

## The Girl in Rags

By Rafiq Ebrahim

After a rigorous morning walk, my uncle and I were seated on the porch of the Army guest house in Murree, a picturesque mountainous resort in northern Pakistan. We had come here on a week's vacation, promised by my uncle if I got a first division in the Matriculation examination (equivalent to High School Diploma). I passed the exams, earning a distinction and he was fulfilling his word.

Though it was quite cold, I enjoyed the scenic beauty of winter in this place. The fragrance of roses and jasmine flowers filled the air. It was exhilarating, but I had never bargained for the strict military discipline of physical workouts which included twenty to twenty-five push-ups and a brisk walk in the mornings. I was only a skinny sixteen-year old boy at that time and my uncle, a sturdy well-built athletic guy, was not only a relative, but an army officer. I simply had to follow his orders.

Looking at my physique, he remarked, "Look here, boy. You must build your body. Keep doing the push-ups and eat more nutritious food. I want to see you as a tough young man." I lowered my gaze and nodded.

Besides physical workouts, I was also made to listen to his philosophies, most of them going in one ear and out the other, but a few sank in. He spoke a lot about persistence and told me that if I wanted to climb the ladder of success, I would have to persist and be patient. With persistence you make life yield to whatever price you ask. He went on and on, but my immature mind could take no more. I just kept on nodding.

My uncle was about to get up and go inside when a little girl of about twelve, dressed in rags, climbed the stairs and came to where we were seated. She was as beautiful as most other children of the northern areas in Pakistan are; her rosy cheeks were weather-beaten with little cracks here and there on her face, but the charm was captivating.

"Sahib (sir), I want fifty rupees," (it was equivalent to five dollars at that time, but now worth only fifty cents).

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Uncle looked at her sternly, turned his face away and proceeded towards the glass entrance door.

“Sahib, I want fifty rupees,” she repeated.

Uncle now stared in anger and waived her to be gone. She, however, stood rooted and said, “I want fifty rupees to buy a toy for my little brother.”

Uncle was now in complete rage. He raised his hand as if to slap her but resisted.

“My little brother won’t eat anything unless he gets that toy,” said the girl.

“Go away!” he thundered and told me to come inside.

“Please don’t go away,” the girl pleaded. “You are the only guests here in this season. All other guest houses are vacant. As such, I can’t get the amount from anyone else.”

Uncle paid no heed to her, grabbed my hand and took me inside. My mother had given me one hundred rupees as a pocket money for the trip. I felt like giving the girl what she asked for, but I could not go against the wishes of my uncle.

A servant brought our breakfast in the living room, and after taking the meal, I sprawled on a sofa with a magazine. One hour later, I looked out. The girl was still there, leaning against a wall. I was surprised at her determination. Why she had to stand there, braving the cold wind, dressed only in skimpy attire, when she was not getting anything from us? I saw her looking up at the sky, as though pleading to God. A moment later, the clouds cleared up and the sun came out, bringing warmth in the air.

Uncle, too, must have seen her from the window of the bedroom, because he came out with his wallet in his hand. Opening the glass door, he went out. I saw him take out a fifty-rupee bill and give it to her.

I was amazed. What made him suddenly change his mind? He came in, inserted his wallet in his pocket and dropped on a chair.

The girl knocked at the door. “Now what?” yelled my uncle, opening the door. The girl had a hundred-rupee bill in her hand which she gave to my uncle. “Sahib, you dropped this accidently while giving me fifty rupees,” she said and went away.

I got the answer. The girl was neither begging nor obstinate, but full of childhood honesty.

Uncle had said so many things to me, most of them didn't click, but I remembered what he said about persistence.

I saw persistence in action. It pays!