

## CHAPTER I

THERE was a silly girl whose marriage had taken place, but from sheer want of common-sense she could not manage to spend even a year or two under the roof of her husband's parents. In the fourth or fifth month after the wedding she began pestering her husband to take a separate house for her, because, forsooth, she was 'unable to stand' his mother and sisters.

Her husband said : 'In all of your squabbles with my mother and sisters which I have happened to overhear, it is you who have been in the wrong. Whatever people there are of the commonest sort living in the mohulla,<sup>1</sup> you treat *their* daughters as if they were your sisters. *Chuniya*—the daughter of Bhondu the sutler, and *Zulfan*—the daughter of Bakhshu the tinker, and *Rahmat*—the daughter of Kimmu the water-carrier, and *Sulmati*—the daughter of Maulan the greengrocer,<sup>2</sup> are received by you with open arms at all hours of the day, and you take no account of the fact that these people are not of our family, or connection, nor admitted to our society or friendship. The whole mohulla is talking about it, and saying, "What sort of a bride has come here now ? Whenever you see her, only girls of *that* sort are sitting with her." After all there *are* people living in the mohulla—people, too, like Kázi Imám Ali, Hakím Shifá-uddaula, Munshi Mumtáz Ahmad, Maulavi Rúhulláh, Mír Hasan rizá<sup>3</sup>—whose daughters and daughters-in-law are in the habit of visiting us. You don't vouchsafe a word to any of *them*. If my honoured mother warned you against associating with girls of low-bred and vulgar people, what was there improper in her doing so ?

The silly wife replied : 'Affection and friendship depend upon

<sup>1</sup> Our nearest equivalent to 'mohulla' (which is spelt in the English fashion) is 'ward'; it means a collection of houses in a city known by one name.

<sup>2</sup> Pronounce Chooniya, Bhoandoo, Zoofun, Bukhshoo, Ruhmat, Kimmoo, Soolmuttee, and Mowlun.

<sup>3</sup> Pronounce Hakím as Hukeem, Munshi as Moonshée, Hasan as Hussun. The 'á' with an accent is the long 'a' in 'father'; the 'ú' the long 'u' in 'ruler'; 'í' has the value of 'ee.'

the union of hearts. There was a bangle-seller named Básu living next door to my mother's house, whose daughter Banno was my bosom friend.<sup>1</sup> I used to play with her when I was little. Yes, Banno and I made a marriage between our two dolls. Banno, poor thing ! was very badly off. I used to steal quantities of things from my mother and give them to her. I would never give up my meetings with Banno, however much my mother forbade them.'

Her husband said : 'A precious idiot you were, then !'

When she heard this, the foolish woman cried out to her husband : 'Look here ! by God's oath, I tell you once for all—you must keep a smooth tongue when you speak to me, Sir. Else, I'll dash my brains out, so that you shall have my blood on your head.' And upon that she began crying, and cursing her father and mother. 'Oh God ! be it bad for such parents ! What a miserable lot they have thrust me into ! Everyone knows I am helpless, and so they are bent on persecuting me. Oh God ! let me die ! Let my bier be carried out !'

And in the height of her passion she kicked over a little pawn-casket<sup>2</sup> which had been left on the bed and upset it. All the catechu and lime was spilt on the mattress. A coverlet of English woollen-stuff had been folded back over the foot of the bed ; as soon as the lime touched it, all its colour was taken out. On hearing the clatter of the box falling, her mother-in-law came running from the saloon on the opposite side. The son, when he saw his mother coming, took himself off by another doorway ; but he said to himself as he left : 'Well, I *have* stirred up a hornets' nest for my sins !'

When the mother-in-law came in, what does she see ? A whole anna's worth of catechu—which she had only put into its cup the day before, after carefully straining and preparing it—all lying spilt, the mattress sticky with it, the coverlet soaked with lime, her daughter-in-law weeping and sobbing convulsively. Directly

<sup>1</sup> Pronounce Barsoo and Bunno.

<sup>2</sup> A box (probably of silver) with compartments containing fresh leaves of the 'piper betel' (paw) and the various ingredients that are put inside the leaf, which is then wrapped up and chewed.

she entered she clasped her daughter-in-law to her neck, and wildly uttered many hard words about her son.

The moral support derived from *this* show of sympathy became a pretext for further action, as irresistible as the proverbial 'a jogger to a nodder.' No amount of entreaty or expostulation on the part of her mother-in-law had the slightest effect upon this hypocritical woman. All the females of the neighbourhood, when they heard the noise of crying and slapping,<sup>1</sup> gathered in a crowd at the door. At last matters came to such a pitch that Zulfan, the daughter of Bakhshu the tinman, ran off to the bride's mother's house, and there rehearsed a story of the affair, in which every incident was magnified fourfold. Now the bride's mother also, by the grace of God, was a very hot-tempered woman. The instant she heard the story she got into her doolie and arrived at the spot. There was a battle royal between the two mothers. In the end, the bride's mother took the bride away with her. For several months all ordinary civilities between the two families were entirely suspended.

In order to make my story intelligible, I must tell you the names of all these people. Akbari Khánam was the proper name of this foolish and deceitful woman, and in her husband's home she had received the title of Mizájdár bahu.<sup>2</sup> Although this Akbari was foolish and ill-educated and bad-tempered, her younger sister Asghari<sup>3</sup> was a very intelligent, sensible, and kindly dispositioned girl. At an early age she had read through the translation of the Qur-án and the vernacular text-books of religious doctrine; and in writing, too, she was not at a loss. Every week she used to send a letter containing the family news to her father. She could do every kind of needlework, and knew how to cook quite a variety of tasty dishes. The whole mohulla sang her praises.

<sup>1</sup> *I.e.*, slapping the breast as a sign of lamentation.

<sup>2</sup> Pronounce Ukburee and Buhoo, with the accent on the first syllable in each case. 'Bahu' means 'bride' or 'daughter-in-law'; 'Mizájdár' may mean in a good sense 'one who has a proper sense of her dignity,' and in a bad sense 'one who has a temper.'

<sup>3</sup> Pronounce Usghuree, with accent on the first syllable. The words Akbari and Asghari simply mean 'elder' and 'younger.' Khánam means 'lady.'

All the arrangements of her mother's housekeeping were left in her hands. Whenever her father came home on privilege leave, he would consult her in his management of the family affairs. The ready money, the keys of the store-cupboard and boxes—in fact, everything of the kind was left under her control. Both of her parents were exceedingly fond of her, and, indeed, she was beloved by everyone in the mohulla; but Akbari, for no reason at all, was always on bad terms with her younger sister, and at times used even to strike her when she found her alone. And yet Asghari invariably treated her elder sister with respect, and never told tales of her to her mother.

It so happened that both sisters became betrothed into the same family. Muhammad Aqil<sup>1</sup> and Muhammad Kámil<sup>2</sup> were two brothers. Akbari had already been married to the elder brother, Muhammad Aqil, and Asghari's engagement to Muhammad Kámil had been definitely arranged, but the marriage had not yet taken place. In consequence of Akbari's display of bad temper, Asghari's betrothal was very nearly being broken off; but there was an aunt on the mother's side of the two girls, who lived close by Muhammad Aqil's house, and she always exerted a good influence over them. Although Akbari had left her husband after a regular quarrel, her aunt denounced her conduct in very plain terms, and lost no opportunity of admonishing her. And, finally, after several months, she took the opportunity of the Ramazán<sup>3</sup> to bring her niece back, and get her received in her father-in-law's house. For some days, indeed, Muhammad Aqil continued to view his wife with displeasure, but at length the good aunt got both husband and wife to be reconciled to each other. Still, when there is no real harmony in the dispositions of two people, occasions for umbrage are to be found in all kinds of little things.

One day, Muhammad Aqil said to his mother: 'I have invited a friend to come in. It would be as well if the food at fast-

<sup>1</sup> Pronounce Mochummud, with accent on the second syllable, and Arckill.

<sup>2</sup> Pronounce Karmil.

<sup>3</sup> Pronounce Rummuzarn, with accent on the last syllable.

breaking time<sup>1</sup> and supper were served up with a little extra care.<sup>2</sup>

His mother replied : ' Heaven knows what I suffer in cooking even the bread for our supper. At fast-breaking time, for the last three days, I have been seized with ague, so as not even to know what I am about. God bless the woman next door for cooking that, even as well as she does ! You really ought to have made some inquiry in the house before inviting anyone.'

Muhammad Aqil glanced towards his wife with a look of amazement, and said : ' What ! is she not even fit to help you in that ?'

Don't suppose that his wife had sufficient self-control to keep silent when she heard such a remark as this was. No sooner had the words caught her ear than she called out : ' Ask this old mother of yours whether she got her son married, or purchased a slave-girl for him. What ! toil over a kitchen fire in fast time ? Not I, Sir.'

Muhammad Aqil thought to himself : ' Now, if I make any kind of reply, there will be the same disgraceful scene as before.'

With a look of blank disappointment he held his peace, and fetched in some things for the fast-breaking from the bázár. So that matter was got over.

## CHAPTER II

BUT Muhammad Aqil was now confronted by a new calamity—namely, the Eed.<sup>2</sup> The poor man had commenced his preparations for Mizájdár bahu's new outfit a whole week before. Every day he brought home cloths of different kinds, bangles of different colours, embroidered shoes of this or that pattern ; nothing met with Mizájdár's approval, until at last there was only one day left before the Eed. In despair he went off and called at the house of Akbari khánam's aunt.

<sup>1</sup> During the fast a very light meal is taken directly after sunset.

<sup>2</sup> *I.e.*, the great feast on the first day after the Ramazán. It is a day of thanksgiving and reconciliation, and all who can afford to do so wear new clothes. The word is spelt here according to the English pronunciation of it.

As soon as she heard his voice, she summoned him in to the ladies' apartments, and greeting him with blessings, affectionately made him sit down by her. Then she prepared some pawn, and having handed a leaf to him, she said : ' Tell me, is Akbari all well ?'

Muhammad Aqil replied : ' Madam, your sister's daughter is a woman of a marvellous constitution ; she quite takes my breath away. Her vivacity is something extraordinary, and her conversation is made up of contradictions.'

His Aunt said : ' My dear son, don't worry yourself about it. She is quite young now. When she has children, when she feels the burden of keeping house, her temper will get right of itself. And, after all, good people do manage to get on with bad people. God has endowed you, my son, with every kind of advantage. Don't let anything happen at which people might jeer. After all, it is your own honor which is at stake.'

Muhammad Aqil said : ' Yes, your honor, and simply on that consideration I do try to overlook a great deal. But just think of this : to-morrow is the Eed, and up to this moment she has not tried on her new bangles, nor made up her new costume. Would you come over for a moment and bring her to her senses ? I have said all I could, my mother has entreated her, but she won't listen to a word.'

His Aunt said : ' Very well. Your uncle has just gone to the mosque for prayers, but as soon as he returns I will ask him, and come over.'

Accordingly, the good aunt came to the house, and made the girl put on her new bangles, and did the cutting-out of the clothes. For greater speed, all the women sat down together to sew. The aunt said : ' Daughter, do you put the frills on to the trousers. Your mother-in-law will cut the trimmings, and, meanwhile, I will stitch the edging on to your mantle.'

When Akbari had finished putting on the frills, she said to her Aunt with a consequential air : ' Here, Lady, you have still two sides left, and I have already finished putting the frills on both legs.'

Her Aunt looked at the frills ; they were put on upside down.