

could trust herself how to act. In her own heart she said : ' Just you wait a bit, Azmat ; please God ! even you shall see how smooth I will make you. Your brains have taken such a high range now that you think to set the whole family at enmity with each other. Please God ! I will smite you where no water is ;¹ and I will so cast you out that never again shall any luck bring you into this mohulla.'

CHAPTER XI

MÁMÁ AZMAT'S evil genius was now well astride of her. She delivered a third blow at Asghari. It was Hazári Mal's custom, whenever he saw Azmat passing by in front of his shop, to call out to her in a fussy way, ' How now, Mámá ! have you any thought of paying my account ?' and once a week or so he would send some dunning message to the house. One day, when Mámá Azmat was on her way to the bázár to make her purchases, as usual, Házari Mal hailed her.

Mámá Azmat said : ' Lála !² what new custom is this you have adopted of molesting me ? Whenever you see me, you begin dunning *me*. Why don't you ask those you lent the money to ? They are the people to dun. What have I, poor wretch ! a lone woman, with two pice a day to live on—what have I to do with great bankers' accounts ?'

Hazári Mal said : ' What's that you say ? Nothing to do with it ! *You* take the money from the shop. " The hand knows the hand." It is you, whom I know, and it is on your assurance that I lend the money. What do I know of the people of the house ?'

The Mámá said : ' Oh, Lála, stop that nonsense ; you are not such a born fool as that. What did you ever see in *me* to assure you ? I have no lands ; I have no money. And you have given me hundreds of rupees with your eyes shut ! Well, if you gave

¹ A proverbial expression for taking a person at a time when he can make no resistance.

² The meaning of ' Lála ' is something equivalent to the slang term ' Duckie ! ' but it has long since become a term for addressing men of sedentary occupations, such as money-lenders and shop-keepers and clerks.

them to *me*, go on, and get them from me. Sell up my mansions—wherever they are standing. Stop the issue of my pension from the palace—if I have any.'

Hazári Mal was quite taken aback at the Mámá's outburst of temper: He endeavoured to pacify her by saying, ' It seems that you have had a quarrel with someone to-day before you came out. Tell me what it is. Has your mistress said anything ? or has the young master been angry ? Come in, won't you ?' And while he spoke thus to the Mámá, he put a pice into the hand of the boy who was looking after the shop, and said : ' Run and get two leaves of pawn made up, with some dry tobacco in them, and bring them here at once.' Then, when the Mámá was seated, he said to her again, with a laugh : ' You have certainly been quarrelling with someone ; that is plain enough.'

The Mámá said : ' God forbid ! Why should I begin to quarrel ? You spoke, and I answered accordingly. When a thing is true, why do you take offence at it ?'

Hazári Mal said : ' Sure enough, my *account* for the money is with the master ; but does it pass through your hands, or does it not ? I have neither note nor receipt ; whatever you asked me for in your master's name, I gave you.'

The Mámá said : ' Yes, stick to that ; when am I likely to deny it ? I will vouch for whatever I have taken before any number of people ; and my mistress too (blessings on her from every hair of my body !), she, poor dear ! never disputes anything.'

Hazári Mal said : ' You are right there, Mámá ; the Begam sáhib is a most noble lady. Bless her ! there is no doubt of that.' And then in a low voice he asked : ' Tell me about the young bride ; what is *she* like ? Is she of the same complexion as her elder sister, or of a different disposition ?'

The Mámá said : ' Don't ask me about her, Lála. The girl is of a noble family—true ; but she is very stingy at heart. Even a farthing's worth of anything she won't approve until she has returned it four times. Ah, yes, in talent and accomplishments, God keep her ! she is far ahead of most married girls. Her cooking is better than the best, and in needlework she could beat

professional tailors and Mughlánís.¹ But oh, Lála! she is not what you call *well bred*. At first she began to fuss and meddle even with me. You know, Lála, how spotless my work is. She soon got tired of that. As for the Begam sáhib, *she* is a saint; it is the saving grace of her life and conduct that keeps the family going. And we unfortunate creatures only hold on to her skirts. People have often tried to frighten the Begam about me, but—God keep her in peace! her heart was never clouded. She never took in a word of all their talk against me.'

Hazári Mal said: 'I have heard the young bride had a very grand trousseau.'

Before he had finished speaking, the Mámá said: 'Rubbish! Not so fine even as the elder one's.'

'That is very odd,' said Hazári Mal; 'the Khán sáhib was a Tahsildár, too, when *she* was married. He ought to have given her more than the elder sister.'

'Ah,' said the Mámá, 'but it was not the fault of the Tahsildár. He, poor man! had made grand preparations. It was this little ill-bred pretender; she made them cut the items down, one after another, on the score of consideration for her parents, to win their favour.'

Hazári Mal said: 'If that is the case, she, too, will be wanting to keep house for herself, like her elder sister.'

'Keep house for herself,' said the Mámá; 'she will make bigger roses blossom than that. The elder sister was ill-tempered—no doubt of that; but she was open-hearted; and this girl is smooth-tongued, but she is not sound at the core. One may wear out one's life in working for her, and give no satisfaction. And whatever she will *say* to you, be sure there's something more at the bottom. Her words mean one thing, but her heart purposes something else. No, my little father, this girl is not the one to get on with anyone for a single day. At this moment she is making her arrangements to go to the hills, to her father.'

'Has any letter come from Lahore lately?' asked Hazári Mal.

¹ *I.e.*, women servants maintained by rich families to do fancy needlework and embroidery. The word is an Indian made feminine of Mughal, our 'Mogul.'

The Mámá said: 'A letter is expected every day, but for some reason or other, I don't know why, none has arrived yet. The mistress is casting about to find money for the house. It was only yesterday or the day before she was saying to me, "Go and get a loan of fifty rupees from Hazári Mal."'

At the word 'loan' Hazári Mal started back, and said: 'If she could find out some way to pay the old debt—*then* I would not mind lending again; but my partner won't hear of it now. You tell the Begam sáhib, Mámá, and see that she understands you; she must pay up the old debt, whatever she does, or else—don't let her blame me.'

The Mámá said: 'Well, if *God* should get your money out of them for you, you will get it. How is the Begam sáhib to pay? She is in debt, every hair of her. The cornfactor is worrying her life for *his* money, and the cloth-merchant is crying out to get his.'

'What have I to do with her other creditors?' said Hazári Mal. 'The Begam sáhib will have to pay my firm's account, anyhow. Personally, I have a great regard for the Begam sáhib's dignity; but my partner, Chidámílál, does not agree. If he were to hear what you have just said he would institute a suit this very day.'

The Mámá said: 'Well, I will repeat all this faithfully to the Begam sáhib. But I know every single thing about the family. You may bring a suit, or go into court, if you like. There is no money to pay, nor the means of raising any. If there were any money, why should they be asking for a loan?'

After the conversation had reached this point, Mámá Azmat took leave of Hazári Mal. When she got home at last with her purchases, Muhammad Kámil's mother asked: 'How now? Mámá, when you go to the bázár, you let your thoughts run so that you forget all about cooking the dinner! Can't you see how late it is? At what time will the meat be put on the fire? When will it be cooked? When shall we get our dinner?'

The Mámá said: 'Lady, the delay was all in arguing with that scoundrel Hazári Mal. The wretched creature has taken to stop me every day as I pass by. To-day I fired up, and said to him: "Why do you make it a rule to treat me every day to this

insolence? What puts you in such a fright? Have a little patience. Let the remittance come from Lahore; then all your account from first to last will be paid off." The creature made at me, and began wrangling and abusing me in the broad street.'

Muhammad Kámil's mother said: 'What has come over Házari Mal? He was never like that before. He has kept our accounts for years, and sometimes we have paid him early and sometimes late. He has never made any difficulty.'

The Mámá said: 'Lady, some other banker has become a partner in the firm. He has made this to-do about getting the debts in quickly, the wretch! He has been realizing straight off from all the clients, and those who did not pay he has filed suits against. Házari Mal told me to say to you, with clasped hands, on his own behalf, that he had no voice in the matter; and to ask you to find some way of paying the money within two or three days, however you can manage it. Or else Chidámílál will file a suit for certain.'

Muhammad Kámil's mother was terribly disconcerted at hearing this news. There was, indeed, a younger sister of hers, Amír Begam, living in the Khánam bázár, who was tolerably well-to-do in the world. Muhammad Kámil's mother said to the Mámá: 'No answer comes from Lahore, Mámá; not even a letter. What hope is there of any remittance? If Házari Mal should really file a suit, what can be done? Even the furniture of the house in my possession is not sufficient for me to meet the debt with—if I should sell it. And then the mere fact of paying after a suit has been filed is a disgrace. Our reputation will be damaged all over the city. Go and fetch a doolie. I am going to Amír Begam. Perhaps some plan will be discovered there.'

The Mámá said: 'Lady, the suit is as good as filed. When a man has said a thing with his lips, it does not take long for him to do it. And where is the young Begam sáhib to get money from? She is embarrassed herself nowadays.'

Muhammad Kámil's mother said: 'Anyhow, something must be done.'

The Mámá went up to her, and said in a low voice: 'If Tamízdár

¹ Pronounce Umear, with the accent on the last syllable.

bahu were to lend you her *bracelets*, just for one month, then the business might be put off. By pawning the bracelets only for the time, a half or a third of Házari Mal's money would be made good. Within the month, either the master might send a remittance, or I could get you the money from some other banker.'

Muhammad Kámil's mother said: 'What! are you mad? Take good care you don't let such a proposal pass your lips again. Should the house we live in be put up to sale, I would accept even *that*; but I have not the face to ask my daughter-in-law.'

The Mámá said: 'Lady, it was only that I thought she is your daughter-in-law—you may say daughter—no stranger; and I had no intention—God forbid!—of selling outright. Just for a month—well, the things are not in her jewel-box; they are deposited with the banker. She might be perfectly at ease in her mind.'

Muhammad Kámil's mother said: 'Yes, but still there is a great difference between a daughter and a daughter-in-law. And a newly-wedded bride, too. Could anyone even mention such a thing? Take care, and don't let such a thing cross your lips again. Why, fancy, if it were to come to Mahmúda's ears, and she should go and tell her sister-in-law!'

The Mámá said: 'The young lady was standing here just now, and listening. But *she* is a child. What does she understand about such things at her age?'

Muhammad Kámil's mother said: 'Go and fetch the doolie. At all events, I will go to my sister. We shall see afterwards what plan we can arrange for the best.'

CHAPTER XII

MUHAMMAD KAMIL's mother got into her doolie and departed to the Khánam bázár, and Mahmúda went off and rehearsed the whole conversation to Tamízdár bahu. Only one course seemed open to Asghari. She sat down at once and wrote the following letter to her elder brother, Khairandesh Khán:

'To his excellency, my gentle brother, the honored, the revered, health and peace! After my benedictions, I make known to you an urgent request, as follows: For a long time I have not written anything about myself to your honor, because I felt sure that the communications which I have in duty addressed to my honored father would also pass under your eyes. But now a special matter has arisen, of such a kind that I think it proper to be made known to you in particular. It is this: Since I came to my father-in-law's house, I have experienced no kind of annoyance; and those matters about which my elder sister used to complain—through your prayers, nothing of the kind has happened to me. Everyone treats me with affection, and I myself am happy. But at the hands of one Mámá Azmat alone I experience such annoyance as would not befall me from a cross-tempered mother-in-law, or a scolding sister-in-law. This woman is an old servant of the family, and all the business of the house, inside and outside, is in her hands. She has been plundering the family, and brought it to the verge of ruin. The debts now amount to such a sum that no means of paying them off are visible. There is no kind of management. I took it upon myself for a few days to look into some of the ordinary items of housekeeping; peculation and fraud were discovered at every turn. This interference on my part has made the Mámá my enemy, and she has ever since been set upon stirring up some new cause of ill-feeling every day. She has not been successful so far in doing me any real injury. Still, I have the strongest objection to this Mámá's staying on in the house. But, on the other hand, to get rid of her is no easy matter. All the indebtedness to the different shops has been incurred through her agency. If she heard a rumour of her impending dismissal, she would go off and excite a panic among the creditors. And then the debts are neither by bill nor by book. The whole of the traffic is done orally by guesswork. What I want is that the accounts of all these people should be investigated and put into writing, and that in each case instalments of a due proportion should be fixed for future payment, and the practice of borrowing henceforth be abolished, and that the Mámá should be dismissed. I take it for

granted that you, too, will come home with my honored father for the Ramazán. All I ask is that you should be so kind as to come round by Lahore, and that by some means or other you will induce my good father-in-law to come home with you for a fortnight at the very least. When all of you gentlemen are present, the whole of this business will be settled admirably.

'I write this letter in a state of grievous disquietude. The Mámá recommended that my bracelets should be pawned. My dear mother-in-law has just this moment gone to my dear aunt's house to make arrangements for some money. No more.'

At the same time that Asghari wrote this letter to her brother, she sent a verbal message across to her aunt, saying that she was alone, and asking her aunt to let Tamásha Khánam come and stay with her for a couple of days, since she had heard that Tamásha Khánam was at present on a visit to her mother. Accordingly that same evening Tamásha Khánam duly arrived. As she got out of her doolie she called out: 'Upon my word, Madam Asghari! I did not think anyone could be so unfriendly. I sent a message to ask you for uncle's letter, and you never let me have it!'

'You don't say so?' said Asghari. 'Who came with the message?'

'Well, you can see her yourself,' said Tamásha Khánam. 'She is here; this Mámá Azmat. Say, old woman—that Friday you came to our house—did I tell you, or not?'

Azmat said: 'Yes, Lady; it is true. She did tell me. I forget everything now, worse luck! By the time I reached this place it was driven out of my head by the housework.'

'Yes,' said Asghari in a low voice; 'you only recollect how to plunder and how to sow strife.' Then she said to Tamásha Khánam: 'The letter is here, and there is another new book just come, full of interesting passages; you can take that home with you when you go.'

Asghari related to Tamásha Khánam the whole story of Mámá Azmat's misdeeds in detail. Tamásha Khánam was a girl of a very hot temper. She was on her feet directly, with her

shoe in her hand, eager to give the Mámá a beating. Asghari caught her by the arm, and made her sit down again, saying: 'Sister, for God's sake! no such violence. Don't be in a hurry yet awhile; everything will be spoilt.'

Tamásha Khánam said: 'You allow yourself to be set at naught with this circumspection of yours. Sister, if I were in your place, by God's oath! I would make this carrion so smooth after shoe-beatings that she would remember it all her life long.'

Asghari said: 'You will see. Please God! in a few days' time God's judgment will fall on this dishonest woman.'

After that Tamásha Khánam asked: 'What is the reason of your mother-in-law going to her sister's house?'

Asghari said: 'She, too, poor thing, all owing to this ill-conditioned Mámá, is driven about in despair from door to door. There is some banker to whom a sum of money is owing. The Mámá came back to-day, and said he was about to file a suit. She has gone to contrive some plan for *his* money.'

Tamásha Khánam asked: 'Who is the banker who is going to sue her?'

Asghari said: 'I don't know his name.'

Tamásha Khánam asked the Mámá: 'Azmat, what banker is it?'

Azmat said: 'Hazári Mal, Lady.'

Tamásha Khánam said: 'What? The Hazári Mal whose shop is in the Jauhari bázár?'

'Yes, Lady—yes,' said Azmat, 'it is that Hazári Mal.'

Tamásha Khánam said: 'Why, he keeps the accounts of my husband's family. My goodness! what nerve has that wretch got to file a suit? I will tell your cousin¹ when I leave this place. You will see how he will settle matters with him.'

Tamásha Khánam remained two days with Asghari. On the third day she took her leave, and as she was starting she said: 'Asghari, dear, I adjure you by my head—when your father-in-law arrives, and all this affair comes on for trial, mind you make them send for me, and then—you just put Azmat under *my* charge.'

In the Khánam bázár Muhammad Kámil's mother was hos-

¹ Meaning her own husband.

pitably detained by her sister, who said to her: 'Dear me, sister! it is but once in a way that you have come here. *Now*, you must stay a week at the least.' But one of the servants was sent to the house every day to inquire after Asghari.

Mámá Azmat incontinently achieved afresh piece of villainy. The Lieutenant-Governor's camp was expected just at this time, and great pressure was being brought to bear by the magistrate in the matter of conservancy. Notifications were stuck up in every street and mohulla calling upon the inhabitants to make their streets and alleys tidy, to have the fronts of their houses whitewashed, and to keep all the drains and sewers clean, with the warning that, should an accumulation of refuse be found anywhere, the premises would be put up to public auction.¹

A notification of this kind had been stuck up on the gateway of our friends' mohulla among others. Mámá Azmat went by night and tore down this notification from the gate of the mohulla, and furtively stuck it up over the doorway of the house. Then, just before dawn, she ran off to the Khánam bázár to give Muhammad Kámil's mother intimation. The doors of the house had not yet been opened when she cried out to her at the entrance. Muhammad Kámil's mother recognised her voice, and said: 'Ho there! run, someone, and open the door. Whatever makes Azmat come posting here at such an unearthly hour?' When Azmat appeared before her, she asked: 'Mámá, is all well?'

Azmat said: 'Lady, there is a 'ttachment—a natchment—what do they call the thing?—stuck up on the house. It seems Hazári Mal has filed his suit in court.'

Muhammad Kámil's mother said to her sister: 'I am going, my dear; good-bye. If I go, I can send for Hazári Mal, and remonstrate with him. God send pity into his heart!'

Her sister said: 'My dear, I am very much ashamed that I have not been able to arrange for the money. But here is this gold chain off my neck; take that with you. If the business can be settled by pawning it, so much the better; but sell it if you must.'

¹ This is a joke at 'non-regulation procedure.'

Muhammad Kámil's mother said : ' You are very kind, dear. I will take the chain. But his money has reached a *terrible* amount ; one chain will not go far.'

Her sister said : ' Come, my dear ; you know *he*¹ promised that he would procure you a loan from another banker. Get into your doolie, with God's name on your lips. He will be back directly, and I will send him after you.'

In due course Muhammad Kámil's mother arrived at her home. As she got down at the entrance she saw the notification posted on the doorway. In a state of dismal depression she went in silently and sat down. When Asghari heard of her mother-in-law's arrival, she came down from the roof and paid her respects. Seeing her mother-in-law in trouble, she asked : ' Mother, dear ! your face looks very said to-day.'

Her mother-in-law said : ' Yes ; the banker has filed his suit. I cannot see *how* to raise the money any way. Amír Begam, too, has disappointed me, and now a notice has been stuck on the house. What will become of me ?'

Asghari said : ' Don't let your honor have the least anxiety. If Hazári Mal *has* filed his suit, it is no harm. He has dealings with Tamásha Khánam's husband's people also, and she promised me that she will take him to task. And if he does not give in, some way will be found of raising the money. What is to be gained by fretting over it ?'

Her mother-in-law said : ' If Kámil were here, I would send him to Hazári Mal.'

Asghari said : ' Of course, that is as your honor pleases ; but in my opinion it is not proper at all to show any fear of the banker, for otherwise he will have greater boldness in the future, and be holding out the threat of a suit every day. Far the best plan will be to make no sign from here, but to bring some influence to bear on him from outside, so that he may abandon the prosecution of his claim.'

Muhammad Kámil's mother said : ' Tamásha Khánam is still only a girl. What does she know about the law courts and offices ? How would it be if the business went wrong through relying upon

¹ *I.e.*, her own husband.

her, while the time for doing anything slipped out of our hands ?'

Asghari said : ' No doubt Tamásha Khánam is a girl, but I made it all thoroughly certain, and I have every confidence.'

While they were still talking, Miyán Muslim gave a shout at the door. Asghari said : ' See, there is Muslim come. He will have brought some news about the matter for certain.' Then she made a gesture to Mahmúda, who went into one of the side-rooms.¹ And she called Muslim inside, and asked him : ' Muslim, what news have you brought ?'

Muslim said : ' My sister sent you her salaam, and asks after your health, and told me to say that she had Hazári Mal sent for, and gave him a thorough good frightening, and he made a promise there should be no suit.'

When she heard this, Muhammad Kámil's mother was comforted to some extent. But Asghari was amazed. How could this be, that Tamásha Khánam should send such a message, and yet Hazári Mal have already filed a suit independently of it ? And then the circumstance of the attachment was altogether extraordinary, for she was in the house all the time, and heard nothing about it. If it had been an attachment issued by the judge, surely some chuprassie,² or office-runner, would have called out to the inmates and given them notice.

CHAPTER XIII

WHEN Muslim had taken leave, Asghari said to Mahmúda : ' Go quietly, and tear off the paper which is affixed to the outer door.'

Mahmúda tore the paper off and brought it in. When Asghari read it, the order was about conservancy ; there was not any mention of a suit in Court. She guessed at once that this, too, was Azmat's trickery. She did not, however, make this fact known

¹ Mahmúda and Muslim being contemporaries and approaching marriageable age, it was not etiquette for them to see each other.

² A chuprassie is a man who carries a badge (*chaprás*) with his employer's name on it.

to her mother-in-law ; but she assured her in the most positive manner that there was no fear whatever of a suit, and that she might remain perfectly at ease.

Her mother-in-law said : ' As far as the suit is concerned I feel more easy from what you tell me ; but the Shabebará¹ and the Ramazán are coming on to worry me. In both of these festivals it is nothing but spend, spend. From Lahore, even letters have stopped coming. The anxiety about this makes my very blood dry up.'

Asghari said : ' There are a good many days yet before the Ramazán. God is called "*the Causer of causes*"; by that time some provision from the unseen will be made manifest. True, there are only four days left now before the Shabebará²; but that is not a festival on which any great expenditure is required.'

Her mother-in-law said : ' In my house, year after year, twenty rupees goes at the Shabebará². You can ask for yourself ; this Azmat who spends the money is present.'

' Her spending,' said Asghari, ' is nothing to be astonished at. But there are some expenses which cannot be avoided, and there are others which can. And there is nothing so urgent about the Shabebará² to involve the expenditure of so much money.'

Her mother-in-law said : ' Sister, the *Fátiha*²—for the saints and the prophets, the great men and elders of our race—is of the first importance, and then there is the sending about to people's houses—most necessary. Why, it is but a small matter to mention—I must have five rupees, if there are to be fireworks enough to satisfy your husband and Miss Mahmúda. Muhammad Kámil is married, but what of that ? God preserve him ! his nature is as full of childish fun as ever it was. Until he has got a hundred

¹ Lit., ' The night of immunity (from sin and sorrow),' a festival analogous to our All Hallows' Eve. It falls in the month preceding the Ramazán. Pronounce Shubbay burrát, with the accent on the last syllable, and the 'á' sounded as in 'art.'

² Fátiha is the name of the opening chapter (seven short verses) of the Qur-án, but the expression here means food consecrated by the recitation of the Fátiha over it, and then distributed.

fire-fountains¹ and twenty bundles of crackers out of me, he will worry my life out ; and Mahmúda, too, will make herself ill with crying.'

Asghari said : ' Five seers² of sweets will be quite enough for the Fátiha, and as for the sending about, what comes to us can be despatched elsewhere. And I will talk to Mahmúda ; she shall not plague you for crackers this time. You shall see, I will manage the business of the Shabebará² all right somehow. Leave it to me, and do not worry about borrowing money on that account.'

These were her words to her mother-in-law, but Asghari herself was in some trepidation as to how she could keep her husband away from his fire-fountains and crackers. At last she hit on the following plan for conveying her wishes to him so cleverly that she managed to say all she wanted, and yet he was not in the least annoyed.

In Muhammad Kámil's presence she herself broached the subject to Mahmúda by asking : ' Well, sister, what are *your* plans for the Shabebará² ?'

Mahmúda replied : ' When my brother brings home his fireworks, he will give some to me, too.'

Before Muhammad Kámil could put in a word, Asghari said : ' You don't suppose your brother will bring you such silly things ? What pleasure is there in fireworks, Mahmúda ?'

Mahmúda said : ' Sister dear ! is it not splendid when they go off ?'

' Well,' Asghari said, ' there will be hundreds of them let off in the mohulla ; you will be able to watch them from the roof.'

' What !' said Mahmúda ; ' and we not let off any ?'

' Are you not afraid ?' said Asghari.

Mahmúda said : ' I ? I don't let them off with my own hands.'

¹ Called *ánár* ; lit., pomegranates. They are cups of earthenware about the size of a pomegranate, filled with powder and steel filings. There is a very small aperture at the top, and when the cup is set on the ground and lighted the effect is that of a fountain of fire.

² A 'seer' is about two pounds.

'Very well,' said Asghari; 'just as you look on when your own are let off, so you may look on when those of the mohulla are let off. And listen, Mahmúda; it is a very bad sport. There is the danger of being burnt. Once, in my mohulla, a fire-fountain burst in a boy's hand; his eyes were blown up, and left quite blank in their sockets. If you want to look on, you should do so at a distance. And, Mahmúda, do you notice your mother's condition? Is she sad, or happy?'

Mahmúda said: 'She is sad, I know.'

Asghari asked: 'Have you ever considered why she is sad?'

Mahmúda said: 'I know nothing about that.'

'Oh!' exclaimed Asghari; 'and yet you say that you are very fond of your mother!'

Mahmúda asked: 'Please, dear sister, why is dear mamma sad?'

Asghari said: 'There's a difficulty about money for the house; the banker won't advance any. She is thinking: "If Mahmúda insists upon having fireworks, where am I to get the money from to give them to her?"'

Mahmúda said: 'I won't ask for fireworks.'

'Well done!' said Asghari—'well done! You are a very dear sister.'

And she took Mahmúda to her breast and caressed her.

Muhammad Kámil, who was sitting close by, listened to all this without saying a word. Since it was quite reasonable, his heart admitted the force of it, and he immediately went downstairs, and approached his mother, and said: 'Mother, I have heard that you are troubling yourself about the Shabebará, and I came to ask you not to worry about me. I don't want any fireworks, and Mahmúda, too, says she will not ask you for any.'

In this way one item of the expenditure was reduced.

As for the Fátíha, a fine assortment of confectionery was produced at a cost of two rupees. The sending about Asghari took under her own control. When a portion came to the house she did not allow it to be put by. As soon as the man who brought it had gone away, she said: 'Take this portion to such and such a place.'

To one after another of all the persons on her list entitled to receive a portion a portion was duly sent. The Shabebará was kept well for an outlay of two rupees.

Azmat was consumed with rage at this arrangement, and no wonder, since a great item of her perquisites was abolished. Whatever used to come from outside she used to take, and of what was sent from the house she used to purloin half, and for months afterwards she would munch the dried-up sweetmeats that she kept from the Shabebará instead of a cordial.

CHAPTER XIV

WHEN the Shabebará was over, the time drew near for the arrival of Asghari's father, and the next few days passed in no time. Four days before the Ramazán Dúrandesh Khán sáhib arrived in Dehli.

Asghari had taken care to mention her father's coming beforehand, and had settled with her mother-in-law and husband that on whatever day the Tahsildár should arrive she should go home to see him. As soon as she received intimation of his arrival, she at once ordered a doolie, and was set down at her father's house. Her father clasped her to his breast, and was moved to tears; for a long time he kept on asking about her, and giving her an account of himself, and then he said: 'Khairandesh Khán has gone to Lahore in accordance with your honor's order, and, please God, will arrive here to-morrow or next day with your father-in-law.¹ A letter from him reached me on the road. Your father-in-law has obtained his leave.'

So that whole night and all the next day Asghari remained at her mother's house. Shortly before the evening she said to her father: 'If your honor will accord me permission I will now go away.'

Her father said: 'Eh, my dear, you must stay a week. I will send a message to your mother-in-law.'

¹ Lit., with *my* 'co-partner in fatherhood.' The English language has no term for the connexion between the parents of a bride and of a bridegroom.

Asghari said : ' I will do whatever your honor determines, but I think it will be the correct thing for me to be in the house before my father-in-law arrives.'

Her father reflected for a bit, and said : ' Yes, that is quite right.'

Accordingly Asghari took leave of her father, and was at home again before sunset. Next day, exactly at the dinner-hour, Muhammad Kámil's father, Maulavi Muhammad Fázil, suddenly appeared on the scene.

I must mention here that the Maulavi¹ sáhib was estate agent to the chief of Lahore. He had a fixed salary of fifty rupees a month from the estate, and the chief was responsible for his house and travelling expenses. Khairandesh Khán had gone to Lahore in accordance with Asghari's written request, and had shown her letter to the Maulavi. When the Maulavi read it he was overjoyed, and though in the ordinary course of things he would probably not have taken leave, yet now in his eagerness to see his daughter-in-law he exerted himself to persuade the chief so as to get a month's leave, and he accompanied Khairandesh Khán on his journey home.

Since Asghari had not yet appeared before her father-in-law after her marriage, when she saw him arrive she went up on to the roof, and stayed there out of bashfulness. Muhammad Kámil's mother was in a state of bewilderment, not understanding why her husband had come. When the meal was over they began to talk. The Maulavi said to his wife : ' Listen to me, madam ! your younger daughter-in-law has dragged me hither.' And then he informed her of Asghari's letter, and of Khairandesh Khán's coming, and then he said : ' Fetch the daughter-in-law in.'

The mother-in-law went on to the roof, and said : ' Come, daughter, you need not be bashful ; why, you used to play in his lap.'

Asghari got up at her mother-in-law's bidding, and went with her, and having made a most respectful obeisance to her father-in-law, sat down.

¹ This word, pronounced Mowlavee, is equivalent to our *Doctor* (of Divinity or Law).

The Maulavi said : ' Listen, my brother !¹ I came here only because you sent for me, and when I saw your letter my soul rejoiced within me. God send His blessing on your youth and grace ! In very truth it was a happy day for us when you entered our house. Now I feel sure that better days are in store for it, and to-morrow, please God, we will arrange matters in accordance with your wishes and your judgment.'

For two or three days, however, the Maulavi—as was only natural in a man just returned to his home—was occupied in seeing his friends, and after that, for the first few days of the fast, he did not feel disposed to attend to house affairs on account of his fasting. But one day he sent for his daughter-in-law, and made her sit beside him, and then called to Mámá Azmat, and said : ' Mámá, while I am here you must make out all your accounts. Let me take down in writing all the debts which are due to or from anyone. Then I can pay to each of them what may be fitting, and if there is anything left over, I can arrange for paying that by instalments.'

The Mámá said : ' If it were *one* man's bill, perhaps I might keep it in my head to tell you straight off. But the banya, the cloth-merchant, the butcher, the greengrocer, the confectioner—there is money owing to all. And Hazári Mal's account is separate. Whatever your honor may be willing to give to any of them let me have it, and I will go and give it them ; the money shall be placed to your honor's credit in their books.'

The Maulavi sáhib was a good, simple-minded creature. He was on the point of paying the money over to her. Asghari said : ' What is the use of paying sums *on account* in this fashion ? First of all find out what is really owing to each, and then pay each one of them after due consideration.'

The Mámá said : ' When I get leisure after dinner I will go round and ask them.'

' What will be the good of your going to *ask* ?' said Asghari. ' Let each man who is to be paid come here and give in his account.'

¹ The use of this term shows that he wished to put her on an equality with himself.

The Mámá answered : 'Lady, you have said what is easy to say. How am I to go wandering about calling people here at this time ? And do you suppose they are likely to leave all their business in order to come with me ?'

Asghari said : 'It is not a question of sending for them every day, Mámá. It is only for one day. Go and ask them to come. Some arrangement shall be made for the evening meal ; you do no other work to-day but this. And as for the creditors, they will run when they hear of payment. Hazári Mal went to the Court—a distance of four miles ; are his feet swathed in henna bands¹ for coming here ? And what distance is it ? The greengrocer, the butcher, the banya, and the confectioner all live in this lane. It is only the cloth-seller and Hazári Mal who are at any distance. Keep them over for to-morrow, and let the odds and ends of the accounts be settled to-day.'

It was not Azmat's wish by any means that the accounts should be gone through at all, but Asghari so overwhelmed her with arguments that she had not a word to offer in reply. First of all the confectioner came. It was asked : 'Well, Lálá, what have you to receive ?' The confectioner said : 'Thirty rupees.' It was asked : 'What things came from your shop ? The thirty rupees you talk of is a great deal too much.' The confectioner said : 'Sir, is thirty rupees such a large sum ? Why, fifteen rupees' worth of things was had this very Shabebarát. There is one item alone of ten seers of sugar.'

Muhammad Kámil's mother exclaimed : 'Oh you ! what sugar ? All that was used in the house *this* time for confectionery was bought for ready money in the bázár.'

When Mámá Azmat heard this she grew quite pale ; she said to the confectioner : 'What made you enter those ten seers of sugar to *their* account ? I took that for another family, and, moreover, I told you as much.'

The confectioner said : 'You never mentioned anyone else's name to me. You took it for this gentleman's house. What good should I get from entering another person's things to his

¹ Henna is applied to the feet (of women and children) by means of bandages (something like a poultice) kept on during the night.

name ? Besides, I have not an account with any other gentleman's family.'

The Mámá was reduced to mere incoherent expressions of her anger. The Maulavi sáhib said : 'Well, let the item of the sugar stand over. Tell us the other things.'

Accordingly the man named in the same way a whole number of other things which had never entered the house in its lifetime. Four seers of *bálusháhi*¹ for the 'Illustrious Birth,' and the best of it was that in this family no one had ever held a birthday assemblage.² In the end some six or seven rupees alone were found to be correct, and the rest all false.

The Maulavi sáhib's soul took fire at this, and his wrath knew no bounds. He cried out : 'How now, you rascally Azmat, have you contrived to put the debts of the whole world upon this family ? Have you levelled this house with the dust simply for fun ?'

When the confectioner was done with the greengrocer came. He said : 'Master, my account is a standing one—two annas' worth of vegetables a day.'

Muhammad Kámil's mother exclaimed : 'What's that ? Only one seer of vegetables comes to this house. Is that two annas a day ?'

The greengrocer said : 'Your highness, the Mámá takes three seers from the shop.'

The Mámá said : 'Yes. I take three seers—one seer for you, one seer for my daughter, and one seer for another family. Do I deny it ? This wretch charges the whole of it to you.'

The greengrocer said : 'Eh, you wicked, dishonest old woman ! you have been taking that amount for years against the account of this family, and whenever I have got my money it has been from this family that I got it.'

When the butcher's and banya's accounts were gone into a thousand frauds were discovered in them also, and it was proved

¹ A kind of sweetmeat, so called from its powdery surface, *bálu* meaning sand.

² A gathering, partly social and partly religious, at which certain texts and prayers are recited in commemoration of the birth of the Prophet.

that the Mámá had been helping to keep her own daughter Khairátan, and the families of two or three neighbours out of the purchases for this one family; nay, she would have a purchase debited against the house, and then sell it elsewhere. But to proceed—all the petty miscellaneous accounts were finished by the evening; there now only remained those of the cloth-merchant and Hazári Mal. The Maulavi sáhib said: 'Have done with it now for to-day; we will see to the rest to-morrow.' But he added in a low voice: 'It won't do for Azmat to run off.'

Asghari said: 'It is hardly likely she will run away now and leave her family and all her belongings, and her house and children. True, if she has any sense of shame she may eat or drink something,¹ but if she were of that sort how should she act in such a manner? Certainly she ought to be looked after, but only so far that someone should keep a watch over her when she is going backwards and forwards.'

Orders were then given privately to one of the servants who had come with the Maulavi to keep an eye upon the Mámá's movements.

CHAPTER XV

WHEN the dinner was well over the Mámá got up stealthily and went outside. The servant followed behind. First of all the Mámá went to her own house, and from thence, having thrust something under her arm, she went as straight as an arrow to the house of the cloth-merchant, and hailed him. The cloth-merchant came out astonished, and said: 'You here at this time, old lady!'

Azmat said: 'The Maulavi sáhib has come home. The accounts of everyone whom he has to pay are being gone through. To-morrow you too will be summoned, and then—don't you say anything that may bring about my disgrace.'

The cloth-merchant said: 'What is there in the accounts that should cause disgrace to you?'

I.e., take poison.

The Mámá replied: 'Lála! can't you understand? this wretched covetousness is a bad, bad thing. In the master's name I have taken for myself too, now and again, from your shop a piece of long cloth, or muslin, or English stuff.'

The cloth-merchant said: 'How am I to know what things you have taken on your own account?'

The Mámá said: 'I have not my wits about me at this moment to reckon it up, but four pieces of English stuff, and some rolls of muslin, and ten yards of red calico will be the outcome of what is mine. Here, take these four bangles—off my own wrists—they are sixteen rupees' worth—perhaps one rupee less now for wear—knock off fifteen rupees from the total against *their* name, and if there *should* be a few more rupees found due from me I am prepared to pay them.'

The cloth-merchant said: 'Well, I will take the bangles, as you give them to me. But it is night now; my books are at the shop; without looking at them how can I tell what is gone, and how much is due to me?'

Azmat said: 'This time my honor is in your hands. Screen me however you can.'

After leaving the cloth-merchant she went straight to the house of Hazári Mal. He too was amazed, and said: 'What! you here at this time of night!'

She fell at his feet, and, bursting into tears, began saying, 'I have done something wrong.'

Hazári Mal said: 'What is that?'

'Oh, promise me,' said Azmat, 'that you will forgive me, and then I will tell you.'

Hazári Mal said: 'Say what it is, can't you?'

Azmat said: 'Four months ago some money for the house came from Lahore, and the Maulavi sáhib sent one hundred rupees for you. All of that money I spent, and out of sheer fright I never made it known to the master's family. Now the Maulavi sáhib has come, and he will send for you to reckon up with him. I will make some arrangement to secure those rupees, but I want you not to let the amount be known.'

Hazári Mal said: 'If it were a matter of two or three rupees I-

could keep it dark, but a lump sum of a hundred rupees could not be hushed up whatever I did.'

The Mámá said: 'What, is not my credit good even for a hundred rupees?'

Hazári Mal said: 'The plain truth is that your credit is not even good for a cowrie. When you have behaved in this manner to a family whose bread you have eaten all your life, is it likely you should prove an honest client to anyone else?'

'Ah, Lálá,' said Azmat, 'when bad luck befalls a woman her friends become her enemies. Well, then, if you will not trust me—here, take these bracelets and armlet of my daughters in deposit.'

Hazári Mal said: 'Yes, that is talking business. Only, if it were daylight the things could be assayed, and then we should know what they are worth. But, at a guess, the whole lot will be worth from fifty to sixty rupees.'

Azmat said: 'Oh, oh, Lálá, don't be so cruel! it is just four months since I had the things made. They cost me a hundred or a hundred and twenty-five rupees.'

Hazári Mal said: 'What is there to fret about? Your property—it may be worth a hundred, it may be worth two hundred—no one is robbing you of it. But when I have got it weighed, it will be known exactly what the value of it is.'

When she had made all these arrangements the Mámá returned to her house, and the Maulavi sáhib's servant recounted all the circumstances to him, as he was shampooing his feet.¹ Asghari, too, was made acquainted with all the facts by Muhammad Kámil's mother.

The next morning Hazári Mal and the cloth-merchant were sent for. As the accounts proceeded objections began to be raised. The Mámá's voice grew louder and louder in the discussion. The cloth-merchant said: 'Old woman, what are you making such a noise about? Here, pick up those bangles of yours;² you declared they were worth fifteen rupees; they value them at nine in the bázár.'

Upon this Hazári Mal produced the bracelets, and armlet; and

¹ To induce sleep.

² This implies that he had thrown them down in front of her.

laid them down before the company, and said to Azmat: 'Excuse me, madam, these valuables are of no good to me.'

The Maulavi sáhib inquired of the two men: 'How, brothers! what is the meaning of these things?'

Then both of them rehearsed the story of the previous night, and Azmat's face was as though it were slapped by a hundred thousand shoes.

When all the accounts were finally settled, and the Maulavi sáhib had brought out the money for payment, he distributed to each person one-half of the sum to which he was justly entitled, and said: 'I have sent to Lahore for some more money, which will arrive in a few days, and then the remainder shall be paid in full.'

All the men asked: 'And what has been found due to us from the Mámá—from whom are we to get that?'

It was during this conversation that Muslim passed by the house on his way from school, and heard what was going on. As soon as he got home, he said to Tamásha Khánam: 'There is a huge crowd collected to-day at the entrance to sister Asghari's house. Her father-in-law is making up the accounts.'

Directly she heard this, Tamásha Khánam got into her doolie, and went to the spot. As soon as she was set down, she began scolding Asghari, and said: 'How now, madam! you never let me know after all? What has happened?'

Asghari said: 'The accounts are still being settled. If all that bother had been over, I would have let you know.'

To make a long story short, the Maulavi sáhib told all the people that what was due to them from the Mámá they must get out of the Mámá; and then he turned to the Mámá, and said: 'Your highness! pay these people their money.'

Azmat kept her eyes on the ground, and said: 'My daughter's ornaments are with me. Let them divide between them what they can make out of those.'

All her daughter's ornaments, however, went in liquidating one-half only of the claims of the greengrocer, the butcher, the banya, and the cloth-merchant. For Hazári Mal's hundred rupees she was obliged to mortgage the hut she lived in. A deed

was written out on stamped paper then and there, and four respectable citizens attested it.

Then the Maulavi sáhib said to Azmat : 'Your honor will now be pleased to take your departure in peace. For a disloyal, treacherous, deceitful woman like you there is no room in *my* house.'

Asghari said : 'She possesses one other quality besides disloyalty ; shall I tell you what that is ? She spent her time in devising schemes for sowing mischief in the household. Eh, Azmat, do you remember about the *karhá-t* which Mahmúda's brother expressed a wish for, and you went and delivered a lying message from me that "the bride says she has a headache" ? Speak out now, and tell us *when* did you mention any wish of his to me, and *when* did I make the excuse of a headache ?'

Azmat said : 'Lady, you were reading the Qur-án on the roof. I went up to tell you, but when I saw you reading, I came back again.'

'And the story of the headache,' said Asghari, 'was your own invention ?'

Azmat said : 'What I thought was this—you had been reading the Qur-án from the early morning to that time ; was it likely you would bother your head about cooking ?'

Asghari said : 'Well, then, how do you explain your saying that I was going to the hills ? Did I ever take *you* into my confidence ? Did you ever hear me *speak* of such a thing ?'

To this question Azmat could make no reply. Then Asghari produced the notification, and threw it down in front of the Maulavi sáhib, saying : 'Just look at that ; my lady Azmat here is capable of *this kind* of thing. She herself tore off the notification from the gate of the Mohulla, and she herself posted it up on this house ; and then she herself went running all the way to my dear mother to tell her about it.'

While Asghari went on recounting these facts the Maulavi sáhib's countenance grew redder and redder. On the other side of the room Tamásha Khánam was grinding her teeth. The Maulavi said : 'It is not enough to turn you out. You are a thoroughly wicked woman.' And having said this, he shouted

to his servant, and said : 'Bahádur ! take this unclean creature to the police-station, and, stay—I will write all her story in a note at once.'

But Asghari said to the Maulavi sáhib : 'It is enough ; she has reached her own punishment. Spare her from the police.' And she made a sign to Azmat to take herself off. Indeed she went with her as far as the outer door.

So after all her pranks was Mámá Azmat turned out of this house. When she got home her daughter fell upon her like a fury, crying out : 'Did I not say to you : "Don't, mother, don't go in for robbing on this scale. If a hundred days last for the thief, one day is sure to come for the merchant ; take care lest one day you be caught ?" Whose words did you care for ? The right thing has happened. As you did so you have received. But don't make *my* name evil now in my husband's home. Go away wherever your God may lead you. There is no work for you in my house. As for the jewels, I have submitted to Providence ; if it be written in my fate they will come to me again.'

CHAPTER XVI

In this manner, after many prayers, Asghari succeeded in routing her enemy, and freed the whole family from an incubus. When Azmat's case had been decided, Asghari asked permission a second time to go to her father, which being gladly accorded, she took leave, and arrived at her mother's house. There she stayed for a whole week : and everything in which she desired her father's advice was discussed by her in full. Her father asked, 'Has Azmat been got rid of ?'

Asghari said : 'By your honor's gracious favour everything has turned out well. If my elder brother had not gone to Lahore my father-in-law would never have come, nor would this account of years have been settled, nor would Azmat have been dismissed.'

The Khán sáhib asked : 'And how will the management of the house go on now ?'