

QURRATULAIN HYDER

Beyond the Fog^{*}

I

THROUGHOUT THE DAY English sahibs, memsahibs, and their *baba log* cross the bridge on mules and horses or riding in rickshaws and *dandis*. In the evening, the same bridge becomes the site of milling crowds of Indians. The swarm of rushing humanity going up and down the slopes huffing and puffing looks like the surge of a massive tidal wave. Movies starring Esther Williams, Joan Fontaine, Nur Jahan, and Khursheed are playing in the local cinemas. Skating continues in the rinks. In the ballroom of the Savoy the Anglo-Indian crooner and his band will soon start “Enjoy yourself, it’s later than you think.” Drums will be struck; maharaja and maharani *log*, nabob *log*, bara sahib and bara mem *log* will start dancing.

At this hour, while the whole of Mussourie is absorbed in merrymaking, a poor man stands quietly on this bridge near the bazaar—“*Kabira stands in the bazaar praying for everyone’s well-being.*”

In his tattered khaki jacket, a cap coming down to his ears, he looks very much like a sweeper out of work. Holding a little English girl in his arms, he often wanders into the bazaar and stands there silently until dusk or sits on the low protective wall of the bridge.

Why does this sweeper Fazl Masih look so destitute and run down if he is entrusted with the care of some sahib’s daughter? Strange!

And this fellow also looks a bit cuckoo. The likes of him were called *holy fools* in czarist Russia, and *majzub* in our culture. God knows whether this poor man is a *majzub* or was merely born an idiot. Anyway, most of the time he just stands quietly. The little girl with curly blonde hair is so incredibly pretty that she attracts the attention of passersby who stop spontaneously to look at her. Now and then *babu log* will smile broadly and utter a “Good evening, Missy Baba” to her. Even recent English arrivals in Mussourie look at Fazl Masih with a smile, but the local English just

^{*}“Kohr kē Pīčchē,” from *Qurratu’l-‘ain kī Muntakhab Kabāniyān* (Delhi: National Book Trust, 1995), 61–81.

pass by totally indifferent to his presence. The one-and-a-half-year-old girl, nestled in Fazl Masih's lap or riding on his shoulder, laughs, cries, or becomes absorbed in her teddy bear or her lollipop. Fazl Masih gazes at the Himalayas in the distance, beyond which lies the invisible "valley of flowers."

When it gets dark, he hoists the girl atop his shoulders and sets out for Vincent Hill with his head hung low. Just once, when some Lukhnavi passerby stopped briefly and asked, "*Ama*, whose daughter is she?" he replied with irritation, "My sister's, sahib."

"What do you think, *mian*, that Hindustan's Anglo-Indians just dropped from the sky?" another passerby retorted with a resounding laugh. "Well, this is just how they came into being."

Perhaps the sound of that laugh reverberates in Fazl Masih's ears, but he never opens his mouth. He just plods along the uphill track to Vincent Hill with his head bent low, the little girl mounted on his shoulder.

The residents of the Vincent Hill area know that Katto ayah is the real mother of the little white girl whose father was a *gora*, a white man who played the drum in the army band, and that she is being brought up by Miss Celia Richmond, the white landlady of Richmond Guest House. Katto, a shapely and graceful sweeper woman with a delightfully sallow complexion, originally from Gorakhpur district, whose parents had been made Christians by Miss Celia's missionary father, was now Miss Sahib's nurse. Her real name was Martha, but she was called Katto because she went up and down the neighboring hills with the speed and agility of a squirrel. Miss Richmond received the guesthouse as an inheritance from her uncle. The entire Richmond family is buried here in Mussourie's English cemetery. Miss Richmond has spent her whole life running this guesthouse. Circumstances have made her quite irritable, and because she makes a lot of noise, like a lapwing, the domestics and coolies of Vincent Hill have given her the nickname Chunchuniya Mem, the Rattle Ma'am. Hers is a second-class "Europeans Only" facility where run-of-the-mill English, poor white missionaries, or fair-skinned Eurasians come to stay. With her keen, hawk-like sight, Miss Richmond can immediately see who has what percentage of English blood. If an Anglo-Indian with even the slightest trace of sallow shows up, she has Katto tell him that all the rooms are taken.

During the last days of World War II, a young Tommy came to stay at Richmond Guest House. He was in Mussourie on two months' leave recuperating from a recent illness. (During the war, out of sheer patriotism, Miss Celia Richmond had offered her guesthouse to the British Government for the use of soldiers.) Before the war Corporal Arthur Bolton, the white Tommy, used to be a drummer in the orchestra of an ordinary restaurant

in London. He wanted to earn himself a name among world-class musicians, but lack of better opportunities, the fate of many artists, kept him anonymous and poor. When the war broke out he enlisted in the army as a drummer and was packed off to India. Like other soldiers in the British army, he was given instruction in romanized Urdu. But he also liked Indian music. In short, Arthur Bolton was an extraordinary Tommy, quite different from other whites of his ilk.

Because he wasn't a Sahib Bahadur of any consequence, that would allow him to stay at the Savoy, he flopped down at poor Chunchuniya Mem's. He strolled in the hills all day long or wrote poetry. He'd have Katto nanny sing *kajris* for him and keep time as she sang. When she sometimes swirled her bellowing white *lehnga*-skirt and jingled her bunch of keys with a jiggle of her hips singing, "*Mirjapur men oaran-tbhoran Kashi hamaaro ghaat*," Arthur would become overjoyed, clap like a child, and start dancing with her. He liked Katto nanny a lot and had also struck up quite a close friendship with her crazy brother, Fazl Masih. The two would set out for the valleys at the crack of dawn to roam around and stare at the fog floating across the mountains. What lies beyond that fog?

2

When the time came for Arthur Bolton to return to the Meerut Cantonment he said, "I'm used to speaking the truth, so I always end up losing. Our regiment will probably leave for Germany. A fierce battle is going on there. I may not be able to write to you at all, or if I do write a letter, I might not write any others. I'm pretty sloppy when it comes to correspondence. And what can a person write in a letter anyway?" But, as courtesy required, he did drop Miss Richmond a note of thanks from the Meerut Cantonment, in which he also sent his greetings to Katto and Fazl Masih and said that he was leaving for the European front in a few days.

When a daughter as white as snow and resembling Arthur Bolton in every last detail was born to poor Katto, Miss Richmond, unexpectedly, didn't grill Katto about the matter at all. She knew that Katto was not disolute. And furthermore, she'd been born in her own house and had been a loyal domestic all along. With the birth of the child, Miss Richmond's otherwise quite dreary existence became somewhat animated and no longer felt so empty. She often wondered why on earth she was killing herself over the guesthouse. For whom was she piling up all this money? Now God had sent her such a lovely girl.

Miss Richmond also indulged in absurd fancies and theatrics now. And very much like her kind, ordinary middle-class English ladies, she was

a perfect snob. She cooked up quite a story about the little girl to tell to the erstwhile residents of the guesthouse. “Her father, Colonel Arthur Bolton, was lost in action on the Berlin front. Poor Arthur ... ” she would say heaving a deep sigh while serving a guest their breakfast. “Poor Arthur was my first cousin. Before coming to India he married the daughter of some Irish lord. Both of them were stationed at the Peshawar garrison. Soon after Arthur left for the front, poor Bridget died giving birth to the girl in the military hospital. Arthur had given my address as ‘next of kin’ so the Red Cross sent the girl to me.”

Even at the girl’s baptism at an English church in Mussourie, she had put down the name of the father as Colonel Arthur Bolton and crossing her heart with two fingers said under her breath, “So help me God.”

India gained her freedom and suddenly Mussourie began to empty of its English, except for Miss Richmond, who was not about to return to Britain to work as a dishwashing and cleaning lady. Unexpectedly, her hotel, its “European Only” sign now removed, picked up business, because Indians took great pride in staying in an “English guesthouse.” Where earlier quite ordinary English stayed there, it now became the haunt of upper-class wealthy Indians.

Catherine Bolton, nicknamed Katy, who was now called “little Katto” because of her frisky, wanton behavior, went to a convent school. Here, they had started teaching Hindi and Sanskrit after Independence. The teacher was a wily young local man. Katy took Hindi lessons from him, and her fair color left the free children of free India in a state of awe.

The English priest who had baptized Catherine left India and settled in Australia, but he kept up a correspondence with Miss Richmond. On Katy’s fifteenth birthday he wrote about his concern for the girl. What kind of future would she have in India? Surely Miss Richmond didn’t wish for her to marry some Hindu heathen? It would be far better if she brought the girl over to Australia.

Miss Richmond gave the matter serious thought: Really, what future could such a beautiful Anglo-Indian girl have in India? Telephone operator, office secretary, or, God forbid, a call girl or cabaret dancer? Already Katy Bolton had become the talk of the town throughout Mussourie for her geniality. The day the shifty Hindi teacher tried to get fresh with her and, when she tried to fend off his advances, outright called her “a coquette, a mongrel,” she went home in a rage and told Miss Richmond everything that had transpired. There and then on that cold evening Miss Richmond made up her mind. She spent the whole night awake in her bed. It wasn’t easy to leave home for good. What might become of her in a foreign land? But Catherine’s future was at stake, it took precedence over everything.

Come morning she sent for Katto and Fazl Masih. They came and stood in the doorway. Miss Celia sat by the fireplace busily knitting. Katy stood by the radiogram. In a grave tone of voice Miss Celia Richmond began, "Katto, we're going to Australia. Katy Baba will go with us. Start packing our stuff."

Both Katto and Fazl Masih were stunned. The two white women before them seemed to have gone off their rockers. They burst out crying. After a while, Katto sniffled and said firmly, "Memsahib, I gave birth to Katy; I won't let her go. My brother too, this girl is his entire life, Miss Sahib. The only reason I didn't marry was the fear of how a stepfather might treat her."

"Be quiet!" the old hag yelled. "Don't forget your place, Katto. What proof do you have that Katy is your child? How dare you say that?"

Katto was stupefied. She never expected that. Miss Sahib had never said such a cruel thing before. Falling to the floor, she cried her heart out.

Katy went into the other room. She could hardly wait to go to Australia. The prudent and farsighted Miss Richmond had already told her a few days ago that Colonel Arthur Bolton was an imaginary being. Corporal Bolton and Katto were her real parents. But her entire well-being lay in keeping a lid on this secret. Katy, who had an instinctive understanding of the rules of survival, had taken this advice to heart.

In an attempt to reason calmly with the distraught woman, Miss Richmond now said, "Katto, you're crazy, altogether crazy. You really ought to think a bit ... with a cool head. What will be Katy's future after I die? A smattering of Mussourie natives still know that she's your daughter. What if the news spreads all over? The caste system is rampant in India. Who will marry her? What is the value of an Anglo girl here after all? People regard her as no more than a tart. Do you really want your daughter to become a striptease dancer in some hotel? Or do you plan to marry her off to some municipality sweeper? Something to think about, isn't it?"

Katto was speechless.

Miss Richmond sold her establishment to a Sindhi who lost no time in expelling Jesus and Mary from the lounge, installing Guru Nanak and Shankar Parvati in their place, and replacing the "Richmond's" sign outside with "New Himalaya Vegetarian Hotel," but he let the old staff, Katto included, stay on. A bereft Fazl Masih and Katto came all the way to Dehra Dun station to say goodbye to Miss Richmond and Katy. The train moved off, leaving a forlorn Fazl Masih in his *kantop* and a light brown quilted vest staring vacantly into space, as was his wont.

smiled with satisfaction. She had made it to a white country ... finally. (Although she was pure white on both sides, she was born in Gorakhpur. Only once in her whole life had she been to England, and for no more than a few months.) Both she and Katy waited for some coolie to rush to pick up their baggage, but no one paid any attention to them. Finally, taking their cue from other travelers, they found themselves a trolley and started to load their bags. When Miss Richmond started to push the cart, her heart suddenly broke a little.

Reverend Sigmore was waiting outside in the hall and took them to his house. He helped her buy a small grocery shop in the market adjacent to his church and also a flat. Within two weeks, Miss Richmond found herself sitting in her shop by the scales. She had made her entry into Sydney's working class.

Catherine was enrolled in a school. It didn't take her long to unfurl her wings. She went on "dates" now, returning late in the evening. Miss Celia Richmond, brought up on Victorian and Indian values, would admonish and rebuke her. Heated arguments would follow. The lives of both women had become miserable. A sixty-five-year-old uprooted English spinster and a sixteen-year-old girl of mixed blood with no clear background to speak of. A tragic pair of fake aunt and niece.

In Sydney, Miss Richmond couldn't cope with either her self-imposed exile or her loneliness for very long and died while Catherine was still in her eighteenth year. Reverend Sigmore assumed guardianship of the girl. He had her admitted into the school's boarding house. Within a few months she ran away. Not even in a blue moon did she deign to drop a letter to her mother or uncle. A few months later the priest also died. Catherine's boyfriends knew she had come into a lot of money. When she attained legal majority they started to play fast and loose with it. A ravishing beauty, her life's ambition was to become an actress, but back in those days Australia boasted neither a regular theater scene nor a movie industry. Some rake advised her to take off for Hollywood, or if she wanted to enter London showbiz the best place to start was the nightclubs there. She took cabaret lessons. In the meantime, she sold her grocery shop and had pretty much spent her entire inheritance. Money just slipped through her fingers like sand.

And so, wandering through Hong Kong and Singapore, she ended up in the Kuala Lumpur nightclub circuit, dancing cabaret here, working as a hostess there. But there she had to suffer the fierce competition of slant-eyed Anglo-Chinese prostitutes, and she was not, at any rate, a call girl, but the daughter of "Colonel Arthur Bolton." This imaginary colonel ensured, at every step, that she maintained her dignity. At times she remem-

bered her overly strict, fake Aunt Celia Richmond and on occasion the image of her own mother and uncle sailed before her eyes. She would wipe her tears and light another cigarette wondering about all the upheavals her life had gone through. The South Asia nightclub circuit had made her quite wise and equally melancholy. She had danced in the stag parties thrown by the high-living, pleasure-seeking sons of corrupt politicians and knew well enough the political and moral state of this part of the Third World. In every city in every country she found the same Bible on the side table in the hotel suites, and found the sacred text to be utterly useless. The mysterious old Chinese hags with incredibly small feet who sat in the back rooms of Chinese restaurants amid the blue haze of incense smoke and told fortunes were never able to solve even one of her problems.

In one Jakarta Chinese restaurant she ran into a delightful Dutchman, about forty, with a toupee pasted on his head and wearing something resembling a robe over his suit. He told her that he was a Dutch Sufi and a disciple of the Paris Sufi preceptor Inayat Khan. "I've come from Amsterdam to gain knowledge of the mysteries of Indonesian Sufism," he told her. "I'm one of those who are referred to as 'Dutch Sensitives.' We possess a heightened sixth sense."

"Your father is alive," he abruptly said, digging into his chop suey.

She was jolted.

"You'll certainly meet him one day. He's a great man."

"Really? What kind of great man?"

"I can't tell you. But he *is* a great man."

Did this mean he really was a colonel and, by now, maybe a general in the British army? The thought made her incredibly happy. Half of her miseries vanished there and then. She felt herself quite safe.

The Dutch Sufi's nearness gave her a sense of profound comfort. Swept away by Sufism, ESP and her own desire for some sense of security in her life, she followed this mysterious man all the way to a mosque in Jakarta, where a slant-eyed, scraggly-bearded Indonesian "Shaikh" had her recite the *kalima*. She was given the name Halima and she was married to the Dutch Muslim Muhammad Moeen Koot. As she signed her name "Catherine Halimawati, daughter of Colonel Arthur Bolton" on the marriage register, she couldn't resist feeling an immense exhilaration flooding her soul.

That new Dutch Muslim was a staunch *momin*. He ordered Halimawati to cease her dancing and singing forthwith. But here was the problem: if she didn't dance in the Jakarta hotel where she did her floorshow she would have to pay for her room and all her bills. Since Muhammad Moeen's money orders from Amsterdam wouldn't be in for quite a while

yet, Catherine Koot was once again obliged to dip into her savings.

They had been living in the hotel for a fortnight when one morning she woke up and found that her Dutch Sufi was clean gone. And gone too were the diamond rings, the genuine pearl necklace and the earrings Celia Richmond had left for her, along with her remaining cash. The lofty Bible on the side table still remained, untouched, with an empty plastic cup on top of it. Just last night, her Dutch literature-loving spiritualist had repeated a line from some American short story writer, which went something like: You may wander through the whole world but a day comes when you realize that the world is full of Holiday Inns and plastic cups and that you must go back home. So Catherine Koot, stumbling about, returned from Jakarta to her home in Sydney. She was getting along in years, her ravishing beauty dangling precariously on the edge of evanescence. All she could find there was a job as a bus conductor.

A peculiar feature of the struggle for survival is that humans never admit defeat. Distributing tickets to the bus riders, she still daydreamed. Maybe at the next stop she would find the prince of her dreams, for who knows what lies beyond the fog?

4

Raja Sir Narendranath's great grandfather was a poor Brahmin fortune-telling astrologer from Qannauj. Pleased by some of his auspicious predictions, Shahanshah Janhangir bestowed on him a jagir by the edge of the Kali River. The present Raja Sahib is a staunchly religious man who firmly believes in sadhus and saints. After the government abolished princely states he moved into a gorgeous mansion in New Delhi and started a big business. It was in this connection that his eldest son (who earlier went by the name of Yuvraj Shailendranathji, but now is merely Mr. S.N. Bajpai) took a business trip to Japan, Singapore, and Australia. This was the first trip out of the country for this rather naïve youth, so he was left quite dazed and fazed in Australia.

It was the Christmas season and a boisterous hustle and bustle had gripped Sydney. That day, as he was getting ready to go to the Opera House, he suddenly remembered the test match that was to take place in the afternoon between Australia and India, so he hopped aboard a bus for the cricket stadium instead and found himself a seat next to the window. The bus was a veritable portrait gallery of faces, one more beautiful than the next: Lebanese girls, Italian immigrants, round-faced Australians. When the bus conductor's hand came abreast of his face, he lifted his head and his eyes were dazzled: such a lustrous face, as beautiful as the full moon.

Is such beauty possible! Seeing an Indian, the fairy-face smiled with a trace of fellowship.

The rajkumar had once heard someone say: if a white woman smiles at you, she's as good as hooked. He looked into her eyes a little less afraid and fell in love with her, heart and soul.

Those who visit a white country for the first time and fail to marry a *mem* within the first six months escape, otherwise not. Rajkumar Shailendra had been in Australia hardly ten days.

The conductor handed him his ticket and moved on smiling. Afterwards she gave him no more attention, but he was a man of firm resolve and nothing if not steadfast. The next day he boarded the bus at the same time. He succeeded, but only on the fourth attempt. He introduced himself: Prince Shailendranathji of India.

"Prince" did seem to make an impression on the earthly houri, because she had been watching princes and the sons of royalty all her life in Mussoorie, right from childhood, and if someone on a bus in Sydney was introducing himself as a rajkumar, her experienced cabaret dancer's eyes could easily see that he was no fake.

The magic began to work on the fairy. Appointment for the evening, candlelight dinner, ballroom dancing, a leisurely stroll, shopping, high-placed family, English girl, a colonel's daughter, granddaughter of some lord—well, what's the harm?

It was a standing practice among our nabobs and raja *log* that they got themselves a junior *begum* or a junior *rani* of European blood, most of whom had been mere London barmaids in their earlier incarnations. But the headline news of free India was that all the *rajwaras* had been folded up, harems put paid to, and the law of single marriage had been slapped on the people. All the same, the snob value that an English or an American wife still had in free India was not something that Shailendranathji was unaware of. His first wife was a princess, a *rajkumari*, but the poor thing died within two years of marriage.

So when he proposed to Catherine she found herself in a Sydney ashram the very next day. Her nikah was performed at a mosque in Jakarta. Here, the pundit recited Vedic mantras. She was given the name Shailaja Devi, to accord with Shailendra—the Bengali pundit explained with a smile.

"Akhand Sobhagyawati, Yuvrani Rajyalakshmi Shailaja Deviji—may she prosper and fructify!" Her nitwit of a husband, several years her junior, shook hands with her beaming. On the marriage register her father's name was inscribed as "Colonel Arthur Bolton of London and Peshawar Cantonment."

From Meerut Cantonment, Corporal Arthur Bolton had straightaway headed to Berlin. The war ended shortly thereafter and he played his drum in the army band to celebrate the victory in different parts of England. Later he was let go of his temporary employment in the army.

Arthur Bolton's father, a shoeshiner who worked in Piccadilly Circus, had died during the bombardment of London. His mother had died too. Arthur found himself a job with a dance band in the West End. He didn't marry. Why get into that mess? Years passed. After paralysis disabled one of his arms, he had to give up drumming. When he got out of the hospital he started working as a doorman. By now age had caught up with him. He still wrote poetry, which never got printed. He attended church regularly—churches, that is, that had somehow escaped being turned into Sikh *gurdwaras*. Since he knew Urdu he was able to hit it off quite well with Pakistani and Hindustani laborers. Actually, it was a Sikh watchman friend who had got him his present job in one of the stores of a major Punjabi businessman, Mr. Khosla. It was a gorgeous showroom in Knightsbridge. There, everyone liked this soft-spoken, loveable, slightly eccentric old man.

That day, after arriving at the showroom, he did his cleaning and dusting in the hall. As he was arranging the scattered periodicals on the table his eyes fell on the cover of a women's magazine published from Bombay. The face of the girl on the cover caught his attention. Inside there was a photo essay on the interior decoration of this beauty's house. Arthur Bolton plopped down on the sofa, took out his eyeglasses, and began reading it:

Yuvrani Shailaja Deviji is English and a member of British aristocracy. Her father, Colonel Arthur Bolton, was lost in action in the last World War. Her grandfather was an Irish lord. Rajkumariji has spent her childhood in Mussourie. Later she left for Australia with her aunt, Lady Richmond, where she trained in ballet dancing, piano, and interior decoration.

Old man Arthur was dumbstruck. He closed his eyes and remained in a state of quiet immobility for some time. Then he got up, walked over to a corner, dropped down on his knees and immersed himself in prayer.

For some strange reason he felt certain that Katto was still in Mussourie and that if he wrote to her at the same old address, she would reply.

And so she did. When he got her letter he asked the manager of the showroom for a month's leave which was granted. He went to India House to obtain a visa. Next he withdrew his life's savings from the bank, bought himself a return plane ticket, and spent the rest on gifts for Katto and Catherine. Carrying the heavy bag of gifts in his working hand, he would

get tired, catch a brief rest in some doorway, and start walking again. With the money saved by walking, he bought a tie for his son-in-law.

Exactly a week later he found himself standing in front of the servants' quarters at the New Himalayas Vegetarian Hotel.

Katto nanny told him plainly, "Sahib, my daughter didn't send me a letter and got herself married. What does this mean? Just one thing: she doesn't want me to ruin her new life."

Katto was sitting on a rock outside the quarters working mustard oil into her hair. As ever, Fazl Masih sat under a pine tree staring quietly at the Himalayas. The valleys in the distance had become filled with purplish fog.

Old man Arthur lit his pipe with his working hand and pondered how incredibly peaceful this poor, illiterate, and heartbroken woman was.

"Katto, you're not angry at all?" he said, in a voice genuinely surprised.

"Angry—whatever for, Sahib?" she said. "In whatever I had to go through, I lived up to the fate assigned by Chhati Ma."

"Chhati Ma? Who is this lady?"

"A Bohri memsahib of Bombay once came here. When she heard how angry I was, she told me, 'Katto Bai, the sixth day after a child is born, Chhati Ma appears at midnight and inscribes its fate on its forehead. Here we call it the "*karm ke lachchhan*," the signs of fate.'"

Arthur listened attentively. Raising his eyebrows, he rubbed his forehead and started laughing.

Katto continued, "In the front room of these very servants' quarters, Chhati Ma came at night and inscribed on my Katy Baba's forehead that she would become a queen. Listen to me, please, Sahib. Don't go to meet her."

"Why?"

"Because I'm telling you."

"No, Katto. Chhati Ma has also written down that both you and I will go to Delhi to visit her. I've brought so many gifts for her from England." Arthur sat down beside her on the rock and started to open the bags with longing and eagerness.

6

A small, nicely manicured lawn was visible at the front of the grand mansion and right across from the gate stood the window of the bedroom which was featured in that English-language women's magazine. It was a pleasant Sunday morning in early spring. Out on the lawn Raja Sahib, his middle son, and a few European men and women were immersed in listening to the discourse of a Swamiji. This was some relatively new Swamiji

who had just recently joined the international guru circuit and was now staying at Mouriya having returned only a few days ago from France with a slew of his millionaire French and German disciples. After breakfast with Raja Sahib, he was holding forth on *sat* and *a-sat* when a taxicab pulled in at the gate and a threesome got out: a grubby old Englishman holding a Selfridges shopping bag, a poor native woman in an ordinary sari, and a crazy-looking man in a *kantop* and faded quilted vest with a matted salt-and-pepper beard who cringed and huddled behind one of the columns of the gate. The shabby Englishman held the hand of the boggled, fearful woman and started walking toward the lawn.

Raja Sahib lifted his eyes and looked at the new arrivals with extreme annoyance and wondered: how in the world did his Gurkha gatekeepers ever allow this riffraff in!

Maybe this clumsy bunch was from the hoard of Jehovah's Witnesses, harmless crazy missionaries. Early on Sunday mornings they just descend on the homes of decent people and tell them doomsday is right around the corner. Oh, how they make life miserable!

Coming near the chairs, the old Englishman stopped. When the Swamiji raised a silver glass to drink some water, the Englishman said cheerfully, "Good morning friends!" Both he and the native woman stood there for some time. Everyone remained absolutely silent. The Swamiji was apparently quite irritated by this intrusion in the middle of his *bhasban*. In utter disgust he picked up a flower and started inhaling its sweet aroma. The Maharaja signaled with his eyebrows for them to sit down, and both promptly did.

"Maharaj, please go on," Raja Sahib, a staunch believer in sadhus and sants entreated by humbly joining his hands.

Swamiji picked up where he had left off in his discourse on *sat* and *a-sat*. Old man Arthur craned his head and started to listen carefully. After a few minutes Swamiji paused to allow his French female disciple to change the cassette.

The old Englishman addressed him, "Mister Guru! Your thoughts about truth and non-truth have affected me greatly. I too have come from England to make manifest a truth." Then turning to the Raja Sahib he said, "Your Highness, I'm the father of your dear daughter-in-law Catherine ... " he took out the clipping from the women's magazine, "Akhand Sobhagyawati Rajyalakshmi Shailaja Deviji."

"Oh, what a pleasant surprise, Colonel!" The Raja quickly thrust his hand forward for a handshake smiling warmly. "Colonel Bolton! Why didn't you inform us that you were coming? Ahead of time?"

"Your Highness," old man Arthur cleared his throat, glanced around,

and said with an angelic smile, “there hasn’t been a single colonel in my family in the past seven generations. My father was a shoeshiner, my mother a cook; I joined the army as a drummer. Now I’m just a doorman.”

Everyone present had turned into statues of solid ice. Arthur threw a sweeping glance around him and shook his head regretfully. “All my life this has been my problem. I’ve always spoken the truth, nothing but the truth. And when I arrive here, what do I see but that Swamiji is talking about the essence of truth. This made me very happy. I’ve spent my entire life’s savings just to see my daughter. I’m a poor man. All the same I’ve brought her some things as a dowry.” He bent over, picked up the Selfridges shopping bag from the lawn and then put it back down. The people remained as frozen as before.

Arthur started again, “I’m sure Catherine would be delighted to meet her mother too. After all, she’s been away since she was fifteen years old.”

Arthur stopped to catch his breath. Katto just looked at him, aghast, dumbfounded. Suddenly the atmosphere had turned entirely surreal. Such episodes don’t happen in real life. Arthur started again, “This foolish woman was afraid to come here. I told her, ‘Martha, are you afraid of the light? Don’t be afraid of the light of truth. Truth is God. And we are His children. Aren’t you eager to see your lovely child? So let’s go to Delhi and meet our daughter. How could it be that parents and their children would hesitate to meet each other? How can they go against the law of nature? There’s nothing to fear.’ And Your Highness, it is mentioned in your mythology that when Lord Shiva arrived at his in-laws, his arrogant and haughty father-in-law scorned him ... ” Arthur paused and cleared his throat, “Forgive me, I gave the wrong example. What I meant was ...”

The old coot, he’s really insane, Raja Sahib thought. He was gaping at this weird stranger with wide eyes and his face was quickly changing colors, but Arthur Bolton went on with his introductory harangue with perfect calm.

“So Your Highness, just now as I arrived at the gate I thought for a minute you might turn out to be as arrogant and haughty as Lord Shiva’s father-in-law, but then your words struck my hearing. You were expressing your agreement with Mister Guru’s utterance that man must speak the truth in all circumstances and have the courage to face it. Indeed it is *siddhant* and *gyan* (knowledge). And Raja Sahib, you’ll be pleased to know that my Savior Jesus Christ has also said exactly the same thing. Actually, it is His truth-speaking that brought Him to the cross—quite a well-known event, you must surely have heard of it.”

The middle prince sensed that Raja Sahib, an irascible man, was just about ready to lose his temper and God knows what he might do. To

smooth things over, he quickly asked, “Would you like coffee or tea?”

Arthur looked at him with a smile. “Martha, coffee?”

Meanwhile Swamiji had started to stroll on the grass. The middle prince poured some coffee and offered it to Katto nanny. Old man Arthur shook his head and said excitedly in Urdu, “I’m very pleased to see that you don’t practice untouchability. We are all children of God the Father. Jesus said that there is room for everyone in My Father’s palace. Your Highness, my daughter’s mother was never married to me. I didn’t even know that Martha had given birth to Catherine. Thirty-five years later I saw her picture in a magazine. This is all God’s work. Martha is a very courageous woman; she still works as a nanny in Mussourie. She is a righteous woman, a true Christian. Her mother and father were also true Christians, and they were also very poor. They worked as sweepers, cleaned bathrooms. Jesus said that the poor shall truly inherit the Kingdom of God. Your Mister Gandhi says the same thing too. He used to live in the Bongi (Sweeper’s) Colony in Delhi. My Katto is also a *bongi*. She will also inherit the Kingdom of God, no doubt about it.”

Raja Sahib, who was glaring at the old man, dropped his head between his hands and bellowed at the top of his voice. Raja Sahib was ill tempered but no one had ever seen him shout like that before. Everyone stood up and rushed to him. He felt dizzy and closed his eyes, letting his head droop. He was beginning to faint. He had a weak heart.

7

Catherine, standing by the bedroom window, was watching this whole scene, which looked like a stage set from that distance. Life couldn’t be more unbelievable! In the morning, when she was introduced to Swamiji at breakfast, both had instantly recognized each other. Swamiji was none other than the former Hindi and Sanskrit schoolteacher at Mussourie who had tried to get fresh with her, leading to Miss Richmond’s sudden decision to leave for Australia. Just as they were about to leave it had come to light that he had siphoned off a considerable amount of school funds and dropped out of sight with some girl from the hill country. Back then too he was quite engaging and a sweet-talker.

After breakfast, when the opportunity offered itself, he told his former student, “Now look here Katto Junior, it has taken me twenty long years and a lot of hard work to fashion this career for myself in the West, which is teeming with swamis nowadays and a cutthroat competition is raging among them. Even so, I’ve got no less than eighteen ashrams in Europe and America, not to mention disciples numbering in the thousands, so

don't you go spilling the beans! Into the bargain, I'll keep mum to your in-laws, conservative royal family that they are, about your being the daughter of Mussourie's Katto nanny." The blood had drained from Catherine's face and her color faded when she heard those words whispered to her. She'd left right away and hidden herself in her bedroom.

Meanwhile Swamiji had returned to the lawn and resumed his *bhasban*, but what had to happen, happened. A taxi stopped at the gate and she saw her mother getting out, followed by her half-crazy uncle, and an eccentric-looking English codger. They walked in and sat down on the lawn, and Catherine heard every word of this unbelievable father of hers.

One time a Delhi Begum Sahib had taught Miss Celia Richmond how to cook "*ba'oli bandia*"—crazy dish. Life too was a crazy *bandia* which, having simmered for some time, now suddenly came to a boil.

Shaking from sheer terror, she looked at what was in front of her. Her uncle stood like a pillar by the gate staring into space, while on the lawn her insane father diligently went about destroying her life. How fervently and how much she had always yearned to meet him. How many stories of this man's innate goodness and innocence her mother and her aunt Celia had recounted—the man who had stayed barely two months in the guest-house and left after winning everyone's heart. Perhaps God had created him just for that: blow in suddenly from somewhere, change the course of lives, and blow out just as swiftly. Unbelievable! Impossible! Are goodness and truth in their essence destructive forces?

Transfixed, she watched the players on the stage in front of her in what might well have been a scene from some comic opera had it not been so horrific: Discovering that his oldest daughter-in-law was the child of a sweeper woman caused the Brahmin Raja Sahib to faint on the spot; the four Europeans, in order to escape the tentacles of the arch swindler Maya, had walked straight into the trap of the arch swindler Swami; the bogus holy man was now mouthing mantras to revive the unconscious Raja Sahib; her poor mother, who had shed tears all her life, still couldn't do anything but shed more; and her destitute father, paralyzed in one arm, who had saved every penny with so much thrift to bring her something for her dowry from across the seven seas, was now looking at everyone, dumb-founded, like some foolish angel who had walked into the wrong place. A sudden wave of compassion and love washed over Catherine and she was overwhelmed by an instinctive desire to rush out and hug her half-mad, eccentric father, her suffering mother, and her dear uncle, to give up this palace, this aristocratic Brahmin family and her well-heeled husband, and leave with these loving, penniless, naïve, and crazy people, because her real home was where they lived, because ultimately the world is filled

with Holiday Inns and plastic cups, three-storied Heinz-style houses with red sloping roofs, and nowhere had she found her place, her home. Was she really Akhand Sobhagyawati Rajyalakshmi Shailaja Deviji? Inside her skin she was just plain Catherine Bolton, and the conflict between Colonel Bolton and Corporal Bolton that had always left her exhausted and worn out was finally over. She would go outside and announce: Daddy, Mummy, here, I'm back. I'm coming with you.

She summoned up her courage and made for the door. Just as she was opening it, her eyes fell on her diamond bracelet. Her personal Mercedes gleamed in the sunlight up ahead in the driveway, and she suddenly recalled that she was expected at the golf club at eleven o'clock. Would all this disappear in the blink of an eye?

The sound of the shower rose from the marble bathroom and another thought crossed her mind: might her husband throw her out after this dreadful denouement? Much better if I leave honorably with these people on my own.

Her head swirled, as though she was standing on a sinking ship. She tried to grab on to the door. She must do everything to save herself. Such was the law of survival. Her nitwit husband emerged from the bathroom in his robe. "What's all this noise outside?" he asked, walking toward the window.

Catherine heaved a deep sigh and said in a clear, firm voice, "Darling, that magazine which had a pictorial essay about our interior decorations, remember? It seems to have created havoc. Some wicked gang has barged in to blackmail us. They're claiming to be my parents. Your father is running for election. I wonder whether this has something to do with that. Looks like your father's opponents have sent an untouchable woman with some English geezer to say that she is my mother, just to turn the Brahmin vote against your father. The old coot might just as well be a CIA agent. You must call the police ... right now."

Rajkumar Shailendra was a moron all right, but perhaps not an absolute moron. He lifted his face and looked at his fairy-faced *yuvrani* somewhat suspiciously. Catherine turned pale. She was shaking from fear. Pushing her out of his way, Rajkumar Shailendra rushed to the door and out to his father who had by now regained consciousness. Catherine ran straight to the bathroom and locked the door.

Outside at the gate her crazy uncle was asking after the well-being of everyone with his hands raised in prayer.

Kabira stands long wishing everyone well. □

—Translated by Mubammad Umar Memon