

The Kidnapping

It is quite possible that the incident never would have occurred at all. On the other hand, it might have. Nothing can be stated with any certainty. For all intents and purposes, whatever happened at the Arlecchino happened purely by chance. That is, it would be futile for anyone to claim that it had all been purposefully orchestrated to provide a smokescreen under cover of which the unknown parties could carry out their plan. For certainly, the person who started the brawl had no reason to let the police put his own neck in a noose!

The neck of this person, by the way, was extremely thick. The person himself was fat—extraordinarily so—and tall, as well, in proportion. Who else but that gigantic blubbery fool Qasim could answer to such a description?*

The cause of all the commotion and uproar was actually rather trivial, though Qasim himself may not have considered it so. In any case, this is how it happened: A young couple arrived at the restaurant and occupied the

* Qasim is a recurring character in the *Jasusi Dunya* series. He is childish and unpredictable, speaks with an unusual sort of speech impediment, and has an incredible appetite. He first appears in #33, *Burf kay Booth* (“The Snow Ghosts”). – Ed.

table next to Qasim, while he was fully absorbed—with all his heart and body—in dining and enjoying himself. He had a number of dishes in front of him, and was busily building a pyramid of bones onto another, larger plate. Both his hands were befouled with gravy and various food residues. The newcomers were a young man and an extremely good-looking young woman. Qasim knew the young man; he was the son of one of the city’s leading industrialists. The young man probably knew Qasim too, for they came from the same class of society.

Qasim didn’t know the girl, but she met with his approval the moment he set eyes on her. In addition to her beautiful face, she had a healthy, powerful body. In Qasim’s dictionary of romantic terms, “beauty” had only a single-word definition—*jumbo*—and while this girl didn’t quite meet his usual hefty standards, her looks and size were agreeable enough that his attention was aroused, and he regarded her with some interest.

The girl looked towards him and smiled. The young man said something softly in her ear, while looking at Qasim out of the corner of his eye. Then they both looked at him and laughed together.

That did it for Qasim. It was obvious: the two were making fun of him! It wouldn’t have mattered much had the girl been alone. If she was alone, Qasim wouldn’t have minded if she had hit him on the crown with her shoes, but this man—this son of a bitch—why did *he* laugh as he eyed him? A couple of screws in Qasim’s brain mechanism came loose, and the very next moment a plate full of meat and watery sauce hit the young man in the face.

The young man obviously couldn’t let this kind of assault go unanswered, especially when he was with his date.

He lunged towards Qasim. The harsh sound of a chair being smashed to pieces reverberated throughout the

dining hall. The waiters and a few guests ran toward the scene, but before they could reach the fighters, Qasim hurled the young man back to his table. He fell over backwards, knocking over the table and everything on it.

Suddenly, the dining hall went dark. A girl's fiery scream echoed through the hall: "Leave me! Let go! Let g—"

It seemed that she had been gagged, or that someone's hand was covering her mouth. Meanwhile, tables were being smashed into each other, and the diners and all the others were shouting, either for help or simply in confusion.

Qasim was scared witless. More people than he could count kept running into him. He fell, and before he could rise, several others stumbled and collapsed on top of him. Then they tried to get up and run again, trampling all over him in the process. Though he was bruised and battered, a thin ray of light glimmered in the morass that he called his brain: He alone would be held responsible for all this tumult! He must decamp, before the lights came back on!

With great difficulty, he rose; first he got to his knees, then, feeling around with his hands, he somehow got his bearings and advanced towards where he thought the main door should be.

Loud clashes; the sounds of people colliding with tables and chairs, or with each other; shouts; the sound of breaking crockery; ladies screaming—it was incomprehensible cacophony. Qasim managed to get to the door, but fighting his way out against the barrage of people charging in was next to impossible.

He somehow made it to the car park and got to his car. Hardly aware of what he was doing, he unlocked the door, climbed in, and started for home. When he got there, his petite wife burst into laughter at the sight of his clothes,

which were covered with large saffron-coloured soup and sauce stains.

“What happened? It looks as if someone shut you up in a kitchen and then had a proper go at you!” she said, barely succeeding in containing her laughter. Qasim danced about, unable to control his rage.

“Look here!” He raised his finger and looked at his wife with menacing, protuberant eyes. “Don’t give me blip. I mean lip. None of this blubbish-lubbish with me! Do you follow?”

At this, his wife’s gleefulness disappeared. She cried: “But where have you been, you lout? It looks like you were caught sneaking into some respectable person’s house!”

“Maybe! Maybe I *was* caught sneaping. I mean sneaking. What the hell is that to you? You go to hell!”

“Go to hell yourself! Don’t get all high and mighty with me. I’m not your slave girl.”

“I’ll say you are! I’ll say it a thousand times! YOU ARE MY SLAVE GIRL!”

“Hey, who the hell do you think you are? Watch your mouth!”

“You... you stop talking blot! I mean rot! Who spoke first, you or me?”

“You’ll have to tell me where you were.”

“I was in a drug den, smoking ganja. What’s it to you?”

“I’ll call Uncle Asim just now. Then you can ask *him* what it is to me!”

Uncle Asim—the textile baron Khan Bahadur Asim Saheb—was Qasim’s father, and also his wife’s uncle; Qasim lived in great fear of him. But right now, Qasim was rather worked up. “Okay. Go, get him!” he shouted.

He realized his folly the very next moment. He pulled himself up and stammered in a pleading voice:

“You’re after me for n-n-nothing. I went to a... uh, a

religious meeting. A Meelad celebration. That's it! I was at a Meelad celeb-b-bration!"

"Then what are those gravy stains?"

"Oh, those? I, um, cooked a special curry for the people who spoke there... N-No, no! It wasn't... Wait, just listen, will you?"

"Look at you, bringing disgrace to your family, and not even ashamed of it!"

"I *will* be ashamed! I will be ashamed from now on!" Qasim responded in a frightened schoolboy voice. "Please don't phone my father! You hear? It's just that I got fired up a b-b-bit."

"And in a heat of rage you jumped into a pot of gravy, did you?"

"Please, will you listen? I got angry with that son of a bitch, that bloody pf-f-fellow P-Parvez!"

"Who is this Parvez?"

"Oh, it's that Sir Sulaiman's son, that *ulloo ka pattha*. He dared to laugh at me, so I threw a plate of food at him, and when he tried to retaliate, I flung the bastard across the hall!"

"Where did it happen?"

"In the Arlecchino."

Qasim's wife drew a deep sigh. "Now you've done it! There'll be long-drawn out litigation. Sir Sulaiman and Uncle Asim are already at each other's throats over business matters."

"Oh! I didn't know they were feuding. If I'd known, I'd have finished the bastard off."

"Just wait, you're about to be finished off yourself. Uncle Asim will surely come to know of what you did."

"Uncle Asim's loving niece!" Qasim spoke through clenched teeth. "If only I could somehow be rid of both of you!"