

❁ Chapter 13 ❁

1864

Early letters of 1864 show that he felt that most of his sufferings were behind him, at any rate for the moment, though they had left him extremely weak. Thus he writes on January 7, 1864, to Junun:

'I am well, but I am old, and these troubles consumed all the strength that I had left. Now I am a body without soul to quicken it. This month of Rajab 1280 AH sees the beginning of my seventieth year and the onset of ailments and sorrows. "Nothing exists but God and God alone works manifest in all things."'

But only eleven days later, on January 18, 1864 he even feels able to undertake a journey. He writes to Alwar, to Mir Bande Ali Khan, recounting the whole history of his sources of income from the time of his father's death when he was only five years old. He stresses his family connection with Alwar—how his father 'was killed fighting along with Maharaja Bakhtawar Singh' and how the authorities had 'continued my father's stipend to me, granting me a village named Talra in perpetuity, so that you may say that the moment I was weaned of my mother's milk I began eating Alwar's bread.' He describes subsequent developments and concludes:

'I am sixty-nine years old. I have gone deaf. I cannot walk without a staff or sit up without a pillow or a wall to support my back. I am not a worldly man, but a darwesh. I seek ample honour, and a little wealth. God preserve His Highness! He will both give me honour and bestow wealth upon me. And leaving that aside, I long to look upon His Highness's splendour. I wrote a poem hailing his accession to the throne with a chronogram, and sent it along with a petition. Why has His Highness not replied to my petition, and why has he not sent for me? . . . I ask you as a particular favour that you will keep this my letter to you carefully and that when His Highness comes you will show it to him. The moment I hear of his arrival I shall set out for Alwar.'

However, it seems that nothing came of his efforts in this direction.

On February 2, 1864 he writes to Jauhar:

'Congratulations on your appointment to the tahsildari¹ of Ballabgarh. You

¹ The chief revenue office in a tahsil. A tahsil is an area comprising usually a small town and a number of nearby villages.

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have moved from Pipli to Nuh, and from Nuh to Ballabgarh; and now one day, God willing, you will come to Delhi.

'I have something to say to you. Hakim Mirza Jan, the worthy son of Hakim Agha Jan, is employed in the area of your tahsil in the medical services of the British authorities. His respected father is a friend of mine of fifty years' standing. He is like a brother to me—and that makes Hakim Mirza Jan my nephew and your cousin. It is incumbent upon you to be of one mind and one heart with him, and be his constant helper. His official appointment is a permanent one. You will not have to take any fresh step—only to try and see to it that things remain favourable to him, and that he continues in the authorities' regard; for Hakim Mirza Jan is an intelligent and conscientious man.'

On February 15, 1864 he writes to Shafaq:

'The past year has been a very trying one for me. I was confined to my bed for twelve to thirteen months. I found it difficult to get up, let alone to move about. There was no fever, no coughing, no diarrhoea, no seizure, no stroke, but something more unpleasant than all these things, namely, overheating of the blood. To put it briefly, between my head and my feet I had twelve boils—and every boil became a wound and every wound a cavity, so that without exaggeration I needed twelve to thirteen plasters and half a pound of ointment a day. For nine to ten months I could neither eat nor sleep, and was in pain both day and night. If I did fall asleep at night, before I had slept an hour the pain in some of my boils would wake me up. I would keep tossing and turning, fall asleep once more, and be awakened once more. Three quarters of the year passed in this way; then things began to improve, and over two to three months I made some sort of recovery. I felt as though my soul had entered my body anew and the angel of death had given up in disgust at my toughness. Now I am well, but weak and lethargic. I haven't got my wits about me, and my memory is gone. It takes me as long to stand up as it does to build a wall the height of a man. I'm filled with gratitude at your enquiry after me: only when you heard I was dead did you ask after me. The oral statement of the man who told you I was dead and my written statements (for example, this one) are half true and half false. If I'm dead, then I'm only half-dead; and if I'm alive, I am only half-alive.

My soul strives feebly on to break the body's bonds.
I live: it lacks the strength to struggle free.

If you will send a copy of these lines to my revered friend Maulvi Ghulam Ghaus [Bekhabar] . . ., Chief Clerk to the Lieutenant-Governor of the North-Western Provinces, you will be pleasing him and obliging me.'

On March 7, 1864 he writes to Bekhabar:

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'Let me tell you how things stand with me now. After the taking of Delhi Lord Canning sent back the ode I had sent him, with a message from his secretary to the effect that during the days of the Mutiny I had been a courtier of the rebel King, and now the government did not see fit to enter into any relationship with me. There was nothing for it but to keep silent. But I am a shameless man. In Lord Elgin's time, in accordance with my custom, I again sent an ode to him at Simla. Contrary to my expectation I received a reply from the Chief Secretary in accordance with all the old forms. The same paper, sprinkled with gold dust, the same titles of address, the same appreciation of my poem, and the same expression of pleasure. And now that this present great lord has become the Viceroy of the realm of India, I have performed my ancient service. On February 13, 1864 I sent off an ode and a petition. Up to today—March 7th—I have had no reply. . . . Naturally I am anxious. But

I have not yet lost heart: I wait
To see what may befall.'

On June 22, 1864 he writes to Amin ud Din Ahmad Khan:

'Allow me to tell you that your being in Delhi was a source of moral strength to me. Even though we did not meet, at any rate we were in the same city.

'Brother, when I survey the scene I see a number of people, like birds who have lost their nests, flying about here and there. One or two of them occasionally come this way even. Now, sir, tell me: when are you going to keep your promise? When are you going to send Alai to see me? These days one can still travel by night and rest by day. [Muir explains: "In those days there was no railway [from Delhi] to Loharu. In the hot season it was customary to travel by night and not by day."] Once the rains start, your permission will be of no avail. The traveller will think, "I'm a walker, not a swimmer. How can I get from Loharu to Delhi without a boat? Where will I get a steamship from?"

O you who do not know what leisure is
Do what you have to do without delay.'

On June 28, 1864, he writes to Junun:

'A hundred and twenty mangoes have reached me. May God preserve you! I have handed over ten pens and two ounces of ink to your servant. God grant they reach you safely. I am not ill, but I am old and weak and so to speak, only half alive. I have passed sixty-nine years in this world, and performed not one religious act. Alas! A thousand times alas!

On July 2, 1864, he writes to Miran:

'My dear boy, I got your letter, but it doesn't explain why Mir Sarfaraz Husain

was off to Jaipur. Anyway, give my blessings to Mir Mahdi [Majruh] and tell Mir Sarfaraz Husain from me: "You went to Jaipur, and I entrusted you to God's keeping: whose keeping did you entrust *me* to?"'

On July 10, 1864, he writes to Alai. It appears that Alai had contemplated writing an ode directed against someone whom he disliked and incorporating a chronogram of some incident in this connection. Ghalib tells him not to:

'Understand this, my friend: Granted that "to curse Yazid¹ is to worship God"; yet one *speaks* the words, "A curse on Yazid!" No true Muslim yet has written an ode to curse him. Among your natural talents is one for composing chronograms; you have earned merit in heaven by it, and, God willing, will get your reward. Don't now bring censure upon yourself and distress to others. Don't manifest your enmity, and if it is manifest already, don't add permanence to it.' He goes on:

'The late Ali Bakhsh [he had died six months earlier] was four years younger than me. I was born in 1212 AH, and in Rajab of this year shall be entering my sixty-ninth year. He lived to be sixty-six. He had a novel way of speaking and writing. Once he met Muir Sahib² in Agra. In the course of conversation he said, "I served with my uncle in Lord Lake's army [in 1803], and took part in the battles against Holkar [the commander of the Maratha forces]. I should be offending against propriety if I were to take off my clothes; otherwise I could show you that my body is a mass of scars from sword-and lance-wounds." He [Muir] was an alert and intelligent man; he looked at him and said, "Nawwab Sahib, I should guess that in General Lake's time you would be about four or five years old." He replied, "Quite so, your honour."

'May God forgive him and not call him to account for his harmless lies.'

(Ghalib writes of Ali Bakhsh again a year later, in an undated letter to Shākir: 'His honour Mir Qasim Ali Khan Sahib is a truthful man, and I presume that he really did come to my house and found the gate shut. But I have an uneasy feeling, because he was very thick with my late friend Ali Bakhsh Khan, and the departed (God forgive him his sins) was proverbial for his lies and tall stories. So if with this in mind I feel some hesitation in accepting his statement, my hesitation is not entirely unwarranted. Anyway give him my regards.')

An undated letter to Salik belongs perhaps to this time:

'My dear friend, what foolish thoughts beset you? You have mourned a father: now lament an uncle too. God grant you long life, and bring to realization all your plans and fancies. For my part I no longer look even to God to help me, much less to His creation. Nothing goes right for me. I watch myself from the

¹ The man responsible for the martyrdom of Husain and his companions at Karbala.

² Sir William Muir, who later became Lieutenant-Governor of United Provinces.

sidelines and rejoice at my own distress and degradation. In other words I see myself through the eyes of my enemy. At every blow that falls I say, "Look! Ghalib's taken another beating! Such airs he used to give himself! 'I am a great poet, a great Persian scholar. Today for miles around there is none to match me!' Let us see *now* what he has to say to his creditors. Ghalib's finished; and call him Ghalib if you like; I call him atheist and infidel, and that's the truth! I have made up titles to confer upon him. When kings die they write after their names, 'Whose abode is in Heaven', or 'Who rests in Paradise.' Well, he thought himself King of the Realm of Poetry, and I've devised the forms 'Who dwells in Hell', and 'Whose Station is Damnation' to follow his name.

"Come along, Star of the Realm!"—one creditor has him by the scruff while another reviles him. And I say to him, "Come, come, My Lord Nawwab Sahib! How is it that you—yes, you a Seljuk, and an Afrasiyabi—are put to such indignity? Well, where is your tongue? Say something! Wine from the shop, and rosewater from the druggist's, and cloth from the drapers', and mangoes from the fruiterer's, and loans from the banker's—and all on credit all the time. He might have stopped to ask himself where he'd get the money to pay it back".

Another letter to Salik dated July 11, 1864 (and these are the only letters to Salik we possess) is in a similar tone:

"God sends His blessings by stealth." I hear that you are fit and well. We must be thankful that we are alive. "If you have your life, you have everything." They say that to despair of God's help is to be an infidel. Well, I have despaired of Him and am an infidel through and through. Muslims believe that when a man turns infidel, he cannot expect God's forgiveness. So there you are, my friend: I'm lost to this world and the next. But you must do your best to stay a Muslim and not to despair of God. Make the text [of the Quran] your watchword: "Where there is difficulty, there is ease also."

All that befalls the traveller¹ in the path of God
Befalls him for his good.

All's well at your home. . . . Yusuf Ali Khan Aziz sends his regards and Baqir and Husain Ali [Ghalib's adopted "grandchildren"] their respectful service. My steward Kallu presents his obeisance. The others lack the status even to do that. Keep on writing to me. Farewell, from him who longs for death, Ghalib.

On August 24, 1864, he writes to Junun:

'Exalted sir, the ghazal your servant brought has gone where I am going—to

¹ In the original, 'salik', which, in a letter to Salik is particularly appropriate.

oblivion. That is, I have lost it. . . . Most of the rest of the letter is taken up with detailed comments on couplets quoted from his own Urdu verse:

'I could, had I not given you my heart,
have breathed in peace.
I would, had I not died, have wept and sighed
a few days more.

'Here we have a very subtle ordering of words. "I could" connects with "have breathed". "I would" links with "have wept". In Arabic involved expression and involved meaning are both faults. In Persian involved meaning is a fault, but involved expression is permissible, and indeed, is considered a poetic merit. Urdu follows the Persian.'

He then shows how the rearrangement of the words in the normal order of prose makes the meaning perfectly clear. After which he takes another couplet, in which the lover tells his mistress:

'To meet you is not easy—all is easy, then.
The difficulty is, it is not difficult.'

'In other words, "If I cannot easily meet you, that makes things easy for me. If it is not easy to meet you, so be it. I cannot meet you, but neither can anyone else [i.e. my rivals]. The difficulty is that at the same time you are not difficult to meet, because you can meet anyone you feel like meeting. I have trained myself to bear separation easily, but I cannot make jealousy easy to bear."

Her fairness and her fair opinion of herself
Have worsted me and given my lustful rival best.

She had such utter confidence in her own powers
She could not see why she should put him to the test.

'Maulvi Sahib, what refinement of thought! It deserves your praise. Fairness of face, and a good opinion of herself—the beloved has both these qualities. . . . She thinks that she never makes a mistaken estimate. "The man struck down by love for me never escapes me," she thinks. "The arrow of my captivating glance never misses its mark." So when she has such confidence in herself, why should she put my rival to the test? Her good opinion of herself has preserved his good name. For the fact was that the beloved was mistaken, and if it had come to the test my rival would have stood revealed not as a true lover, but as a man impelled only by lust.

I do not breathe a word against you, friend,
but if you meet

The man you gave my letter to, just give him
my regards.

'This theme calls for something by way of preamble. The poet [lover] needed a messenger [to take a letter to his mistress]. But he was afraid that such a messenger might himself fall in love with her. A friend of the lover brought a man to him and said, "This man is a man of honour, a man whom you can trust. I can guarantee that he won't do any such thing." Well, he was given a letter to take to her. As fate would have it, the lover's misgivings proved well-founded. The messenger looked upon the beloved and at once fell madly in love with her. The letter, the reply—all were forgotten, and in his frenzy he rent his clothes and made off to the wilderness. And now the lover, after all this has happened, says to his friend, "Only God has knowledge of the unseen. Who knows what is in another's heart? So, my friend, I bear no grudge against you. But if by any chance you meet my messenger, give him my respects and say, "Well, sir, what now of your tall claims that you would not fall in love?"

If it be granted me to live on for a few days more
I have made up my mind to show you what I have in store.

'There is no difficulty here. It means just what it says. Why should the poet reveal what he intends to do? He hints obscurely that he will do something. God knows whether he will become a faqir, and make his humble abode in the city or on its outskirts, or whether he will leave his own country for other lands.'

About the same time—the letter is dated only '1864'—he writes to Bekhabar:

'I have heard from an outside source that you are writing a pamphlet refuting my work . . . *Qāte i Burhan*.¹ I didn't believe it, but I was certainly surprised. . . .

'In this city there is a festival called the Flower-men's Festival. It takes place in the month of Bhadon [August–September], and everyone in the city, from the nobles to the artisans, goes off to the Qutub [Minar]. There they stay for two to three weeks. All the shops in the city—Muslim and Hindu alike—stay closed throughout this time. Our friend Ziya ud Din Khan, and [his son] Shihab ud Din Khan, and my two boys have all gone to the Qutub. In the men's quarters these days there's no one but me, and my steward, and one servant who is ill. When our friend [Ziya ud Din Khan] comes back he'll write to you again. He's come down the big hills² and gone up the little hills.³ That's why he hasn't written.'

¹ See Ch. 17 below.

² The foothills of the Himalayas, where those who can afford to, go to escape the worst of the hot season.

³ The Qutub Minar stands on slightly higher ground than Delhi.

Bekhabar evidently replied with indignation to the suggestion that he could write a polemic against Ghalib, for Ghalib's next letter begins:

'Master and guide! One does not get cross at such things! "I heard . . . but I didn't believe it." So far I provide no target for wrath. So what we quarrel about is my surprise. Well the occasion for surprise is that your friend says that . . . you . . . who are my shagird, are writing a reply to my *Qāte i Burhan*. If saints behave like this, then alas for the state of us sinners! What I wrote to you was a report, not a complaint. I wear the dress of a worldly man, but I am a faqir, and a faqir of independent spirit, not one who cries loudly of his need or cheats his fellow men. I am seventy years old, and I tell you without exaggeration that seventy thousand men must have passed before my eyes—and that too counting only the gentlemen; how many of the common people I have seen I cannot compute. I have seen two sincere men, men whose love is true: one, Maulvi Siraj ud Din (God's mercy be upon him), and the other [yourself], Munshi Ghulam Ghaus [Bekhabar] (may Exalted God preserve him). My lamented friend did not possess beauty of form, and his sincere and unfeigned friendship was something specially for me. Praise be to God! my second friend is all mankind's well-wisher, a man (may no evil befall him) of handsome form, and one perfect in love and loyalty, and utterly sincere. In fact, radiance upon radiance. I am not a mere man, but a man who knows men:

My glance is like a burglar that breaks through
Into the inmost chamber of the heart.

Rejoice, you pillars of hypocrisy!
Rejoice! for I have left these fields behind.

I have held you to be a man who possesses in the fullest measure the qualities of kindness and love, and of this much I am certain: Once I looked to two men to mourn for me when I am gone. One I have myself had to weep for, and now—may God preserve him—one friend is left. I pray to Him, "O God, let that day never come when I must bear the wound of parting from him. May I die while he yet lives!" My friend, I love you truly.

'Our friend [Ziya ud Din Khan] is not back from the Qutub yet. . . .'

His next letter (also dated only '1864') tells him:

'There is a gentleman in Calcutta, a deputy-collector¹ named Maulvi Abdul Ghafur, pen-name Nassakh. We have never met, but he has sent me his published diwan . . . I have written him a letter of acknowledgement, and since this is suitable for inclusion in my collection of Urdu prose,² I am sending it to

¹ The second administrative officer of an Indian district.

² Bekhabar was collecting Ghalib's Urdu letters for publication.

you. And tell me, my good sir, is the collection going to be printed or not?¹ If it's already printed, then please send your humble servant as many copies as Munshi Mumtaz Ali Khan Sahib's magnanimity impels him to grant as the author's right.'

The letter to Nassakh is interesting as an example of what he now thought fit to write in Urdu with publication in mind, but more interesting still for the brief review of his own poetic experience which it contains. It begins with a paragraph of elaborate (and, one cannot help feeling, exaggerated) praise of Nassakh and his verse, ending with the words: 'You are wise in the secrets of the Urdu tongue, and the pride of the whole realm of India.' He then turns to himself:

'Your humble servant turned to the practice of Urdu poetry when he first entered the years of discretion, and again in middle age, as the servant of the King [Bahadur Shah], for some days plied his pen in this same style. My love and inclination is for Persian verse and prose. I dwell in India, but bear the wound of the sword of Isfahan.² And as far as my powers allowed I prated much in the Persian tongue. But now I no longer think of Persian, no longer speak of Urdu, expecting nothing of this world, and hoping for nothing from the next. I, and the unending sorrow of disappointment; as I myself say in . . . one of my odes:

My eyes are opened now to see what I have done:
The future holds no hope, the past fills me with shame.

I have lived nine and sixty years in the world. And how much longer can I hope to live? One Urdu diwan of some thousand to twelve hundred couplets, one Persian diwan of ten thousand and some hundred couplets, and three small books of prose—these five things are the outcome of my work. And now what more should I write? My odes earned no reward, my lyrics no due of praise. I have consumed my life in idle versifying, and now, as Talib Amuli (God's mercy be upon him) says:

I closed my lips from speaking: you would think
My mouth was once a wound, now long since healed. . . .'

On September 6, 1864, he writes to Tufta:

'Yesterday I sent off a parcel of your verses. I put a one-anna stamp on it and wrote on it, "This is a parcel, not a letter". The post-office clerk told my servant

¹ Literally, 'will it be printed or will it be hidden?'—in the original, 'chapega' (with 'a') or 'chupega' (with 'u')? In the Urdu script the short vowels are generally not written.

² i.e. I love Persian poetry. The city of Isfahan is the symbol of his beloved [Persian poetry], the sword of whose glance wounds her lover's heart.

to post it in the box for letters. He can't read, and did as the clerk told him. The words, "This is a parcel, not a letter" constitute an acceptable certificate: so if the postman there demands the letter-post fee you can refer him to that.'

From the next words it seems that Tufta was contemplating coming to Delhi and had asked Ghalib if he could arrange for him to rent a suitable place for him to stay.

'The house is near mine, and near Hakim Mahmud Khan's, and there is a druggist's shop and other shops nearby. You can rent it for two and a half rupees. But the landlord won't promise to hold it available for more than a week. "After that, if your visitor doesn't come, I'm free to let it to anyone else," he says.

'About Rampur, the short answer is this. I can't write to the Nawwab, nor can I write to you *why* I can't write. Get on the train and come here, and I'll tell you about it.'

On September 17, 1864, he writes to Alai:

'Well, Maulana Alai, the Nawwab Sahib [Alai's father] has given you two months' leave. I'm not making that up. Mirza Ali Muhammad Beg has told me personally that the Nawwab has told you, "That matter is over and done with now; by all means you can go to Delhi. I give you leave to spend anything from two weeks to two months there". So why haven't you come? You have the Lord's blessing, and your lord's [i.e. father's] acceptance of your request; so why this idleness and indifference on your part? If my informant's information is wrong, then you write and tell me what the real state of affairs is.

'Mirza Yusuf Ali Khan Aziz (whom you invited) and Mahdi Husain (whom your father sent for) left for Loharu yesterday, taking Mirza Abdul Qadir Beg's family along with them.'

On October 14, 1864, he writes to Tufta:

'You're quite right when you say that you've sent me a lot of manuscripts which I haven't yet corrected, but don't get the idea that it's only your odes that I've put aside. It's the same with the Nawwab Sahib's [of Rampur] ghazals. You know as well as I do what the rains have been like, and you also know that I don't live in a house of my own, but in a rented one. The rains started in July. Hundred of houses in the city have collapsed, and the rains are of a novel kind. It rains two or three times a day, and every time it does it falls so heavily that the water runs in streams everywhere. The sitting room with the balcony—the place where I rise and sit, and sleep, and wake, and live, and die—hasn't collapsed, it's true, but its roof is like a sieve, and there are bowls and basins and spittoons all over the place [to catch the water leaking from the roof]. I've

put the inkwell and books in the small room off the store-room. The landlord doesn't do anything about repairs. It's as though I've been living in Noah's Ark these last three months. But now deliverance has come and both the Nawwab Sahib's ghazals and your odes shall be attended to.

'Mir Badshah came to see me and I learnt from him that all was well with you. Mir Qasim Ali hasn't been to see me. For the last two days Nawwab Mustafa Khan [Shefta] has been here, and I've met him once. He's staying on here for the present. He's ill, and Ahsanullah Khan is treating him. He's already been bled and had leeches applied. Now they're thinking about purging him. Otherwise he's quite all right. I've grown very weak, and am as good as confined to bed. If any stranger comes and courtesy demands that I get up, then I do. Otherwise I lie about all the time, and write letters and correct verses as I lie. Alas, alas!'

From the next letter to Alai, dated November 3, 1864, it is evident that Alai had eventually taken advantage of his father's permission to spend some time away from Loharu, and equally evident that he did not take the opportunity to visit Ghalib:

'No letter from Lahore, and none from Loharu either. I went on waiting—or, rather, hoping, with all the capacity for stupidity which I possess. And now when it's evident that I can no longer expect anything, this gives me a chance to pour out my complaints against you. Yes, I know that in reply to each complaint you'll write a pamphlet as long as the *Tuti Nama*¹ and set out a thousand reasonable reasons. But I'm enjoying myself in anticipation and waiting to see what you have to say.

'You got your grandmother to write,² and your aunt to write, and Ghalib to write, and then when you got permission, you didn't come! Does that make nonsense, or doesn't it? Right, my son, write something on this point. . . .

'Give my blessing to the children, and write and tell me how they all are. My regards to Mir Jan Sahib. That'll be the day when you come to Delhi and I hear from your own lips what happened in Lahore. . . .'

In November he had news that the Nawwab of Rampur had fallen ill. Despite occasional differences, he had helped Ghalib a great deal, and Ghalib had a genuine regard for him. He writes on November 8, 1864 in some distress:

'Ever since I heard from elsewhere of Your Highness's indisposition, He Who knows the unseen is witness to the distress which I and my wife and my son Husain Ali have experienced. For a whole day no food was cooked in my house, and all of us fasted through both the morning and the evening meal. In the end this alarming news proved to be false, and we recovered our composure.

¹ A long narrative work.

² To Alai's father, persuading him to allow Alai to leave Loharu for a while.

But we shall not feel fully at ease until I hear the good tidings that you have recovered and bathed, and I have sent you a chronogram to celebrate the occasion.¹ For the moment all I ask is a reply to this letter, telling me the true position about your ailment. . . .

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

This letter brought a reply on November 12th, and on November 13, 1864 Ghalib wrote again:

'I cannot tell you how I passed the days and nights between the 1st and the 11th of November. It is a long way to Rampur, and I am ill, and my resources are inadequate; but if there had been a mail-coach leaving Delhi for Rampur I would not have hesitated a moment, but would have come to attend upon you. There is no electric telegraph to bring me speedy news of your health. So all I could do in my agitation was send off a letter to you on the 8th of this month. God's kindness and my perfect spiritual guide's (Your Highness's) missive brought me out of the vortex of distress before there was time for a reply to my letter to come. Your kind letter came yesterday, November 12th, and I felt that life had returned to me. . . .'

On November 27, 1864, he wrote again:

'My tongue cannot express and my pen cannot write of the anxiety and care in which I have passed the last week to ten days. Every day until evening my eyes were on the door, watching for the postman to come with a letter from Your Highness. At length God showed his kindness, and my life began anew; for last night, some two hours after dark the postman brought your kind letter. When I read it, a new spirit entered me and my blood coursed through all my veins. To sleep, to go to bed, was out of the question. I sat down by the light and began to write verses of congratulation. Only after I had written seven couplets, including the chronogram of your restoration to health, did I sleep. Now I have written it out in fair and am despatching it.'

The Nawwab seems to have been genuinely appreciative. On January 25, 1865, he writes to Ghalib:

'I received the poem of congratulation on my restoration to health which you sent me, and the joy of recovery increased twofold. What other man can write such verse and such chronograms? It is the truth that Almighty God made you without peer or equal; no matter to what field one turns one's gaze, you are the one, unsurpassed master. . . . Truly such men as you are not to be found. The skies revolve for thousands of years to produce a man of such perfection.

¹ Muslim usage prescribes bathing after recovery from illness, and the occasion is one for celebration. Cf. p. 109.

May God grant you long life and health and prosperity, and long may the world draw benefit from your presence. . . .'

On November 28, 1864,¹ the day after he had sent off his congratulatory poem to the Nawwab, he wrote to Safir Bilgrami:

'Blessing from an old man of seventy. Today as I lay here I have reckoned it up, and found that this is my seventieth year. Alas:

The years of my life are now ten and three score;
At the most I can last only three or four more.'

He goes on to praise a story which Safir Bilgrami had written and sent for him to see, after which he notes how often the calligrapher has committed mistakes in copying it out. 'That is the calligrapher's ignorance. May God strike down these perverse calligraphers. They didn't rest until they had ruined my diwan and *Panj Ahang* and *Mihr i Nimroḡ*. . . .'

On December 3, 1864 he writes to Sayyah, complaining that Sayyah's patron, Mir Ghulam Baba Khan, does not seem to understand what Ghalib wants:

How does it come about that nobody understands what I say?

There is no man who understands my tongue;
What words shall I address, then, to my friends?

Remember, the point was that I wanted to get *Qāte i Burhan* reprinted, and to get the Nawwab Sahib [Mir Ghulam Baba Khan] to help me by buying two hundred copies. Well, he has presented me with a watch. I ask you, what good is that to me? For four days I've been contemplating sending it back. Then I thought he would be offended. So in the end I decided to keep it and thought that once the book is printed I'd send off a hundred to a hundred and fifty copies to him. Along with this letter you'll receive a letter to the Nawwab thanking him for the watch. And I may tell you that the key to the watch hasn't come. Presumably by some oversight it got left behind there.'

The letter to the Nawwab reads as follows:

'Revered Nawwab Sahib, graced by all good qualities and bountiful to all men, may Exalted God preserve you in His care. I salute you with the forms which the usage of the Prophet of Islam approves, and prayers for your wealth and prosperity are ever upon my tongue. And then I thank you with every hour and every minute that passes for the gift of the watch. First you are a friend,

¹ The letter is dated 1863, but *Mihr* shows that this must be a mistake for 1864.

then a noble, then a Sayyid, and with all these three things in view I hold your gift very dear and treasure it as I treasure the sight of my eyes. May the God Who adorns the world preserve you and bring you aid and comfort with every hour that passes. It appears that at the time it was despatched the key was, by some oversight, not included. Well, one can be made here. My greetings, and a thousand respects to you. He who seeks his friends' good will, Ghalib.'

On December 9, 1864, he writes to Tufta:

'Last year I was ill, but I was not found wanting in serving my friends. Now I am dead, and a dead man cannot do anything. I've given up calling upon the Delhi authorities—the Commissioner, the Deputy Commissioner and so on—but I *have* to meet the Deputy Commissioner once a month because he has charge of the treasury, and if I didn't meet him he wouldn't issue my pay to my agent. Now the Deputy Commissioner, Mr Decrowther (?) has taken six months' leave and gone to the hills. Mr Rattigan has been appointed in his place. Of course, I had to meet him. He is writing an account of the poets of India in English, and he asked my help. I've borrowed seven books from brother Ziya ud Din Khan and sent them to him. Then he asked me to write out and send him accounts of poets whom I knew well. I sent him accounts of sixteen, limiting myself to men who are still living.'

He then names three of the list—Ziya ud Din Ahmad Khan, Shefta, and Tufta himself—and continues:

'It looks as though after I'd sent this list he must have got his clerk to write to you, and then written to you himself. But I have no information about this: I gather it from what you say in your letter. Now I'll have someone send for his clerk, Maulvi Mazhar ul Haq, and find out all the details. The thing is that the account will be in English, and won't include translations of Urdu and Persian verses. Entries will show only the name of the poet and of his ustad, and the poet's residence, birthplace and takhallus. God grant that you get something out of it; but it looks as though all you're likely to get is the inclusion of your name. Now Mr Rattigan has been made a judge of a small-cause court. Mr Decrowther(?) has returned from the hills and resumed his duties. Mr Rattigan has moved to a place about four miles outside the city. Not to speak of the fact that it's winter, and I'm an old man, it's not easy to get to his place, and besides, I can't see anything worth while coming of it. Anyway, Maulvi Mazhar ul Haq is coming to see me on Sunday, the day after tomorrow. I'll find out from him how things stand, and if a visit or a letter from me seems likely to do you any good, I'll certainly go.'

Five days later, on December 14, 1864 he writes again:

'Come along, Mirza Tufta, and give me a hug. Then sit down and hear what I

have to tell you. On Sunday Maulvi Mazhar ul Haq came and told me everything. The first letter to you was written by his brother, Maulvi Anwār ul Haq, on Mr Rattigan's instructions. Then Mr Rattigan drafted a letter of his own to be sent to you. The four volumes you sent him—your two diwans, the *Dagger of Love* and an account of poets—reached him. He is very pleased, and admires you greatly. He says, "I should imagine that in all India there is no other poet so great as he—with fifty thousand couplets to his credit." What you will gain by his good opinion is a very favourable mention in his book. Beyond that, let's see. And yes, he has it in his jurisdiction to appoint to posts worth fifteen to twenty rupees. If you permit me I can speak to him about this.

"I am in a bad way, and I can't make out why you don't believe me:

To lose one's life is bad, but just as bad
Is to fall prey to your suspicious mind.

My hearing had already given up the ghost, and now my eyesight has grown very weak. All my powers, all that a man possesses, are declining. I can't keep my wits about me at all. My memory's so poor you'd think I'd never had one, and I'm as though I'd never had any aptitude for the art of poetry. The Nawwab of Rampur gives me a hundred rupees a month. Last year I sent word to him to say, "A man must have his wits about him to correct verse, and I do not find that I have. I ask you to excuse me from performing this service, and to reckon what I receive from your court as a return for past services. If you will, count me as your 'sick number',¹ or, if you will, a beggar who lives on your crumbs. And if your bounty is conditional upon my performance of service, then my fate depends upon your will." For a whole year he has sent no verse, but I have received my usual monthly grant up to November. Let's see what happens as time goes on. So far the Nawwab Sahib in his magnanimity keeps sending me my allowance. As for you, my friend, practice—touch wood—has made you perfect. There is nothing that needs correction in your verse. And if you insist willy nilly on believing that your verse still needs correction, then, my dear friend, what will you do when I am gone? I am like the lamp dying at morning, the sun setting behind the mountain's crest. "Verily we are for God, and verily to Him we shall return."

¹ Ghalib uses the English words—in a somewhat adapted form. He means that the Nawwab should continue his allowance, regarding it, if he so chooses, as sick pay.

❁ Chapter 14 ❁

1865

But if Ghalib felt that he was 'the lamp dying at morning, the sun setting behind the mountain's crest', the letters for 1865 are none the less as varied and lively as ever. He seems to have kept in moderately good health throughout the year, despite the inevitable weakness of old age. His friend Alai at last visited him in Delhi. His old patron, the Nawwab of Rampur, died in April, and for a while he was uncertain how much he could expect from his successor. But to his satisfaction, the new Nawwab treated him as well as the old. In October he was well enough to travel to Rampur, staying there for the celebrations of the Nawwab's accession and returning only a few days before the end of December.

On January 5, 1865 he writes to Alai. He begins with a complaint that neither the last days of the Muslim month of Rajab nor the first days of Shaban have brought him a visit:

"Well, sir, Mirza Rajab Beg has died, and you did not mourn him. Shaban Beg has been born, the ceremonies of the sixth day have been held, and you did not come to them. . . .

"My son I don't know how I manage to write you these few lines. Shihab ud Din Khan's illness has taken away the zest of life. I tell you, I wish I could die in his place. May God grant him life, and let me not see the day when I must mourn his loss. O God, grant him health! O God, grant him long life! Three children, and another yet unborn—O God, preserve him to watch over them!"

Fortunately, Shihab ud Din survived his illness. In the same month Ghalib writes again:

"God has had mercy on Ziya ud Din's¹ old age and on my helplessness. My dear Shihab ud Din is safe. Piles and dysentery, and fever and migraine—what varied ills beset him! But now at last he is restored to health in all respects. His weakness will leave him in its own good time. And who could call him strong before, that he should think him weak now? An old man was passing along a lane when he stumbled and fell. "Alas for old age!" he said. He looked around, and when he saw that there was no one about he muttered as he went on his way "and youth was no better, either."

¹ Shihab ud Din's father.