Naami Sahib arrived while the man was present, he would go straight to him and the two talked quietly for a while. A time came when the man stopped coming to the library. Naami Sahib said that the man's relatives had taken him to some other city.

Naami Sahib was a regular visitor; he had actually been coming before the librarian was appointed. He planned to read every book in every cabinet and had already worked his way through several cabinets. He socialized with people in just about every quarter of the city. He was a very cheerful fellow and every time he came he brought a bit of light into the otherwise somber library. Whenever he grew tired of reading, he came over to sit by the librarian and said, "So tell me, how are things going?" and then he himself started describing his own condition and that of the city. Then he got up, walked over to his book and resumed reading until one of his friends came to pick him up. The librarian looked forward to both Naami Sahib and his friend, but he was only informal with Naami Sahib, or more precisely, only Naami Sahib was informal with him and talked freely. Naami Sahib was the one who started calling him "librarian" —though his employment papers always referred to him as the "supervisor of books." He didn't know the exact meaning of the word "librarian," nevertheless he liked it and liked Naami Sahib for giving him this name.

A boy also came into the library regularly. He too asked for any book and then poured over it quite a while. He'd been coming frequently since he was ten or eleven years old. He was rather weak and his face was always flushed. Naami Sahib was also acquainted with this boy. He was probably the friend of one of the boy's elders. The boy continued coming to the library until he was fifteen or sixteen. After that the library was closed to ordinary people.

The librarian only found out this much: some disputes had arisen in connection with the Trust but it had no effect on his job. He was told that the only people who could come into the library now were those given special authorization by the trustees, but he never did see any authorization form, so, following this stipulation, the entry of people into the library ended abruptly.

Meanwhile, the librarian's life had also witnessed several changes. His wife and both of his daughters died, one after another. His wife had been ill all along, but the daughters were healthy. He had loved the younger daughter most, and she cared for him a lot as well. Since her death he stayed at home less and less. He spent most of his time at the library. His work had now been reduced to just taking care of the books. The library was protected against dampness and there were no termites, although tiny worms bored holes in the books and he was constantly repairing those.

He wasn't given his salary regularly, but his expenses weren't much, just food—and not even food, since he often skipped eating. He just didn't feel hungry.

During this time, when he went out to eat dinner one day, he saw a nicely dressed man coming toward the library. The man greeted him, came up beside him and stopped.

“Don't you recognize me? I used to come to the library quite often.”

With some difficulty the librarian finally recognized him. He was working somewhere good now.

“I read a lot here,” he said. “I haven't come this way for a long time so I thought I might just stop to say hello.”

After that he explained all about his job, shook hands and said goodbye.

The books were deteriorating quite fast now. The librarian was aware of it too. The holes made by the worms were becoming more and more difficult to see. He had to bring the books close to the window to check their condition, and even then he was obliged to bring them very close to his eyes. He wrote to the Trust asking that a new library supervisor be appointed and followed that with several reminders, but no action was taken.

He couldn't see things in the distance clearly anymore, not even the gutters on the library's roof, which carried away the rainwater. The gutters stuck out a bit in front of the roof so the water fell away from the walls of the library, but one of them had broken so on that side some water flowed through the gutter and some brushed against the wall as it came down.

One day during the rainy season, after examining a book in the light coming in through the window, the librarian was walking toward a cabinet to put it away when he noticed Naami Sahib standing near one of the cabinets in the distance. With great eagerness he went toward him. Naami Sahib came toward him quickly too, but after taking a few steps he sort of stumbled and then managed to catch himself and stand up straight. The librarian stopped. The book slipped from his hand and fell to the floor. Naami Sahib saw the book fall and moved forward to catch it, but he stumbled again. They both stood quietly looking at each other until they heard some movement near another cabinet and Naami Sahib's friend came over. Just then, a dense cloud may have blocked the sun and briefly darkened the inside of the room. When the cloud moved out of the way, only the librarian was inside. Or rather, not even the librarian. □

—*Translated by Jane Shum and Muhammad Umar Memon*