

❁ Chapter 16 ❁

1867

Money matters again preoccupy him as 1867 opens. He writes on January 8, 1867, to the Nawwab of Rampur:

'My lord and guide, thanks to your charity my debts have now been paid, freeing my pension from deduction and myself from distress. Alike with heart and tongue I sing the praises of your bounty and generosity and pray that your wealth and prosperity may endure for ever. Half of my debt was cleared by your earlier gift, and half by the present one. Now I have to say something which I cannot say and yet cannot help saying. If an allowance of fifty rupees a month each for the two boys¹ be made with effect from January 1867, that is the present month of the present year, and sent month by month along with your humble servant's stipend, then your loyal retainer will never need to incur debt again.'

This request was not to be granted during his lifetime.

On January 11th he writes to Zaka:

'My dear, my very life, Maulvi Munshi Habibullah Khan [Zaka], a broken-spirited Ghalib sends you his greetings; and to the light of his eyes and delight of his heart Munshi Muhammad Miran [Zaka's son] he sends his blessing; and himself he congratulates on the good news that he has a worthy son [—i.e. he regards Zaka's son as his own]. His note to me was in handwriting exactly like yours. Tell me, did you write the letter on his behalf, or did he write it himself? Your boy didn't come with you to Hyderabad. Clearly you have sent for him from his home. Write and tell me all the details. Is he the only fruit of the tree of your desire, or has he any brothers and sisters too? Did he come to Hyderabad by himself, or did you send for your whole family? And yes, the name Muhammad Miran ought to mean that you are Sayyids. The reason I ask you so many questions is that I love you so much; it is not idle curiosity.

'Yusuf Ali Khan is a gentleman, and of a very good family. He used to receive a monthly allowance of thirty rupees from the king of Delhi, but the allowance disappeared when the [Mughal] Empire did. He is a poet—he writes in Urdu. He is a man who is always wanting something and impatient to

¹ This perhaps implies that the elder boy, Baqir Ali Khan, was again wholly dependent on Ghalib at this time.

1867

349

get it. He thinks that everything he wants can be obtained with ease. He reads and writes well enough, but has no more learning than that. His father was my friend, and I look upon him as a son. To the extent that my resources permit, I have made him a monthly allowance, but he is a man with a large family and it does not meet his needs. You will just have to ignore his request and not reply. What else can you do? . . .'

He writes to Zaka again on February 15, 1867:

'My brother, I do not know why I feel such faith in you and such love for you. Clearly it has to do with the world of the spirit, for evident causes do not enter into it. . . . I am in my seventy-third year. . . . My memory has gone so completely that one would think I never had one. My hearing had long been defective; now, like my memory, it is gone altogether. For the last month now my state has been such that when friends come to see me, all our conversation, beyond the formal polite enquiries after each other's health, is done by their writing down what they have to say. My diet is practically non-existent. In the morning, crystallized sugar, and the juice of peeled almonds; at midday, meat broth; towards evening four fried meat kababs; and before I sleep, five tolas¹ of wine mixed with an equal quantity of rosewater. I am old and useless, and a sinner and a profligate and a disgrace. Mir Taqi's verse describes me aptly:

The whole world knows me, but my tale
is done.

In short, do not pursue me; I am gone.

Today I was feeling somewhat better. I had another letter to write, and when I opened my box, the first thing I saw was your letter lying there. I read it again and found that there were some points to which I had not replied.'

Zaka must have asked him to explain how he had come to receive his pension from the British, because Ghalib goes on to give the account of his ancestry and family background which we have quoted at length in Chapter 1, following it with a summary account of the honours he had been accustomed to receive at British durbars. He then turns abruptly to another theme. He has received an anonymous letter from Hyderabad in which the writer attempts to estrange him from Zaka. His response is characteristic:

'I am not a man who thinks perversely or whose understanding is at fault; my judgement is sound and not followed by misgivings. When I have once assessed a man, I never need to revise my assessment. I do not keep secrets from my friends. Someone has sent me an anonymous letter through the post from Hyderabad. He had not sealed it well, and in opening it one line got cut

¹ About an ounce.

off from the rest. But the purport is clear all the same. The sender's object was to create bad feeling between us, to make me displeased with you; but by God's power my love for you increased and so did my certainty of your heartfelt love for me. I am enclosing the letter exactly as it is and sending it off to you. On no account, if you recognize the writing, are you to quarrel with the man who wrote it. I send it you so you will know that thanks to it, I am aware of your advancement and increased salary.'

During the same month his Hindu friend Pyare Lal Ashob had published a small selection of Ghalib's Persian letters, preceded by an Urdu translation of what he had written about Persian grammar in *Panj Ahang*. Ghalib wrote a short foreword which makes it clear that the book was prepared for presentation to 'Macleod Sahib, ruler of the land of the Panjab' [i.e. Lieutenant-Governor], and ends by remarking that

'Urdu was formerly compounded of Arabic, Persian, Hindi and Turkish—these four languages. Now a fifth language, English, has entered into it. See the capacity of Urdu! How sweetly this fifth language extends its influence over it! It has assimilated these languages so well that none of them seems an excrescence upon it.'

On March 13, 1867, he writes to the Nawwab of Rampur of his failing health:

'[My] condition now is past description. My old ailments have increased, and three new ones—vertigo, trembling, and failing sight—have come to join them. I cannot make my own pens; the boys have to make them for me. It is no more a matter of years; only weeks or months of life remain to me.'

He writes again on April 14, 1867:

'I read in the paper the accounts of the . . . exhibition at Rampur and eat my heart out because, alas, I am not there. I live on the upper storey and cannot get down the stairs. And suppose my servants take me in their arms, carry me downstairs and sit me in the palanquin; the palanquin-bearers are off, and I survive the journey to Rampur. I reach there; the bearers take the palanquin to the Benazir Garden and set it down. The palanquin is a cage, and I a captive bird—and that too one that has lost its wings. I cannot walk. I cannot move about. To suppose what I have just written is to suppose the impossible. These things just cannot happen. So I am sending a chronogram [of the exhibition] in three couplets. . . .'

On April 23, 1867, he writes to Sayyah:

'Two days ago I had a letter from you and one from Chote Sahib [Mir Ghulam

Baba Khan]. Your letter enclosed two notes for Rs. 50 each, and I drew Rs. 100. Today I write to inform you and to send my thanks to the Nawwab Sahib. . . . My friend, you must have seen reports of my condition in various newspapers. I am now completely unfit for anything. God forbid that I should tell a lie: my box is full of verses sent to me for correction from fifty different places. . . . Your own pages are among them. The day I feel a little better I will attend to them all.'

A few weeks later, on June 11, 1867, he again has to write to Sayyah to the same effect:

'My friend, you will get an idea of the state I am in from the fact that I can no longer write letters. I used to write them as I lay here, but now my hands tremble so much and my sight is so weak that I can't do even that. And when this is the state I am in, then tell me, sir, how can I correct verses? And that too in this weather, when the heat is enough to melt the brains in your head and the sunlight is so intense that you cannot bear to look at it. I sleep in the courtyard at night, and in the morning two servants take me up in their arms and bring me through the hall into a small, dark cell where they set me down. I lie all day in this gloomy corner, and then at evening the two servants again take me as usual to my bed in the courtyard. Your ghazals, Mir Ibrahim Ali Khan Bahadur's ghazals, Mir Alam Ali Khan Bahadur's ghazals, Hakim Mir Ahmad Hasan Sahib's ghazals, and I don't know who else's ghazals are all laid aside in one place. If I live on a few days more and emerge safely from this heat I will attend to them all.'

'The position about my portrait is that I have an artist friend who made a sketch of my face and took it away. That was three months ago. To this day he hasn't returned to sketch my body. I made up my mind to submit even to having my photograph taken. I have a friend who does this work. He came to see me at Id, and I asked him to take my likeness. He promised that he would come next day or the day after, and bring with him the things he needed to take it. . . . That was more than four months ago, and he still hasn't come to this day.'

'I received Agha Ghulam Husain's short poem. A few couplets in it called for correction. But who was to do it? I was too involved in my own troubles. In the end a loyal shagird of mine, Munshi Hargopal Tufta, came by rail to see me. I pointed out the places where correction was needed, and he altered the verses exactly as I told him. I sent the corrected poem to [the paper] *Akmal ul Mutabe*. Next week you too will see it.'

From a letter dated June 16, 1867, to another correspondent, Prince Bashir ud Din, grandson of the famous Tipu Sultan, it seems that despite all difficulties he had in fact managed to have his photograph taken:

'Your kind letter came today, Tuesday, 16th June 1867, at twelve o'clock. I looked at the envelope and felt that I saw the white gleam of the dawning of my hopes. I was sitting with nothing on near a little grass screen.¹ When I read the letter, it put me in such a state that had I been dressed I would have torn my clothes, and had I not valued my life I would have dashed my brains out. How else should I support the grief I felt? I had a portrait of myself done, and sent it to you. I got . . . Shihab ud Din to address the envelope in English and sent it off unstamped. But I find no acknowledgement in your letter. It seems that the mail has been robbed and my lifeless form torn to pieces. . . .'

It was perhaps in the same month of June 1867² he wrote to Amin ud Din Ahmad Khan—the last letter to him we possess. 'How can I describe what things are like here? In the words of Sadi—God's mercy be upon him—

There is no water left except the lustre
That gleams upon the unmatched pearl.

Night and day it rains fire or dust,³ and one can neither see the sun by day nor the moon by night. Flames leap up from the earth and sparks fall from the sky. I wanted to describe something of the heat, but my reason said, "See here, foolish man! Your pen, like an English match, will burst into flames, and burn up the paper." My brother, the hot wind is a torment, and when from time to time it ceases, that is even harder to endure.

'Anyway, I turn my back now on the warmth of the weather to write of the warmth of a meeting with a youngster exiled from his own country. For that is a warmth which does not burn the soul, but lights up the heart. Two days ago Farrukh Mirza came. [Farrukh Mirza, son of Alai, and grandson of Amin ud Din Khan.] His father was with him. I said to him, "Well, sir, how are we related? What relation am I to you and what are you to me?" He replied with joined hands [a mark of respect], "Sir, you are my grandfather and I your grandson." Then I asked him, "Has your allowance [from Loharu] come?" He replied, "Respected sir, my daddy's has come, but mine has not." I said, "You'll get it when you go back to Loharu." He replied, "Sir, I tell daddy every day that we should go back to Loharu; why leave Loharu, where he is lord and master, to mingle with the ordinary citizens of Delhi?"

'Glory to God! A mere tot of a boy,⁴ and he has such good sense and sound disposition! It is for this beauty of behaviour and goodness of character that I call him Farrukhsiyar.⁵ He is a companion beyond compare. Why don't you send for him? But, my brother, you follow in the path of the late Ghulam Husain

¹ Cf. p. 232, n. 3.

² The month is definite; the year is Mihr's conjecture.

³ Delhi commonly has dust-storms in the hot season, sometimes so intense as to make the day quite dark.

⁴ If Mihr's dating is correct, Farrukh Mirza would be six years old at this time.

⁵ Cf. p. 332 above.

Khan, who never let Zain ul Abidin [Arif] and Haidar Hasan and their children draw near him.'

(Mihr explains, 'Ghulam Husain Khan Masrur was married to Ghalib's wife's sister, and was the father of Zain ul Abidin Khan Arif. He abandoned his wife . . . and children, and married another lady. . . .') Ghalib continues:

'A son of such wisdom and extensive learning as Ala ud Din Khan, and a grandson so understanding and who speaks so sweetly and wittily as Farrukhsiyar—these two are God's gift to you—one larger bounty and one smaller. . . . Today is June 22nd. The sun has already passed into Cancer. The summer solstice has passed, and the days grow shorter. Let your wrath and displeasure too diminish day by day.'

On July 3, 1867, he writes to Maududi:

'What you heard to the effect that Ghalib's health has improved slightly, is completely false. I was already feeble, and now I am half-dead. I cannot write letters. I have got one of the boys to write these few lines, taking them down at my dictation, poor fellow. You are a Sayyid and a man to be revered. Pray for me that I may not live past the end of my seventy-third year, and that if I am to live some days more, Exalted God may bestow on me a measure of health so that I may go on serving my friends.'

On August 25, 1867, he writes to Sayyah. He explains to him, as he had to others, why he could not write his own letters, and continues:

'I don't employ a clerk. If a friend or acquaintance calls, I get him to write the replies to letters. My friend, I have only a few more days to sojourn in this world. . . . I have had a detailed account of my condition printed in the newspapers, and asked to be excused answering letters and correcting verses. But no one has acted accordingly. Letters still come in from all sides demanding answers to previous letters and enclosing verses for correction; and I am put to shame. Old, crippled, completely deaf and half blind, I lie here day and night, a chamber-pot under the bed and a commode near it. I don't have occasion to use the commode more than once in every three or four days; and I need the chamber-pot . . . five or six times in every hour.

'The Indian portrait-artist friend I had has left Delhi. There is an Englishman who does portraits, but I haven't the strength to go downstairs from the roof and into the palanquin and to his house, and sit on a chair for an hour or two hours and get my portrait done and still get home alive. I was very sorry to hear how a son had been born to you and had died. My friend, I know exactly what such a loss means. In my seventy-one years I have had seven children,

both boys and girls, and none lived to be more than fifteen months. You are still young. May Exalted God give you patience, and another son in his place.'

An undated letter—the last of his letters to Qadr Bilgrami—perhaps belongs to this time:

'Sir, your humble servant has given up writing verse and given up correcting it. The sound of it he can no longer hear, and the sight of it he cannot bear. I am seventy-five [sic] years old. I began writing verse at fifteen, and babbled on for sixty years. My odes have gone unrewarded and my ghazals unpraised. As Anwari says:

Alas! there is no patron who deserves
my praise.

Alas! there is no mistress who inspires
my verse.

I look to all poets and to all my friends not to write my name in the roll of poets and never to ask my guidance in this art.

Asadullah Khan, poetically named Ghalib, entitled *Najm ud Daula* [Star of the Realm]—God grant him His forgiveness.'

A little earlier, in a letter of August 19, 1867, to the Nawwab of Rampur, comes the first mention of a matter that was to bring him much distress in the months to come:

'That slave bought by your gold, Husain Ali Khan, is now engaged to be married, to a girl of his own family—that is, to the grand-daughter of the full-brother of the late Nawwab Ahmad Bakhsh Khan. The month of Rajab has been fixed for the marriage. And it is in your hands, in my old age and penury, to preserve my honour.

Whom should I tell my need if not to you?
For I must speak; there is no other way.
May you live on another thousand years,
And every year have fifty thousand days.'

It is noticeable that whereas in his letter of January 8, 1867 he had asked (without success) for an allowance to be made to both of his 'boys', he now speaks only of Husain Ali Khan. Perhaps it was at this time, therefore, that Baqir Ali Khan, the elder of the two brothers, had secured employment at the court of the Raja of Alwar. From a letter which Ghalib wrote to him later in the year, on November 16, 1867, we know that he had then been in Alwar for some time, and that his family was, at any rate at that time, not with him. Ghalib writes:

'It is a long time since your letter came, but you did not write your address.

You only wrote "Alwar". So how was I to reply? Now at last Shihab ud Din Khan has told me your address, and so I am writing to you. Jiniya Begam [Baqir Ali Khan's eldest daughter] is well, and often comes to see me. All is well at your home. I sent [your wife] your allowance for October. Mirza Husain Ali Khan presents his respects.'

On September 5, 1867, he writes again to the Nawwab of Rampur:

'I was honoured by the receipt of your kind letter. I found that it contained your command in connection with the marriage of Husain Ali Khan to submit in brief what it was I desired. I obey your command and submit. in brief, I am a beggar that sits in the dust at your palace door, and he is your slave. In more detail, I have neither cash, nor goods, nor possessions, nor property, and my wife has not a single, small item of gold or silver jewellery. None is prepared to give me an advance or a loan. I ask you to grant me money, so that this task may be accomplished and a poor old man not put to shame among his fellows.

'The second matter is, that I receive as alms from your court a hundred rupees a month, and as a pension (in lieu of an estate) from the British government sixty-two rupees, eight annas a month. He Who knows the unseen knows that I live with great difficulty on this income. How am I to support my boy's bride?¹ Let Husain Ali Khan be granted an allowance, but let it be issued not in his name, but in that of his wife, Husn Jahan Begam, daughter of Akbar Ali Khan. And let the receipt for it be sealed with her seal. The amount of the grant for the expenses of the wedding and the amount of the allowance must be left to my lord and master's magnanimity and to this wretched cripple's fortunes.'

The Nawwab replied in a somewhat pompous, half-Persian style on September 18, 1867:

'Since your kind self did not commit to writing the amount of the expenses of the marriage which he proposes, I therefore impel my pen to write in this missive of love, asking that first you inform me of the expenses of the marriage; when these are once ascertained, then an appropriate dispensation for this special occasion will be put into effect, because, as is demanded by our mutual affection and ancient amity, the writer keeps always in view that in matters that are fitting, he act for his kind friend's pleasure.'

Ghalib wrote again on September 23, 1867:

'I was honoured by the receipt of your kind letter. Great is God! Your Highness's sympathy and affection and graciousness to his humble servant have reached such heights that none before him save Sultan Sanjar among the kings of Persia and Shahjahan among the kings of Hindustan can have shown such

¹ When a young man is married he generally brings his bride home to live under his parents' roof.

care and solicitude for his servants. Baqir Ali Khan was married to a girl of Nawwab Ziya ud Din's family. He [Ziya ud Din] spent two thousand rupees on food and clothing [to celebrate the wedding] and my wife spent two thousand five hundred rupees, including five hundred in jewellery. The father of Husain Ali Khan's bride, Akbar Ali Khan, is a man of our family, but he is not rich; he is in employment. How can I bring myself to say what you should give? I am a beggar, and it is not customary for a beggar to name the sum he begs. I have stated the position about what was spent on the [earlier] marriage in our family. Two thousand or two thousand five hundred rupees would enable us to celebrate the wedding very well. But let me add at the same time that I have not served you well enough to feel that I have the right to ask so much. I will manage the wedding on whatever you see fit to give.'

A note entered by the Nawwab's chief clerk on the back of the envelope in which Ghalib's letter was received reads: 'Presented. No instructions for a reply yet issued. 28th September, 1867.' Nor does Ghalib again refer to the matter until December. But on December 29, 1867, he writes again:

'Today is Saturday, the first of the blessed month of Ramzan. . . . In the month of fasting kings and nobles distribute alms, and if the marriage of the orphan Husain Ali Khan can fall within this dispensation, and money be sent to this poor old cripple, then preparations can be put in hand this month and the marriage ceremony performed in the month of Shawwal. And since in this blessed month the doors of bounty are opened and the beginning of the English year also falls, the twenty-five rupees' monthly allowance of which you have made auspicious mention can be issued to the said Husain Ali Khan as from January 1868, and I would feel that I have won both worlds.'