

ensued. At first they had planned to hold the ceremony at Ujantek Community Centre. Sharfuddin's wife said, "General brother has said that he would come to the marriage ceremony. Let us arrange it at a big community center."

The bridegroom's family was informed that the marriage had been arranged according to the wishes of the bride's elder uncle the major-general. The neighbourhood people also came to know that the marriage had been given the go-ahead by the bride's uncle, a big army official, who would be present at the wedding.

The marriage was settled, ignoring the girl's tears and reluctance to get married. Though the bridegroom was a BA, he had a big family with parents, brothers and sisters. About four years back Sharfuddin had arranged a big feast on the occasion of the circumcision rites of his two sons. With high hopes they had invited the major-general brother. He had not shown up, and they had surmised that it was because Ujantek's narrow lane was too difficult for him to negotiate. This time, since he had promised that he would come, when they began to enquire about more luxurious community centers in the city, the neighbourhood people informed them that Shohag would be the best. It had AC. At the marriage ceremony one well-decorated table was laid out separately in a corner, complete with napkins, spoons and forks like in five-star hotels. The bridegroom's party took it for granted that the special arrangement was for them. A little later, after talking with the bridegroom's party, they learnt that the table had been reserved for the bride's major-general uncle and his family. Both the bride's and the groom's parties were to sit there waiting to view the distinguished guests when they arrived. Food was delayed till they could wait no longer, and even then before serving it Sharfuddin contacted the home of his major-general brother via telephone. He was informed that his brother had diarrhea. He could not come, even though the bride's father had let it be known to his daughter's would-be father-in-law and various uncles-in-law that the bride's own uncle was a major-general.

The bride's new in-laws and some of Sharfuddin's neighbours asked, "Don't you have a brother or somebody who is a major-general or the chief of the army? Is he not coming to your daughter's marriage ceremony?"

"He has a severe diarrhoea and vomiting. They say it's food poisoning," Sharfuddin explained.

At his home the major-general's wife reminded him, "Time and again Sharfuddin has said, 'Bhabi, we are doing it at the Shohag because we are expecting that you are going to come.'" Leaning back on his pillow the general replied, "Have your wits left you? How can I attend such a marriage ceremony given the level I'm at? Isn't it enough that I even acknowledge them as my relatives?"

The next few days were a busy period of grief at bidding goodbye to their daughter, as well as having to entertain different groups of relatives, counting the gifts and with other such formalities. When the crowds thinned, with her mother-in-law, sister-in-law and her husband clustered together, Sharfuddin's wife raged at him, "Saying 'major-general brother this' and 'major-general brother that' makes fourteen generations of you foam at the mouth. If you could, the lot of you would get together and call him 'papa'. But he couldn't care less about you. The general brother said it was okay, and promptly you married off your daughter to a clerk! When we could have arranged such a good marriage for our pretty daughter with a doctor or an engineer. All the neighbours are poking fun at me, they're

saying: 'Who gives such a beautiful girl to such a groom! If ever you go to any event hosted by your brother, I've got news for you.'" Though she was a clerk's wife, Sharfuddin's wife was from a comparatively well-off family. She had a little extra vanity. It did not stop her from talking to her neighbours about the power, influence, servants and peons of the major-general whenever she got the opportunity. However, they did stop going to their brother's home.

Soon after that one day the major-general's wife invited them to their home by sending over the orderly. In an instant Sharfuddin and his wife swallowed their pride and cooled down: It must be because their brother and sister-in-law wanted to apologize for not coming! Why, they could have conveyed that over the phone. That night, dressed in their best clothes, husband and wife presented themselves at the general's home. Immediately after greetings were exchanged, the sister-in-law said, "Sharfuddin, you and bhabi are the ones close to me. In my time of trouble I instantly thought of you. My eldest daughter is going to have a baby soon. Caesarean. All her in-laws stay abroad. Bhabi, would you please stay with my daughter these few days in the hospital. I myself am not in good health so I am requesting you."

Sharfuddin's wife felt honoured on being given this responsibility. Summoning her daughter from her in-law's home to look after the children and household, she packed her things into a bag and presented herself at the clinic by the following afternoon. Before bringing her daughter back she confided to the latter's mother-in-law, "The daughter of my major-general brother-in-law is going to have a baby. My nephews and nieces swoon on hearing my name. She is going to give birth but she doesn't want her mother - she wants her aunt by her side."

Her niece Anushka and her husband treated her with respect at the clinic. Anushka's younger sister also came in from time to time. She was a beauty. She stayed in America. Both the girls enquired after their aunt. They greeted her warmly. The children of the powerful people are better human beings than their parents. But Anushka and her husband did not introduce her to their friends and relatives. It was then that she felt very uncomfortable. Out of fear for being taken for a maidservant, she would dress up, put on as much make-up as possible. She also carefully selected the saris she wore.

Returning home this time Sharfuddin's wife vowed never again to go to anything connected with the major-general. These rich people had no scruples about using their relatives when they needed them, yet refused to introduce them as their relatives. But the sad truth is that they could not behave equally rudely with them. Given the slightest sign of welcome they again melted. Coming back from his office saying that he had urgent business to attend to, Sharfuddin left for his village home in Munshiganj that very afternoon. When he came back the next afternoon his wife wanted to know about the matter in detail. Sharfuddin replied, "My major-general brother wanted me to arrange the sale of his land." Flaring up with anger his wife said, "I don't feel like sharing my life with such a spineless man like you. All you know is how to run after powerful people. All they do is get their job done, then they throw you away, do not ask about you. It's only I who'll live with you. If it was some other woman she would have beaten your head with a broom and run away long ago." After a whole day of chasing customers, and tired from his long journey Sharfuddin's temper too rose, "Damn

where, you in whose family there's been nobody in generations worth a damn, what would you know about powerful relatives?" Sharfuddin's wife exploded, heaping bitter curses on his long-dead parents and subsequent generations. At one stage she savagely beat her son who was watching TV instead of doing schoolwork.

After a few days one midday Sharfuddin came back home in a great hurry. He said to his wife, "There is a sad news. The younger daughter of my major-general brother has died. His brother called me at the office."

Since there were lots of jeeps and cars in front of the house they had to get down from their scooter at some distance from the house. Reaching it they learnt that some minister had come, and was upstairs consoling the parents.

Time and again Sharfuddin's wife could recall the sweet face of the girl. This girl was brought up in USA. She had studied there, staying with her aunt. She had seen first seen the girl at her eldest sister's marriage ceremony. When the eldest sister was giving birth to a child the younger one, on vacation, had come to the clinic. Her mother had introduced her to Sharfuddin's wife in the clinic, "She is your aunt." On hearing it the girl had answered with a sweet smile, "*Salam alaikum*. How are you?" Her mother had also added that her daughter had completed her PhD and taught in a university. Sharfuddin's wife had been surprised. She thought, 'She looks like she's barely in college. How can such a little girl complete a PhD and teach in a university?', then had repented marrying her own daughter off so young. Returning home she had recounted in detail to the neighbouring women of the beauty and manners of her doctorate niece, who seemed to be hardly 18 or 20. Some of the listeners had thought, "Oh! If only I had such a daughter!" Giving the example of her niece Sharfuddin's wife had made her daughter understand that she should continue with her studies even after her marriage.

They had heard that the girl had died falling down from a rooftop. It was only a relative fresh from their village who enquired of Sharfuddin, "Didn't the girl commit suicide?" Sharfuddin did not know the answer. When he asked some servants of the house about it, they said they didn't know anything. A crowd of well-to-dos with aristocratic mien surrounded their cousin brother and his wife. One lady with a veil on her head and natural-coloured lipstick on her lips was chanting prayers while holding a rosary. Sharfuddin and his wife struggled through the crowd and stood beside their brother and sister-in-law. Addressing her sister-in-law Sharfuddin's wife simply said, "One can't find such a golden girl nowadays!" Their sister-in-law began to cry again. When she started wailing like a mad woman everybody tried to console her. She was moaning and saying, "I could never clasp my child to my breast for even a few days. Why did I have to send her to America!" The major-general brother looked like a fallen tree in a heavy storm - twisted, flattened, utterly desolate.

After some time they went outside.

Returning home by scooter Sharfuddin said, "The girl died falling down from the roof. Seems like she did commit suicide. At this age she did not get married so maybe it's possible?" Sharfuddin's wife remained silent for some time. Then she said, "Who knows? Could be."

They did not exchange another word while on the road.