

Unit 11

Kabuliwallah

Why do people sometimes have to leave their families and go to other countries to work?

What are the effects of this on their family life? Do you know of any family that has had to go through this experience? Share with your class.

The window of my room overlooks the road. My five-year-old daughter had seated herself at my feet near my table, and was playing softly, drumming on her knees. All of a sudden Mini left her play, and ran to the window, crying, 'O Kabuliwallah! O Kabuliwallah!' Sure enough in the street below was a Kabuliwallah, passing slowly along. He wore the loose soiled¹ clothing of his people, with a tall turban; there was a bag on his back, and he carried boxes of grapes in his hand.

I cannot tell what were my daughter's feelings at the sight of this man, but she began to call him loudly. The Kabuliwallah turned, and looked up at the child. When she saw this, overcome by terror, she fled to her mother's protection and disappeared.

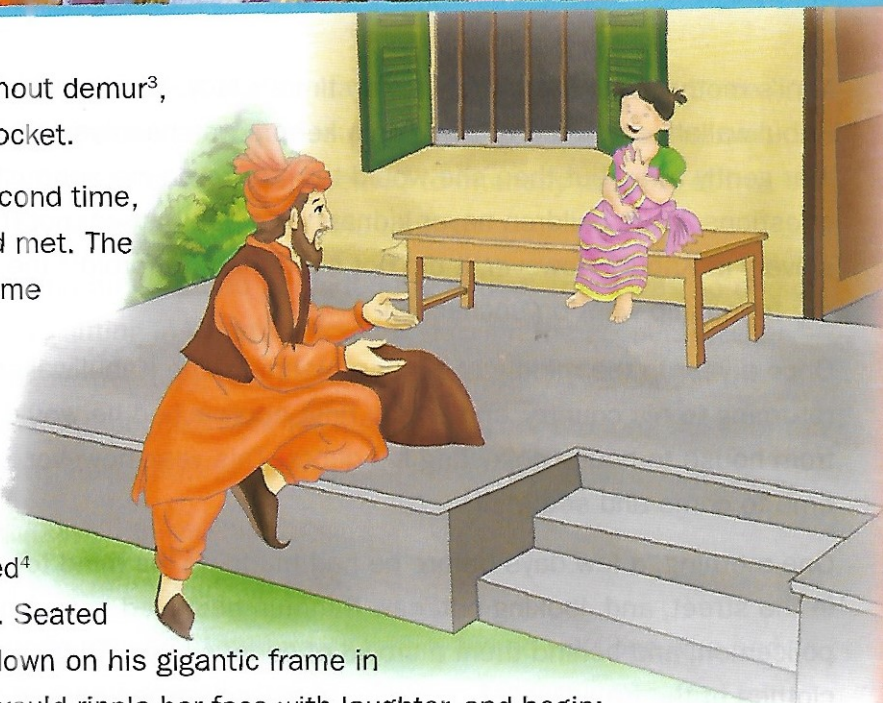
I made some small purchases, and as he was about to leave, he asked: 'And where is the little girl, sir?' And I, thinking that Mini must get rid of her false fear, had her brought out. She stood by my chair, and looked at the Kabuliwallah and his bag. He offered her nuts and raisins, but she would not be tempted, and only clung the closer to me, with all her doubts increased. This was their first meeting.

One morning, however, not many days later, as I was leaving the house, I was startled to find Mini, seated on a bench near the door, laughing and talking, with the great Kabuliwallah at her feet. In all her life, it appeared, my small daughter had never found so patient a listener, save her father. And already the corner of her little sari was stuffed with almonds and raisins, the gift of her visitor, 'Why did you give her those?' I said, and taking out an eight-anna² bit, I handed it to him. The man

¹soiled dirty ²anna a former monetary unit of India and Pakistan, equal to one-sixteenth of a rupee

accepted the money without demur³, and slipped it into his pocket.

It was not the first or second time, I found, that the two had met. The Kabuliwallah had overcome the child's first terror by a judicious bribery of nuts and almonds, and the two were now great friends. They had many silly jokes, which afforded⁴ them much amusement. Seated



in front of him, looking down on his gigantic frame in all her tiny dignity, Mini would ripple her face with laughter, and begin:

'O Kabuliwallah, Kabuliwallah, what have you got in your bag?' And he would reply, in the nasal accents of the mountaineer: 'An elephant!' Then the Kabuliwallah would take his turn: 'Well, little one, and when are you going to the father-in-law's house?'

Now most small Bengali maidens have heard long ago about the father-in-law's house; but we, being a little new-fangled⁵, had kept these things from our child, and Mini at this question must have been a trifle⁶ bewildered. But she would not show it, and with ready tact⁷ replied: 'Are you going there?'

Amongst men of the Kabuliwallah's class, however, it is well-known that the words father-in-law's house have a double meaning. It is a euphemism⁸ for jail, the place where we are well cared for, at no expense to ourselves. In this sense would the sturdy⁹ pedlar¹⁰ take my daughter's question. 'Ah,' he would say, shaking his fist at an invisible policeman, 'I will thrash my father-in-law!' Hearing this, and picturing the poor embarrassed relative, Mini would go off into peals of laughter, in which her formidable¹¹ friend would join.

³demur objection, reluctance ⁴afforded provided ⁵fangled fashioned ⁶trifle slightly

⁷tact skill ⁸euphemism a mild or indirect word for one considered to be harsh or blunt

⁹sturdy strongly built ¹⁰pedlar a person who goes from place to place selling goods

¹¹formidable impressive

Mini's mother is unfortunately a very timid¹² lady. So she was full of doubts about the Kabuliwallah, and used to beg me to keep a watchful eye on him. I tried to laugh her fear gently away, but then she would turn round on me seriously, and ask me solemn¹³ questions. Were children never kidnapped? Was it, then, not true that there was slavery in Kabul? However, it did not seem right to forbid¹⁴ the man the house, and the friendship went on unchecked.

Once a year in the middle of January Rahmun, the Kabuliwallah, was in the habit of returning to his country, and as the time approached he would be very busy, going from house to house collecting his debts. This year, however, he could always find time to come and see Mini.

One morning, a few days before he had made up his mind to go, I heard an uproar in the street, and, looking out, saw Rahmun being led away, bound, between two policemen, and behind them a crowd of curious boys. There were blood-stains on the clothes of the Kabuliwallah, and one of the policemen carried a knife. Hurrying out, I stopped them, and enquired what it all meant. Partly from one, partly from another, I gathered that a certain neighbour had owed the pedlar something for a Rampuri shawl, but had falsely denied having bought it, and that in the course of the quarrel, Rahmun had struck him.

Suddenly in a verandah of my house appeared my little Mini, with her usual exclamation: 'O Kabuliwallah! Kabuliwallah!' Rahmun's face lit up as he turned to her. He had no bag under his arm today, so she could not discuss the elephant with him. She at once therefore proceeded to the next question: 'Are you going to the father-in-law's house?' Rahmun laughed and said, 'Just where I am going, little one!' Then seeing that the reply did not amuse the child, he held up his fettered¹⁵ hands. 'I would have thrashed that old father-in-law, but my hands are bound!' On a charge of murderous assault, Rahmun was sentenced to some years' imprisonment.

Years passed away. It was once more autumn and we had made arrangements for our Mini's marriage. It was to take place during the Puja Holidays. With Durga returning to Kailas¹⁶, the light of our home also was to depart to her husband's house, and leave her father's in the shadow.

¹²timid easily frightened ¹³solemn serious ¹⁴forbid refuse to allow ¹⁵fettered confined in chains ¹⁶Kailas Kailash or Lord Shiva, Goddess Durga's husband

The morning was bright. After the rains, the sun-rays looked like pure gold. Since early dawn to-day the wedding-pipes had been sounding and at each beat my own heart throbbed. The wail of the tune, Bhairavi, seemed to intensify my pain at the approaching separation. My Mini was to be married tonight.

From early morning noise and bustle¹⁷ had pervaded the house. There was no end of hurry and excitement. I was sitting in my study, looking through the accounts, when someone entered, saluting respectfully, and stood before me. It was Rahmun the Kabuliwallah. At first I did not recognize him. He had no bag, nor the long hair, nor the same vigour that he used to have. But he smiled, and I knew him again.

‘When did you come, Rahmun?’ I asked him.

‘Last evening,’ he said, ‘I was released from jail.’

The words struck harsh upon my ears. I had never before talked with one who had wounded his fellow, and my heart shrank within itself when I realized this, for I felt that the day would have been better-omened¹⁸ had he not turned up.

‘There are ceremonies going on,’ I said, ‘and I am busy. Could you perhaps come another day?’

At once he turned to go; but as he reached the door he hesitated, and said: ‘May I not see the little one, sir, for a moment?’ It was his belief that Mini was still the same. He had pictured her running to him as she used, calling ‘O Kabuliwallah! Kabuliwallah!’ He had imagined too that they would laugh and talk together, just as of old. In fact, in memory of former days he had brought, carefully wrapped up in paper, a few almonds and raisins and grapes, obtained somehow from a countryman, for his own little fund was dispersed¹⁹.

I said again, ‘There is a ceremony in the house, and you will not be able to see anyone today.’ The man’s face fell. He looked wistfully²⁰ at me for a moment, said ‘Good morning,’ and went out. I felt a little sorry, and would have called him back, but I found he was returning of his own accord²¹. He came close up to me holding out his offerings and said: ‘I brought these few things, Sir, for the little one. Will you give them to her?’

¹⁷bustle hectic activity ¹⁸better-omened having a greater chance of good fortune

¹⁹dispersed given away ²⁰wistfully longingly ²¹of his own accord voluntarily

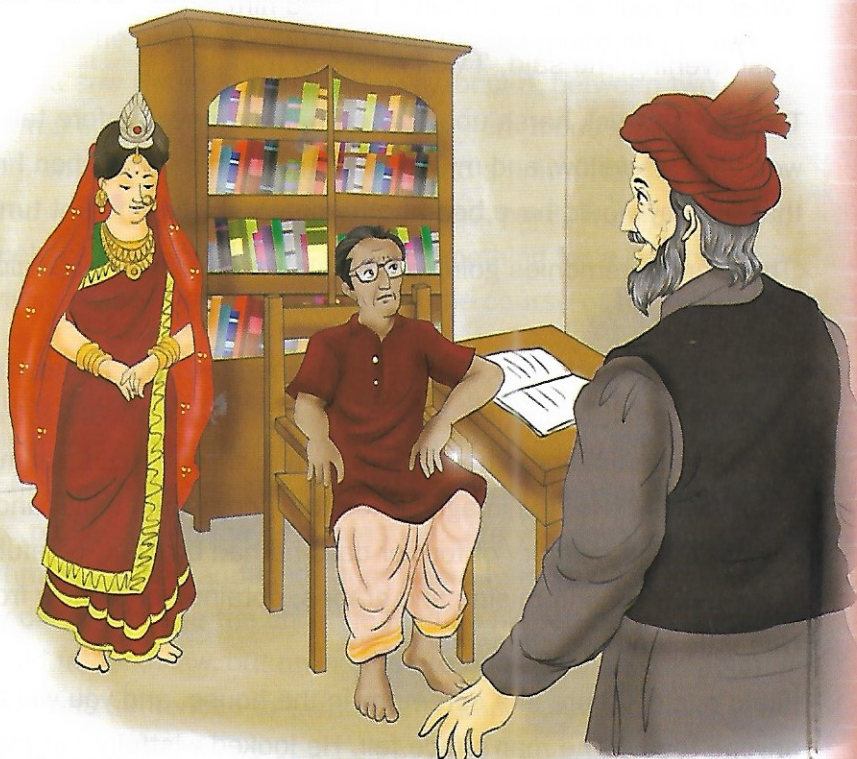
I took them and was going to pay him, but he caught my hand and said, 'You are very kind, Sir! Keep me in your recollection²². Do not offer me money! You have a little girl, I too have one like her in my own home. I think of her and bring fruits to your child, not to make a profit for myself.'

Saying this, he put his hand inside his big loose robe, and brought out a small and dirty piece of paper. With great care he unfolded this, and smoothed it out with both hands on my table. It bore the impression of a little hand. Not a photograph. Not a drawing. The impression of an ink-smeared hand laid flat on the paper. This touch of his own little daughter had been always on his heart, as he had come year after year to Calcutta, to sell his wares²³ in the streets.

Tears came to my eyes.

I forgot that he was a poor Kabuli fruit-seller, while I was— but no, what was I more than he? He also was a father. That impression of the hand of his little Parbati in her distant mountain home reminded me of my own little Mini.

I sent for Mini immediately from the inner apartment. Many difficulties were raised, but I would not listen. Clad in the red silk of her wedding-day, with the sandal²⁴ paste on her forehead, and adorned as a young bride, Mini came and stood bashfully²⁵ before me.



²²recollection memory ²³wares goods ²⁴sandal sandalwood ²⁵bashfully feeling shy

The Kabuliwallah looked a little staggered²⁶ at the apparition²⁷. He could not revive their old friendship. At last he smiled and said, 'Little one, are you going to your father-in-law's house?' But Mini now understood the meaning of the word 'father-in-law,' and she could not reply to him as of old. She flushed²⁸ up at the question and stood before him with her bride-like face turned down.

I remembered the day when the Kabuliwallah and my Mini had first met, and I felt sad. When she had gone, Rahmun heaved a deep sigh, and sat down on the floor. The idea had suddenly come to him that his daughter too must have grown in this long time, and that he would have to make friends with her anew. Assuredly he would not find her, as he used to know her. And besides, what might not have happened to her in these eight years?

The marriage-pipes sounded, and the mild autumn sun streamed round us. But Rahmun sat in the little Calcutta lane, and saw before him the barren²⁹ mountains of Afghanistan. I took out a bank-note, and gave it to him, saying: 'Go back to your own daughter, Rahmun, in your own country, and may the happiness of your meeting bring good fortune to my child!'

Having made this present, I had to curtail³⁰ some of the festivities. I could not have the electric lights I had intended, nor the military band, and the ladies of the house were despondent³¹ at it. But to me the wedding feast was all the brighter for the thought that in a distant land a long-lost father met again with his only child.

RABINDRANATH TAGORE

²⁶**staggered** overwhelmed ²⁷**apparition** a remarkable or unexpected appearance ²⁸**flushed** become red due to a feeling of strong emotion ²⁹**barren** infertile ³⁰**curtail** reduce in extent ³¹**despondent** in low spirits