

❁ Chapter 3 ❁

Delhi, 1829-47

Ghalib arrived back in Delhi on November 29, 1829, with none of his financial difficulties solved; and when fourteen months later the Governor-General rejected his claims absolutely, it was clear that no certain prospect of solving them remained.

It is more than likely that by this time Ghalib had long since resigned himself to the prospect of defeat. At some earlier stage he had written in anger and disgust to Siraj ud Din Ahmad:

'A report on my case has been sent up to a higher court. And, God save me, what a report!—a report involved and involuted as a Negro's curling hair, a report full of tumult and disorder as a lover's distracted heart, a report to encompass the murder of a world of hopes and longings, a report to call forth a decree to dash my honour in the dust.'

And at a later stage, when the case was under the consideration of the Governor-General, Lord Bentinck, he wrote again:

'My heart, which is a mirror of the secrets of the unseen, holds no hope; and when I look upon the blemishes in this government's laws and reflect upon the long vicissitudes my case has undergone, then if, let us say, my execution were ordered it would cause me no surprise, and if on the other hand one half of so and so's estates be awarded to me, that would not surprise me either. True justice is not to be had, and one must greet whatever happens with, "Be it so".'

Ghalib's debts at this time amounted to more than Rs. 40,000—that is to nearly sixty times the amount of his regular annual income. But the anxieties which this caused him were only a part of his misfortunes. His adversary Shams ud Din was both influential and popular in Delhi society, and Ghalib's failure to win his case against him gave many people a good deal of satisfaction. He says in one of his letters that he became an object "of ridicule to all and of censure to some", and for a time he kept very much to himself and avoided the society of others. Within a few years he was subjected to further humiliation when two of his creditors grew tired of waiting and took him to court. The court ordered him to pay Rs. 5,000 or go to jail. He had no means of paying, but fortunately for him, prominent men were treated with special consideration in the Delhi

of those days, and were safe from arrest so long as they kept to their own houses. Ghalib's period of 'imprisonment' amounted therefore to no more than house-arrest. All the same, the indignity would have rankled deeply even with men far less touchy about their honour than Ghalib was, and he writes bitterly to his Lucknow friend and fellow-poet Nasikh, who had written to ask him for news of what was happening. The letter is in Persian, but he writes with a feeling and spontaneity which for the most part leaves him no time to produce the elaborate prose which his Persian letters generally exemplify:

'Four months have passed since I retired to my corner and closed the gates of access on friend and stranger alike. I am not in prison, but I eat and sleep as any prisoner does, and may I be branded as an infidel if in these few days I have not suffered torture and distress more than twofold the torment that the infidel suffers in a hundred years in Hell. Urfi has said:

The bitter fragrance of the poison Fate poured in my cup
Has burnt to ash the heart that could have felt hope and despair.

The first spark that fired the harvest of my hope and fortitude was that two of my creditors, in accordance with the rules of the English courts, obtained a decree against me. The rule is that I must either pay the sum named in the decree or hand myself over to the confining bonds of prison. And king and beggar in such case are alike. True, a distinguished man gains this much, that the court's men may not come to his house to take him. So long as he does not venture out to pass along the street he cannot be taken. Since I had no means to pay the money, regard for my honour compelled me willy nilly to seclusion, and to forgo the pleasure of riding out. And to this day the strong bond of my self-regard binds my exhausted hands and feet and makes them still.'

The letter goes on to speak of a still more painful experience that befell him while he was still undergoing this 'imprisonment'. On March 22, 1835, William Fraser, the British Resident of Delhi, was shot dead. Ghalib was closely involved in two ways. First, he knew Fraser personally, and was genuinely attached to him. Though the details of their relationship are not known, it is easy to see on what it was based. Fraser was, like Ghalib, a proud and independent man, impatient of convention and filled with intellectual curiosity. 'He lived as a solitary among his colleagues, saying that they had no rational conversation. But when he met the botanist Jacquemmet, he travelled two days' journey out of his way to enjoy his company.' Jacquemmet described him as 'an excellent man with great originality of thought, a metaphysician to boot...'. In marked contrast with his lack of interest in his British colleagues was his easy intimacy with the aristocratic families of Delhi, an intimacy based on an insight into and respect for their culture. An Indian contemporary tells us that he possessed a substantial library of Persian and Arabic books. All these things

must have won him Ghalib's sincere regard. But the two men were also connected by a further tie, for Fraser had espoused the cause of Ghalib's friends Amin ud Din and Ziya ud Din against their kinsman Shams ud Din. The tone in which Ghalib continues his letter to Nasikh is therefore understandable:

'While I dwelt in this same seclusion and distress, a cruel, ruthless man who knew not the fear of God—may he dwell in eternal torment—in the blackness of the night killed with a musket's shot William Fraser Sahib Bahadur, the Resident of Delhi and unhappy Ghalib's kindly benefactor. My heart felt afresh the grief of a father's death. My soul was shaken within me; a mighty sorrow seized in its grip all my power of thought and burned to ashes the granary of my content and scraped from the page of my spirit all trace of the writing of hope. As chance would have it, far-sighted men saw signs that did not err, and on their foundation [Karim Khan] a horseman in the service of the Lord of Ferozpur [Shams ud Din] was seized on a charge of the murder of that officer of lofty rank and noble qualities. The Magistrate of the City already knew me and felt the bond of mutual regard. In the seclusion I have spoken of, when like the owl I flew by night alone, from time to time I went to him at night to pass an hour or two in pleasant converse. When this event took place he made me his partner to pry into the mystery, until at last the crime was brought home to the Lord of Ferozpur, and on the Government's command he was made prisoner, along with others who were close to him, and a force of police was sent to his estate. The men of Delhi knew that he and I were at odds, and now all assailed me and laid at my door the seizure of that man of black ingratitude and killer of a just ruler. That is, the men of Delhi, high and low, have spread abroad the slander that Shams ud Din Khan is innocent, and Fathullah Beg Khan and Asadullah Khan [Ghalib] have out of their abundant malice caught the authorities in a web of lies they have woven, drawn them from the path of right, and plunged poor Shams ud Din into disaster. And in all this the best of it is this, that Fathullah Beg Khan is himself the uncle's son of the Lord of Ferozpur. In short the stage is come when the slanderers of Delhi repeat their constant curses upon me. At first my heart felt only the grief of William Fraser Sahib's death; but now that the man who killed him is identified, and the slanderers of the city loathe and shun me, I raise my voice each morning in prayer to that God who strikes down the oppressor and succours the oppressed, and call on Him to speed the day when that ruthless, overweening man shall pay the penalty and be hurled from the heights to the gallows' degradation. And I know that my desire will prevail and my prayer will find acceptance. . . . Within a month the outcome will be settled. . . .'

Things did indeed come to an issue soon after. Investigations showed that Karim Khan, the actual murderer, had acted on the direct instructions of Shams ud Din, and on October 3, 1835, both of them were publicly hanged. In a further letter to Nasikh, Ghalib tells him of this outcome:

'If I am late in sending you this letter do not conclude my affection for you fades. What could I do? For my resolve was set upon a mighty task and my eyes upon a lofty aim, until the turmoil was stilled and each one met the end he merited. The ruler of Mewat [Shams ud Din], like Karim Khan his man, was hanged by the neck and sent into oblivion:

The day must come when every man reaps what he sowed.'

He goes on to say that the Firozpur estate and all its appendages had been confiscated, but that a full and final settlement had not yet been made. When it was, he hoped to gain by it:

'My eyes still wait to see the token of my triumph. To speak more plainly, what the Lord of Firozpur used to pay me was less than was my due; and if the government pays no more than that sum, I shall not rest content.'

Meanwhile he had more immediate difficulties to face. His first letter had not spoken too strongly of the strength of feeling in Delhi over the Fraser murder, and if his love for Fraser made him feel a fierce satisfaction at Shams ud Din's execution, many of his fellow-citizens of Delhi felt differently. Among Shams ud Din's numerous well-wishers there were many who believed him to be innocent and suspected his enemies—and Ghalib among them—of having conspired to get him hanged. The strength of popular feeling may be gauged from the fact that for some years Shams ud Din's tomb was a place of pilgrimage, and that in the 'Mutiny'—twenty-two years later—the insurgents completely destroyed Fraser's tomb, while leaving those of other prominent British officials unmolested.

A letter written about the same time to Mir Azam Ali, who taught in a Muslim seminary in Agra, reflects the same bitterness and distress as his letters to Nasikh, and is of special interest because in it he reviews the whole course of his life since he left Agra for Delhi many years earlier. He writes:

'[Your letter] recalled to my mind that the world in former days held a city that I called my birthplace and men I called my friends. Your asking after me was like a dagger, thrust into the very vitals of my mind; and now you may see and wonder at the blood that drips from my lamenting lay. The years of separation which you, my master, reckon at sixteen years and I who write this letter deem to be not less than twenty, have been the sharp point of a knife scraping the writing of all peace and happiness from the page of my heart. When I first came to Delhi, my goblet held still the lees of the wine of heedlessness, and some few days of my life were given up to seek the satisfaction of my sensuous desires. I wandered erring in these ways until my drunken head was reeling, and, lost to myself, my feet strayed from the tavern floor and stumbled in the pit. I rose, with my whole body bruised and broken, and with dust upon

my head and face. From one side came the onset of my brother's madness, and on the other rose the angry outcry of my creditors; such turmoil came upon me that my breath lost the way to my lips and my sight the way to the windows of my eyes, and the world lit by the shining lamps of heaven was darkened in my sight. I sewed my lips against speech and closed my eyes to the sight of myself, and set myself to live with my grief through world upon world of ruin and disaster. . . . Lamenting the injustice of the age I pressed my breast against the edge of the sharp sword and reached Calcutta. Those who held sway there strengthened my spirit with kindness and compassion, bringing me hope that the road that lay blocked before me would be opened up. And the desire to go out into the wilderness and die, which had brought me out of Delhi, departed from me; and the yearning for the temples of the god of fire and for the taverns of Shiraz¹ which tugged at my heart, calling me to Persia, left my soul. Two years I dwelt in that place of radiance, as though it were a shrine and I in constant attendance there. When the Governor-General prepared to go to Hindustan,² I hastened before him to Delhi. But the times turned against me, and the building I was building fell to ruin. Six years have passed since then, and I have thrown to the winds all thought that I might prosper. I give up my heart to the high hope of sudden death and keep to my corner, closing the doors of access on friend and stranger alike.

If in the midst of this grief and sorrow of which I have told you but a part, my letters cease and words fail me and my pen and voice write and speak no more, and I forget the august elders of the city of my birth, then in the realms of justice I go innocent. But what of those who hold high rank in the land of love and loyalty, and care not for those who lie in distant parts, and do not even seek to know whether they live or die? If I should speak of them, then would the steed of grievance course side by side with the steed of speech. If in this field I should contest with you, how will you score against me? And if you ignore so weak an adversary, what answer will you render to God, Who is not weak? None of my countrymen has helped me bear my grief, and I must think that in this world I *have* no country.'

He goes on to reject bitterly and emphatically a suggestion that he should come to Agra to plead his case before a court about to assemble there. For the man under whose authority it meets 'is that same self-willed, callous man whose dagger of oppression struck me down, and whose black glances darkened my days. Grant me, O God, that he too suffer loss, and the things that he has made my eyes to see, Fate may compel him too to look upon!'

In all these hardships Ghalib seems to have found his main consolation in writing, and he comforts himself with the idea that his greatness as a poet

¹ The ancient religion of Persia was Zoroastrianism. Shiraz was the city of Hafiz, the great classical lyric poet of Persia.

² In the more restricted sense of the central region of the northern plains.

necessarily means misfortunes without end. One of his poems of this period contains the lines:

I asked the Mind Supreme why Destiny
Decreed for me life-long captivity.
It said, 'Ill-starred one, are you then a crow,
Caught in the snare only to be set free?
You are nightingale, held in a cage
So that the age may hear your melody'.

A Persian letter written some years later to his friend Haqir amplifies the same thought.

'Words cannot tell of hapless Ghalib's failures. One might say that he has no God to care for him. And intellect bears witness and observation argues that cutting and wounding alone makes beauty and excellence shine forth. That the beauty of the cypress may appear, men cut and wound it. That the wine may be worthy to be passed round, they press and strain it. Until the reed be cut and shaped it cannot be a pen; until the sheet of paper be cut and reduced to pages it cannot be the bearer of a letter. Assuredly in this great workshop of creation and destruction He must needs create in order to destroy, and must needs destroy in order to create. He made me out of earth, and then exalted me to the skies. For some years He had regard for my exalted station; and then He hurled me down to earth, and that too with such force that my whole form made its imprint in the earth—and such an imprint that no knife can scrape this imprint from it. One would think that these accidents of creation and destruction bore me away from the world and brought to it in my place a broken man, a man so broken that death and life, laughter and weeping seem the same to him. O God, grant that this form that made its imprint on the earth and this imprint on the earth that this form made, may soon be removed from the face of the earth and consigned to the bosom of the earth.'

It was during these years that he first compiled the volume of his selected Urdu verse, discarding much of his earlier work as has already been described. He also gathered together his Persian verse and prose, and wrote many new Persian ghazals at this time. The Persian prose collection was probably compiled by about 1840 (though it was not printed until 1849), and is in five sections, of which the third and the fifth are the most interesting. In the third section Ghalib quotes selected lines from his Persian verse and instances appropriate contexts where they might be quoted in letter-writing; in the fifth he assembles his Persian letters to his friends. These include letters to many of the most famous names in the literature and scholarship of the nineteenth-century Muslim India, and show how well-established Ghalib's reputation was. It is worth stressing that these letters were written with the most elaborate care—as is clear from the some of those already quoted—and Ghalib

regarded them as much as any other of his Persian prose writings, as models of literary composition on which he could pride himself. They cover a number of years, and most of them are either undated, or dated with insufficient precision to be placed accurately. Moreover in the published text of Ghalib's collected Persian prose the publishers supplemented them in 1875 with any other Persian letters they could find, without indicating at what point in the text these later additions begin. From internal evidence it is clear that the letters go back at least to the time when he was contemplating his journey to Calcutta, and a number of them were written during that journey. They vary greatly in mood, so that while some are intensely serious, others are equally light-hearted; and though as a general rule Ghalib composes them with the utmost care, he does not sacrifice warmth and spontaneity of feeling. In one he stresses that letter-writing should be like conversation:

'God is my witness that as I write this letter of humble service to you the desire to be with you so wells up within me that it leaves no room for the formal styles and titles of address. For I want to write to you in every way as though I were talking to you; and this means that many a time my words stray from the point, and I take no thought of what comes first and what comes last, and I write on and on without care for the length at which I write. Lost to myself, I let the reins fall from my hand, and am carried along over the ups and downs as I pass through the valley of conversation.'

To another correspondent he writes,

'Praise be to God that I was born a straightforward and a truthful man. My tongue speaks out all that my heart holds. If I have sinned against the religion of love and loyalty, then I deserve the torment of punishment; and if I be thought worthy of forgiveness, then I deserve the good tidings that my fault is pardoned.'

He often jokes with his correspondents. One letter is addressed to a man named Alif Beg, to whom a son had been born in his old age, and who had written to Ghalib asking him to suggest a name for the boy. Ghalib's answer plays upon the technicalities of the Urdu alphabet associated with the letter *alif* and the sign *hamza*. *Alif* is a simple vertical line, while *hamza* has a zig-zag shape. Both represent the same phonetic value, and both happen also to be used as personal names.¹ He writes:

'Kind of face and kind in grace, greetings! The tree of hope has borne fruit out of season, that is, a son has been born to you in your old age. Congratulations on so happy and auspicious an event! You wrote . . . to me to name the newborn babe. . . . Know then, I did not have to undertake the toil of thought. A

¹ The spelling of Hamza differs from that of hamza, but in Urdu the pronunciation is identical.

name flashed on my mind; my mind despatched a poem to my tongue; and my tongue entrusts the poem to the pen. May the Lord prosper him whom I name with this auspicious name! And may he be a loyal son to you, and in your lifetime live to be your age, and live for years and years when you are gone! This is the poem:

A child is born to Alif in old age,
A perfectly entrancing little son.
I name him Hamza, for, as all men know,
An Alif bent with age turns into one!

Your old associates speak often of you. Some day you should take the road towards this wilderness too.'

He writes to Rae Chajmal Khatri from somewhere on the way to Calcutta:

'Congratulations on becoming the agent of Zeb un Nisa Begam—and may this prove the prelude to further advancements in the future. If only you had told me what salary you were receiving I should have known in what measure to congratulate you.'

He goes on to speak of the marriage, which had just been celebrated, of Chajmal Khatri's son Jawahir Singh.

'The occasion requires both that I congratulate you and demand that you congratulate me.¹ May He Who grants increase of life and wealth grant us both to see the day when we may act the hosts at the wedding party of Jawahir Singh's sons. A diverting idea has just occurred to me—and you are not to treat it lightly! This joyous gathering took place in my absence. Well then, I should not be deprived of my share in the festivities. You should put aside the money to entertain me. If I live to return to Delhi I'll get the entertainment; if not, you'll get the money.

You say that So-and-so leads the philosopher's life and conducts his affairs as one who knows the ways of the world. Despite my sorrows I had to laugh, and let fall the reins of self-restraint from my hands. Don't you know? It's not the way of a philosopher to ride out on fleet horses with serving-men running before him, and to adorn his body with all manner of raiment, and to fill his belly with all manner of choice foods and to let his lust lead him into every excess and so soil his head with the dust of evil-doing; nor do such things become the man who seeks after the truth. . . .'

A letter to the same man, also written during the journey to Calcutta, introduces to him a man who is going to Delhi and who may need his help:

¹ i.e. Jawahir Singh is like a son to me too, and if you are to be congratulated on his marriage, so also am I.

'I write to introduce to you Mirza Amjad Ali Khan Sahib, a man of excellent qualities. This letter will bring him the honour and the pleasure of meeting you. He is a scion of the nobility of this city, and one who has suffered at the hands of fate; and his journey, like that of him who writes these lines, is occasioned by circumstance. He desired of me that I write a letter to some one of my acquaintances in my home city [Delhi], that it might be the means of his introduction to them. I who humour the every whim of my friends and feel without displeasure the indifference of my acquaintances, am at a loss to know to whom I should write; for I fear lest he to whom I shall write should fail to give first place to the duties of kindness and hospitality and so lay on me the burden of all manner of shame. In the event, I saw no other course before me than to write to you, in whom all the courtesy and kindness of the city is assembled. So he comes to you, alone and far from his homeland; and he must receive at your hands all that this condition merits, for you too have a friend who is far from his homeland. I do not say 'Do this' and 'Do that'; but this I know, that you will treat him with all the marks of consideration that the situation demands. I need not write more.'

Some of the best letters are to his Calcutta friend Siraj ud Din Ahmad, a man whom he was to describe many years later as one of the two best friends he had ever had. For years after his return to Delhi, Ghalib continued writing to him. One letter begins with a rebuke to him for not having written:

'You whose command Ghalib obeys, and in whose service Ghalib is bound and to whom Ghalib turns in reverence, were it not that a great grief possesses my heart, I and my heart alone could tell what new paths of complaint against you we would have opened up, and for what quarrels we would have laid the foundations. It is your gain that I am hapless and helpless. Otherwise, had I the resolve and the strength, I would have grappled with you and fought till your clothes were all torn and my face and head were cut and bruised. Fear God! Ponder well and judge justly: our relations have come to this, that ages pass and not a letter comes to show that you remember me!

I have said that I am bound by the need to lay a new grief before you. What room for complaint is there in a soul that grieves? The few lines I have written had no place on this page, but I wrote them because my reason told me—and writhed in pain to tell me—that perhaps my friend, who is unacquainted with the ways of friendship, might think that I am pleased with him and, so thinking, might neglect to atone for the wrong that he has done me.

The real reason why I write this letter is this. The home of my dear brother Nawwab Amin ud Din Ahmad Khan Bahadur, son of Fakhr ud Daula Dilawar ul Mulk, Nawwab Ahmad Bakhsh Khan Bahadur, Rustam i Jang, suffered destruction in that same floodtide of misfortune that sank my ship. And I have done violence to the rights of loyal love, that in this journey I failed to bear him company.

My house lies all in darkness: I am its burnt-out candle;
In shame I hide my blackened face even from my own eyes.¹

Judge of my haplessness and helplessness from this, that I harden my heart and let Amīn ud Din Ahmad Khan go on his journey alone. If for this crime he who passes judgement in the cause of love should pin me to the ground and draw his ruthless sword to spill my blood, it would not be more than I deserve. And the worst is this, that the more I speak of this, and the more I wax eloquent in apology, the more my sense of shame and of unworthiness increases.

But yes, let Siraj ud Din Ahmad arise to make atonement, so that I may shed this burden of grief and wipe the grime of shame from my face—in short, let him gird his loins to entertain the traveller and lighten his troubles, resolved to see himself as Amīn ud Din Khan's old friend, and to show him such sympathy and consideration that he, though beset by troubles and far from his home, may forget the disgraced Asadullah [Ghalib] and look upon you in his place.

My worthy brother (whom God preserve) has been told that when he reaches Calcutta and meets you there he will think to himself, "See, Asadullah has reached Calcutta before me!"

Were I to write more, it would be contrived, and contrivance is a thing from which I flee.'

Siraj ud Din was evidently interested in getting subscribers in Delhi to a newspaper called *Aina i Sikandar* ('The Mirror of Alexander'). (In Persian legend, Alexander the Great set up a huge mirror in Alexandria in which he could see all that was happening in Europe and so be forewarned of anything that was being plotted there against him.) He approached Ghalib to help him, and Ghalib replied:

'My friend, the sight of *Aina i Sikandar* brought lustre to my eyes, and its pure style threaded pearls upon the string of my gaze. Its reports are well-written, its news succinct: the points it makes are pleasing to the mind, and the eye rejoices to read all that it writes. With all my heart and soul I obey your command, and intend to make every effort to secure the circulation of its pages. The people of this city feel strong dissatisfaction at the inaccuracy of the news that appears in *Jam i Jahan-numa*. ["The Cup that shows the World"—a reference to a legendary cup of the Persian Emperor Jamshed, into which he had only to look to see what was happening in all parts of the world.] It happens but rarely that the news which the editor of *Jam i Jahan-numa* publishes this week is not declared false next week by this very same editor. One week he threads upon the string of writing this pearl, that before winter comes [the British] will declare war upon the ruler of Lahore; and two weeks later he writes that this news proved to be false. One week he gives the news that the mosque

¹ The verse is Ghalib's own.

in Agra Fort and the Taj Mahal mausoleum have been sold for such-and-such a sum. Again two weeks later he writes that the authorities of the Council have declared this sale invalid.

Anyway . . . Mubariz ud Daula Hisam ud Din Haidar Khan Bahadur and Fakhr ud Daula Amīn ud Din Khan Bahadur have seen the paper, and have decided not to subscribe. Hereafter I shall write and tell you what other prominent men of the city have to say.'

Another letter concerns the death in Calcutta of a common friend, Mirza Ahmad Beg.

'He used to say, "I shall be coming to Delhi," but, unkind man that he was, he forgot his promise and turned into another road, urging his camel swiftly on towards another goal. And, granted that he cared nothing for his friends, why did he not take thought for his little children, that he withdrew his protecting shade from over their heads? Alas for the friendlessness of his friends! and woe for the fatherlessness of his children!'

He goes on to speak of the dangers that beset the children—for even the eldest son is no more than a boy—and concludes,

'At all events, what is needed now is a trustee, a man who is both prudent and who respects their rights, who will come to their help and comfort them in their fatherless state. . . . I know what they must feel, for I was myself a child when I lost my father. By God I tell you that the care of these poor children is a prime duty, a binding duty, upon you and Mirza Abul Qāsim Khan. You must keep their helplessness ever before your gaze and never be heedless of them. . . . "God sees to it that they who do good shall not fail of their reward."'

On another occasion he writes of the resignation from his post and departure from Delhi of his old friend Fazl i Haq. Exactly what happened is not clear from the letter, but it appears that Fazl i Haq, who held a post in the Delhi courts, was unjustly put in a position where he felt that the only honourable course was to resign. Ghalib writes bluntly and indignantly about it.

'Be it known that the ineptitude of the authorities who do not know men's worth, has come to the pitch where that man of unparalleled learning . . . Maulvi Hāfiz Muhammad Fazl i Haq has resigned [his post] and so released himself from shame and degradation. Take Maulvi Fazl i Haq's knowledge and learning and wisdom and character and reduce them all a hundredfold; then measure this hundredth part of them against this post in the civil courts; the post would even then be less than these qualities merited. To be brief, after his resignation Nawwab Faiz Muhammad Khan appointed a monthly sum of Rs. 500 for my master's [i.e. Fazl i Haq's] expenses and sent for him. The day

Maulvi Fazl i Haq left Delhi I cannot describe what the people of the city felt. The heir apparent to the throne of Delhi . . . Mirza Abu Zafar Bahadur sent for him to bid him farewell. He took a shawl from his own personal apparel and laid it upon his shoulders, and the tears came to his eyes as he said, "As often as you say 'I am leaving', I think that there is nothing I can do but bear it patiently. But All-Knowing God knows with what infinite effort I bring the words of farewell from my heart to my tongue." These were the words of the heir apparent; and what a distracted Ghalib wants of you is that you should write in shining words the news of Maulvi Fazl i Haq's leaving Delhi and of the heir apparent's grief and of the sorrow in the hearts of the people of the city, and put it into print in *Aina i Sikandar* and so put me in debt to your kindness.'

One of the last letters to Siraj ud Din in the published collection is evidently in answer to a request that Ghalib should send his verses for him to see. Ghalib replies:

'Now that I am involved in all manner of struggles with myself, it is no easy matter to write verse. I am a man who, had the age granted him but some small measure of ease, would by the force of my imaginative power have wrested the prize from the grasp of the masters of the art. In a word, whatever in the way of poetry shall come to my lips, despite all the misery I feel, shall be committed to the pen and so be brought before your attentive gaze.'

If writing consoled Ghalib, it did not feed him, and his financial position was as acute as ever. The one gain he could register was that after the execution of Shams ud Din, the Firozpur estates were confiscated and Loharu given into the possession of Amin ud Din, while Ghalib's own 'pension' of sixty-two rupees eight annas a month became payable by the British authorities in Delhi. To know that he would now get his pension regularly was something; but the pension itself was quite inadequate to his needs. In 1837 an English tradesman named Macpherson obtained a court order requiring Ghalib to pay him Rs. 250, and on this occasion he was taken by surprise while away from his home and actually arrested. Only the intervention of Amin ud Din, who generously paid out Rs. 400 in settlement of the whole debt together with the interest due, saved him from imprisonment. But if he badly needed extra income, he would not seek it in any way he thought derogatory to his honour. In this way he missed an opportunity in January 1842 of a professorship in Persian at Delhi College. Hali relates what happened:

'In 1842, when Delhi College was reorganized on new principles, Mr Thomason, Secretary of the Government of India, who later became Lieutenant-Governor of the North-Western Provinces, came to Delhi to interview the candidates. A teacher of Arabic had already been appointed at a salary of Rs. 100, and Mr

Thomason wished to make a parallel appointment for Persian. The names of Ghalib, Momin Khan and Maulvi Imam Bakhsh had been suggested to him, and Ghalib was the first to be called for interview. When he arrived in his palanquin . . . Mr Thomason was informed, and at once sent for him. But Ghalib got out of the palanquin and stood there waiting for the Secretary to come out and extend him the customary welcome. When some considerable time had passed and Mr Thomason had found out why Ghalib did not appear, he came out personally and explained that a formal welcome was appropriate when he attended the Governor's durbar, but not in the present case, when he came as a candidate for employment. Ghalib replied, "I contemplated taking a government appointment in the expectation that this would bring me greater honours than I now receive, not a reduction in those already accorded me." The Secretary replied, "I am bound by regulations." "Then I hope that you will excuse me," Ghalib said, and came away.'

It was more in accord with the traditions he knew to take the course open to every poet or scholar of established reputation and seek the patronage of a ruler wealthy enough to provide for his support. Modern opinion too readily assumes that such a relationship necessarily implies subservience of the poet to his patron; but this was certainly not the case. In Mughal society the patronage of learning and letters was one of the accepted social functions of the nobility, and the established poet could look to receive patronage simply because he *was* an established poet; occasional panegyrics of his patron and odes on special occasions would be expected of him, but this was by no means the most important basis of the relationship, and the poet saw nothing injurious to his self-respect in it, any more than the great noble saw anything dishonourable in his allegiance to his overlord. Ghalib was of all people the least likely to fawn upon a patron, though he readily accepted the composition of panegyrics as a recognized part of the unwritten contract between them. He had made his debut in this line some years ago, when in 1827 he had composed an ode to the ruler of Oudh, hoping to receive in return a substantial contribution to the expenses of his journey to Calcutta. It is significant that in it he had written

I pledge my faith, and swear I never fawned on kings;
Our independent pride was handed down to us.
We too give bounty, and I need to feel no shame
To come now asking bounty from the bounteous.

This always remained his attitude. But if his independence of spirit was admirable, he was often to find that his diplomatic skill left something to be desired. This became most evident in his attempts to gain favour with the Mughal King—the nearest and most obvious target for a Delhi poet. When Ghalib made his first approaches in 1834 Akbar Shah II was King, and his son Zafar the heir-apparent. But Ghalib knew that the King was anxious to get another son, Salim, recognized as his successor, and was negotiating with the

British to this end. Ghalib calculated that his own interests lay in the same direction, for Zafar had already made Zauq, a rival poet of Ghalib's, his *ustad*; and in an ode to Akbar Shah he therefore went out of his way to sing the praises of Salim as well. As things turned out, this was a blunder. The British refused to agree to Zafar's supersession, and only three years later Akbar died and Zafar became King under the name of Bahadur Shah. It may be imagined that he did not look too kindly on Ghalib, and for years together he failed to gain entry to the Court, despite a number of odes which he composed in praise of the new king. Nor did his efforts elsewhere meet with much success. Many years later he was to recall the continuing failure of his efforts to gain the patronage of the Oudh court. In a letter to his friend Tufta dated August 19, 1861, he speaks of one of his odes and continues:

'I sent this ode, through Munshi Muhammad Hasan, to [the Prime Minister] Raushan ud Daula, and through Raushan ud Daula it was presented to [King] Nasir ud Din Haidar [1827-37]. The very day it was presented, the King gave order for Rs. 5000 to be sent to me, but my intermediary—i.e. Munshi Muhammad Hasan—did not inform me of this. When the late Muzaffar ud Daula came from Lucknow he told me this secret, adding, "For God's sake don't mention my name to Munshi Muhammad Hasan." All I could do was to write to . . . Nasikh asking him to find out what had happened to my ode and write to me. He wrote in reply, "You were granted five thousand rupees, of which Raushan ud Daula helped himself to three thousand. He gave the remaining two thousand to Munshi Muhammad Hasan and told him to send you as much of it as he thought fit. Has he not sent you anything yet? If not, write and tell me." I wrote back that I had not even received five rupees. He replied, "Now you should write me a letter to the effect that you have sent an ode in praise of the King and have been informed that it was presented to him, but do not know what was granted you in reward. I will have your letter to me read to the King, and see that the man disgorges your money and sends it to you." Well, my friend, I wrote the letter and posted it off. Two days later the news reached Delhi that Nasir ud Din Haidar had died. So, I ask you, what could I or Nasikh do now?'

Another intermediary in a later reign was to serve him equally badly. He recalls the whole story in an undated letter to Shafaq, placed by Mihr between one of June, 1862 and one of February, 1864:

'Let me tell you a story. In the early days of Amjad Ali Shah's reign¹ there was a man with whom I was slightly acquainted. I don't know where he came from,

¹ Amjad Ali Shah was King of Oudh from 1842-47. However, as Mihr points out, Ghalib in fact means Ghazi ud Din Haidar, 1814-27.

but he had come to Agra at some time and had once been a *tahsildar*¹ somewhere; he had a plausible tongue and could use his wits, and he had come to Agra to get some sort of a job. But he never managed this. He came to see me once or twice, and then disappeared God knows where. Meanwhile I moved to Delhi. It must have been near enough twenty years later, in Amjad Ali Shah's reign, when out of the blue the mail brought me a letter from him. In those days my mind was alert and my memory sound, and I realized that it was this same gentleman. He began his letter with this line of verse:

I thank my fortune, and I thank the age

and went on, "Since we last met I have spent twenty years wandering from place to place. I got employment at Jaipur, but I left it after two years, and since then have been to all sorts of places and done all sorts of things. Now I've reached Lucknow. I've met the Wazir, and he is most kind to me. Through him, I have entered the King's service. The King has bestowed on me the titles of 'Khan' and 'Bahadur' and entered my name on the roll of his courtiers. My stipend has not yet been fixed. I have aroused the Wazir's interest in you, and if you write an ode to His Majesty and a petition or letter (as you think fit) to the Wazir and send it to me, I am sure that the King will send for you. . . ." I had only recently written an ode to Amjad Ali Shah . . . but was at a loss to think whom I should send it to for presentation. Anyway I put my trust in God and sent it off. A mere acknowledgement came, and then a fortnight later, a letter came: "The ode has been presented to the Wazir, who has read it with great pleasure and has promised to present it in due form to the King. Now I would ask you to get Miyan Badr ud Din . . . to engrave a seal for me showing my name and title, and send it to me. It should be a square silver seal, and the engraving should be in a bold script." Your humble servant fulfilled this commission and sent the ring off. I received an acknowledgement, and with it the good news that my ode had been presented to the King. Then for the next two months I heard nothing. I sent a letter, and it was returned to me with the explanation from the postal authorities that the addressee was not there. A long time later I discovered that the gentleman had indeed gained access to the Wazir and waited upon him, but that he had never been taken into the King's employment or been granted a title. He had tricked me into getting the seal with the title engraved and had gone off to Murshidabad. When he left, the Wazir had made him a present of two hundred rupees.'

It may have been, in part, his financial straits which made Ghalib indulge all the more a fondness for gambling, and this was now to involve him in one of the most distressing experiences of his life. The full circumstances of the incident, which occurred in 1847, are somewhat obscure, and there are several

¹ The chief revenue officer of a *tahsil*—a small area consisting usually of a small country town and its neighbouring villages.

conflicting accounts of it. It appears that Ghalib had always enjoyed gambling, though he had not habitually played for high stakes. It was his misfortune that he was now living in a period when the authorities seem to have felt that gambling had assumed the proportions of a serious social evil in Delhi society, and were determined to stamp it out by the most drastic legal penalties. He had already felt the effects of this policy six years earlier, when his house had been raided and he had been fined Rs. 100; but he now seems to have thought that he had meanwhile acquired influential friends in the British administration on a sufficient scale to protect him from any drastic consequences even if he were caught. He was soon undeceived. This time when his house was raided he was arrested, brought to trial, and given a heavy sentence. A contemporary newspaper reported: 'Mirza Sahib has been sentenced to a fine of Rs. 200 and six months' imprisonment with hard labour; in the event of failure to pay the fine, the period of imprisonment will be extended, while on payment of Rs. 50 over and above the Rs. 200 he may be excused the hard labour.' This sentence was upheld in higher courts. This was an unexpected and terribly heavy blow to Ghalib, not least because he could not understand how his influential contacts had failed to protect him. Hali writes:

'Ghalib has himself given a brief account of this incident in a Persian letter, which I give here in translation: "The Chief of Police was my enemy, and the Magistrate did not know me. . . . Although the Magistrate has authority over the Chief of Police, he behaved, where I was concerned, as though the Chief of Police had authority over him, and issued the order for my imprisonment. The Session Judge was my friend; he had always treated me with friendship and kindness, and in most companies where we met, had behaved quite informally with me; yet he too acted now as though he did not know me. An appeal was made to the higher court, but my case was not heeded and the sentence was upheld. . . ."'

The heavy sentence seems to have created a great stir in Delhi, and a good deal of indignation. The newspaper report already quoted continues:

'When it is borne in mind that Mirza Sahib has long been a sick man on a strict diet . . . we are obliged to say that the distress and the hard labour will be beyond his strength to endure, so much so that his very life may be endangered. . . . It is contrary to all justice that, for a very ordinary crime, a talented nobleman, whom the public honours and respects profoundly, should have to pay a penalty so drastic that it may well cost him his life.'

So great was the concern at Ghalib's arrest that the King, who entertained no very warm feelings towards him, was induced to write to the authorities requesting his release; but he received the reply that this was a matter for the courts, and the administration could not intervene.

Accordingly Ghalib began to serve his prison sentence, and if he had felt deeply humiliated by his 'imprisonment' in his home twelve years earlier, it can be imagined what his feelings were now. The hardships of prison life¹ were not all that was in store for him; even more painful to him was the effect of his sentence on his friends and relations. All except one held aloof from him, apparently thinking it discreditable to continue association with one who was now a convict serving a prison sentence. Two of Ghalib's closest friends from his earliest years in Delhi had been Fazl i Haq and Amin ud Din, who was now Lord of Loharu. Fazl i Haq was no longer in Delhi; Amin ud Din, who had not only been Ghalib's friend but was related to him by marriage, became openly hostile, and when an Agra newspaper mentioned in a report that he was Ghalib's kinsman, he went to the extent of having it made clear in a subsequent issue that the relationship was one by marriage only. His brother Ziya ud Din's conduct was no better. The one exception was Ghalib's fellow-noble and fellow-poet Shefta, whom Ghalib had come to know well later than the others, after his return from Calcutta, and who now did all he possibly could to relieve Ghalib's distress.

Nawwab Mustafa Khan Shefta was nine years younger than Ghalib, having been born in Delhi in 1806. His background was strikingly similar to Ghalib's, except that his ancestors had migrated to India not from Turkestan but from Kohat, in the borderlands of Afghanistan, and were related to the family which early in the eighteenth century established the small principality of Farrukhabad in what is now western Uttar Pradesh. His father served in the Maratha armies as the commander of a regiment, and when the conflict with the British under Lord Lake developed, he used his diplomatic skill to bring about a peaceful settlement between Lord Lake and his own commander. The British rewarded him in 1813 with estates bringing in three hundred thousand rupees a year. This grant was for the duration of his own life, and he provided for his descendants the following year by buying the estate of Jahangirabad in the Meerut district, then being auctioned by the British because the former owner had failed to pay them the revenue due on it. On his death the British resumed possession of the estates they had granted him, but in recognition of his past services appointed a stipend of Rs. 20,000 a year to his successors.

Shefta grew up in Delhi, and received a thorough education in Persian and Arabic. In his youth he lived in the usual style of the young Delhi aristocrat; wine and women formed part of his regular pleasures, and his liaison with a stylish, wealthy and cultured courtesan named Ramju was well-known. But he later turned to religion and gave up these things. In this connection the story is told that he visited Ghalib one day during the cold season when Ghalib was drinking wine. Ghalib invited him to join him. 'I have given it up,' said Shefta. 'What?' said Ghalib, 'Even in winter?' In 1839 he set out on the pilgrimage to Mecca, and after an adventurous journey during which he was shipwrecked, ultimately returned to Delhi in 1841.

¹ Though he did not have to eat prison food. His food was sent to him from his home.

Though no such reform had taken place in Ghalib, Shefta's regard for him was unchanged. Poetry was the great bond between them and each had the highest opinion of the other's work. Ghalib once wrote to him:

'Envy of Talib¹ and pride of Ghalib, greeting. My heart was still full of my ode . . . though it had travelled from the heart to the tongue and from the tongue to the world beyond, it was yet in my heart. But when I read the ghazal that you sent me, my ode was both banished from my heart and lowered in my eyes. A fine ghazal! A ghazal to gladden the heart! Though I am one whose language is unworthy and whose tongue falters, yet if I should write a separate ode of praise to every one of its verses, that were fitting. . . . And whose tongue can praise its last couplet? . . . I envy you that final couplet. Live on for ever and ever, for you are the life and soul of poetry!'

Mihr writes:

'Hali used to say that as soon as Shefta heard the news of what had happened, he at once took steps to see everyone in authority he could think of, and made continuous efforts to get Ghalib released. Then came the trial and the appeal. Shefta paid all the expenses out of his own pocket. All the time Ghalib was in prison he went to visit him regularly every other day. He used to tell people, "My deep regard for Ghalib was never based upon his sobriety or his piety, but on his greatness as a poet. Today he is accused of gambling, but that he drinks wine has always been known. Why should it make any difference in my regard for him that he has been charged and sent to prison? His poetic talent is the same today as ever it was."'

Ghalib felt a gratitude to him as intense as the bitterness he felt for the friends who had turned their backs on him, and both feelings find expression in a long poem which he wrote in prison:²

Here within prison walls confined I tune the lute
of poetry
That sorrow bursting from my heart, transmuted
into melody,
May sing a song to draw forth blood—that even
from captivity
I may work wonders in the world, and build a
tavern for the free.
Thus shall I labour hard; hard labour consorts
with imprisonment
Bonds shall no longer choke my voice, and I
will sing my heart's lament.

¹ A classical Persian poet.

² It is considerably abridged in the translation that follows.

Old friends, you must not incommode yourselves to
come and visit me,
And knock upon my door—I cannot open it as
formerly.

Imprisoned thieves are now my friends, and bow
to my supremacy.
I still their clamour, telling them, 'Outside there
is no loyalty.'

The sentence passed upon me, true, is not for
all eternity,
But from the world I look no more for joy
that makes man truly free.

The candle's flame with equal ease puts darkness
everywhere to flight
But better that it burn for kings, filling their
palaces with light.
Ghalib is precious frankincense; if he must burn,
then it were right
To burn him in a costly censer, symbol of a
prince's might.

Alas that he lies here where never comes
the cooling breeze of morn—
Only the burning, searing wind that scorches
even the desert thorn.

But prison warders, prison guards, assemble here,
for I am come.

Open the gates to welcome me as I draw near, for
I am come.

Friends, prisoners in your narrow cells, be of good
cheer, for I am come.

A poet's words, a poet's wisdom you shall hear,
for I am come.

When friends and kinsmen all have turned away
from me in my disgrace

Why should I not find comfort here from strangers,
captive in this place?

It was no policeman sent me here, no magistrate, no
power of earth—

This suffering, this imprisonment, was written in my
fate at birth.

And what of that? One noble man, Mustafa Khan,
despite this dearth

Of noble men, asks after me, and makes me see my own
true worth.

GHALIB

He is God's mercy, God's compassion, sent in
 human form for me
 And if I die I shall not grieve, knowing that
 he will mourn for me.

Friends, in this garden of the world I am a weed;
 if I should die
 You need not grieve; its cypresses and fragrant flowers
 are you, not I.
 But if you lack the heart to love, still you can raise
 your voice on high;
 I lay this poem before you now; its meed of praise do
 not deny.
 You will not think of me, I know, in one another's
 company
 But still, where men recite their verse, surely
 you will remember me.

Ghalib did not serve his full sentence, and, so far as is known, did not have to perform hard labour—means were presumably found to pay the Rs. 250—but he did serve three whole months in jail. Then, in circumstances which are now quite obscure, and which he himself declared he did not understand, he was released. The letter quoted by Hali says as much, and continues by describing Ghalib's feelings about the whole affair:

'Then for some unknown reason when half my term had expired, the Magistrate took pity on me and wrote a report to the higher court recommending my release, and the order for my release was handed down. . . . Because I believe that all that happens, happens by God's will—and there is no fighting against His will—I hold myself free from any stigma in what has happened and resign myself to accept all that the future may bring. Yet to entertain a desire is not to contravene the law of submission to Him, and it is my desire no longer to stay in this world, and if I must stay, then not to stay in India. There is Rum; there is Egypt; there is Iran; there is Baghdad. But these too I pass by. The Kaba itself is the sanctuary of the free, and the threshold of the Prophet,¹ who is God's blessing to all the worlds, is the resting place of His devotees. I await the day when I shall gain release from this bondage of wretchedness, which wears away my soul more than the bondage I have undergone could do, and shall set my face towards the wilderness, not caring where I go. This, then, is what I have suffered, and this is what I desire.'

¹ Medina, where Muhammad is buried.