

God be Praised

(Ahmed Nadeem Qasmi)

BEFORE HIS MARRIAGE, Maulvi Abul Barkat, alias Abul, used to live in comfort, even pomp. On his head, he wore a light brown turban known as Mashadi lungi, because it originally came from Mashad in Iran. The gilded tip of his cap used to shine brightly above the turban. He always carried a walking stick, a sort of scepter with decorative bands of brass and gilt. For his hair, he used fragrant oil. Its sweet pungent smell lingered in the village lanes whenever he walked through them.

Maulvi Abul had slightly bulging eyes. On his fingers he wore silver rings with large turquoise stones. These rings came off his fingers five times a day before ablutions, and yet no change was ever observed in the order in which they were worn.

Every Eid, after his sermon, whenever the cotton bag containing from 150 to 200 rupees collected from the devotees happened to fall with a thud, he distributed 40 to 50 rupees in the presence of the worshippers among the needy and the poor of the village. After each such act, he used to say: "Please don't pray for me. Remember the Benevolent Almighty Allah. If He creates insects in stones, He supplies their food there too. Please do not bless me. What has He not blessed me with? Health, peace of mind, freedom from care; I have everything one can desire. I don't need anything more from His unlimited treasure of divine blessings."

Like the children who came in quick succession, the times, too, had changed fast. A pair of shoes for his first born, Mehrunnisa, had cost him one rupee. For his youngest daughter, he was now asked to pay six rupees for a pair. When he complained, the shoemaker said: "Maulviji, I didn't charge more for your sake. Had it been someone else, I could easily have wangled ten rupees. The cost of leather has gone sky-high. Prices have risen so suddenly that it seems as though all the cows and buffaloes in the country have been dispatched to the Mount Caucasus. My cost price is five twelve. Believe me, my profit is only four annas. Come on, Maulviji, don't look disappointed and, pray, don't give me even that four annas bit. I will charge only what I have spent for these dainty shoes. If I am lying, the curse of Allah be on me and may I be drowned in some pond. May I even be deprived of a decent burial!"

If it were possible to get the necessities of life from the heavens through prayers, Maulvi Abul would have prayed to Allah for a pair of shoes for his Umda, the youngest in the family. At night he consulted his wife. But instead of replying, she silently lifted a corner of the quilt to expose Umdatunnisa's small, bare feet. Seeing those dainty feet, Maulvi Abul burst into tears like a child.

Next day, after his morning prayers, he went to the shoemaker and paid him five rupees and twelve annas and bought the shoes. Leaving his shop, he vowed, with Allah as his

witness, never to use the powdered tobacco that he loved.

When Mehrun reached the age of 14, Maulvi Abul's prayers became intense and prolonged. During Ramadan, he led the nightly tarawih prayers as usual. But the same Maulvi Abul who never had made a single mistake, began straying from one Surah of the Holy Quran to another. Sometimes, unconsciously, he repeated the same chapter twice in the same part of prayer.

Once when Chaudhry Fateh Dad, the member of the District Board, reprimanded him for a mistake, Maulvi Abul felt like shouting back at him: "You have a whole row of boys, Chaudhri Sahib. Had you also been blessed with a daughter then you would understand why I repeated a chapter of the Holy Book twice!"

But Chaudhry Fateh Dad's censure was purely religious. Why, he was the same rich, pious Muslim, the Head of the village, who every evening for years had been sending Maulvi Saheb homebaked bread smeared with ghee and an earthen bowl of dal. He was very regular in his offering. If for some reason the daily offering of the evening meal was delayed, Chaudhry Fateh Dad would carry it himself to Maulvi Abul's house and apologise for the delay, saying: "I am terribly sorry, Maulviji. My wife is unwell. So the maid has cooked the food." He, sincerely considered the daily gift to Maulvi Abul a part of his daily worship.

Conscious of the ever increasing responsibilities of her husband, Zaibunnisa too had started teaching young girls of the village the Holy Quran. On Thursday, when each of the girls brought a small portion of sugar on bread, Zaibunnisa would arrange for at least two baskets. These small baskets were used to store morsels of home baked bread.

But, there was yet another problem. Besides bread to fill their bellies, they also needed clothes to cover their bodies. Chaudhri Fateh Dad used to present new clothes to Maulvi Abul once a year after every harvest. Whenever these clothes came, a tailoring shop would spring up in Maulvi Abul's house. Zaibunnisa, with the assistance of Mehrun and Zabda and Shamsun, would cut them into smaller outfits for the younger kids. If he ever received some extra money, this bonus would usually be locked up in a tin box.

With the passage of time, the appetites of the children increased.

Maulvi Abul was caught in the whirl of life. Time had not been kind to him. The hair around his temples had become silvery white. The grip of his teeth on his gums had for long been loose. But his voice remained resonant. However, sometimes that too quivered.

Chaudhri Fateh Dad was the only one who knew the reason. Maulvi Abul had once opened his heart to him about a suitable match for Mehrun. The Chaudhry had carefully considered the eligibility of all the young men of the village.

There were some whom he found suitable. But the trouble was that everyone in the community knew Maulvi Abul well. Chaudhri Fateh Dad tried to negotiate with a couple of elders but all of them drew back as if bees had suddenly sprung from a bed of flowers.

Ultimately Maulvi Abul's and Zaibunnisa's prayers bore fruit. A young man from the village who had gone away, came back and opened a small cloth shop. He called himself Shamim Ahmed.

He was the only son of a Haafiz. After the death of his father, Khudayar, tried to follow his father's footsteps. When he was about 16, he went away to the city, leaving his old mother behind. Later they learnt that he had worked in the house of a head clerk, after which he had managed to open a small shop on a footpath where he began selling cut pieces. After saving some money and gaining experience in the business, he returned to the village. He then begged Maulvi Abul to inaugurate and bless his shop by becoming his first customer.

That day, in order not to disappoint his erstwhile disciple and his aged mother, Maulvi Abul took a momentous decision. He went to his wife and said: "Shamim Ahmed wants me to inaugurate his shop by becoming his first customer. If you agree, let us buy a piece of cloth for Mehrun's suit. In any case we will need it for her dowry. My purchase in the presence of the entire village may impress them."

"May Allah bless you," she blurted out and immediately took out the key which hung in a thread around her neck. She opened the trunk, took out the tin box and placed it before her husband.

As she opened it, her eyes suddenly became bright with unshed tears. Just then Mehrun walked in. Then she turned back with a smile, almost as if she was thinking. I know the secret of Abba's readiness to inaugurate Shamim Ahmed's shop!

Maulvi Abul counted his savings. There were 43 rupees. He put the money into his pocket, stood up slowly and said: If somehow Mehrun can be married, all my worries will disappear. I will feel as light as a feather, at least for some years to come."

When Maulvi Abul reached Shamim Ahmed's new shop, he found a crowd had already assembled there to watch the proceedings. Most of the onlookers were women. They lingered to gaze with wistful longing at the colourful display.

Maulvi Abul inaugurated the shop by first reciting verses from the Holy Quran in his powerful voice. Then he selected a piece of pink cloth with beautiful flowers nestling amidst yellow dots.

"I will need a piece from this for a young lady's suit," he said loudly.

Overjoyed, Shamim Ahmed picked up his yard stick, uttered "In the name of Allah" silently, measured seven yards, picked up the large pair of scissors and cut the cloth. He then folded it neatly and placed it before Maulvi Abul with respect. He almost seemed to be offering it as a gift.

"How much should I pay?" Maulvi Abul asked. Out of respect, Shamim Ahmed hesitated for a moment, rubbed his palms, cleared his throat and replied: "At the rate of six rupees per yard, it will be 42 rupees, sir."

His words fell like a bombshell on Maulvi Abul. Suddenly he felt as if bundle after bundle of cloth from the various shelves had been falling over him. Out of 43 rupees he kept a rupee and quickly paid the rest to Shamim Ahmed.

"Thank you, sir," Shamim said, flushing with happiness. "You have graciously become my first customer, I consider it a good omen. That is why I have not offered you any

concession today. But I am your humble servant, sir. I will, hopefully, compensate you soon in some other way.”

Maulvi Abul placed the bundle of cloth under his arm and got up to leave. He smiled, blessed Shamim Ahmed and began walking slowly home.

One evening, a few days later, someone knocked at the door. He went to the door himself and opened it. A wave of fragrance flowed into the house.

“Assalam-o-Alaikum, sir.” He heard a familiar voice. It was Shamim Ahmed. After the preliminary exchange of greetings, Shamim Ahmed hesitatingly said something private to Maulvi Abdul.

A thrill went through Maulvi Abul's ears. An idea came to him. Instead of listening to Shamim Ahmed's request on his threshold, he turned and shouted: “Arif's mother, I am going out. I will be back soon.” And he started walking towards the mosque. Shamim Ahmed followed him silently.

They went to a room at one end of the mosque. It was dark and usually used for offering special prayers in solitude.

Maulvi Abul went into the room. He put a match to a dry twig and with it lit the earthen lamp. The flame flickered for a while, then became steady. Shamim Ahmed was now looking nervously into the flickering flame.

To put him at ease, Maulvi Abul said softly, “What is it, son?”

Shamim Ahmed lowered his eyes, hesitated for a moment and then replied, “If you allow me, sir, I'll begin.”

“Yes, of course, son. What is it?” To encourage the youth he patted his back.

Shamim felt at ease, but couldn't overcome his embarrassment. Then, finally mustering up courage, he cleared his throat and began in a low voice: “As a matter of fact, my mother should have done this, but she is not well. That's why I have come.” He stopped.

“You did the right thing,” Maulvi Abul said affectionately.”

“My request is, please accept me as your slave. I mean....!” He stopped abruptly, stumbling over the words.

Maulvi Abul could not believe what he had just heard. To make sure, he asked: “What is it, son? I don't quite understand. You wish me to accept you as...?”

“Yes, sir, as your slave!” Shamim Ahmed blurted out in haste, “I mean, if you have no objection, I will send my mother with the marriage proposal. It will be an honour, sir, to be your son....”

In his excitement, fear and confusion, he did not see the tears which had silently rolled down Maulvi Abul's cheeks. In that silence, time almost stood still for both of them. They looked dazed.

Maulvi Abul sighed and wiped the tears from his eyes and his face with the loose end of his turban. In a quivering voice, he said: “O Allah, daughters are your helpless creatures!”

He caught hold of Shamim Ahmed's hand and added: "They are for marriage. You are my dear disciple. Brother Hafiz Abdul Rahim's son is also my son. Come, my son, come!" And he embraced Shamim Ahmed warmly.

Half an hour later, when he reached home, Zaibunnisa asked: "Where are you coming from with this wave of fragrance?"

Mehrun looked up. Before her father could answer, she said: "Yes, Abba, what a sweet perfume. The whole house is full of it."

Seeing him silent, his wife went to him. "What is it?" she enquired softly.

Maulvi Abul looked first towards his eldest daughter, then towards the row of children who had appeared on the scene. They had all clustered around their sister. They looked disappointed, for he had returned empty-handed. They had to be pleased first. So he declared slowly, "Tonight, all my children will get a special treat, a little raw sugar with bread."

This did the trick. Their faces immediately lit up with joy. He then went to another part of the courtyard and sat down on the matted bed.

"Come here, Arif's Mother," Maulvi Abul sounded excited as he called out to his wife. He told her the whole incident. At first Zaibunnisa did not believe him. But when he repeated the story under oath, she began to cry.

"Don't cry, Zaibun," he said softly. He rarely addressed her that way. But today was a special day. "Allah did listen to our prayers. Let us bow our heads to Him."

They were still lost in their newly acquired happiness when suddenly, once again, they heard a knock. Before any of his children could rush and open the door, Maulvi Abul shouted.

"Wait. Let me see." He went to the door and opened it. Chaudhry Fateh Dad was standing there, wrapped in a shawl. He warmly caught Maulvi Abul's hands and embraced him. "Congratulations, sir. At last my efforts have proved fruitful" he said in a low voice.

"Yes, Chaudhry Saheb. I am thankful to you and grateful to Almighty Allah."

"Shamim is a good boy, sir. Please take a decision without delay. Who knows what may happen?" Saying that, he brought out a cotton bag from under his shawl and handed it over to Maulvi Abul. "This is a humble gift. Please give it to my daughter on my behalf," said Chaudhry Fateh Dad.

Gratified and almost dazed, Maulvi Abul went back to his wife. With a thumping heart he opened the bag. Tied neatly in a large silken kerchief were a pair of gold pendants set with large, shining stones and wrapped in a hundred rupee note!

A few days later, the pre-marriage celebrations began. Mehrunnisa, was put in seclusion in a separate room till the auspicious day. Her hands and feet were covered with henna. The gay songs that usually accompany wedding ceremonies were not sung, for after all, this was Maulvi Abul Barkat's residence. Music of any kind could not be allowed in his house. So the village girls simply sat in a circle round the shy bride, and for several nights

sang songs of love and friendship, flowers and their fragrance, and the romantic rainy season which has a special significance for young men and women in the rural Punjab. They also sang sweet songs of the excitement of union and the pangs of separation.

On the other hand, nobody could restrain Shamim Ahmed from celebrating his marriage any way he desired. So he came to marry Mehrun amidst fireworks with musicians playing gay tunes. That night, after a lot of whispering in one corner of the house, many trunks were dragged out and opened. The next morning when the dowry was exhibited in the courtyard, the entire village was stunned by what it saw. People were not impressed much with the colourful clothes, for this was not unusual. But the jewellery! It was incredible. Some secretly believed that the Maulvi had a special amulet whose charm blessed him with secret power to get as much money as he desired from the angels.

In the crowd, there was also a loudmouthed old hag who seemed to have other views. In a loud whisper, she pointed out that several suits in the dowry had once belonged to a woman who had died young. There were others which had been part of Zaibun's dowry. "Even the bracelets and the gold nose-ring are hers," she added with conviction. "But the gold pendants?" She raised her eyes and looked towards the heavens, as if they were a gift from there.

After the ceremonies were over, Mehrun was made to sit in a palanquin: Beautifully decorated, it was covered with a large silken cloth so that the bride could go to the bridegroom's house in strict purdah. As two sturdy villagers carried it away, Maulvi Abul walked a few steps with it. He must have cried silently for his eyes and nose were red and he looked pale. At the same time he looked at peace.

As he went back to his house, Zaibunnisa suddenly appeared from behind the door. She held his hand and burst into tears. "Look at this house," she said, sobbing. "Without Mehrun, doesn't it look like a graveyard?"

Maulvi Abul smiled and consoled her, "Don't be silly, Zaibun. Has Mehrun taken Zabda also with her? What about Shamsun?" Suddenly he remembered something. "Arif's mother, where is Zabda?" he asked in a whisper.

"Inside. Crying," she replied.

"Zabda." Maulvi Abul called her. A few minutes later Zabda came out of the room. She looked sad. There were large dark patches of tears on her new pink head cloth.

The Maulvi said to his wife, "Arif's mother, have you noticed?" he whispered. "This Zabda of ours has suddenly grown up."

There was silence for a while. Then Maulvi Abul said, perhaps to reassure himself more than his wife: "Don't worry. Allah Almighty is kind and benevolent. It's a sin to lose faith."

Oblivious of his surroundings, Maulvi Abul's mind was racing elsewhere. As if in a trance, he had called Shamsun. Slowly, his third daughter came forward and began walking towards them.

A few months after Mehrun's marriage, a primary school for girls was opened in the village.

All these years, Maulvi Abul had two main sources of inspiration, in which he had implicit faith. The first one was Almighty Allah and after Him, Chaudhry Fatehdad. It was certainly Allah's benevolence that sinners like Maulvi Abul and Zaibunnisa were still alive and that all their children were living and Mehrun had been married with such splendour.

About the Author

Ahmed Nadeem Qasmi (1916 – 2006) was a poet and a writer of national repute. He was born in a small village of Anga in Khushab district.

Theme

In this story he has depicted the life of a village Maulvi and his miseries relating to his domestic life, his low income and the marriages of his daughters and about suitable matches for his daughters.

EXERCISES

1. Answer the following questions.

- i. What was alias Abul's full name?
- ii. What was his turban known as and where did it originally come from?
- iii. What did he always carry with him?
- iv. Describe Maulvi's appearance.
- v. How much did the Maulvi collect on every Eid?
- vi. How much was distributed among the needy and the poor?
- vii. What was the name of his eldest daughter?
- viii. What was the name of the member of the District Board where the Maulvi lived?
- ix. What was the name of his wife?
- x. Write the names of the other two daughters mentioned in the story.

2. Read the lesson and tick the correct word. Write the correct sentences in your notebook.

- i. Maulvi Abul had slightly (slanting, bulging, drooping) eyes.
- ii. He wore (silver, gold, platinum) rings with large stones.
- iii. His cotton bag contained 150 to (100, 200, 300) rupees collected from the devotees.
- iv. The name of his first born child was (Zebunnisa, Mehrunnisa, Lutufunnisa)
- v. Ch. Fateh Dad was member of the District (Council, Board, Bar).
- vi. Shamim Ahmed was the (eldest, youngest, only) son of a Haafiz.

- vii. Maulvi Abul had saved (33, 43, 53) rupees only.
- viii. The seven yards of silk that Shamim measured for Maulvi Abul was for (142, 42, 420) rupees.
- ix. A few months after Mehrunnisa's marriage a (secondary, middle, primary) school was opened in the village.
- x. All these years Maulvi Abul had (one, two, three) sources of inspiration.