

[*The Wedding Bicycle* was written some time before 1979. It was suggested by the observation of dowry and marriage customs in rural East Pakistan, now Bangladesh. The village of Mathurapur is (or was, if the Kushiya River has finished its job of washing it away) a real village where I lived when I was not at school in Dacca. The characters and incidents of the story are, of course, the product of my imagination. JRC/MN]

THE WEDDING BICYCLE

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Altaf Husain Khan sat on a thwart of his boat staring unhappily through the humid darkness towards a dim patch of light some distance up the canal. It was the glow of a lantern placed on Abdul Hamid's landing to guide unfamiliar boatmen through Mathurapur's maze of waterways. But Altaf's boatman did not need a light. He had worked for the Khans many years and he knew every ditch and bamboo brake in the village. At night, his fingertips on the poling cane were his eyes.

"Do not be anxious," drawled the boatman. "We shall be there before the bridegroom. These high-family fellows are always late, even when they are hungry."

His pole struck the muddy canal bank with a lazy sucking sound.

Altaf was silent. He was thinking about Sufiyya, imagining her dressed in a rich bridal sari sitting in the women's room surrounded by female relatives and teasing village girls.

“We did not expect you,” continued the boatman in a warm voice. Since boyhood, he had been Altaf’s village mentor. “Your mother said it would be better for you to stay at the University.”

Altaf bowed his head. He was remembering Sufiyya’s brief letter and he did not want the boatman to see his face. The canal at night was a black tunnel of water amid the dense foliage, but Altaf knew boatmen could see where ordinary folk cannot.

The letter had arrived in Dacca only yesterday, but it had thrown Altaf into a panic and ripped his academic world from its moorings. He threw up his studies and rushed to catch the night mail-train to Sylhet. During the tedious twelve-hour journey, he had read the letter a hundred times, searching it for every possible meaning.

“I had put off writing to you of my betrothal because I hoped it might not be concluded,” it ended. “I must obey my father’s will. Perhaps, it is wrong of me to inform you, but I shall be married on the tenth of Sraban. Do not come...”

Each word left Altaf more miserable and more perplexed. There had been no hint of Sufiyya’s betrothal last winter when he was home from the University on vacation. He had thought that Sufiyya’s father Abdul Hamid had regarded him with favor. After all, he was being educated in Dacca, his father was the most affluent man in the village, and his record had been sober and good.

But something had happened. Altaf detected it in his father’s surprise at his sudden arrival on the morning of Sufiyya’s wedding. His mother was tearful and uncommunicative, for she had been partial to Sufiyya. No one in the Khan household would talk about the wedding. However, in the seclusion of the canal the family servant was more informative.

“Abdul Hamid is getting himself a real aristocrat for a son-in-law,” the boatman commented as he poled away from a stump. “There are plenty of honest husbands to be found in our quarter of the world, but Abdul Hamid

must fly to the sky for his daughter and marry into the kin of the Chaudhuris.”

He spat to emphasize his scorn.

“But he has overreached himself. His wife says he has had to pay a big price for the Cbaudhuri, too big for the mouth of his purse.”

“Which Chaudhuris are they?” asked Altaf, brushing aside a flotilla of sluggish mosquitoes.

“Vulture Chaudhuris from Tarapur.”

Altaf felt the smirk on the boatman’s lips. Rumor had it that the Chaudhuris of Tarapur village had little else in the world but their aristocratic name, which they had taken to bartering in profitable marriages. Several generations of spendthrifts had evaporated their estate and doubtless Abdul Hamid’s modest acreage would disappear just as fast. Altaf slapped his forehead desperately.

“Why would Sufiyya’s father go to them?”

The boatman stopped poling and stood silhouetted against the yellow shafts of light coming from the landing a few yards away around a clump of bamboo.

“To spite your father, I think.”

“My father is Abdul Hamid’s friend.”

“Rivalry is greatest among friends and saints.”

He paused leaning close to Altaf.

“It is because of women’s chatter,” he whispered.

“My wife told me that Sufiyya’s father is angry with your father for something he said about Sufiyya when...” and he became more confidential, “...when your mother mentioned to him what a good match Sufiyya and you would make. Your father grew very angry and told her he had other plans. He said that he was not spending thousands of rupees on his son’s education to marry him to an unschooled village girl. He would find a bride who would bring prestige and honor to the Khan family. My good woman has an unstoppable mouth. She told Abdul Hamid’s wife and when he heard it from her, he exploded and swore that he would show up Bara Khan.

“So he ran like a sacrificial goat to the Tarapur Chaudhuris, who thrive on such matters. After all, any Chaudhuri in-law, even a Tarapur Chaudhuri, is an unbeatable ornament in a house, better even than your father’s iron roof.”

Altaf knew that his father held proud ambitions for him, including a high marriage, but Altaf had thought that a fine B.A. result next year would make him indulgent enough to agree to make a proposal to Sufiyya’s father. Had he not in his great joy and pride given him a most expensive gold wristwatch after passing his Intermediate examinations in the first division? It was a question of time, but after tonight, there would be no more time.

“Didn’t anyone try to reason with him?” Altaf asked.

“Who can reason with a man whose pride has been wounded? He is determined to buy glass with gold... if he has as much gold as he told the Chaudhuris. In any case, he would not have it much longer.” The boatman straightened up and poled the boat sharply towards the light.

The boat shuddered slightly as it touched the lashed palm trunks of the landing. Snatches of laughter, taunting Altaf’s ears, glided under the thick black masses of dripping canalside foliage. Several young men stood smoking and joking, away from the insect-collecting lamp on the path that skirted a small lawn between the landing and Abdul Hamid’s thatched compound. They were villagers and Altaf knew them all. He stepped ashore and stood for a moment looking at the grotesque play of the hot lantern light on the crazily-angled wedding arch that had been erected on the path to the guesthouse. Its columns were banana-plant trunks and upon its paper-covered bamboo lintel, the welcoming word *Swagatam* painted in bold purple Bengali letters winked mockingly at him in the wavering light. In a short while, it seemed to announce, another bridegroom borne in a draped palanquin would pass from the landing, under that arch, and into the guesthouse to be married to Sufiyya. The *Swagatam* was

not for Altaf Husain Khan. Altaf winced and fought down a renegade desire to flee back to Dacca and the bland indifference of his books.

At that moment, a swarm of shouting children waving a string of firecrackers dashed out from behind the house and onto the lawn. There was the ruddy flame of a match in a circle of round faces and then a series of bright staccato explosions cracked the moist night air and sputtered defiance at a fragment of moon struggling to overtop a low layer of clouds. Altaf swore at their thoughtless merriment and moved up the path to the guesthouse.

Abdul Hamid's guesthouse was already crowded from wall to whitewashed wall when Altaf entered. Since the bridegroom was a "foreigner" from another part of the district, the entire village belonged to the bridal party and was supposed to be seated before the arrival of the groom's party. The moderately-sized room was flooded with the naked white brilliance of a pump-light. The villagers were dressed in their finest and looked expectant. The elders had been enjoying their hookahs for some time and a heavy pall of tobacco smoke veiled the roof beams obscuring the details of the paper-and-cloth decorations.

Abdul Hamid was sitting in the midst of the elders. His grey-bearded face was aglow, presumably with the satisfaction of having achieved a social coup and a march on Bara Khan, Altaf's father. But at moments when he thought no one was looking, it plunged into an abyss of worry and apprehension. He took no notice of Altaf when the student walked in but deliberately deepened the attention he was giving to the many words of Bara Khan. As the richest man in the village, Bara Khan was of course the most interesting conversationalist in the room and no one ever thought it advisable to interrupt him while he was speaking. There was no hint of friction between Bara Khan and his host; rivalry became improper only when carried on openly.

Impiously, Altaf thought them both vain and stupid. Worst of all, their vanities were costing him Sufiyya. For years, ever since they had played together as small children in the village courtyards, he had kept her lithe image tucked in a corner of his breast. The change from child to young girl had forced Sufiyya more and more to keep to the confines of her own homestead, as any well brought-up girl should do. But on the day Altaf had gone away to the University, she had secretly brought him rice cakes. After that, they had rarely spoken, but Altaf could remember the exact tone and coloring of every word she had used in his hearing. And where their tongues were bound by propriety, on rare occasions their eyes had met.

Altaf sat down as far from his father and the elders as possible. He folded his hands and stared at the throbbing dark veins that wove patterns under their skin. He heard the titter of the women in the next room and he felt unspeakably sad. If there were only some way he could prevent the wedding! But tradition sat as heavily upon him as it did the others in the room and gave little room for dramatic action.

He had no idea how long he had been sitting in that position when he heard someone hear him mention that the groom was late. This was not unusual but the villagers were much irritated because they were eager to see real Chaudhuris in their midst. Never, in the memory of any man in the room, had a Chaudhuri married someone from Mathurapur. The local gossip had been exhausted and the room lapsed into a discontented silence. Everyone was too distracted by curiosity and a sense of history to try to maintain the semblance of a conversation. Even Bara Khan became quiet. The room was stuffy with smoke, humidity, cooking odors, and the animal smell that always pervades a company of ox-using farmers no matter how well-scrubbed they are.

Altaf glanced at his watch. It was nearly nine o'clock. He began to nurture a hope that the boat bearing the groom's party had sunk on the way.

However, the splash of poles and the bumping of boats in the canal shattered his optimism. There was a general stir among the wedding guests and some of the younger guests stretched and went outside. A moment later, there were shouts from the boatmen: "Lights! Bring lights! Is everyone asleep when the groom arrives? Bearers, hurry! The Chaudhuri groom has arrived!"

The palanquin bearers who had been lounging on the veranda outside the guesthouse picked up the curtained chair and padded noiselessly down to the water's edge. Inside, the company burst into a confusion of activity. Excited chatter debated last-minute seating arrangements. Supplies of incense and *pan* leaf were renewed. A small boy ran into the room with fresh tobacco for the hookahs. In the women's quarters, there were high-pitched orders, and the delicate clash of bangles and bracelets danced atop much constrained giggling.

Few of the guests had ever seen the bridegroom and by this time, Altaf too had dropped his reserve and was staring with the others at the open rectangle of the doorway now reddening with the light of approaching lanterns. Even the normally impassive village elders, who attended weddings as though they were less important than fish bazaars, found their equanimity disarrayed at the prospect of beholding a groom of Chaudhuri lineage in their village. Any Chaudhuri, even a Tarapur Chaudhuri, would bring fame to Mathurapur.

There was a rustle of cloth on the veranda. In the next instant the bridegroom, Zamir Ali Chaudhuri, clad in a white sherwani and a black karakul cap appeared sharp and angular in the doorway. In accordance with time-honored Bengali Muslim custom, he held a handkerchief before his face. This was supposed to show modesty, but it was somewhat inadequate to conceal his casual air as he ambled straight towards the groom's seat.

"*Assalamu alaikum!*" greeted his father Askar Ali on behalf of the groom's party as he followed his son into the room. He was as flaccid as his son was lean, but both

father and son shared the small sharp eyes and the acquisitive nose which was the hallmark of the Tarapur Chaudhuris and which, denizens of the bazars reported, had been developed through generations of sharp practices.

The villagers returned the greeting bashfully for there was not a one of them, not even the self-made Bara Khan, who was not at least a little awed by the presence of men whose ancestors had once held life-and-death power over the peasantry. Only Altaf remained aloof, but his indifference was not noticed.

After a moment's hesitation, Abdul Hamid stood up enthusiastically to receive his guests of honor and the corpulent elder Chaudhuri allowed himself to be embraced by his rural in-law-to-be. Finishing this demonstration of affection, Abdul Hamid helped Askar Ali to a seat in the section reserved for the groom's party. Askar Ali's son had already taken his place amid the pile of cushions meant for him with disconcerting ease and he sat scowling behind his handkerchief.

"Sraban is a perfect month for weddings in these villages," began the bridegroom's father as he arranged his clothes about him. He had a broad, olive face, at that moment radiant with good will and amiability. "The rains have been good and you have such excellent waterways down here."

Askar Ali was a master of urbane conversation and he prided himself on his ability to make his social inferiors feel comfortable. No sooner had he sat down than he was engaged in a series of light questions about the state of crops, the height of the flood, and the price of cloth which he assured everyone were his chief concerns. Mathurapur's villagers hung on each word as though they were being pronounced by an oracle. The village's greatest talker, Bara Khan, hardly dared to inject more than acquiescent monosyllables into the stream of pleasantries.

Altaf sensed a growing cordiality replacing the sullen hostility the villagers normally felt for anyone born outside their circle of communities. He felt betrayed, and at

the same time immensely superior. For the name and birth of the Chaudhuris had at least not deceived him. Yet, the knowledge of his superiority could not deter him from looking about the room from figure to figure disconsolately until his gaze rested on his unwitting rival, the aristocratic bridegroom, Zamir Ali Chaudhuri. The black eyes of the groom had been peering over the handkerchief of modesty and darting about the room noting with evident disdain the rustic appearance of his surroundings and the lazy rural dialect being spoken. Altaf disliked him instantly. A wave of fury swept over him at the thought that Sufiyya was being married to that smug gourd. It was so unjust! But he dug his fingernails into his palms and recovered himself.

At a sharp rasp from the officiating imam's throat, the market talk and pleasantries that had engaged the wedding guests quickly sputtered to an end. The imam had been brought over especially from the mosque of a large neighboring village, the local imam not being considered important enough.

Altaf bit his lip. The room was steaming from the large number of guests and the hot monsoon weather. The gay bunting hung limp from the walls. With the subsiding of the male voices in the guesthouse, the murmuring ripple of the women's muted talk in the adjoining room became audible. Self-conscious, the women too fell silent. Altaf knew that in the center of a circle of those women, Sufiyya sat on fresh mats in a swirl of red and gold cloth, her head veiled and bowed, and her voice stilled by modesty. A village girl could not think of protesting her father's choice of her husband.

The wedding was about to begin.

"The contract!" the imam demanded out taking a last puff on a hookah. "We cannot start until we read the contract."

There was a stir among the elders and the wedding contract was handed to the imam. He looked at it imperiously and cleared his throat again.

“Shhh!” someone said and the movements of the women adjusting their listening positions along the dividing screen ceased. The imam straightened his back and applied himself to the document, reading in an uncompromising monotone.

“Sufiyya Begum, daughter of Abdul Hamid Miah, an inhabitant of the village of Mathurapur, Nabiganj Thana... Zamir Ali Chaudhuri, son of Askar Ali Chaudhuri, of the village of Tarapur...”

Altaf’s face darkened as he listened to the words that were sealing Sufiyya away from him. There was nothing he could do. His hurried trip from Dacca had been utter folly. Another bridegroom was sitting in the place of honor at Sufiyya’s house, in the place he had once dreamt of occupying. He cursed Sufiyya for bothering him with the letter and everyone in her family for their blindness. Then, softening, he wondered what she was thinking at that moment. He looked about him. The younger villagers were listening to the reading of the contract with the vapid awe of the uninitiated confronted with a legal jargon they could not fully comprehend. The elders sat back lulled by the imam’s single-toned vocal style. Abdul Hamid was uneasy and appeared preoccupied with his own thoughts. Occasionally he looked up at the document the imam was holding with a shadow of dread in his eyes.

“...the bridegroom is to provide the bride with a suitable pair of earrings, a necklace, and a nose ornament, all of pure gold to the value of two hundred rupees...”

The lists of gifts had begun and the entire bridal party leaned forward. But before they had fully focused their attention, the reading of the dowry for the bride was over. Many started in surprise at its brevity. It was the absolute minimum that Bengali Muslim society permitted a man to give; a poor man would have been expected to give more. What kind of dowry were the Chaudhuris offering? Some of the older men lifted their eyebrows in astonishment and looked towards Abdul Hamid. But he

merely pulled at his beard and did not acknowledge their glances.

“Let us see the dowry that is to be given to the daughter of Abdul Hamid,” said the imam putting down the paper.

Tranquilly, Askar Ali picked up a small bundle of saris and placed it before the imam. From his pockets, he produced the required gold jewelry. Displayed thus, the dowry was more paltry to the eye than to the ear, and the villagers ogled it in disbelief. Some of the younger men snickered while the elders addressed Abdul Hamid expecting him to make some comment or protest. But Abdul Hamid remained silent and would neither look at the dowry nor meet the elders’ gaze. Instead, he shot a fearful glance at the document the imam was holding.

“And now for the gifts of the bride’s family to the groom,” started the imam, cutting short the muttering of the bridal party. At the imam’s words, the interest of the groom’s party quickened visibly. Zamir’s father leaned forward with an unctuous smile on his full lips and he genially mumbled something about the gifts having been amicably agreed upon. The handkerchief Zamir Ali was holding with both hands dropped below his lips and his two hard eyes glittered like small chips of marble in contravention of all the rules of a groom’s behavior at his wedding. Mathurapur’s conservative villagers did not fail to notice this with disapproval. The imam began to read...

With a disarming smile that put the villagers back in humor, Askar Ali followed the imam’s words on a list of the gifts due his son of his own. He checked them off with his thick, soft finger as they were laid down in the center of the room. Abdul Hamid was sitting erect and watching his guests nervously.

As the pile of clothes and utensils grew, Askar Ali’s smile became more fixed and critical. He appraised each item with a merchant’s eye and judging by the expression on his face, he was pleased with nothing. Once or twice, he glanced towards his son as though checking his own

estimate of a particular piece. The villagers gaped in wonder as the heap of goods rose in flashes of metal and colors of cloth under the harsh lights. Never had a groom received such presents at a wedding in Mathurapur!

Suddenly Askar Ali's heavy hand shot out over a piece of folded wool being placed before him. His finger drew down the list he was holding.

"One moment! A minor matter, Brother, about the shawl you are giving my son. This shawl seems to be somewhat inferior to what was promised during the negotiations. Let it not be said that a Sylheti presented his son-in-law with an inferior shawl on the occasion of his wedding. Now, my list says that the value of the shawl is to be sixty rupees. I do not, in my fair judgment, think that this one can be worth more than forty."

Still smiling, Askar Ali Chaudhuri ignored the devastating effect of his words on the assembly and more particularly upon Sufiyya's father who sat before him black with embarrassment. The room was insufferably hot. The villagers squirmed about looking from one elder to another. Abdul Hamid stammered for an instant trying to form a reply, but Bara Khan waved for silence.

"Chaudhuri Sahib, I bought that shawl myself in town," he declared. "It cost fifty-eight rupees and four annas."

Askar Ali appeared surprised that his observation about the value of a mere shawl could have disturbed anyone in the bridal party.

"Of course," he purred. "It seemed to me to be of somewhat less value because I recently purchased one similar to it for forty-two rupees in a Sylhet bazar."

While Altaf wondered aloud to his neighbors whose money Chaudhuri had spent, the face of his father grew livid. Bara Khan was known as the most astute bargainer in seven villages and many entrusted their own town purchases to him. He rose in hot argument at the suggestion that he had been cheated. But the imam and several others calmed him down and made him take his seat. Abdul

Hamid's head swung nervously as though his neck had become a hinge.

The imam continued reading the list and more gifts for the groom were brought out. The village of Mathurapur looked reverently at the pile of goods gathered in the middle of the room. The imam had had to move aside to make room for clothes, brassware, toiletries, embroidered spreads, mirrors, part of a bed (the rest was put outside), and the other paraphernalia of a Bengali household. Never had anyone seen anything like it. One old farmer gasped and whispered to another that the dowry must be worth at least two thousand rupees. And more was still coming out! Everyone wondered at Abdul Hamid who must have spent every last anna of the cash that he had received from his jute and rice crops, for he was known as one who would not incur debt even to harass his neighbors with petty lawsuits.

After a large carved chest was placed beside the gilt hookah, Abdul Hamid wearily signed to the imam that that was all. He looked at his guests apprehensively.

The elder Chaudhuri smiled cordially at the massed array of Abdul Hamid's wealth, but his eye was unimpressed. Once again, he drew his finger ominously down the list and finding the item he wanted tapped the paper. His smile turned to a leer of accusation. The whole gathering guessed something was amiss, for to their horror the bridegroom himself made a move to speak. Abdul Hamid shrank back trembling while Askar Ali placed a fleshy hand on his son's knee and restrained him from this ultimate violation of wedding etiquette. Everyone in the room leaned forward in an agony of anticipation. The women were absolutely silent and the smoky air of the room oozed electricity. But no one was prepared for the outrage which followed.

"There seems to be one major item missing," Askar Ali Chaudhuri began, "and you know, brothers, that we Chaudhuris cannot sign a document which has not been

completely fulfilled. That would not be honorable. We have come here trusting in your good faith.”

He was displaying his copy of the list of the dowry before the imam’s nose.

“In the marriage agreement there is distinct mention of a bicycle. A genuine imported, completely new bicycle. A significant item. I do not see any bicycle among the gifts offered here.”

The elder Chaudhuri glanced about the room with theatrical disappointment written on his fallen face.

Abdul Hamid’s beard dropped to his chest. He seemed to shrivel as he sat the center of everyone’s appalled gaze. His throat swallowed convulsively as he strained to reply.

“If your honor will be patient,” he faltered. “We have supplied everything else. After three thousand rupees, it is only a matter of four or five hundred... Your son comes of a very ancient... Excuse...”

He stopped unable to continue and buried his face in his hands. He had tried valiantly to secure everything the Chaudhuris had demanded of him, but the final outlay for a bicycle had been too much. Bara Khan threw a large arm about his shoulder. Askar Ali’s face was an oval frown. His son was jumping about his cushions making choking sounds. Against the wall, Altaf’s body shook as his temper teetered on the rim of his education and the tradition of his upbringing.

Of a sudden, the discipline of the entire assembly exploded into a shouting dispute. The bolder of the women shrieked their opinions too through the thin partition. As tight as a spring, Altaf sat on his fists and glowered at the groom’s party. Sufiyya’s family and with them Sufiyya had been disgraced before the assembled men of two villages. A vision of Sufiyya shrinking in unspeakable shame slung spears at Altaf’s self-control.

“Bah!” burst out the groom. “Bah! What have we to do in a village of this sort? What kind of wedding is this,

Father? No music, a muddy chicken house to receive us, and now hardly any presents.”

He threw his handkerchief down and waved his long fingers at the heap of presents that covered the center of Abdul Hamid’s guesthouse. Never in their lives had any of Mathurapur’s villagers heard of a groom speaking thus at his own wedding, and the assembly’s tumult was abruptly replaced by a stunned silence over which Zamir Ali’s voice blasted like a tongue of sarcastic flame:

“For an unlettered country girl...”

Askar Ali Chaudhuri was not entirely happy with his son’s intemperate words and he tried to retrieve the situation with a conciliatory speech, but he hardly gotten two words out of his mouth when a scream of rage shook the room.

Still numbed by the sound of the bridegroom’s voice, no one knew how Altaf had arrived in the middle of the presents hurling insults and curses at Zamir Ali’s narrow face in the explicit rural Sylheti dialect. His father looked at him open-mouthed and men of both parties fearing a brawl jumped up between Altaf and the groom. But the spite in his words made them cringe.

“How much is the bicycle you want worth?” Altaf demanded. “I shall stand you surety! No, my word would not be good enough for a Tarapur Chaudhuri. Take my watch. It is gold, worth two hundred rupees. And this American pen. It is worth one hundred rupees, I am sure you could get more.”

He threw the watch and pen into Zamir Ali’s lap contemptuously.

“How much more of your price remains to be paid so that you will not disgrace honest families? One hundred rupees? Two hundred? If my word is not good enough for you, take my clothes and my skin!”

For an instant, Altaf seemed to be on the point of falling upon the groom with fists swinging, in spite of the

men blocking his way. Instead, he turned his back on the groom's party haughtily and addressed the imam.

"Now that the contract has been fulfilled, let the wedding proceed. Have the documents signed quickly so that this family and this village does not linger a minute more than necessary in dishonor."

He stalked dramatically back to his place and sank back against the wall, exhausted, his heart thumping loudly in his ears.

Speechless, the company sat around staring at one another, the imam, and then the Chaudhuris. No one knew quite what the reaction of such proud aristocratic folk would be. Abdul Hamid stared blankly at the pile of presents that represented a year's work. The light of the pump lamps seemed whiter and more merciless than ever, yet many felt the room had suddenly grown cooler.

Oblivious of the attention concentrated upon them, the Chaudhuris sat examining the watch and pen Altaf had flung at them. If Altaf's outburst had caused a sensation among the villagers, nothing equaled the consternation generated by Askar Ali as he, first looking askance at the watch and pen his son was holding and then brushing some imaginary specks from his short beard, began to speak as though the Chaudhuris of Tarapur had not been insulted.

"Let us excuse the rashness of the young man over there, but he has removed an obstacle," he said serenely, not dignifying Altaf with so much as a glance.

"Now that the matter of the fulfillment of the dowry by both sides has been concluded, I am sure of the good faith of our Mathurapur brother in regard to the bicycle. Let us begin the ceremony, Imam Sahib."

He started to pocket the watch and the pen, but a shaking brown grabbed his wrist and prevented him from doing so.

Altaf Husain was staring at the sooty underroof with a foolish vacuity on his face. He congratulated himself that though he had lost Sufiyya, at least he had saved her honor. For the rest he no longer had any concern. He only

wished he could be transported to Dacca immediately so that he would not have to endure the humiliation of this wedding any longer. Hardly aware of what was going on in the room, a sudden change in the pitch of the general murmur pulled his attention reluctantly back to the center of the room. The hairs on the back of his neck bristled with excitement when he recognized the figure of Abdul Hamid bending over Askar Ali and speaking in a feeble voice.

“No, Imam Sahib,” Sufiyya’s father was saying, “do not begin. To my shame, this comedy has continued long enough.”

He took the pen and watch from Askar Ali’s moist hand and delivered them to Altaf’s father. Then he turned to the Chaudhuris. The muscles of his face were twitching violently.

“It is no good. Let us cancel this wedding amicably, Chaudhuri Sahib. Your son is much too good for my family. My daughter is not suitable for such nobility as yours. For your trouble, you can have the presents here. I do not want them. But this is my house, not a market. My daughter’s marriage must wait until a groom more appropriate to her class is found.”

The shame of his position overcame him and his voice failed him completely. In tears, he collapsed back into his place. Altaf sat up expectantly while the Chaudhuris stared at each other.

Askar Ali Chaudhuri’s face assumed a wounded dignity. He eyed the pile of presents and was apparently deliberating how best to make off with them before Abdul Hamid changed his mind. But words were beginning to splatter like pellets from the younger Chaudhuri’s virulent mouth.

“We should have known better, Father, than to come to a village of rustics expecting the decencies and manners of well-bred persons. They have no thought of the value of gentility...”

“Be still, dolt,” cut in his father sharply, for he had not forgotten Abdul Hamid’s offer of the dowry piled

before him. After all, he deserved recompense for his trouble. Three thousand rupees were better than nothing. He motioned to some of his company to pick up the presents and carry them to the boats, but his son's words had done their work. An impressive figure stood between the Chaudhuris and Abdul Hamid's goods. It was Bara Khan and he was backed up by several other sturdy village men.

"Take the saris and the gold trinkets you brought for Abdul Hamid's daughter," said Altaf's father, once again completely in charge. "There is nothing else for you here."

Askar Ali appraised the situation quickly and signaled his company to leave without further words. But before he left, he turned around and gave everyone in the room a faint smile of contempt.

Bara Khan looked at his son significantly before sitting down beside Abdul Hamid.

"Brother Abdul Hamid," he was saying softly, but in a voice which he knew would catch Altaf's attention, "you said that Sufiyya's marriage must wait until a suitable groom is found."

Abdul Hamid looked up doubtfully.

"After this, I do not..." he mumbled. Bara Khan interrupted him gently.

"I think I have a suitable son-in-law for you. At least, he will be after he completes his B.A. examinations next year."

Altaf caught his breath as he listened to his father's words. He almost forgot to look properly bashful as his future marriage was discussed. His father was saying: "Tonight let us all enjoy the good dinner your wife has prepared. Tomorrow will be soon enough to talk over the terms of the contract if all parties are agreeable."

He paused and glanced at his son whose answer he could easily read on his face. Then, he added:

"But, brother let there be no mention of a bicycle in it by either party."

There was friendly laughter among the listeners.

Abdul Hamid's lips parted in a grateful smile. His brow smoothed itself of the worries that had been creasing it since he began his negotiations with the Chaudhuris. He knew that he had been acting foolishly. He glanced at Altaf out of the corner of his eye. The lad has promise, he thought to himself.

"Yes," he said aloud. "Tomorrow will be soon enough."

And the two men embraced as friends and relatives in Bengal will. From outside the shouting and cures of the boatmen drifted in as they start to pole the boats hauling Chaudhuri entourage out of Mathurapur.

Alta was giddy with joy and his ears became attuned to sounds no one else in the room could hear. Among them, he heard the relieved sobs of happiness that could only have come from Sufiyya.

END