

WHEN Pandit Ayodhyanath died, everyone said: "May god give such a death to all men!" He left behind four grown up sons and one daughter. He also left a substantial amount of property—a house, two orchards, jewellery worth several thousands and Rs 20,000 in cash. The widow, Phoolmati, was grief stricken and lay prostrate for some days, but the thought of her four sons revived her.

Her four sons were extremely well behaved, and her three daughters-in-law very obedient. When she lay down at night, her daughters-in-law used to take turns to press her feet; when she returned from the bath, they kept her clothes ready. The whole house was run on her dictates.

The eldest son, Kamta, had an office job and earned Rs 50 a month; the second, Umanath, had just completed his medical studies and was now planning to open a clinic; the third, Dayanath, had failed the BA exam, but earned something by writing articles in magazines, while the fourth, Sitanath, was the brightest. He had passed BA in the first division and was now preparing for the MA. None of the boys displayed any sign of those vices, that shallowness, that extravagance, which torment parents and wreck family honour.

Phoolmati was mistress of the house. She had handed over the keys to her eldest daughter-in-law—she was not a victim of that lust for authority which embitters old people and causes conflict—yet not a sweetmeat could be bought for a child of the house without her approval.

It was the evening of the twelfth day after the Pandit's death. Preparations were afoot for the community feast to be held the following day. Phoolmati, sitting in her room, could see the servants bringing in sacks of flour and sugar, tins of clarified butter, baskets of vegetables, pots of curd. The goods to be given in alms came next—utensils, clothes, beds, bedrolls, umbrellas, shoes, walking sticks, lanterns—but none of these goods had been shown to Phoolmati. Ordinarily, all the goods would have been brought to her, she would have looked at each one, approved of it, and

decided on the quantity to be ordered. Only then would the goods have been kept in the store room.

Why had her opinion not been asked? And why had only three sacks of flour arrived? She had ordered five. And there were only five tins of clarified butter although she had ordered 10. The quantities of vegetables, sugar and curd must also have been reduced accordingly. Who had interfered with her orders? Who had the right to add or subtract from what she had decided?

For 40 years now, Phoolmati's word had been law in this house. If she said a hundred was to be spent, a hundred was spent, if one, one. Nobody dared complain. Even Pandit Ayodhyanath never went against her wishes. But today her commands were openly being flouted, before her eyes. How could she accept this?

For a while, she sat still but finally she could not hold herself back. Autonomous rule had become a habit with her. She came out of her room and said to Kamtanath: "Why have you brought only three sacks of flour? I had ordered five. And only five tins of *ghee*? Don't you remember I asked for 10? One should not be wasteful, but on the other hand, it will be shameful if the soul of the one who dug this well goes thirsty!"

Kamtanath did not apologise or acknowledge his mistake. He did not even look abashed. For a minute, he remained stubbornly silent, then he said: "We

A Mother of Sons

Munshi Premchand's Poignant story about a widow robbed of her rights by her own sons



decided on three sacks of flour, and five tins of *ghee* are plenty for three sacks. The amounts of the other stuff were reduced accordingly."

"Who decided to reduce the amount of flour?" asked Phoolmati heatedly.

"All of us."

"So my opinion counts for nothing."

"I don't say that—but we too know how to protect our interests."

Taken aback, Phoolmati stared at him. She failed to understand what he meant by this. Our interests? She was responsible for the interests of her own house, What right had others, even if they were the sons born of her womb, to interfere with her affairs? This lad was talking as if the house belonged to him, as if it was he who had toiled and slaved to build the household, and she was a stranger! What cheek!

Her face flaming, she said : "You are not responsible for protecting my interests. I have a right to do as I think fit. Now go immediately and get two more sacks of flour and five more tins of *ghee*, and don't any of you dare mess around with my instructions ever again."

She thought she had made herself amply clear. Perhaps she had overdone the harshness. She began to regret her anger. They were only boys after all; they must have thought they should save money. They must have neglected to consult her because they knew she was so thrifty herself. Had they known that she would not approve of thrift on this occasion, they would never have dared go against her wishes. Although Kamtanath had not budged an inch, and his face showed no inclination to obey her orders, Phoolmati returned to her room, quite satisfied. It never even occurred to her that anyone could possibly disobey her after she had delivered herself so forcefully.

But, as time passed, she began to realise that she no longer had the status in the house that had been hers 10 or 12 days before. Relatives were sending contributions in the form of sugar, sweetmeats, curd, pickles. The oldest

daughter-in-law was storing them away, with the air of being the mistress of the household. No one came to consult Phoolmati about anything. Whenever members of the community had to consult someone, they approached Kamtanath or his wife.

Since when had Kamtanath become a manager of affairs ? Why, the fellow was always lying in a stupor induced by *bhanga*. Somehow or other, he managed to get to office about 15 days in a month. His boss would have kicked him out long ago, were it not for his regard for Panditji. And how could a slovenly woman like the eldest daughter-in-law manage such affairs? She couldn't even keep her own clothes in order—and here she was, prepared to take over the running of the household!

Nothing but disgrace could come of it. The whole lot of them put together would publicly dishonour the family name. They

"I don't know what things have come, and at what rate. How can we pay until we calculate the amounts?"

"All the calculations have been done."

"Who did them?"

"What do I know? Go and ask the men! I was ordered to fetch money so I'm obeying."

Phoolmati swallowed her rage as if it were so much blood. This was no time to display her anger. The house was full of guests. If she scolded her sons, people would say that rifts had already developed in the house so soon after Panditji's death. She forced herself to return to her room. She would tackle each one of them, once the guests left. She would see who dared confront her and answer her back. They would forget their arrogance in no time.

But even after she had retired to her room, her mind was not at rest. She kept watching events with the keenness of a

This lad was talking as if the house belonged to him, as if it was he who had toiled and slaved to build the household...!

would run short of something or other, at the last moment. Only an experienced person could handle such an affair. They would end up with large quantities of one dish going to waste and another dish in such short supply that many guests would have to go without it.

What had come over them, all of a sudden? And now why was the daughter-in-law opening the safe ? Who was she to open it without asking Phoolmati? She had the key, all right, but the safe was never opened unless Phoolmati said money was to be taken out. Today, she was opening it as if Phoolmati did not exist. This was intolerable!

She sprang up and went to the daughter-in-law : "Why are you opening the safe? I didn't ask you to."

Quite unembarrassed, the daughter-in-law replied: "Don't we have to pay for the goods ordered from the market?"

hawk, lest any code of etiquette be broken or any custom ignored. The feast began. The whole community was made to sit down together to eat. The courtyard could barely seat 200 people at a time. How would 500 people be squeezed into it? Would they sit on one another's heads? What was wrong with serving the guests in two shifts? Of course, it would mean that the feast would go on till 2 instead of 12—and the family members were all in a hurry to go to sleep. All they wanted was somehow to get this nuisance over and have a good night's rest!

People were squashed together; they couldn't move a limb. The eating leaves too were practically piled one on top of another. The *puris* were cold. People were asking for hot ones. White flour *puris* become tough as leather when cold. Who would want to eat them? But why had the cook been allowed to leave so early? It is

such mishaps which lead to disgrace.

Suddenly there was a commotion—there was no salt in the vegetables. The oldest daughter-in-law hurriedly began to grind salt. Phoolmati ground her teeth in rage, but she had to control herself and keep quiet. The salt was ground and served out. Then there was another commotion—the water is warm, fetch cold water. No arrangement had been made for cold water, there was no ice in the house. A man was despatched to market but he returned empty handed—there was no ice to be had, so late at night. The guests had to drink the warm tapwater.

Phoolmati would have liked to give her sons a good spanking. Never had such shoddiness been witnessed in her house. None of them had the sense to order an essential item like ice, yet all of them were clamouring to become masters of the house. Too busy gossiping to pay attention to detail! What would the guests think of them—setting out to feast the community and no ice in the house.

Now what was the excitement about? People were getting up, without finishing the meal. What had happened?

Phoolmati could not keep away any longer. Stepping out of her room into the verandah, she asked Kamtanath: “What’s happened, son? Why are people getting up?” Kamta moved away without replying. Annoyed, Phoolmati looked around and saw a maidservant. On questioning her, she learnt that a dead mouse had been found in someone’s food.

Phoolmati stood still as a statue. Her inner turmoil was such that she could have hit her head against the wall. These wretches dared presume to give a feast. Was there no limit to their slovenliness? How many people’s religious scruples they had offended! How could people help rising up from the feast? Would anyone knowingly lose his religion? All that effort for nothing. Hundreds of rupees down the drain. And to top it all, the terrible disgrace.

The guests had left, leaving the uneaten food on the leaves. The four boys were standing in the courtyard,

shamefacedly trying to lay the blame on one another. The eldest daughter-in-law was scolding her younger sisters-in-law who, in turn, were blaming Kumud. Kumud stood by, crying. Phoolmati came up and said: “Well, have you blackened your faces sufficiently or are you planning further exploits? Go and drown yourselves, all of you, now that you are not fit to show your faces anywhere in town.”

None of the boys made any reply. Getting still angrier, Phoolmati went on: “What does it matter to you? None of you has any sense of stepne. His soul is weeping who wasted his life building the honour of this house. You have blackened his pure soul. The whole city is spitting at you. No one will approach your doors even to urinate on them.”

Kamtanath listened quietly for a while. Then, he answered irritably: “All right, mother, be quiet now. It was a mistake, all of us admit it was a very bad mistake, but do you propose to butcher the family for it? Everyone makes mistakes. One can only regret them. One can’t kill oneself.”

The eldest daughter-in-law tried to absolve herself: “How were we to know that Kumud would not be able to manage so simple a task? She should have examined the vegetables before putting them in the cooking pot. Instead, she emptied the whole basket straight into the pot. It’s no fault of ours.”

Kamtanath rebuked his wife: “It’s neither Kumud’s fault nor yours nor mine. It’s a matter of chance. We were fated to suffer this disrepute. For such a big feast, one can’t possibly put in the vegetables by handfuls. One puts them in by the basket. Such accidents do occur. There’s no need to consider oneself dishonoured. You are needlessly sprinkling salt on the wound.”

“Instead of feeling ashamed, you are going on to talk still more shamelessly”, said Phoolmati.

“Why should I feel ashamed?” retorted Kamtanath, unabashed. “Have I committed a theft? Ants are found in sugar and weevils in flour—everyone knows this but

no one can bear to see it. Our only misfortune was that we didn’t notice it earlier. We would quietly have taken out the mouse and thrown it. No one, would have got to know.”

“What?” Phoolmati was horrified. “You would have spoilt everyone’s religion by feeding them a dead mouse?”

Kamtanath laughed and replied: “What old fashioned talk is this, mother? Such things don’t spoil one’s religion. In any case, which of these pious people, who have just got up and left, does not eat mutton with relish? They don’t even spare turtles and tortoises. What’s so special about a small mouse?”

It seemed to Phoolmati that the end of the world could not be far off. When educated men entertained such irreligious thoughts, only god could protect religion. She went away, crestfallen.

Two months had passed. One night, the four brothers were sitting and chatting. The topic of conversation was Kumud’s marriage. The eldest daughter-in-law was also present.

Kamtanath remarked: “Father’s decisions have gone with father. Murari Pandit is a scholar and comes of good stock. But a man who sets a price to his scholarship and breeding is a base fellow. We should not wed Kumud to the son of such a man, even without dowry, let alone with Rs 5,000. Let us break off the understanding with him, and look for another groom. We have a total of Rs 20,000. That works out to only Rs 5,000 for each of us. We’ll be ruined if we give Rs 5,000 as dowry and spend another Rs 10,000 on gifts and entertainment.”

“I will need at least 5,000 to open my clinic”, said Umanath. “I can’t give a single paisa from my share. I won’t start making profits, right away, so I’ll have to live on my capital for at least a year.”

Dayanath looked up from his newspaper, removed his glasses and added: “I’m planning to start a paper. I’ll need a capital of at least 10,000 to set up the press and the paper. If I invest 5,000 I’ll be able to find a partner. I can’t survive

for ever by writing articles in magazines.”

Nodding his head in agreement, Kamtanath said: “Editors are not willing to publish articles even for free, let alone for payment.”

“No, no”, retorted Dayanath. “I don’t write for anyone without; advance payment.”

Kamta took back his words: “I’m not speaking of you, brother, you manage to get a little, but not everyone does.”

The eldest daughter-in-law remarked piously: “If the girl is fortunate, she will be happy even in a poor house, but if she’s ill starved, she’ll weep even in a king’s palace. All this is decided by one’s fate.”

Looking approvingly at his wife, Kamtanath added: “And this year, we have to get Sita married as well.”

Sitanath was the youngest. Listening with bowed head to his brothers’ self centred talk, he had been wanting to speak up. As soon as his name was mentioned,

“Do you hear his talk, brother?” said Uma to Kamtanath.

Dayanath spoke up, “Well, what do you lose? He is giving his money—spend it. We have no enmity with Murari Pandit. I am happy that one of us is in a position to make a sacrifice. He doesn’t need money right away. He’s getting a government scholarship and when he passes out, he’ll get a job somewhere or other. The rest of us are not in his position.”

Kamtanath then gave evidence of his foresight, “If one of us gets into trouble, will the others just look on? He is only a boy. He doesn’t realise that there are times when a rupee is worth a million. Who knows, he may get a government scholarship to study abroad or he may get into the civil services. Then he’ll need four or five thousand to prepare for the journey, and whom will he ask for it? I don’t want his life to be ruined just because of dowry.”



he said: “Please don’t worry about my marriage. I won’t even think of marriage until I begin to earn, and, to tell the truth, I don’t want to marry at all. Right now, the country needs workers, not children. Please spend my share of the money on Kumud’s wedding. It is not right to break off the agreement with Pandit Murarilal after everything has been arranged.”

“Where will Rs 10,000 come from?” said Uma sharply.

“I’m saying I will give up my share”, said Sita, somewhat frightened.

“And the rest?”

“We can ask Murarilal to reduce the dowry amount. He is not so blindly greedy as not to back down a little, considering the circumstances; if he is content with 3,000, we can manage the whole thing with 5,000.”

This argumen’t broke Sitanath’s resolve. Abashed, he said: “Yes, if that happens, I will need money.”

“Is it impossible that it should happen?”

“I wouldn’t say it is impossible, but it is hard. Those who are influential get scholarships. Who will bother about me?”

“Sometimes the influential get left behind and those without influence carry off the prize.”

“Then let it be as you think best. I am ready to say that even if I can’t go abroad, Kumud should go to a good house.”

Kamtanath said, resolutely: “A good house is not ensured by dowry alone, brother. As your sister-in-law just said, these things are decided by one’s fate. I would like us to break off with Murarilal and look for a family which is agreeable to

less expenditure. I can’t spend more than Rs 1,000 on this wedding. What do you think of Pandit Deendayal?”

“Very good”, said Uma, pleased. “He may not be a BA or MA, but he has a good income from his tenants.”

Dayanath raised an objection: “We should consult mother too.” Kamtanath did not think this necessary. He said: “She seems to have taken leave of her senses. She goes on and on with the same old fashioned talk. She’s stuck on Murarilal. She doesn’t realise that times have changed. All she wants is that Kumud go to Murari Pandit’s house, even if it means the ruin of all of us.”

Uma voiced a doubt: “Mother will give all her jewels to Kumud— see if she doesn’t.”

Kamtanath’s self interest could not flout the norms. He said: “She has absolute rights over her jewels. They are her *stridhan*. She can give them to anyone she likes.”

“Should she throw them away just because they’re *stridhan*?” said Uma. “After all, they also came from father’s earnings.”

“Whoever’s earnings they may be, she has full rights over her *stridhan*.”

“That may be the law but it is unjust. Four of us have to share 20,000 between us while mother has control of jewels worth 10,000! Wait and see, she will use them to marry Kumud into Murari Pandit’s family.”

Umanath could not let so large a sum slip away from him. He was a skilled trickster. He decided to get the jewels away from his mother by hook or by crook. Until this was accomplished, it would be wiser not to provoke Phoolmati by discussing Kumud’s marriage.

“I don’t like the idea of such stratagems”, said Kamtanath, shaking his head. “The jewels can’t be worthless than

*According to some schools of Hindu law, before 1956, property descended from father to son; widows being entitled only to maintenance and unmarried daughters to their dowries. But a woman had control over her *stridhan*—wealth given to her by her parents or husband which was often in the form of jewellery.

10,000", Umanath said.

"However much they may be worth, I don't want to participate in unethical actions", Kamtanath replied, unmoved.

"Then stay out of it. But please don't interfere."

"I will keep out."

"And you, Sita?"

"I'll keep out."

But when Dayanath was asked, he expressed his readiness to help Umanath. After all, he would get Rs 2,500 from the 10,000. Some fraud was surely forgivable in the interest of getting so large a sum.

Phoolmati had finished her dinner and lain down when Uma and Daya came and sat by her. Both of them looked as if some terrible disaster had overtaken them. "Why do you two look so upset?" Phoolmati asked.

Scratching his head, Uma replied: "Mother, writing articles for newspapers is a very risky job! However careful you are, you get into trouble some time or other. Dayanath wrote an article and he has to pay a bond of Rs 5,000. If it's not deposited by tomorrow, he'll be arrested and go to jail for 10 years." "Why do you write such things, son?" cried Phoolmati, beating her head. "Don't you know that we have fallen on evil days? Is there no way to avoid the bond?"

Dayanath answered, as if guilt-stricken: "Mother, I didn't write anything objectionable—I was just unfortunate. The district commissioner is terribly strict, he has no mercy. I've done as much running around as I could."

"Then, haven't you asked Kamta to arrange the money?"

Uma pulled a face. "You know his nature, mother—money is dearer to him than life. He won't give a paisa even if it means Daya being banished to the Andamans."

Daya agreed. "I haven't even talked to him about this."

Phoolmati got up from bed. "I'll go and speak to him. How can he possibly refuse? Is the money meant for a crisis like this or is it meant to be buried?"

But Umanath stopped her. "No, mother, don't say anything to him. He won't give the money—he'll only create a scene. He'll be so scared of losing his job that he won't let Daya stay in the house. I wouldn't be surprised if he went and informed the officers."

"Then how will you arrange the bond?" said Phoolmati, helplessly. "I have no money. Ah, but I have my jewels. Pawn them and pay the bond. And swear that you will never write another word in any paper."

"No, mother, I can never take your jewels to save myself", said Dayanath, putting his hands over his ears. "It's only a matter of five or 10 years in jail—I'll endure it. It's not as if I'm accomplishing great things, sitting here."

Phoolmati beat her breast and said:

Having stolen their mother's jewels, the four sons had begun to placate her. If a little courtesy satisfied her soul, why deny it to her?

"How can you talk that way, son? Who can dare arrest you as long as I am alive? I'll scorch his face. Jewels are meant for a crisis like this. If I lose you, what use will I have for these jewels?"

She brought out the jewel box and kept it before him.

Daya looked pleadingly at Uma and said: "What do you advise, brother? This is why I told you there was no need to tell mother. It was just a matter of going to prison."

Uma protested: "How could such a big thing happen without mother knowing? I couldn't have kept it from her. But I don't know what should be done now. I don't like the idea of your going to jail but neither do I like the idea of pawning mother's jewels."

Phoolmati said, tearfully: "Do you think the jewels are dearer to me than you are? I would sacrifice even my life for you, not to speak of jewels."

Daya said, firmly: "Mother, I will not take your jewels, no matter what happens

to me. I haven't been able to serve you in any way; how can I walk off with your jewels now? A useless son like me should never have been born of your womb. I've never given you anything but trouble."

Phoolmati said, equally firmly: "If you don't take them, I will go and pawn them myself and deposit the bond at the district commissioner's office. Try me and see. I don't know what will happen after my death but as long as I am alive, god knows no one can dare look askance at you."

Umanath said: "Now there's no way out, Dayanath. Take then but, remember, as soon as you can lay your hands on some money, you must redeem the jewels. It is rightly said that motherhood is one long penance. Who but a mother can show such love? How unfortunate we are that we do not show her even one percent of

the devotion that we should."

The two of them took the jewel box as if greatly anguished at having to do so, and off they went. Their mother looked on, her heart full of love and her soul yearning to gather them into her arms. Today, after many months, her wounded maternal heart had experienced the rare joy of being able to sacrifice its all. Her imagination had, as it were, been searching for an occasion to undergo this sacrifice, this self abnegation. No element of right or greed or egotistical love was involved. The right to sacrifice was itself a joy to her. Today, having recovered her lost right and offered her life at the altar of her restored image, she was overwhelmed with bliss.

Three months passed by. Having stolen their mother's jewels, the four sons had begun to placate her. They had instructed their wives to be pleasant to her. If a little courtesy satisfied her soul, why deny it to her?

The four sons did exactly as they

pleased but they would consult their mother or weave such a web that the simple woman would be taken in and concur in their decisions. She hated the idea of selling the orchard but the four together played so clever a game that she agreed to the sale; but when it came to the question of Kumud's marriage, an irreconcilable difference of opinion arose. The mother had set her heart on Pandit Murarilal while the sons had decided on Deendayal. One day, the conflict came out in the open.

Phoolmati said: "A daughter too has a share in her parents' earnings. You got an orchard worth Rs 16,000 and a house worth 20,000. Does Kumud not have even a 5,000 share in the 20,000 cash?"

Kamta replied, mildly: "Mother, Kumud is your daughter but she is also our sister. You will depart in a few years, but our relations with her will continue for a long time to come. We will always try our best not to do anything that may cause her harm, but if you talk of shares, Kumud has no share. It was different when father was alive. He could have spent as much as he liked on her wedding. No one could stop him. But now we have to try and save every paisa we can. What sense does it make to spend Rs 5,000 on something that can be managed in Rs 1,000?"

"Why 5,000?" put in Umanath. "Say 10,000."

With drawn brows, Kamta replied: "No, I'll say 5,000 because we cannot afford to spend 5,000 on one marriage."

Phoolmati was determined: "She will marry Murarilal's son, whether 5,000 has to be spent or 10,000. These are my husband's earnings. I have struggled to save and collect this money. I will spend it as I please. You are not the only ones born of my womb. Kumud too came from the same womb. All of you are equal in my eyes. I am not asking you for any help. You sit quiet and watch; I will manage everything. Five thousand of the 20,000 are Kumud's."

Now Kamtanath had no alternative but to shelter behind the bitter truth. He said:



"Mother, you are needlessly fanning the fires. The money you think is yours is not really yours. You cannot spend any of it without our permission."

"What did you say?" cried Phoolmati, as if bitten by a snake.

"Just you say it again! I can't spend the money I myself have saved?"

"That money is no longer yours. It is ours."

"It may be yours—but only after my death."

"No, it became ours as soon as father died."

Umanath remarked, rudely: "Mother has no knowledge of the law and gets excited for nothing."

Infuriated, Phoolmati said: "To hell with your law. I don't want to know about any such law. Your father was no millionaire. It was I who scrimped and saved, who denied myself many things, to build up this household—otherwise, you wouldn't have had a roof over your heads. You cannot touch my money as long as I am alive. I spent 10,000 each on the weddings of three sons. I will spend the same on Kumud's wedding."

Kamtanath too grew angry, "You have no right to spend anything at all."

Umanath rebuked his elder brother: "Why do you unnecessarily get into arguments with mother? Write a letter to Murarilal to say that Kumud will not marry his son and there's an end of it. Mother doesn't know the law but keeps arguing for nothing." Phoolmati said in a controlled voice: All right, let's hear. What is this law?"

Uma replied, innocently: "The law is that after the father's death, the property goes to the sons. The mother has only a right to food and clothing."

Seething with indignation, Phoolmati asked: "Who made this law?"

"Our sages, the great sage Manu, who else?" Uma replied, calmly. Phoolmati was speechless for a moment. Then she said in an anguished voice: "So I am living in this house on your charity?" Umanath replied with the dispassionate demeanour of a judge: "You may look at it any way you please."

Hit by this thunderbolt, Phoolmati's soul seemed to cry aloud. Words like live sparks fell from her mouth: "I built up the

house, I accumulated the property, I gave birth to you, and brought you up, and today I am an outsider in this house? This is Manu's law, and you want to follow this law? Very good. Keep your house. I am not willing to live as your dependant. Far better to die. What wonderful justice? I planted the tree but I can't stand in its shade; if this is the law, may it burn in hell."

The four young men, were quite unmoved by their mother's anger and terror. Protected as they were by the iron armour of law, what effect could these thorns have on them?

Phoolmati got up and walked away. For the first time in her life, her loving motherhood stood up and cursed her. The motherhood she had considered her life's blessing, at whose altar she had thought herself privileged to sacrifice all her desires and aspirations, today seemed to her like a ball of fire that was consuming her life.

Dusk was falling. The margosa tree at the door stood still with bowed head, as if grieving over the ways of the world. On the western horizon, the god of light and life, like Phoolmati's motherhood, was burning on the pyre he himself had lit.

Phoolmati went and lay down in her room. She felt as if her back was broken. She had never dreamt that her own sons would turn into enemies as soon as her husband died. The boys she had reared on her heart's blood were today rending her heart. This house was now a bed of thorns to her. To live on crumbs, without respect, without value, was intolerable to one of her proud spirit.

But what else could she do? If she separated from her sons, who would be disgraced? Whether the world spat at her or at her sons, it was she who would be defamed. The world would say: look at the old woman—she has to live by her labour though she has four grown sons. Those she had always despised would laugh at her. Such insults would be far more wounding than this disrespect. Wisdom lay in keeping her own and her family's life veiled. But she would have to adjust to

the new circumstances. The times had changed. So far, she had lived as the mistress, now she would have to live as the maid. This was god's will. Better to take insults and kicks from her sons than from strangers.

For a long time, she lay with her face covered, weeping over her plight. The night passed in this fashion. The winter dawn emerged fearfully from Usha's lap, like a prisoner escaping from jail.

Phoolmati, departing from her usual custom, got up at dawn. Overnight, she had undergone a mental metamorphosis. While the whole house was still asleep, she began to sweep the yard. The cemented floor, drenched in the night's

to Deendayal was arranged. Deendayal was over 40 years old, he did not have too good a reputation, but he was fairly prosperous. He agreed to get married without delay.

The date was fixed, the bridegroom's party arrived, the wedding took place, and Kumud departed. Who can know what passed in Phoolmati's heart; who can know what passed in Kumud's heart; but the four brothers were very happy, as if a thorn in their flesh had been removed.

The daughter of a respectable family—how could she open her mouth? If happiness is written in her fate, she will experience happiness; if sorrow, she will endure it. God's will is the last support of

She laid the jewels and cash at her mother's feet and said: "Mother, your blessings are worth millions to me. Keep these things. Who knows what hardships you may yet have to endure?"

dews, hurt her bare feet like thorns. Panditji had never allowed her to get up so early because the cold affected her health adversely. But those days were gone. She was trying to alter her constitution to suit the changed times. After sweeping the yard, she lit the fire and began to clean the rice and lentils.

After a while, the sons and daughters-in-law got up. They saw the old woman at work, shivering from cold, but none of them said: "Mother, why do you tire yourself out?" Perhaps all of them were pleased that the old woman's pride was humbled.

From that day, Phoolmati made it her practice to toil ceaselessly at housework but to remain inwardly aloof. The glow of self respect on her face was replaced by the shadow of deep grief. It was as if an electric bulb had been replaced by a small oil lamp, whose flicker could be extinguished by a mild gust of wind.

The letter breaking off relations with Murarilal was written. Kumud's marriage

to the helpless. Even if the man her family marries her to has a thousand vices, he is her lord and master. Revolt was alien to her imagination.

Phoolmati did not intervene at all. She had nothing to do with what Kumud was given, how the guests were entertained, or with the gifts sent by relatives. Even when anyone did consult her, she only said: "Son, whatever all of you do, is right. Why ask me?"

When the time came for Kumud to leave and Kumud embraced her mother and wept, she took her daughter to her room and giving her the little cash and the few inexpensive jewels she had left, said: "Daughter, my desires remained unfulfilled—otherwise, would you have been married like this and sent away like this today?"

Phoolmati had not told anyone about her jewels. Even if she had not fully seen through the fraud her sons had practised, she well knew that the jewels would not

come back to her and that to ask for them would only generate more bitterness, but on this occasion, she felt the need to clear herself of blame. She had brought Kumud to her room because she could not bear that Kumud should go away under the impression that her mother had kept her jewels for her daughters-in-law.

But Kumud had already come to know about the trickery; she laid the jewels and cash at her mother's feet and said: "Mother, your blessings are worth millions to me'. Keep these things. Who knows what hardships you may yet have to endure?"

Phoolmati was about to reply when Umanath came in and said: "What are you doing, Kumud? Hurry up. The auspicious moment is passing. Your in-laws are getting impatient. You'll come to visit in a couple of months. You can take whatever you have to, then."

Phoolmati felt as if salt was being rubbed into her wounds. She said: "What do I have left to give her? Go, daughter, may god make your wedded status immortal."

Kumud left. Phoolmati collapsed, as if stunned. Her last attachment to life was destroyed.

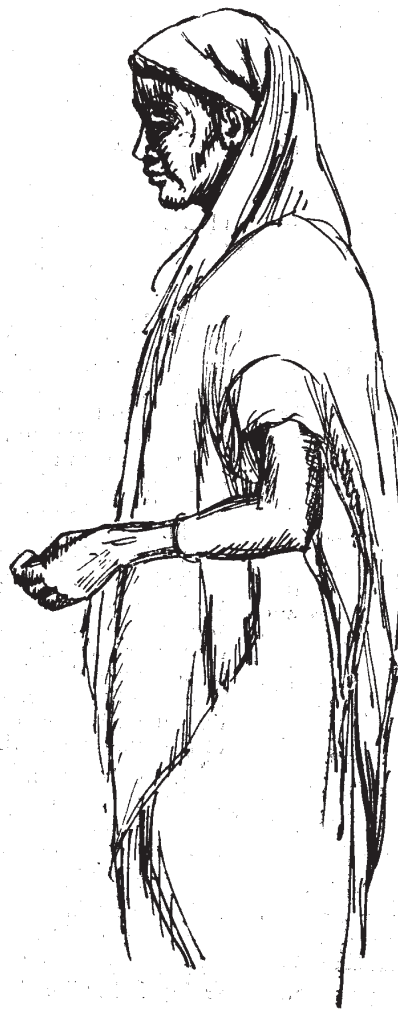
A year passed, Phoolmati's room was the biggest and airiest in the house. Several months ago, she had vacated it for the oldest daughter-in-law and moved into a small shed like room where she lived like a beggar. She had not the slightest affection left for her sons and daughters-in-law. She was now the maidservant of the house. She had nothing to do with anyone, any thing or any event in the house. She lived merely because death had not come to her. Neither joy nor sorrow touched her. Umanath's clinic opened, his friends were feasted, there was an entertainment programme. Dayanath's press opened, there was another function. Sitanath got his scholarship and went abroad—yet another celebration. Kamtanath's eldest son's thread ceremony was performed in style. But no sign of joy appeared on Phoolmati's face.

Kamtanath lay sick of the typhoid for a month and nearly died. Dayanath actually

wrote an objectionable article to boost the circulation of his paper, and went to jail for six months. Umanath took a bribe in a criminal case and wrote a wrong medical report, as a result of which his licence was cancelled. But not a flicker of perturbation was to be seen on Phoolmati's face.

Her life was now devoid of hope, of interest, of anxiety. To toil like a beast of burden and to eat—these were the only two activities left to her. An animal works when it is beaten but eats with pleasure. Phoolmati worked without being told to, but ate as if the food was poisoned. For months together, she would not care to oil her hair or wash her clothes. She had become as though inanimate.

It was the rainy season. Malaria was spreading. Mud coloured clouds in the sky, muddy water on the ground. The moist air spread fever, chills and colds. The maid



servant fell sick. Phoolmati washed all the utensils and did all the work, drenched to the skin. Then she lit the fire and set the food to cook.

The boys must eat on time. Suddenly, she remembered that Kamtanath did not drink tapwater. Although it was raining, she set out to fetch Ganga water.

Kamtanath, lying on his bed, said: "Let it be, mother. I'll fetch the water. A fine day the maid-servant has chosen to absent herself"

Phoolmati looked up at the overcast sky and, said: "You will get wet, son, and catch a cold."

Kamtanath said: "You too are wet. Don't go and fall ill."

Phoolmati said, unconcernedly: "I won't fall ill. God has made me immortal."

Umanath was sitting nearby. His clinic brought in no income so he was always anxious to please his brother and sister-in-law. He said: "Let her go, brother. She reigned over her daughters-in-law for a long time. Let her do penance now."

The Ganga was swollen, like an ocean, its farther shore touching the horizon. Only the topmost branches of the trees on the shore were visible above the water. Phoolmati went down with her pitcher. She filled it, and was coming up when her foot slipped. Unable to save herself, she fell into the water. For a moment, she struggled, then the waves dragged her down.

Some priests standing on the shore cried out: "Help, help, an old woman is drowning." A couple of men ran to help but Phoolmati had been absorbed by the waves, those tumultuous waves the sight of which is enough to make the heart quake.

One asked: "Who was this old woman?"

"Don't you know her—Pandit Ayodhyanath's widow."

"Ayodhyanath was a big man, wasn't he?"

"He was, but she was fated to suffer."

"He has several grown up sons, and all are earning, aren't they?"

"Yes, all that is true, brother, but fate too counts for somethingw!"

(translated from Hindi by Ruth Vanita)