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The Gamblers

THE police carried out the raid so cleverly that not a single culprit slipped through their grasp. There was no chance of escape. The one stairway that led up to the room was controlled by the police. That left the window. If anyone had been crazy enough to jump out, his knees most likely wouldn't have survived the impact on landing, but even supposing the injury wasn't too serious, he still wouldn't have been able to flee since half a dozen policemen in the bazaar below had surrounded the gamblers' den. So, in a matter of moments, all ten gamblers were seized.

As luck would have it, except for one or two professionals, the rest of the gamblers who had come to the den that day were amateur enthusiasts and respected, well-to-do gentlemen, including a contractor, a government office-worker, a banker's son, a truck driver, and a leather merchant.

Two innocent men were also arrested, the first of whom was Mansukh Panvari. He gambled occasionally, but that evening he had definitely not gone to play cards, rather he had brought a ten rupee note to break for a friend waiting at his shop. Having gotten the change, he was on his way out when he caught a glimpse of one of the players' hands. The cards were unusually good, so he stopped for a moment to see what card the gambler would play. In the meantime, the police arrived, and he was stuck.

The other man was an elderly scrivener, who had been searching everywhere for the contractor in the hope that this old acquaintance might help find some petty contract work for his son. When, finally, he had tracked him down, it was in this place where the contractor, terribly engrossed in the game, could scarcely talk to him and where he felt too diffident to broach the matter in front of so many others. Since the contractor was completely absorbed in the game, the scrivener had no choice but to try and devise a way to stop the game for a few moments and get

the others to leave the room, but he couldn't come up with a suitable plan. The contractor remained squatting on his knees on the other side of the room playing cards. Finally becoming discouraged, the scrivener decided to leave, but by that time the police had already arrived, and he was captured along with the cardplayers.

Both of these men gave ample evidence of their innocence, but the police wouldn't have any of it. As for the cardplayers, they were left speechless by the sudden raid. Everyone, guilty or innocent, was led down from the room, surrounded and then marched off to the police station.

Fortunately it was dusk. Hiding their faces behind their coat collars or the ends of their turbans in the fading light, they managed to avoid the stares of most passersby as they strode hurriedly along. At the station the chief ordered them locked up for the night.

Once they had found safety in the jail's solitude from the scornful gaze of onlookers, the stern countenances and harsh voices of the police, and the fear of running into anyone who knew them, they naturally turned their attention to the owner of the gambling den, who was locked up with them. Everyone regarded him as the cause of their undoing, and they were extremely angry at him. If he had only managed things more carefully, if he hadn't let the place become a flophouse so that anyone and everyone could come barging in, if he had posted a lookout, and, furthermore, if he had kept up an amiable relationship with the police, then this trouble would never have befallen them.

God only knows what the man's real name was, everyone called him Nikku. He was of medium height, slender build, and fair-complexion. His yellowish eyes were lined with kohl. He had a small mustache, a face scarred by smallpox, and teeth which were stained blackish-red from the copious amounts of *pan* he chewed. His curly hair was always heavily oiled. It was parted on the left, while the hair on the right fell in a wave across his forehead. A small gold charm tied to a black string hung around his neck. Gold buttons were attached to his muslin *kurta*, and although his *kurta* was invariably spotless, his *dboti* was usually grimy. In the winter he would wear an old, red shawl with gold-embroidered edges over his clothes. He was as quick as the devil. In the flash of time it took the most skillful gambler to shuffle and cut the deck once, he could shuffle and cut the deck at least twice.

Nikku was prepared for his companions' reproachful assault. He had remained aloof and kept his silence ever since the police had burst in, but now under attack from sharp glares on all sides, he shuddered slightly and offered an affable but faintly playful smile in self-defense. He let the smile

linger for a few moments, and then with perfect equanimity he swept his gaze over them all and spoke with great self-assurance:

“Don’t worry. I guarantee you not a single hair on your heads will be harmed. In the past five years nothing like this has ever happened at my place. Consider this incident, how should I put it, a joke. Take it as a joke.”

Their anger remained undiminished. Some shook their heads, others shrugged their shoulders.

“Take it as a joke, hunh. Perfect!” the contractor scoffed.

“There is no strength or power but in God ...,” the leather trader exclaimed. “You’re a strange man, *yar*, everyone’s honor has turned to dust, and you’re calling it a joke.”

“Why are you so upset, Shaikh-ji? I’ve told you not a hair on your head will be harmed. You’ll all walk out of here twirling your mustaches, I repeat twirling your mustaches!”

“Shut up, you fool,” the contractor said.

“You’re calling me a fool?” Nikku responded with annoyance. “Well, say whatever you want, but I’m telling you again—no one will come to any harm.”

The cardplayer who was an accountant in a government office despised gambling, yet whenever his wife and children went to visit his in-laws, he’d dash off to the gamblers’ den. He’d go straight there after leaving the office, and every time he would lose, curse himself, and then solemnly vow never to set foot in that place again. But the very next day he’d be the first one to arrive. This man, ignoring everything Nikku had been saying, began to wail:

“I’m ruined. I’m a government employee. My honor will be worthless. *Ha’e*, my wife and children. Nikku has destroyed me, *ha’e* ...”

“Just listen for a minute, Malik Sahib ...”

“*Are*, listen to what, useless chatter? I curse the ill-fated day I first laid eyes on you. Friends, I’m a government employee. If this reaches the ears of my fellow-workers, I’ll be dishonored. To hell with dishonor. I’ll have to wash my hands of fifteen years of employment. *Ha’e*, my wife and children ...”

The banker’s son, having only recently discovered this effortless and amusing way of earning money, had kept himself under control until now, but after hearing Malik’s woeful plaint he suddenly burst into tears. Everyone turned their attention to him.

“Pull yourself together, young Shah-ji,” Nikku said. “You’re crying like a woman. Be a man. *Are bhai*, it’s no big deal.”

“When my father finds out,” sobbed the banker’s son, “he’ll throw me out of the house.”

“*Are yar*, enough, no one’s going to be kicked out of any house,” Nikku reassured him.

“Nikku,” Malik accused, “this is all your doing!”

“Malik Sahib,” responded Nikku emphatically, “don’t worry at all. Believe me. You won’t be harmed. I’ll get you out of this jam in no time at all.”

“Give it up,” Malik said. “If you really have that kind of spunk, then why did you let the police in to begin with!”

“Malik Sahib, believe me, I’m telling you the truth. Not a single hair on your head will be harmed. It’s like this—the station chief is our man. You understand? He’s a good friend of mine. He won’t say anything against you. Spit on my face if he does.”

The cardplayers quieted down for a moment. Some, like drowning men clutching at straws, wanted to believe Nikku, several others, as was apparent from the look on their faces, were having a hard time deciding whether or not to trust him, though it was obvious their anger was beginning to dissipate.

“Look, Nikku,” Shaikh-ji the leather trader said, “I don’t care about money, but my honor has to be protected. What you’re saying is nothing special, my brother-in-law himself is a subinspector of police, but this is something that’s too shameful to mention to anyone!”

“Shaikh-ji, there’s no need to be anxious. I’m telling you, you should take this as a joke. Sometimes he likes to have his fun at my expense.”

“Who?” escaped involuntarily from Mansukh Panvari’s mouth. Seeing so many important men in this tight spot he had completely forgotten his own trouble.

“Why, our Right Honorable Station Chief,” Nikku couldn’t help laughing.

Then the truck driver who had been standing in the corner watching Nikku very closely walked right up to him and, looking him straight in the eyes, said with extreme seriousness:

“Look, Nikku! Early tomorrow morning I have to take my truck full of dried fruit on a long haul. A contractor is waiting for me. If you really do know someone in this police station, then fix it so that I can get out of here before daybreak.”

Everyone had gradually begun to listen to Nikku, but the decisive way the truck driver addressed him established Nikku’s authority over his companions. Nikku sensed this too, and his eyes glittered with his suc-

cess. No one, however, liked the fact that the truck driver had put his own interests before everyone else's by requesting a favor for himself alone, and they attributed this act to his selfishness and base character.

Nikku, whose voice had already become more self-confident, said to the truck driver in a highly patronizing tone:

"Mirza-ji, my dear, don't worry. Consider it done."

"Pish posh, absolutely nothing will get done," the scrivener suddenly yelled. "Mirza, you've been taken in by this braggart. You'll have to find your own way out of this mess."

Nikku deftly cut short this unexpected salvo from the scrivener: "So, listen to the esteemed gentleman," he laughed. "Nothing will get done. Well, what about the influence money I've been stuffing him with regularly every month? Brothers, I tell you again this is nothing but a joke. I swear by all the Hindu and Muslim oaths that not a hair on your heads will be harmed. It's like this, the station chief—what should I tell you?" he chuckled, "I've already said he's our man—now you force me to come clean with it—all right, but don't let it slip to anyone or you'll get caught, and it won't be my fault. It's like this, the station chief—why should I hide it from you anymore—friends, he's a relative of mine. You hear me? Are you satisfied, now, esteemed sir? Don't you realize this is the only way a business like mine keeps running in this city." Nikku swept his eyes across the room. His authority had been even more firmly established.

The face of one among them betrayed no sign of shock or sorrow. During this entire incident he had remained completely silent. He was a thin, twenty-eight year-old, dressed rather carelessly. A while back he had lost a substantial amount of money through inexperience. That same day he had vowed that he would win back what he had lost and then would never think about gambling again. An hour or two before going to the gamblers' den he would sit in some park and prepare a sort of game plan, thinking about every move. He played with extreme caution and never got over-excited, but through bad luck the amount he was losing was steadily increasing day after day, and right along with it so were his debts. He didn't care at all about disgrace, or prison, or a fine, what bothered him was that they were all cowards. Whether they emerged unscathed or not from this incident, they'd never go to the gamblers' den again.

Meanwhile, Nikku had finally gained control of the situation. Even though he hadn't been able to make arrangements for their release during the night, he had somehow convinced everyone that even if the station chief wasn't a close relation, he was certainly a distant one. And first thing in the morning they would all be released. With this in mind, everyone

was now lying on the floor, on some old, tattered, smelly blankets that the policemen had brought, free from worries.

“Oh ho! A calamity!” said Nikku suddenly sitting up.

“What is it? What’s the matter? Is everything all right?” the cardplayers asked in the dark.

“Friends, if only we had known we’d be forced to spend the night here, we could’ve brought a deck of cards with us and spent the whole night pleasantly.... Tell me, should I send for one of the policemen and ask for a deck and a candle?”

“No, no, *baba*, count us out,” several voices replied at the same time.

“You know,” Nikku said carelessly as if in not taking his advice the loss was theirs, “otherwise we could have had some fun and the station chief would’ve had a good laugh, when we’d have told him about it in the morning.”

Around nine o’clock the next morning an officer stood outside the iron-barred door of the jail and called out loudly:

“Get up, gamblers. You’re to appear before Darogha Sahib.”

The cardplayers had been waiting a long time for just such an order. Everyone’s eyes unconsciously turned to Nikku. He gave them a sly glance and smiled.

Five minutes later all ten men were standing in a row on the station’s small quadrangle. Five minutes, ten minutes, half an hour passed, but the station chief didn’t appear. During this time Nikku kept his companions’ spirits up with his jokes, jests, and humorous banter, but when an hour went by and the station chief still hadn’t appeared, they became quite nervous. The laughter disappeared from their faces, and a wave of doubt swept over them. Time and again they looked worriedly at Nikku with questioning eyes. In reply Nikku would motion with his hand for them to be patient.

While they were waiting, two or three policemen passed near them. Nikku called out “Khan Sahib-ji, Khan Sahib-ji,” to each one trying to attract his attention, but none of them replied or even turned to look in his direction.

At last, after they had been standing for a full two hours and their legs were completely worn out, a black truck drove into the station. The station chief and several policemen got out. The station chief clutched some papers in his hand, while the policemen carried rifles against their shoulders. They appeared to be returning empty-handed from the raid for

which they had left at daybreak, and it certainly must have been some very important matter, judging by the agitated look on the station chief's face.

Nikku became animated when he saw the station chief from afar.

"My savior is here," Nikku said. "Relax. We'll be out of here in no time."

He gave the station chief a ground-sweeping *salam* from a distance. The station chief either didn't see it or intentionally averted his gaze as he went inside the officers' barracks.

"Nikku," the scrivener said sarcastically, "I know the station chief didn't see you, otherwise he would have acknowledged your greeting."

"Forget it," Nikku shot back. "He'll never acknowledge me. He has to maintain a dignified appearance, you understand? The station chief's position is no joke. If he talked openly with us, then how would he keep his subordinates in line? They wouldn't be intimidated by him anymore. Tomorrow these very same policemen would be giving him a devil of a time. You know his subordinates are all like a *madari's* monkey. As long as the monkey sees the stick it dances to the drumbeat, but the minute the *madari* diverts his attention the monkey begins to take liberties and put on airs."

Five minutes later the station chief emerged from the barracks talking with some policemen. They passed by the gamblers and went to the station gate, where they continued their conversation. The telephone rang in the office and a few seconds later a policeman ran over to the station chief. As the station chief returned alone to his office Nikku made another *salam*. The station chief turned and stared at him and then quickly went inside.

"Didn't I tell you," Nikku crowed triumphantly. "Didn't I say he won't respond to my greeting? Well, did he?"

The gamblers didn't say anything.

"One day," Nikku continued, "just he and I were here at the station, there weren't any policemen around. What happened next? He tickled me so hard I nearly died laughing."

The station chief remained in the office for over half an hour. They were getting impatient again when the same policeman who had given them the order to present themselves earlier that morning came out of the office and walked straight towards them. He addressed them in a rough tone:

"Gamblers! Listen up! Darogha Sahib has ordered you to untie your *pajamas* or *dhotis* and lie facedown, single file on the ground. The man at

the front of the line will then get up and give each one of you ten blows with his shoe before going to lie down at the end of the line. In this way everyone will take his turn giving ten shoe-beatings to everyone else.”

This totally unexpected order from the station chief left them stunned. They stared at the policeman in bewilderment.

“Why are you gaping at me like imbeciles? Didn’t you understand the order, shall I repeat it?” Without waiting for an answer the policeman gave the order again.

At this the scrivener and Mansukh Panvari lost all semblance of self-control. They both lurched forward and clung to the policeman’s legs.

“Khan Sahib, we’re completely innocent,” they implored as one. “Everyone here will testify that we’re completely blameless. We weren’t playing cards when the police came. We didn’t even go there with that intention. We’re innocent. God knows we’re completely innocent.”

“I can’t do anything about it,” the policeman replied. “This is the order of Darogha Sahib.”

“Khan Sahib-ji! You’d be doing us a great kindness if you’d clasp your hands together on our behalf and tell the respected station chief that we both were arrested without cause. Everyone will testify to this.”

“I’m not interested in testimony,” the policeman responded. “Darogha Sahib gave this order for everyone. And listen up, he said that if you didn’t comply, you’d all be locked up again. So don’t waste time. I have to leave with Darogha Sahib shortly. The truck is ready and waiting. If you dilly-dally any more I’ll throw you back in jail.”

Crestfallen, the scrivener and Mansukh returned to their places. After their drubbing no one else had the audacity to speak. Shaken, they all stared agitatedly at one another, unable to figure out what to do next. They glanced at Nikku repeatedly, but he wasn’t looking in their direction. His eyes were fixed on the station office, as if boring through the walls in search of the station chief.

“Hey, hey!” the policeman admonished, “you’re stalling. I’ll be forced to lock you up.”

Nonetheless, the cardplayers were still procrastinating when suddenly they heard the thud of someone flopping to the ground. It was Nikku who was lying facedown on the ground with his *dhota* open. Seeing him in this condition, Mansukh lost heart and fell to the ground just as Nikku had done. As the accountant Malik was trying to take in what was happening around him, the policeman came up behind him, grabbed him by the scruff of his neck, and forced him down to the ground. Having no other choice, Malik unbuttoned his pants.

Witnessing the policeman's conduct, the rest of the gamblers hit the dirt themselves. Only Shaikh-ji the leather trader remained standing. His eyes were filled with tears, and he had a piteous look on his face. His hand repeatedly moved to his waistband and faltered there. Seeing such a noble and dignified-looking man in such an unpleasant position, the policeman's heart softened and he intentionally withdrew from the vicinity. The Shaikh summoned up his courage, wiped his eyes with the end of his turban, turned his head to look all around, and then with great reluctance finally carried out the station chief's order.

The truck driver was at the head of the line. It was his turn first to give the shoe-beatings. When he got up, Nikku cleared his throat loudly, "Take it easy, now, Mirza-ji," he said. "They're all our own, okay? Make it look like a strong blow, but ... you know what I mean."

The truck driver had just counted to five when the same policeman emerged from the station office and motioned with his hand for them to stop. He came over. "Darogha Sahib says if you cheat on beating he'll have his own men do it." Then he went back into the office.

Given the circumstances, the cardplayers felt the best course of action would be to give each other a solid shoe-beating. Around twenty minutes later, after everyone had given everyone else ten blows with their shoe and they were all getting up and dusting off their clothes, the same policeman came over and said, "Now get out of here. Darogha Sahib has excused your crime. Don't gamble again."

They came out of the station like men leaving a cemetery after burying a close, dearly-loved relative. For some hundred yards they hung their heads in silence. Suddenly Nikku guffawed loudly, the force of his laughter doubling him over: "Did you see! No citation, no court proceedings, no fine. Didn't I tell you it was just a joke!" □

—*Translated by Robert Phillips*