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I'm Your Gold

Ziaul Moid Khan

When I met Abdul for the first time, I could not believe that he might, financially, be so poor a man that he could not even afford to pay for a packet of common cigarettes. For his personality was that of a shining and luminous man of great knowledge in alchemy and supernatural science apart from an invincible command over six languages including Arabic, Persian, Urdu, English, Hindi and Sanskrit. But he lived in ruins of a building that must have once been very pretty.

The three doors verandah of the big mud house facing west had been seeping the incessant rain for the last three days. At the fall of evening, thunder shower suddenly got a momentum, and the heavy downpour seemed lethal to this dilapidated building that was, now, more vulnerable to the heavy rain. Sixty year old Abdul in a shabby innerwear and underwear squatted on a cot that was lying in the left door of the verandah.

His six children: five sons and a daughter were at different positions in the same verandah. Little Zack, his youngest three year old son, was sitting beside him. Wife Fatima was washing the utensils in the kitchen. A villager, in the morning, had informed that water in all the three major ponds of the village, was overflowing and mixing together. This, usually, happened in this remote village of Northern India.

Out of the three, two ponds were extremely old; while the third one had recently been dug and was deep enough for three elephants standing one above the other to drown easily, they villagers say. Parents refrained their kids from going near this pond. Understandably so, the pond was treacherous and a threat in the rainy season.

Just at the report of thunder, Fatima came out from the kitchen murmuring aloud, "*Jalle jalal tu! Aai bala ko taal tu!*" (O great almighty! Just save us from the impending danger!) The backlash of rain was her reason of worry, as the mud house might collapse due to heavy rain. She repeated the line three times in a row. The thick clay plaster of the house was now giving in and spilling off from its place at the outer walls.

Abdul, musing over the fate of the mud house, stooped from his cot and picked up a small piece of clay from the just fallen soil-plaster, while all the six children were watching in profound silence. He, pensively, muttered some verse in Arabic, breathed on the clay piece, and then threw it into the middle of the courtyard. All the twelve eyes of the kids widened in utter disbelief, when they saw that as soon as the clay piece landed in the courtyard, the heavy shower stopped abruptly. But Abdul remained normal as before.

Around thirty minutes passed and then the rain started again. A fresh piece of clay, Abdul picked up again, and flung in the direction of his earlier shot. The children this time had anticipated the result. They smiled looking at one another, as the rain stopped again. “Though it is direct interference into God’s affair; yet for the sake of the safety of the house I had to do so.” said Abdul to his wife, now sitting there facing him. She nodded in silent affirmation.

“Can’t you prepare a cup of tea?” he asked her. “There is no milk left at home,” She informed. “Then I’ll prefer black tea.” Fatima smiled and went into the kitchen. A little kerosene had to be sprinkled at the chopped wooden pieces in the hearth before lighting the fire. She was putting the kettle onto the stove, when she heard Abdul talking eagerly with someone. Peeping outside, she recognized the face: It was Munshi Ji, her husband’s old time friend, who often came here. There was good tuning and bonding between the two. Both shared the common interest of alchemy and witchcraft.

Munshi Ji, an old fellow of around sixty with a long beard, wheat complexion and thinly built frame, was an avid reader of Urdu literature and alchemy; while Abdul was an alumnus from Anglo Muslim Aligarh University. Both the friends, firmly, believed that gold manufacturing was a possibility and they, whenever got time, were engrossed in their gold making experiment. Years had passed with no result.

“If you can drink black tea, why can’t I?” Munshi Ji said to Abdul insisting on taking the black tea like his friend was doing. After a little haggling, Abdul had to give way. Now both took their cups, sipped, and discussed the progress made in the direction of gold making. “No headway so far.” Abdul said.

Twelve years is not a less time, they were working on the this project: artificial manufacturing of gold; but in vain. Nothing happened by now. Experiment after experiment failed without result. “I’ve come to you with fresh new ideas this time.” Munshi Ji said with beaming eyes. “Every time you come here; you say the same thing.” Abdul took a dig at him. “But this time it is not like that!” he said with surety. “Let’s see at the furnace!” said Abdul.

After the tea and supper, both the friends sat together by the side of a furnace in the living room. The flames from it were rising high increasing the room temperature. In the middle of the room a big rectangular blue table was positioned surrounded by a dozen chairs. The furnace was placed in the extreme right corner. Two chairs had been dragged nearby and were now occupied as both the friends were sitting in them.

The fire now was on the sublime, Munshi Ji broke the ice, “Mercury will make the metal soft; particularly its effect on copper will be surprisingly great, I’m sure.” “But why this phosphorus?” inquired Abdul. “The crystals of red phosphorus will give metal a permanent golden color.” Munshi Ji said. Abdul was not agreed; but he did not say anything at the moment.

Kuthali- the stone pot in the middle of furnace was red hot by virtue of the fire all around it. Abdul put about ten gram copper piece in the pot with tongs. Munshi Ji followed suit and poured the same quantity of mercury into it. A few more elements were mixed. The chemical process started as the metal melted and the pot contents looked like volcanic magma now.

“When to add the phosphorus?” Abdul asked his friend. “Just wait a while!” prompt came the reply. A few minutes passed while both the friends were gazing intently the red hot pot made of stone; but at this time it was burning as a red coal. And the contents inside it, were a liquid form of the alloy metals. When Munshi ji was going to add phosphorus, his host warned him, “I think, it’d not be wise to mix the red powder in this mixture.” “You, just wait and watch!” Munshi Ji said.

Then putting the red powder in a big handled spoon, he extended a long hand and poured it into the *kuthali*; while Abdul was watching the process as a keen observer. BANG!

With a horrible sound, the furnace exploded and the burning coals were scattered all around in the living room. Munshi Ji stumbled and fell backward heavily.

Abdul held his head with both hands, the steel made long handled spoon, still there in Munshi Ji's hand, had –Only God knows how-- struck on his head. Excruciating pain in head, whistling sound in his ears and thick smoke all around! A few moments passed in utter amazement. Then, getting back his nerves, Munshi Ji asked, “Are you fine, Abdul?” Enraged Abdul grabbed his friend's long white beard and called him several names. “I foretold you, you silly old man!” Munshi Ji withdrew in fear, and somehow released his beard from his friend's hold. He was extremely embarrassed, and rushed to the other room. One more experiment to manufacture gold artificially had failed.

Remorseful at his own behavior with his old friend, Abdul was restlessly tossing in his bed. He was trying to sleep; but sleep was far away from him tonight. He regretted that he misbehaved with Munshi Ji who was older in age too. And moreover, he did not ruin the experiment intentionally. They wanted the same result after all: making gold artificially. If ever they get success in their endeavor, they might get a Nobel Prize for such a never before human experiment. But every time he thought he was nearby; something wrong would happen. “Bad luck!” he thought and tried to sleep.

It must be around two o'clock midnight, when he was feeling a little drowsiness after long hours of mental conflict. He remained divided between his good soul and bad one. Eventually, when he decided that he would apologize to Munshi ji early next morning. A little relaxed he felt himself, and now he was sinking slowly in deep sleep.

Ghastly dim light of the kerosene lamp that was the only witness of the pitch dark solitude shrouded the whole sitting room. It was a rectangular room where two chests of drawers in-built in the opposite mud walls, were facing each other. Both of them were filled with piles of books ranging from palmistry to witchcraft; and philosophy to alchemy. Abdul had his interest on a wide range of subjects. Of late he had been inclining towards conjuring. Trying to invoke some dead souls, he'd always desired one of them someday.

All of a sudden, he felt- as though in dream- a little jerk in the cot he was sleeping on. Thinking it all an illusion, or some vision, he remained calm and composed. Then the second jerk he felt and then the third. But so fatigued was he that even after willingness to probe the matter, he could not rise and kept himself tugged inside the sleeping cover with white lily flowers all over it.

He was fond of sleeping prostrate. Tonight also he slept in the same state-with his mouth sunk in the pillow and rest of his front body in touch with the cot. Now it seemed as though someone was pulling the blue bed sheet that he had covered himself with. Abdul clutched his hands onto it tightly. Some irresistible force- perhaps in a dream- was pulling the sheet; but it kept on pulling away with some supernatural force. And finally the whole flying away landed four feet away beside the right side wall under the foot of the chest of drawers.

Irritated, he sat up thinking that it must be Fatima, his wife. His eyes widened in horror and shock, as he saw in the dim light of the kerosene lamp that was well lit on the table: A girl in her early twenties was standing just beside the table with a sly smile on her face. Abdul was horror struck. Her long hair was touching her thighs. Yellowish *salwar-kamiz* gave her a typical grave touch.

Before Abdul could understand anything; she approached him and sat beside him on the cot. It was amazing, she was not breathing; while Abdul was panting. He wanted to run; but his feet froze. He wanted to screech; but his voice stuck in his throat. His whole body was paralyzed to make any movements. Suddenly she leaned over him and put her long nailed hand onto his right shoulder. It gave him a shudder; for her touch was wondrously cold. This left him agape. He glanced her hand, it was death pale. Her face looked like that of a corpse.

He felt shivering to the depth of his bones. Then she put her second hand on his left shoulder. He wanted to release himself; but he felt unable and helpless to resist. Her grip tightened, and she grinned fiercely and waved strangely toward the lamp that blew off leaving the entire living room in pitch darkness. Abdul was still gasping for breath; while she was leaning more and more over him. Eventually he was down under her weight.

He could feel her bare body; and the movements of her ice cold hands in all the nooks and corners of his own thin body. Soon she was in full command, and he was there just a

helpless creature. When the last moment came, she put her mouth very close to his ears and whispered, “I’M YOUR GOLD!” With the release of the last sweat of his energy, he felt his entire body to be in North Pole. Slowly and steadily he was getting drowsy. Then he felt his body light as a flower; but he was too tired to get up, a strange darkness surrounded him from all quarters. And he seemed to be in the deep cradle of sleep.

Next morning, when Abdul asked after Munshi Ji, he was informed that he had, already, left for his village early in the morning on a pretext of some urgent piece of work. But, Abdul was not thinking about him anymore, for the girl’s face had still been haunting his memories. “What was she: a beautiful witch or some critter in the attic?” he asked himself. He did not have the answer. “Some mysteries should remain mysteries only: like the gold-making and the critter in the vision last night.” He thought. All of a sudden he recollected her words, ‘I’m your Gold’ and became thoughtful again but without an answer.

Later, when Abdul told me this narrative, I was sure this must be the brainchild of his genius mind. He was, no doubt an eccentric scientist whose mind could go to any realms of unknown horizons. Though I remained courteous and assuaged him that one day he would be successful in the gold-making research and of course the Nobel Prize too. But now it would not be possible because the man is no more. He was found drowned in one of the three ponds, the deepest one of the village a few years after this incident. But he’d, beforehand, burnt all his books on alchemy; Munshi Ji, still believes in this theory and continues his experiments in Gold making, and misses Abdul a lot.