

and Chawri Bazar and Ajmeri Gate Bazar and Bulaqi Begam's lane and Khan Dauran Khan's mansion". Mir Mahdi, I think to myself how you lie abandoned and helpless in Panipat, and how Miran Sahib lies there wishing all the time that he could visit Delhi, and how Mir Sarfaraz Husain wanders around looking for employment. Do you think that such heart-rending sorrows are easy for me to bear? Had I had the means, I would have shown you what I would have done. "Alas, how many yearnings have turned to dust!" O, God! O, God!

As the Christian year ended, nearly half of A. H. 1277 had already elapsed and Ghalib still believed in his own prediction, he had at the most another six to seven months to live. He perhaps has this in mind when he writes to Sayyah on December 31, 1860:

'My weakness is at its height, and old age has made me useless. I am weak, slothful, lethargic, depressed, and weary of life. My foot is in the stirrup and my hand on the bridle. I have a long, long journey to travel, and no provision for the road, for I go empty-handed. If I am forgiven without being questioned, well and good. If I am called to account then I shall dwell in hell and damnation will be my station. Alone to face eternal torment. How well some poet<sup>1</sup> has said:

Tired of all this, we look to death  
for our release  
But what if even after death we find  
no peace?'

<sup>1</sup> Zauq—cf. p. 85 above.

## ❁ Chapter 10 ❁

1861

Ghalib's first letter of 1861 is addressed to Majruh. He writes on January 9th about conditions in Delhi:

'Kashmiri Katra is in ruins. Alas for those tall gateways and spacious rooms on either side of the road! You cannot even see now where they were. The coming of the railway and the clearing of a path for it are still postponed. For the last four days an easterly wind has been blowing. Clouds gather, but we have had only a few spots of rain. It hasn't really rained. Wheat, gram and millet are all selling at the same price—eighteen or nineteen pounds to the rupee. . . I can't really make out whether Mir Sarfaraz Husain and Miran Sahib are here or in Jind. Mir Nasir ud Din came to see me twice, but I don't know where he is now.'

In the next letter, written only two days later, on January 11, 1861, he takes up this last point:

'Just look at this! Here am I asking you where Mir Sarfaraz Husain and Miran Sahib are; and Mir Nasir ud Din is in Delhi and doesn't come to see me, while Mir Sarfaraz Husain came here and didn't stay with me. In fact—God save us!—he not only didn't stay with me: he didn't even come to see me. Alas that those whom I look upon as my own kin regard me as a stranger. You will ask me, "How did you find out that Nasir ud Din was in Delhi and . . . [Mir Sarfaraz Husain] had been there?" Well, my friend, today is Friday, the 28th of Jamadi us Sani, and the 11th of January, and it's morning. At first light I awoke, and I was lying there wrapped in my quilt when all of a sudden Mir Nasir ud Din honoured me with a visit and announced, "I am leaving now, and so is Mir Hasan Sahib." I thought he meant Sarfaraz Husain. But as he went on I discovered that Mir Hasan had come from Jaipur and had stayed somewhere or other and was off somewhere or other. Alas, alas! He must have counted me a stranger or thought that I was dead, that he never came to my house to see me. He stayed with his in-laws and kept away from his own parents. By God, I would have loved to see him. Now I'm up. Let the cold go and the sun come out and I'll send a man to Agha Jan's house. Curse it, I don't even know where Agha Jan lives. But I'll send my man to Mir Ahmad Ali's wife, by Habsh Khan's Gate. When I find out Agha Jan's address and the man has been there

to see the house, and found out whether Mir Hasan Sahib is there, then if he is, I'll . . . go to see him. Be quick and answer this letter and tell me why your uncle has come to Delhi and how he is getting on. . . .'

In further letters to Majruh he returns again to conditions in Delhi. In one dated only '1861' but perhaps written in April or May, a verse which Majruh had sent him for correction starts him off. He quotes the verse,

'My friend, this is the language  
Delhi people speak.'

and comments:

'Oh, Mir Mahdi, aren't you ashamed of yourself? My good sir, "Delhi people" now means Hindus, or artisans, or soldiers, or Panjabis or Englishmen. Which of these speak the language which you are praising? [It's not like Lucknow.] The population of Lucknow hasn't changed. The state has gone [the British annexed Oudh, of which Lucknow was the capital, in 1856], but the city still has its masters of every art.

'The grass screens and the breeze from the east? Not in *this* house. These were the advantages of the old house. Now I am in Mir Khairati's mansion, the house faces in another direction. Anyway, I get along all right. The great trouble now is that Qari's well has been closed, and in all the wells in Lal Diggī the water has suddenly turned brackish. Well, we might have drunk it even so, but it comes up warm. I went out . . . two days ago to find out about the wells—past the Jama Masjid towards the Rajghat Gate. I tell you without exaggeration that from the Jama Masjid to the Rajghat Gate is a barren wilderness, and if the bricks piled here and there were taken away it would be absolutely bare. You must remember that on the far side of Mirza Gauhar's garden was a hollow twenty to thirty feet deep. Now the place is level with the wall of the garden courtyard. Even Rajghat Gate itself has been blocked up. The parapet of the battlements has been left clear, but the rest is all buried. You saw Kashmiri Gate for yourself when you were here. Now they've cleared a path for the railway from the Calcutta Gate to the Kabuli Gate. Panjabi Katra, Dhobi Wara, Ramji Ganj, Saadat Khan's Katra, Jarnail ki Bibi ki Haveli . . . [and other localities]—you won't find a trace of any of them. In short, the city has become a desert, and now that the wells are gone and water is something rare and precious, it will be a desert like that of Karbala<sup>1</sup>. My God! Delhi people still pride themselves on Delhi language! What pathetic faith! My dear man, when Urdu Bazar is no more, where is Urdu? By God, Delhi is no more a city, but a camp, a cantonment. No Fort, no city, no bazaars, no water-courses. . . .'

His next letter, dated May 23, 1861, again takes up the theme. Majruh had

<sup>1</sup> The place where Husain and his companions were martyred, after their access to water had been cut off.

evidently protested that Ghalib had painted too black a picture. He replies, speaking this time of the once-famous poets of Delhi who are now no more, or are silent:

'Oh, my friend . . . Delhi's devoted lover, dweller in the now-demolished Urdu Bazaar, jealous maligner of Lucknow, fierce of heart, and stranger to shame, where is Nizam ud Din Mamnun? And where is Zauq? And where is Momin Khan? Two poets survive: one, Azurda—and he is silent: the other Ghalib—and he is lost to himself, in a stupor. None to write poetry, and none to judge its worth. . . .'

Other things depressed him too. He had written to Tufta on January 20, 1861, evidently replying to a letter in which Tufta had told him that he was having his collection of Persian verse printed; he had entitled it *Sumbulistan* (The Hyacinth Garden). Ghalib replies gloomily:

'I got your letter from Meerut . . . God prosper you in publishing *Sumbulistan*. He alone guards your honour. Most of my life has passed, and only a little more remains; and I have no complaints either about the past or the future. I ask myself, "What good did the fame of Urfi's odes do Urfi, that the renown of mine should profit me? What fruit did Sadi reap from his *Bostan* that you should reap from your *Sumbulistan*? Apart from God, all that exists is unreal, a fantasy—no poetry, no poets, no odes, no desire to write. Nothing exists but God.

'If you meet our friend Mustafa Khan [Shefta] give him my regards. The news of the renewal of his sister's pension gave me great pleasure—and even greater surprise. What wonder if something even more pleasing and even more surprising should happen and he himself should get his pension restored? God's is the power.'

He wrote again on April 19, 1861, when *Sumbulistan* had appeared and Tufta had sent him two copies:

'Mirza Tufta, my dear sir, you've thrown your money away, and shamed both your own poetic power and my corrections. Alas! What a wretched production the book is! Had you been here you would have seen the true parallel to your verse and its printed form; you would have seen the ladies of the Fort moving about the city, their faces fair as the moon and their clothes dirty, their trouser-legs torn, and their shoes falling to pieces. This is no exaggeration. Your *Sumbulistan* is like a lovely woman meanly clad. Anyway, I've given the two copies to the two boys and told their teacher to set their lessons from it. And they've started on it today.'

On February 22, 1861 he had complained to Junun of his deteriorating physical and mental powers:

'My memory is as good as gone, my sense of smell diminished, and my hearing defective. There is nothing wrong with my sight, though it is not so sharp as it was:

Old age, a hundred ailments, as they say.'

But, in general he is not in bad humour during these months, and even where he has something distasteful to say he handles it with a light touch. A letter of April 4, 1861 to Ala ud Din Ahmad Khan Alai, is typical:

'The lion feeds its cubs on the prey it has hunted, and teaches them to hunt their prey. When they grow up they hunt for themselves. You have become a competent poet, and you have a natural talent. Why should *you* not compose a chronogram on the birth of your child? Why should *you* not work out a name that yields the date? Why trouble me, an old man grieved at heart? Ala ud Din Khan, I swear by your life: I worked out a chronogram-name for your first son and put it into a verse; and the child did not live. The fancy haunts me that this was the effect of my inauspicious stars. No one whom I praise survives it. One ode apiece was enough to dispatch Nasir ud Din Haidar and Amjad Ali Shah [Kings of Oudh]. Wajid Ali Shah [the last king] stood up to three, and then collapsed. A man to whom I addressed ten to twenty odes would end up on the far side of oblivion. No, my friend, may God protect me, I will neither write a chronogram on his birth nor work out a chronogram-name. May Exalted God preserve you and your children and confer long life and wealth and prosperity on you all.

'Listen to me, my friend. It's a rule with men who worship beauty that when they fall in love with a youngster they deceive themselves that he's three or four years younger than he really is. They know he's grown up, but they think of him as a child. Your tribe is no better. On my faith I swear: here is a man whose honour and fame are known and established among men; and you too know it, my friend. But you can't feel happy until you shut your eyes to all that and think of the poor fool as a nobody, whom no one has ever heard of. I have lived fifty years in Delhi. Thousands of letters come in from every quarter. Some who write don't even give the name of the muhalla. Some address me at the muhalla where I formerly lived. Letters from the authorities, in Persian and in English—even letters from England—come addressed simply with my name and "Delhi". You know all these things. You have seen such letters. And then you ask me for my address! If you don't class me as a noble, well and good. But at any rate I'm not an artisan, that the postman can't find me unless you write the muhalla and the police station. Address me by name at "Delhi". I'll stand guarantee that your letters reach me.'

He concludes an undated letter (probably of May or June 1861) to Majruh:

'These days Maulana Ghalib (God's mercy be upon him) is in clover. A volume of the *Tale of Amir Hamza* has come—about 600 pages of it—and a volume of the same size of *Bostan i Khayal* (The Garden of Fancy).<sup>1</sup> And there are seventeen bottles of good wine in the pantry. So I read all day and drink all night.

The man who wins such bliss can only wonder  
What more had Jamshed? What more Alexander?'

In June 1861 he writes to Nawwab Amin ud Din Ahmad Khan's son Ala ud Din Khan Alai that he loves him as any man would love the son of one who has been a friend to him:

'You are the fresh fruit of that tree which came to maturity before my eyes, and in whose cool shade I have rested, blessing his name. How could you be otherwise than dear to me? As for our seeing each other, there are only two possibilities: you should come to Delhi, or I to Loharu. But you cannot come, and I must be excused. Do not listen to my excuse—I tell you this myself—until you have heard from me who I am and what my story is:

'Listen: there are two worlds, the world of spirits, and this world of earth and water. The Ruler of both these worlds is One Who has Himself proclaimed the question: "Whose shall be the kingdom this day [Judgement Day]?" and has Himself given the answer: "That of the one God, the All-Powerful". Though it is the general rule that those who sin in this world of earth and water receive their punishment in the world of the spirits, it has sometimes happened that those who have sinned in the world of the spirits are sent to undergo punishment in this world. Thus I, on the 8th Rajab 1212 AH<sup>2</sup> was sent here to stand trial. I was kept waiting in the cells for thirteen years, and then on the 7th Rajab, 1225 AH<sup>3</sup> I was sentenced to life-imprisonment. A chain<sup>4</sup> was fastened on my feet, and the city of Delhi having been designated my prison, I was committed there, and condemned to the hard labour of composing prose and verse. After some years I escaped from prison and ran away to the east [Calcutta] where I roamed at liberty for three years. In the end I was apprehended in Calcutta and brought back and thrown into the same jail. Seeing that I would try to escape again, they fettered my hands as well.<sup>5</sup> The fetters chafed my ankles, and the handcuffs wounded my wrists. My prescribed hard labour became a greater burden to me, and my strength departed from me entirely. But I am a man without shame. Last year I got my feet free, and, still

<sup>1</sup> Enormously long medieval-style romances. The *Tale of Amir Hamza* runs into eighteen bulky volumes.

<sup>2</sup> The date of Ghalib's birth.

<sup>3</sup> The date of Ghalib's marriage.

<sup>4</sup> Ghalib's wife.

<sup>5</sup> The two boys whom Ghalib adopted as 'grandsons'.

handcuffed, ran off, leaving my fetters in a corner of my cell. By way of Meerut and Muradabad, I made my way to Rampur. A few days short of two months had passed when I was apprehended and brought back again. Now I have promised not to run away again. And how can I? I no longer have the strength. I await now the order for my release. When will it come? There is just a faint possibility that I may get out this very month—Zil Hij, 1277.<sup>1</sup> But, be that as it may, a man released from jail makes straight for home, and I too, when my deliverance comes, will go straight to the world of spirits.

Happy that day when I shall leave this prison  
house of earth,  
Forsake this barren vale, and reach the city  
of my birth.'

His words make it clear that he now felt it unlikely that his prophecy that he would die in 1277 was going to be fulfilled.

A letter of this same month of June 1861 to Junun suggests that he has deliberately changed his mind about it:

'Why have you written like that about the mangoes? Gifts do not have to be repeated for evermore, especially when the gift is itself something that does not last. My dear sir, this year mangoes are scarce everywhere, and what few there are, are dry and tasteless. And it is not to be wondered at. There was no rain in the winter months and none in the rainy season. You can ford the rivers on foot, and the wells are dried up. How can one expect the fruit to be juicy? Please do not think anything of it. I shall prove my own revelation false, and live on till next year's rains to eat your . . . mangoes.'

And 1277 did indeed elapse with Ghalib still surviving. In due course, as we shall see, he thought up an ingenious explanation, but for the moment he had other things to occupy his mind. His patron the Nawwab of Rampur, had just celebrated with great pomp the marriage of his second son. Arshi describes the occasion:

'Preparations had been started months beforehand. Robes of honour had been distributed to the courtiers, and food sent to every citizen of the capital; and throughout the city gatherings were held where dancing girls and musicians entertained the people. Dependants of the court outside the state were sent invitations to come to the wedding. Ghalib too received one, but he was not well enough to come. . . .'

The Nawwab then sent him a gift of Rs. 125 in lieu of the tray of choice food and the robe of honour traditionally conferred on such occasions. Ghalib was

<sup>1</sup> Because Zil Hij is the last month of the Muslim year, and Ghalib had prophesied that he would die in 1277.

either exceptionally short of money at the time or else he felt that where the Nawwab had spent so much, he might be persuaded to spend a little more. Accordingly he writes on July 11, 1861:

'I am not writing to you but conversing with you, and, seeking your pardon for my impertinence and your permission to speak my mind, what I have to say (and I say it by way of a joke) is this: You have presented me with Rs. 125 to provide myself with a feast and a robe of honour. I am starving. If I spend it all on feeding myself, and don't use any of it for getting the robe made, will your highness still owe me money for a robe or will you not?

May you live on another thousand years  
And every year have fifty thousand days.'

At the same time he composed and sent the Nawwab some poems in honour of the occasion, of which the Nawwab expressed his appreciation. However, an incident now occurred which aroused his displeasure. Ghalib's friends, Miran Sahib and Mir Sarfaraz Husain, had, with Ghalib's approval, gone to try their fortunes at Rampur, and Ghalib had given them a letter of introduction to the Nawwab's Chief Steward. This perfectly reasonable action seems to have upset the Nawwab, who presumably thought that Ghalib ought to have approached him direct, and Miran Sahib and Mir Sarfaraz Husain had to come away empty-handed. Ghalib's distress is evident from the letter he wrote the Nawwab on July 22, 1861:

'It is seven or eight years since I entered your service and began to share in your bounty. I have made it a binding rule never to make an improper request of you or recommend anyone to your favour. . . . I did not send Mir Sarfaraz Husain or Miran Sahib—I swear by God I did not. They went looking for employment. That is Mir Sarfaraz Husain's profession; and Miran Sahib recites elegies [on the martyrdom of Husain], and is outstanding amongst his fellows here in this art. When I wrote to your Chief Steward that they had such-and-such qualifications, what I had in mind was that during Muharram when half a dozen or more reciters are retained for the occasion, Miran Sahib might make one of them; and since, after all, there are numerous officials needed to take charge of your police stations and of the administrative sub-districts, Mir Sarfaraz Husain, who is an intelligent and able man, might be appointed to some such post in some district. Had both or either of these things been done, well and good. They have not been done; well and good. What I wrote was indeed not a recommendation; my aim was simply to introduce them. Had I wished to recommend them, could I not have written to you? Where I am concerned, you may set your mind at rest.

For years and years no breath has passed my lips  
But such as tended to your happiness.'

To Majruh he wrote, understandably, in different terms. In a letter dated simply 'July, 1861' he writes:

'Your letter came yesterday in the middle of the afternoon. I feel sure that Mir Sarfaraz Husain must have reached you at much the same time, or at any rate that same evening. You will hear from his own mouth how he fared on his journey. I don't know what *I* can write. Whatever I have heard, I too have heard from him. His coming back empty-handed was not what I had wished and not what I had intended; but it accords with what I had believed and expected. I knew that he would get nothing there. He has spent a hundred rupees for nothing, and since he spent it trusting in my suggestion, I feel ashamed. In my sixty-six years I have often been shamed and disgraced in this way, and when a man bears a thousand such scars, well, he can bear one more. But my heart feels keenly the pain of his loss.

'Why bother to ask about the epidemic?'<sup>1</sup> This was the one arrow left in the quiver of Fate, the unerring marksman. Where killing has been so general, and looting so merciless, and famine on so great a scale, why not an epidemic too? "The Voice of the Unseen"<sup>2</sup> had proclaimed ten years ago:

Ghalib, all other woes have come to pass  
And only unexpected death remains.

'My friend, I was not mistaken about 1277, but I thought it beneath me to die in a general epidemic. Really, it would have been an action most unworthy of me. Once this trouble is over we shall see about it.

'The printing of my collected Urdu verse is finished. Most probably you'll be receiving a copy through the post this week—or at the latest by the end of the month.

'There are plans for printing the collected Persian verse too. If everything works out, that too will be printed. . . .

'The epidemic has died down somewhat. For six or seven days it raged everywhere. Two days ago Khwaja Mirza (son of Khwaja Aman) came to Delhi with his wife and children. Yesterday night his nine-year-old boy contracted cholera and died. "Verily we are for God and verily to Him we shall return."

'The epidemic affects Alwar too. Alexander Heatherly, known as Alec Sahib, has died. I tell you truly and sincerely, he was very dear to me, a man who wished to advance my interests and served as a link between me and the Raj. And it was for this crime that death has taken him. Well, this is the world of causes and effects. What are its workings to us?'

Mihr notes of Alexander Heatherly:

<sup>1</sup> There was a severe epidemic of cholera in Delhi at the time.

<sup>2</sup> A title by which the Persian poet Hāfiz is often known. Here Ghalib applies it to himself.

'His father was French,' and he had married an Indian woman. He was a very good Urdu poet, one of the disciples of Zain ul Abidin Arif [the "nephew" of Ghalib who died young and whose two children Ghalib adopted as his "grandsons"]. His usual pen-name was Azad, but he sometimes used Alec, the shortened form of Alexander. He died at the age of thirty. His younger brother Thomas had his collection of Urdu verse printed at Agra in 1863.'

In his next letter, dated August 8, 1861, he returns to the Rampur fiasco: 'My friend, you are right when you say

Nothing befalls the sons of man but passes by.

But what pains me is that they went there on the strength of my letter, and suffered by it. . . .' But after a few lines he returns to other themes.

'The volume of my Urdu verse is printed. Alas! When the Lucknow press prints a man's diwan it raises him to heaven. The calligraphy is so good that every word shines radiant! May Delhi and its water and its press be accursed! They call for the poet of the diwan as a man calls for his dog. I looked at every proof as it was brought to me. But the copyist was not the man who brought the pages to me, but someone else. Now that the copies are printed and I have received my author's copy I find that not a word has been corrected. The copyist has left them just as they were. All I could do was make a list of errata, and this has been printed. Anyway, no matter whether I like it or not, I'll buy several copies, and, God willing, a copy each will reach the trinity of you this very week. But I got no pleasure from it, and you won't either.

'And what's this you write—"There are customers here: write and tell me the price"? I'm not an agent, nor a merchant, nor the manager of the press. The Ahmadi Press is owned by Muhammad Husain Khan, and managed by Mirza Amu Jan. The press is in Shahdara—Muhammad Husain Khan, near Painters' Mansion, Rae Man Lane, Delhi. Price of the book: six annas [about sixpence]. Postage to be paid by the customer. Give this information to anyone who wants the book. Anyone who wants to order copies—two, or four, or ten, or five—should write to Muhammad Husain Khan, Painters' Mansion, Rae Man Lane, Delhi, and ask him to send them off by post. The books will come by post, and payment can be sent off in cash or in stamps, as you like. What's it got to do with me and you? You know what to tell anyone who asks.

'I can't tell you whether an epidemic's mounting or subsiding unless there *is* an epidemic. There is a man of sixty-six here [Ghalib] and a woman of sixty-four [his wife]. If either of them had died we would have known that there *was* an epidemic. A fig for such an epidemic! It's Thursday, August 5th, but there's no sign of the lunar month. Last night we put one stool on top of another, and several people kept climbing on them to look. But the new moon

<sup>1</sup> This is incorrect. His father was English, and his mother an Indian Muslim lady.

was not to be seen.' (The Muslim month begins when the new moon is actually seen.)

This letter makes it unmistakably clear that the Urdu diwan had not been printed in Agra after all. Not until January 10, 1862 do we find any indication why. But on that date he writes to Aram:

'It seems to me that Maulvi Mir Niyaz Ali Sahib has not presented my case to you properly. What I wanted him to make clear to you was that the printing of the Urdu diwan in Delhi had already begun before Hakim Ahsanullah Khan could bring me the proof-sheet you had sent him, and that I had authorized the press here to print the diwan because I thought you no longer proposed to do so. Just consider: remember how Muhammad Azim, the owner of the press at Meerut, implored me to let him have the diwan, and how in order not to incur your displeasure I compelled him to return it to me. How could I then give anyone else permission to print it? You had left off writing to me, and I thought you must be cross with me. I told Maulvi Niyaz Ali Sahib, "You must please persuade my son Shiv Narayan to forgive me!" My friend, I swear to God, I regard you as a dear son. Why speak of the diwan and the picture? It was for you alone that I got the diwan copied out and brought it from Rampur. It took me a lot of searching to find the portrait in Delhi, but I found it, and bought it, and sent both things to you. They are yours. You may do as you like with them—keep them, give them away, or tear them up and throw them out. You had a fine edition of *Dastambu* prepared and made me a present of it: I sent you my portrait and my Urdu diwan. You are the living memorial of my cherished friend Nāzir Bansi Dhar:

O fragrant flower, your fragrance pleases me  
Because it holds another's fragrance too.'

On September 22, 1861 he writes again to Majruh. He had corrected some verse of Mir Sarfaraz Husain and returned it, apparently with only a brief covering note. Majruh seems to have objected, for Ghalib now writes:

'Yes sir? What do you want of me? I corrected the manuscript . . . and returned it. What more did you want me to write? . . . You prefer the ways of Muhammad Shah's reign [he was Emperor from 1719 to 1748]: "Here all is well, and I desire to know of your welfare also. I had received no letter from you for many days. I was pleased to hear from you. The manuscript, duly corrected, is returned herewith. Please give it to my dear son Mir Sarfaraz Husain, and give him my blessing also. And further, give my blessing to Hakim Mir Ashraf Ali and to Mir Afzal Ali. It behoves you as a dutiful son always to continue writing to me in this way.'

'What do you say? Isn't it a fact that this is the way they used to write

letters in those days? Good heavens, what an attitude—that unless it's written like that, a letter's not a letter but a well without water, a cloud without rain, a tree without fruit, a house without light, a lamp without radiance! I know that you are alive: you know that I am alive. I wrote what was necessary, leaving it to another time to write the superfluities. And if I can't please you without writing like this, well, my friend, I've written you a line or two in that style now—and when a man makes up for a prayer he has missed, his atonement is accepted.<sup>1</sup> . . . So forgive me, and don't be cross.

'Mir Nasir ud Din came once, but he hasn't been since. I haven't written any more Persian verse, so how can I send it to your uncle or to you? Nawwab Faiz Muhammad Khan's [Lord of Jhajjar's] brother, Hasan Ali Khan has died. Hämid Ali Khan has been awarded a hundred and thirty thousand and some hundred rupees from the former King's treasury. Kallu, my steward, was ill, but today he's quite recovered. Baqir Ali Khan has had fever for the past month, and Husain Ali Khan has two swollen glands on his neck. The city is silent. No sound of shovels plying, no houses being blown up, no work on the railway going on, no mounds being raised. Delhi city is a city of the dead. I've used up all my paper, otherwise I'd have written more, just to please you.'

Two days later, on September 24, 1861, he sends a letter of recommendation to Shihab ud Din Khan:

"Light of my eyes Shihab ud Din Khan, my blessing upon you! This is to tell you that the man who has come with my note is named Hasan Ali, and is a Sayyid. His skill in making medicines is unmatched, and in making pickles and preserves, unparalleled. His father Jan Muhammad was employed at the King's court, and his uncle [father's brother] Mir Fatah Ali now holds a post at Alwar at a salary of Rs. 15 a month. Anyway, I have told him that he will get Rs. 5 a month and will have to go to Loharu. He refused, saying that on an income of five rupees he could neither keep himself nor send anything to his wife and children here. I replied, "It's a big establishment. If your work pleases them, they will raise your salary." He said, "Very well, on the strength of that I'll accept the small salary; but I must be provided with two meals a day. Otherwise I can't possibly manage."

'Listen, my son. The poor fellow is quite right. Unless he gets his keep he can't manage. I'm sure that when you report the facts, you can get this authorized. So much for that. Now he says, "Let me have two months' salary in advance so that I can get some clothes made and leave them something at home to be going on with. And let me have money to cover the expenses of food and conveyance for the journey. Here too I think he's in the right, but I'm not in a position to say anything on this point. Anyway, you can send on this note I've written you to our lord and master [Ala ud Din Khan] Alai.'

<sup>1</sup> A Muslim unable to say one of the five prayers at the prescribed time is permitted to make good the omission later.



He writes to Alai himself the next day. Alai must have asked him how it was that he could go to Rampur (as he had done the previous year), but could not come to Loharu. He replies on September 25, 1861:

'Lord and master Alai, I've just received your letter, and sat down to answer it the moment I finished reading it. Here's a fine thing! I am to be your ox, and my ties with Rampur your goad—or I your horse and taunts about Rampur your whip. Why should my ties and commitments to Rampur hinder and prevent my coming to Loharu? I'm not the Nawwab's representative, posted to a certain area. Just as nobles provide for the upkeep of faqirs, so does the court of Rampur provide for mine. The only difference is that a faqir is expected to call down God's blessings on his patron while I am expected to correct his verse. If I like, I can stay in Delhi, or in Agra, or in Lahore, or in Loharu—just as I like. I have only to hire a conveyance for my clothing, pack a dozen bottles of wine in my trunk, contract for the services of eight palanquin-bearers, leave two of my four servants here, take two along with me, and set off. Any letter from Rampur can be sent on by the boys' tutor. I can arrange for the conveyance; I can get the wine; I can find the palanquin-bearers. But where shall I get the strength? When I go for my meals from my own quarters to the zenana (which is quite near) it takes me almost half an hour to get my breath back, and the same when I get back to my drawing room. And after all, the Nawwab of Rampur too invited me to his son's wedding and I told him the same thing, "I hardly exist any more. Your auspicious influence sustains me to correct your verse, but expect no service from me beyond that."

'I would love to see both my brother [your father] and you. But what can I do? I can hope to come when the sun is in Scorpio or Sagittarius, that is, in November or December, but I wish it were only Gurgaon or Badshahpur I had to get to instead of Loharu. You'll say, "Is Rampur any nearer, then?" But it's two years since I went there, and my strength fails and declines with every day that passes. You can't come here, and I have not the strength to go there. So if in November or December my final assault succeeds, well and good. Otherwise

I grieve because I cannot see my friends  
And for no other thing. . . .'

He writes again on October 15, 1861:

'My dear child, what are you saying? What more do you want? The breeze is cool again, the water cold again; the harvest has been good, and grain is plentiful. I have conferred the honour of succession upon you. [He means that he has declared him his literary successor, but he goes on to use the terms appropriate to a saint handing on his powers to a disciple.] I have bestowed my cloak upon you, and I would not grudge you rosary and prayer-mat too, were

there any sign of them here. More than that, my brother [your father] has recovered his health. Master Mir Jan has arrived [at Loharu], and at the end of October or the beginning of November you will be welcoming [your uncle, Nawwab Ziya ud Din Ahmad] Nayyar i Rakhshan. Then why think anything of the sun of Scorpio and Sagittarius?'<sup>1</sup>

Springs, summers, winters—all will come and go  
When we are mingled in the dust and stone.<sup>2</sup>

'To Master Mir Jan, since my father's sister was his father's brother's wife, and since he is younger than I am, my blessing: and, since he is my friend, and friendship takes no regard of whether a man is older or younger, my regards: and, since he is called "Master", my humble service; and, since he is a Sayyid, my reverence: and, since, as the verse tells us,

Apart from God, is nothing: all that is, is God—

my worship . . .

'You may eat all the fried gelded goat's meat you like, and all the meat and onion, curries, and pulaos and kababs. I swear to God I don't give it a thought. But I only pray that sugar-crystal from Bikaner is denied you. Whenever I imagine Mir Jan Sahib munching lumps of it, I eat my heart out with envy.'

Alai evidently responded by sending him a present of Bikaner sugar-crystal, for he writes again on November 12, 1861:

'Today at the time I usually go to the zenana for lunch Shihab ud Din Khan arrived with your letter and a bag of sugar-crystal. I had it taken along with me and had the crystal weighed in my presence. It came to about four ounces over the four pounds. God prosper your dwelling-place! That is enough and more than enough, and I don't need any more. When I came out again after having my lunch, your cousin's [Shihab ud Din Khan's] servant was waiting to ask me for an answer to your letter, saying that the camel-man was about to leave. I usually lie down after lunch, so I've written this acknowledgement lying here. I'll answer the other things in your letter tomorrow.'

Only a few letters speak of things that saddened or distressed him. In a letter to Sayyah dated October 4, 1861, he writes:

'Munshi Mir Amir Ali Sahib and I have never met, but I hear him spoken of as a good man of exceptional qualities. Maulvi Izhar Husain Sahib I have met

<sup>1</sup> Cf. the previous letter. Ghalib had said he would hope to visit Loharu 'when the sun is in Scorpio or Sagittarius'. There is a play upon words here. 'Nayyar i Rakhshan' literally means 'the dazzling sun'.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. p. 169 above.

on two occasions, here in Delhi, but I did not find him the sort of man to feel friendship and consideration for a poor faqir. He is all right for the rich. Alas for Maulvi Muhammad Hasan and Maulvi Abdul Karim! If either of them had still been here in these times I would have had no occasion to lament my fate. Time passes, but one does not forget.

'And yes, Khan Sahib, now you have reached Calcutta and met everybody there, make full enquiries about Fazl i Haq, and write and tell me why he has not been released and under what conditions he lives there in the islands [the Andaman Islands, where criminals sentenced to transportation were sent] and how he is.'

A letter from Shafaq, in which he had apparently complained of ill-treatment by his relations, provokes an outburst of bitterness on Ghalib's part against his. He writes on October 22, 1861:

'Most reverend sir, . . . In matters of feeling, the union of two opposites is beyond the bounds of possibility. How can it be that at one particular time one particular matter can be at once the cause of joy and the grounds of grief? Yet in reading your letter I found just that, for I felt both pleasure and pain. Glory to God! I find that in so many things you and I have shared the same fate—ill-treatment from our relatives, grievance against our kin. Throughout the realm of India I have no fellow-countryman. One or two in Samarkand and a hundred or two among the nomads of the deserts of the Khifchaq [Central Asia] there may be. But relations by marriage I have; and I fell into their toils when I was only five, and for sixty-one years have borne their tyranny.

Ghalib, were I to tell the tale of all my  
kin have done to me  
Then hope—that custom men observe—would  
leave the world for evermore.

You cannot come to my support, nor I to your aid. Oh God! I have swum the river, the further shore is near, and two more strokes will bring me to the land.

I lived my life waiting for death to come  
And dead, I still must see what else I face.

. . . You are a prey to grief and sorrow, but . . . to be the target of the world's afflictions is proof of an inherent nobility—proof clear, and argument conclusive. . . .'

His depression must have been enhanced by the fact that he was ill at the time, as a later letter shows. On November 11, 1861 he writes to the Nawwab of Rampur:

'Your loyal well-wisher has been ill for a full month. It began with the same old bouts of colic. Then because I took the heating medicines which one has to for this ailment, I fell a prey to fever. I suffered several bouts, and now for the last two times a bout was due, I have felt nothing. But my strength is completely spent, and mental exhaustion has brought me to death's door. For the present I am taking apple juice.'

A letter of November 20, 1861, to Sayyah shows that he had still not made a full recovery:

'These days I suffer so much from giddiness and mental exhaustion that even a lot of the Nawwab of Rampur's verse is put to one side just as it is until I can attend to it. . . . The ghazals you sent me are all safe. You may rest assured. When I have corrected the Nawwab Sahib's ghazals, yours shall be corrected too.'

Otherwise, he had gone on consistently with the correction of his friend's verses—Sayyah's, Junun's and Tufta's, to name only three—throughout the year, praising and rebuking alike with the same forthrightness as ever. Thus he writes to Tufta on August 19, 1861: 'My friend Mirza Tufta, a thousand times bravo! What a fine ode you have written! All praise to you! . . . The construction is excellent, and the simplicity of the language admirable. . . .' On the other hand, on September 9, 1861, he scolds him for entertaining a doubt 'which only a schoolboy or a beginner ought to feel' and on October 4, 1861, for making a mistake 'astonishing in so practised a poet'.

In an undated letter to Rana which perhaps belongs to about this time he writes: 'My friend, Delhi and Lucknow are agreed that "*jafa*" is feminine. No one would ever make it masculine, except perhaps in Bengal, where they make even "cow-elephant" masculine.'

The same good humour pervades an undated letter to Sahib i Alam:

'Lord and Master, to what can I compare the couplets you write in my praise and how can I thank God sufficiently for them? It is God's goodness to His servants that makes His chosen favourites speak well of such a disgrace to creation as I am. It seems that this great good fortune was written in my fate that I should come through this general epidemic alive. O God, my God, praise to Thee that Thou hast saved one who deserved death by sword or fire, and then raised him to high estate! I sometimes feel that the throne of heaven is my lodging and Paradise my back garden. In God's name, compose no more verses in my praise, or I shall not shrink from claiming Godhead myself!'

From what follows, it is clear that Sahib i Alam's handwriting had not improved over the years.



“*Panj Ahang*, that book replete in instruction, that work so fair and fine . . .”— what follows that, your slave could not read. All I could make out were the three names, Chaudhri Sahib, and Hazrat Shah Amir Sahib and Maulvi Fazl i Ahmad Sahib. Even then I am doubtful about the second name, and wonder if my guess corresponds with the facts or not. About the other two—Chaudhri Sahib and Maulvi Fazl i Ahmad Sahib—I do not feel any doubt. Further, I could not make out what it is you want. If it is *Panj Ahang* you ask for, the answer is that I have a cousin by marriage, Nawwab Ziya ud Din Khan (God preserve him) who used to collect all my verse and prose. The collected prose and the Urdu poetical works were in his library. It is with fear and trembling I tell you that his library—it must have been worth twenty thousand rupees—was looted. Not a single page survived. True, the printed *Panj Ahang* is still on sale; but it is faulty in two respects. First, it does not include such prose as I wrote after it was printed; and secondly, the copyist made “corrections” in my prose of which only my heart can tell. Were I to tell you that no line is free of mistakes I should be pitching it too high. But I can say without exaggeration that no page is free of mistakes. Anyway, if you wish, I can send it. Please offer my due respects to your noble sons, first to the first, whose name I could not decipher, and then to Sayyid Maqbul Alam. My desire to see them grows day by day.’