

From page 12

'I am an agent', he said.
'Agent? You mean a broker?' she said.
'Why should I be a broker? We do not work with deeds. All is by word of mouth and on trust. We want to serve you,' he said.

'Good,' she said, 'Will you do my grocery shopping for me?'

'Of course. But, madam, this house is in your name?'

'Perhaps it is, but does this mean you would not do anything for me if I were not the landlady?'

'No, that is not it. Can I sit for two minutes? I will explain everything to you. If you are the owner of the house, then we will spare you the harassment of handling tenants. And if you are the tenant, then we will help you face the arrogance of the landlord. You will get the same service, the only difference being in the rate we charge. We always consider tenants first. From them we take twenty taka to twenty-five per hundred, and from owners we take thirty-five to fifty taka. If you want us to go to court, or be your lawyer, or find something to quarrel about between tenants – we will do everything. In fact, we can even find a low-rent house for you to live in and rent this house at a higher rate.'

This time, the wife was truly astonished. What sort of trouble was this? She said, 'Shumi, send your elder brother to me and ask him to bring the shopping bag. This gentleman is a well-wisher. He will teach my simpleton of a son to shop properly.' Then she said to the man, 'But, be warned, it is noon now and if you bring rotten fish, I will see to it that your brokering is finished. Buy some vegetables as well. You have already wasted an hour with your idle chatter.'

Shumi announced from the next room, 'Bhaiya has gone to take his bath after his exercises.'

The wife said to the man, 'That means one more hour. You may as well come tomorrow. Put this shopping on the list of your various businesses, and it will help everybody.'

The man insisted, 'But whose house is it?' 'My father's,' said the wife in anger. 'Whose house? Certainly not yours. Get out, I say, get out. The young man thought her half mad and quickly went out.'

All these troubles. Now more troubles were to follow. It was only noon, and events would continue till midnight. Shumi reminded her that the day was Saturday and everything closed at 2 pm. Tomorrow was Sunday and everything would be closed too. Therefore, Shumi's friend's wedding present had to be bought today and she needed approximately twenty taka.

'Twenty taka? Does money grow on trees? After this morning's loss, I cannot give you any money.' But she was compelled to give her fifteen taka. Her children were ashamed to go without anything nice. In the meantime, the head of the household returned. 'Oh my, what has happened to your knee?' cried the wife.

'Nothing, I had a narrow escape.' 'Meaning?' 'Meaning, the rickshaw.'

'The rickshaw? Do you mean the rickshaw overturned?' The wife almost burst into tears.

'What are you getting so upset about? The rickshaw tilted a bit. Can't you see I am all right, except for the bruise on my knee?'

'That's all right, but you should buy a car now,' said the wife, wiping her eyes. 'If you are not here, what will I do with all your money?'

'Really, father,' said her son, 'You must buy a car. Not buying a car is a mistake.'

Sarkar Sahib said, 'What is the matter with all of you? A car! As if having a car would save us all. The fault was the rickshaw wallah's, and the gentleman driving the car got such a beating for nothing. If the police hadn't come, things could have taken a terrible turn.'

The wife said, 'Rubbish. Both the rickshaw wallah and the gentleman should be thrown into jail.'

Sarkar Sahib said, 'It may have happened already.'

By this time Shumi had brought Iodex to rub on her father's knee. The wife also sent the son to fetch the doctor.

But the son returned almost immediately.

'What's wrong? Why have you come back?'

'Bad news.'

'What bad news?' said his mother. 'Who has died? For the past few months I have bad news and nothing but bad

news about friends and acquaintances.'

'No,' said the son, 'Nobody is dead. My friend has divorced his wife.'

'Divorce? What a scandal!'

For the first time, Sarkar Sahib seemed agitated. 'The whole country is falling to pieces.'

'This is why I am not getting married. Marriage means divorce.'

His mother said, 'Oh what a statement. Employment means slavery, so you enjoy the free life. I can see very well what you are doing. No accounting for young people these days.'

The son said, 'So you begin your nagging again. This is why I don't want to stay home. I want a little peace.'

Shumi cried out, 'Bhaiya, don't go, have your lunch first.'

The mother remarked, 'Honestly, Shumi is my only hard-working daughter.'

The son said, 'I don't want plain rice and lentils.'

Shumi said, 'Why only rice and lentils? There's fried egg and mashed potatoes too.'

Her mother asked, 'Where did you get potatoes and egg?'

Shumi began, 'Rajab Bhai from next door...'

Speechless, the mother stared at her daughter. Her face seemed flushed. Her dark daughter seemed to be glowing. She thought, let them do whatever they wanted. She couldn't cope anymore.

In the evening, after the day's troubles had subsided, the wife sat on the open roof. She sat there every evening. It was her

habit; she would not change. Before the evening meal, she had to rest there awhile.

Limping, Sarkar Sahib came to sit beside her. He did this very rarely, because he was busy most evenings with the various meetings and social activities of the neighbourhood.

Startled, his wife said, 'You could not go out tonight, but why are you here with me?'

Sarkar Sahib said, 'Yesterday, it was too late when I returned and I did not get a chance to speak of it.'

Can you see the one-storey house in front? The one that Mr Ali's new tenants have moved into? Mr Ali is having a great problem with them.'

'Why? They mind their own business, they do not seem to bother anybody.'

'No, they do not, and they pay the rent regularly, but still it is not possible to let them stay there.'

'Why?' cried his wife anxiously.

'It is a tremendously scandalous affair.' 'Scandal? They are the parents of two children. How can they be involved in anything scandalous?'

'What if they do have children? They are not even married.'

'You are mad,' said the wife. 'How can such thoughts enter the head of such a respectable person?'

'Then why can't they show us the marriage deed?'

'Marriage deed? Do you have one? Can you show it? Why, we who have been living together these last thirty years, what proof is there that we are really husband and wife?'

'Why, who does not know it? It is the truth...?'

The wife did not let Sarkar Sahib finish the sentence. She said, 'How do you know that they are lying?'

'People are saying...'

'Which people?'

'That Mr Ali could not say. He only said that some people of the locality are saying that they cannot be allowed to live here.'

'Have they heard that?'

'Yes.'

'What did they say?'

'They said, "We did not have a court marriage with a deed we could show to everyone, and even if we did, what does it matter to anybody?"'

After a while, Sarkar Sahib said, 'The problem is right there. The gentleman is a bit hot-tempered. He works for a company where no one bothers or interferes with anyone's private life. But can one live with just one's home and office? One has to live with the people of the locality, talk to them politely, have tea with them, exchange good and bad news. But he won't do this; he is absolutely unsocial.'

The wife said, 'Forget it. This town I see worse than the village. Why are people so greedy? Don't they have enough to eat at home?'

'I said as much, and yesterday we had a meeting about the matter, but everybody is of one opinion.'



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