THE ABDUCTION AND LIBERATION OF KHWARMAH

CAT 59–61

The villain Qimar flees to Tawarit, whence he sends his spy Mahus to discover the plans of the Muslim forces led by Sa'id Tamukh-Nizahad. Mahus learns that Qimar’s former wife, Khwaja Bilhud, wants to rejoin his master, and together they hatch a plot to release from prison Qalmas, Qimar’s cousin, and kidnap Khwarmah. Qimar’s daughter, who has fallen in love with Prince Ibrahim. Having achieved this, Mahus persuades Bilhud that the most effective way to smuggle Qalmas, Khwarmah, himself, and his wife out of the city is to conceal them all in chests. Mahus has the four large trunks loaded onto camels outside an inn, a sight that arouses the suspicion of Zambur, one of Hamza’s spies. Because Zambur is alone, he is unable to compel the guards to divulge the contents of the questionable cargo, so he hastens to report the situation to Ibrahim. Ibrahim comes to investigate with a large number of soldiers, but they arrive too late: the caravan has departed already, and with it the cherished Khwarmah.

Khwarmah is held in Tawarit, and she arises. She volunteers to accompany Zambur to Tawarit, and finds the house of a female doctor, Ustad Khatun. Mahiya makes the doctor a present of the fruit she has brought, and persuades her to take her as a patient. By night Zambur discovers where Khwarmah is held, but is arrested by a group of guards led by one Gharrad. The guards are so drunk that they hang Zambur up by his feet before falling asleep. Mahiya finds them in this state, recognizes Zambur, and cuts him down. She then kills all the guards except Gharrad, whom she strings up in Zambur’s place.

Mahiya now uses gentler means to get to Khwarmah. She charms Ustad Khatun into letting her accompany her on her rounds, which, Ustad Khatun brags, include tending to Khwarmah in the luxurious setting of Malik Na’im’s harem. When the eunuchs and queen ask why Ustad Khatun has brought this new woman with her, she foils them with claims that the stranger is her sister or relative, and sometimes helps with her work. As Mahiya enters Khwarmah’s chamber with Ustad Khatun, Khwarmah recognizes her and gives her a knowing smile. She quickly makes an excuse to have Mahiya remain with her that night. Once they are alone, the two women update each other on Khwarrmah’s confinement and the plans for her rescue.

Meanwhile, Malik Na’im’s son, Ghazanfar, is hopelessly in love with Khwarrmah. Seeing his despair, his mother orders her spy Tamus to drug Khwarrmah, abduct her from Tawarit and take her to Khurramabad, where Ghazanfar can marry her. Once again Zambur and Mahiya set out to rescue her. Posing as a fortuneteller, Zambur tells Ghazanfar that his sister is so well-versed in magic that she can prepare a potion that will make Khwarrmah love him. When Ghazanfar arranges for Khwarrmah to meet Mahiya, the two women again collude, this time with the result that Ghazanfar is drugged and thrown into the sea, and Zambur and Mahiya smuggle Khwarrmah out of Khurramabad. To escape, they must cross a desert, which blisters Khwarrmah’s feet. Zambur obtains a horse for her by murdering a sleeping enemy agent, on whom he discovers a letter authorizing the forced marriage between Ghazanfar and Khwarrmah. Zambur ultimately leads the brave party to Ibrahim’s camp, where the prince is blissfully reunited with his beloved.
The plot thickens now. Songhur Bahānī manages to free Sabukayda and Prince Ibrahim from prison, an action that soon leads to the city's capture by the forces of Sa'id Fānuh-Ḥath and the flight of Qimar to Tawâniq. The villainous Qimar dispatches his spy Mahus back to the city of Zabardanaqar, where Ibrahim is now in charge. There, Mahus overhears Khwaja Biḫbud, Qimar's former vizier, trying to devise a plan to repair and please his master. Mahus enters and proposes a daring plan to extract Qalmas, Qimar's cousin, from prison and to kidnap Khwāraṁ, Qimar's daughter, who has taken up with Prince Ibrahim.

"After several days he arrived and released Qalmas, took him to Biḫbud, and said, 'I'm going to bring Khwāraṁ.' He went. Khwāraṁ was in a garden asleep on a throne, so he went over the wall into the garden, rendered her unconscious and took her to Biḫbud.

'O sayyār,' he said, 'in one night you have done something more has ever done."

'O Khwāraṁ,' he said, 'now one must go."

'How should we go?' he asked.

'I will put you in a chest, the wife in another chest, Khwāraṁ in another chest, the cousin in another. Then I'll load the four chests and put those who are loyal to you in a certain caravanserai."

Biḫbud said, 'That's a good idea. And they set out to execute that plan."

Dasavanta takes some license with the action described in the caption and last line of text. Four figures are already stashed in trunks, and two more stand beside them. Mahus, the mastermind of this operation, is presumably the central figure, in violet exiting Biḫbud as he dumps the stupidified Khwāraṁ into the trunk on the right. The alert woman opposite is Biḫbud's wife. The young figure in blue must be Qalmas, identified once as Qimar's cousin and another time as his nephew. The occupant of the fourth trunk, the heavyset figure in red, seems to be an interloper, for if Biḫbud himself is to be among the stowaways, then one trunk should still be empty. Indeed, it appears that the artist did not trouble himself much with the headcount described in this somewhat confusing story, and simply filled the four trunks mentioned in the text with four figures, a solution more satisfactory on a visual level than another narrative one.

No matter who they are, the figures are characterized with remarkable acuity, particularly for a scene with little overt drama. Khwāraṁ's face, though damaged, is convincingly added; her body, with one arm pulled uncomfortably back, is believably limp. Even her yellow robe is modeled with such fluidity that it seems to wrap about her like a shroud. On Qalmas, Dasavanta takes the modeling to still more compelling extremes, streaking the blue robe recently with wet, white highlights in a manner later made famous by El Greco. No less engaging is the corpulent figure, who, already filling the trunk to capacity and still awaiting the lid, twists his mouth to the side in an expression conveying both apprehension and skepticism. This figure, however, is the work not of Dasavanta, but of the figure specialist, Madhava Khurān. Here, again, the figure is outlined with a wet, black line, his eyes are more rounded than those of Dasavanta's figures ever are, and his left hand is noticeably plumper and more three-dimensional than any other figure's in the painting.

Dasavanta devotes the remainder of the scene to a courtyard and garden, two of the most common elements in Mughal painting. Dasavanta, however, infuses these standard features with uncommon boldness. He positions brackets and coves below the chamber, for example, but the resulting visual rhythm of that foreground area is so exciting that the structural intricacy becomes mere afterthought. He gives the tilework pattern such geometric and coloristic strength that it pulses; indeed, it advances so much that the chamber appears to recede into it. Similarly, he makes a normally innocuous golden vessel swell to oversized dimensions and shine with a suffet of energy. Likewise, the garden he creates is both orderly and vibrant, tied to the rest of the architecture by the framing red fence, and given emphatic regularity by the ranks of plantain trees. For the ground, Dasavanta selects one of his favorite colors—a greenish black—to heighten the contrast with the bright flowers and beaded yellow buds of the cypress trees.

Some of the architectural details, notably the trilobed pattern and shaded brick of the front wall, the blue band along the roofline, and the dome of the rooftop kiosk, are the work of Jagana.
Once the allies know that Khwanimah is being held in Tajwariq by Bihbud, they ask Ibrahim's aygar Zambur to retrieve her. He is willing, but fears that the infidels will kill her if they know that he is near. Ibrahim suggests that they ask Sher Banu for her advice.

"She said to the person who had been sent, 'I don't know, but I have a woman in my service who has no equal in trickery and sneakiness. She says that if someone goes with her she will go into the city and get word of Khwanimah.'

... She said to summon Mahiya. 'Get two donkeys,' she said. 'Load one with fruit and the other with supplies.' Mahiya put her veil over her head and got on a donkey and set off with Zambur to Tajwariq.

When they got there Zambur asked where to go. 'Take me around the city lane by lane,' she said. Suddenly a man appeared with a donkey on which sat a woman. The woman was waiting.

Mahiya said to Zambur, 'Ask what is wrong with her and where she is going.' He asked,

'I am Ustad Khutun,' she said, 'and I am a medicine woman.'

Mahiya went with her.'

The designer of the painting sets the encounter of the two couples on a dusty byway of Tajwariq. Mahiya and Zambur arrive from the right, their donkeys conspicuously laden with the provisions specified in the text. Mahiya looks back at her accomplice as she gestures toward the oncoming woman. That woman is a narrative device of sorts, for she inadvertently provides Mahiya with a cover and leads the aygar couple to a safehouse. But she is also introduced to serve as Mahiya's personal foil. She, too, rides a donkey, but one driven by her actual husband. Unlike Ustad Khutun, who is both distressed and compassionate, Mahiya is all insincerity and subterfuge, the epitome of the female operative.

The designer elects to use an unusual composition, with the road angling precipitously through the town.

This feature probably reinforces the fortuitous nature of the meeting, but it also poses insurmountable difficulties for the second member of the team of artists. The two couples are relatively large and solid, as the protagonists in these illustrations are wont to be. The framing buildings, however, are entirely different in scale and substance. They assume illusory dimensions, with whole rooftops and kiosks measuring little more than a donkey's pace. Their tilted surfaces tip and teeter in ramshackle fashion; the two steeply angled rooftops below Ustad Khutun, for example, cap no defined building, and the staircase before them leads nowhere.

These qualities, of course, are not new to architectural representations in the Hamzana, but they never appear in such contexts placed so obtrusively in the foreground. This architectural confection is, in fact, the work of Mah Muhammad, whose contributions in other Hamzana paintings are at a safe remove from the action.

The painter of the four protagonists, who presumably also blocked out the composition, is probably Kesava Das. The donkeys are lively and strongly modeled, and the bags of fruit borne by Zambur's animal are rendered with exceptional depth. More tellingly, the potted tree in the upper center, which so obviously stands out from the remainder of the painting that it must be his work as well, has the same dense structure, three-dimensional foliage, and feathery grasses about it as some of the vegetation in a slightly earlier joint work by Kesava Das and Mah Muhammad (cat. 55). The major figures, who would normally confirm such an attribution, are of little use here, for three of the four have been almost entirely repainted.