

# The Golden Shamla



The Karez Project Library  
Volume 7.0

## The Golden Shamla

“**M**irwais! Up here. Give me your hand. You can see much better from here.” Sadiq reached down from the lowest branch of the large shade tree and pulled Mirwais up beside him. The boys looked down upon the village square where the two men stood bristling.

Half a meter separated the combatants, their eyes locked in unblinking gazes. Like two rams preparing to engage in a battle for supremacy, neither yielded ground in speech or posture. Keeping their set distance, they stepped from side to side in a strange dance of conquest, all the while being somehow careful to not soil their shoes in the street’s mud.

“My father says watching a fight is like taking a holiday,” Mirwais noted.

“Today we may feel like we have taken a full vacation,” Sadiq replied. “Not often does anyone challenge an elder of the village. And today, being market day, there are sure to be many witnesses. Even though Rasul is Hamid Khan’s cousin, I am surprised that he would challenge him openly like this.”

“What’s it all about? Why is Rasul taking on Hamid Khan?” Mirwais asked.

“Something about land,” Sadiq said. “At least, that’s what I heard.”

The boys looked on in silence for a moment before Mirwais spoke again.

“Sadiq Jan, I feel like something big is happening right before our eyes. I’m sure that, however this turns out, our village will never be the same.”

“You worry too much my friend. Listen. They are speaking again.”

Hamid Khan had the upper hand and he knew it. Rasul’s land claim was only a ploy to challenge his cousin openly. All his life, Rasul had challenged him in private, but not today. If Hamid Khan stood his ground in public and showed no sign of weakness, then he was sure to win the day.

“Why this open fury, my little brother? Certainly these matters should be settled in private, not like this before the entire village.”

Rasul’s red face seemed to glow brighter with each word. Hamid knew that his cousin was older than he. From childhood he had always treated him as his lesser. The time for Rasul to turn and walk away was over. Now, before the whole village, Rasul would expose Hamid for the man he truly was.

“Always patronizing, aren’t you my cousin? Well you will have to answer for more than my land claim. Yes, you will answer today for a lifetime of arrogance.”

## The Golden Shamla

Rasul's thoughts carried him nearly twenty years into the past to the time of his mother's illness, the illness that had taken her life. He had been away on a journey with his father or certainly he would have taken her to Peshawar for treatment. It was his duty as the firstborn son. But Hamid had taken his place, usurped Rasul's position as he had so many times before, but in small ways up to that point. He remembered his heart darkening toward his cousin at that time. The pain of his mother's passing was only heightened by the knowledge that she had shared her last hours with Hamid and not him.

Years later, village eldership was conferred upon Hamid. But it was Rasul who was older; it was Rasul who was more educated. As always, Hamid was given the honor in Rasul's place. In a way, from the time the village elders wrapped the silk turban around Hamid's head displaying the fanned shamla, Rasul began to truly despise his cousin. There was a time when he pulled a fanned shamla up on his own turban, only to be rebuked by Amir Khan for his presumption. Amir Khan had confronted Rasul in private, but Rasul would bring his rebuke of Hamid out in the open. Rasul would show his worth. The village would have to recognize him as a true elder.

"Who do you think will throw the first punch?" Mirwais asked.

"I say that Hamid Khan will hit first," Sadiq said. "He has to. His honor is at stake and as a village elder he must protect not only his own honor but also the honor of the village. No, he will strike first and very soon."

"I pick Rasul. He will strike first," Mirwais replied. "I have never seen a man so agitated in my life. He can't hold it in. He is like a coiled snake by the path. See how calm and in control Hamid is? It would not do for him to strike first. Yes, his honor is at stake, but he gains more honor treating Rasul as though he were a dog barking into the darkness."

"One hundred afghanis says Hamid Khan will throw the first blow," Sadiq challenged.

"I'll take you up on that my friend. But, I do hate taking money away from you so early in the day."

For a moment, a look of concern crossed Hamid's face. It was only there for a second, but Rasul saw it and took note. It was at that moment that Hamid had wondered what it was that Rasul knew about his land dealings that would so embolden him. He had run afoul of Rasul before, but it had always been settled in private. Was there something Rasul knew that made this occasion that much more perilous for Hamid's honor?

Hamid's flash of doubt strengthened Rasul's resolve. He knew what he planned to do. He had dreamed of this moment for years, and the look on Hamid's face told him now was the time.

Amir Khan's voice could be heard above the crowd calling the two men to retreat into a private yard. In that moment Rasul's chance came. Hamid's attention turned to the elder

## The Golden Shamla

just long enough for Rasul to strike. He grabbed Hamid's shamla while he was not looking and pulled off the silk turban, casting it into the mud. An audible gasp rose from the astonished crowd.

"That's not a blow to his body," Sadiq said objecting. "It's a blow to his honor, true, but no real strike."

"We'll settle our accounts later, my friend," said Mirwais smiling.

Hamid froze, fists clenched. He looked down at his turban, the silk soaking in the mud. The memories of the night he was given that turban came flooding into his mind. Amir Khan had said the words that echoed even now in his ears. "Put your prayer cap on your head, wrap your turban, raise your shamla. You can go out now!" There had never been a prouder moment in his life.

He looked back up at his cousin with every intention of landing a series of blows to his head. But at that moment, Rasul's expression caught the disgraced elder off guard. The sweet satisfaction of ripping Hamid's turban from his head passed from Rasul's heart sooner than it took the five meters of silk to touch the ground. Now gripped in remorse for his foolish trick, he steadied himself for his inevitable fate.

Hamid had never realized how much Rasul looked like his mother until then. The expression of fear and foreboding on Rasul's face was the same expression Hamid had witnessed on his aunt as she approached eternity. It had been an emotional time for Hamid, made all the more difficult to bear because he, even though still a youth, had to be the man. He had to make arrangements for his dead aunt. His mission had failed, and all the way back to the village he rehearsed over and over how he would break the news.

Time stood still in the village square. Only the distant braying of a donkey could be heard. In that moment of suspended time a memory long forgotten returned to Hamid's consciousness.

Nurses in white cloaks floated like ghosts in and out of the room.

"We are Muslims, you know," the young Hamid offered.

"Yes, we know. We deal with this all too often. Wait down the hallway. If you hurry, you may make it in time for the story."

Sent out of the room while his aunt's body was prepared, he heard the persistent hacking cough of a bearded old man sitting in the corner, coughing and spitting, coughing and spitting. The smell of disinfectant was strong as a hunched-backed woman swabbed the cool dark hospital hallway, pulling her chador back up over her head with each pass. People crowded around a doorway at the end of the hallway, everyone turning an ear to hear the story.

## The Golden Shamla

“There was once the younger of two sons who went to his father and said, ‘Give me my inheritance now.’ So the father divided up his inheritance between his two sons. No sooner had he done so, that the younger son took his inheritance and traveled to a far country where he wasted it. A famine came upon the land and the boy could find no work except to feed a farmer’s pigs. He was so hungry that he even sought to eat the food the pigs ate. Finally, he came to his senses and said to himself, ‘Servants in my father’s house have a better life than this. I will go back to my father, seek his forgiveness, and ask to be treated as one of his servants.’ Yet, while he was still some distance from the village, his father saw him and ran to him, kissed him, and embraced him.”

Hamid leaned against the cool wall of the dark hallway while a fan overhead stirred the air. The hunchbacked woman, her work now finished, carried her bucket and mop outside into the bright sunlight. The man with the cough was gone.

“The son wanted his father dead so that he could get his hands on some money,” Hamid thought. “What great dishonor he showed his father! Yet, when he returned home after wasting his inheritance, and even feeding swine, his father welcomed him back. His father ran through the village like a schoolboy. No doubt others in the village would have attacked the boy before he could reach his father for the outrage and dishonor he brought to the village. Even so, his father embraced him. At great cost, his father embraced him.”

The nurse interrupted his thoughts. “Your aunt’s body has been prepared.”

The braying of the donkey had ceased. All eyes were on Hamid. He stepped forward, but his hands were no longer clinched. Rasul shut his eyes and braced for the blow.

People say that that was the moment a truly great leader was revealed. The shock of Rasul’s offence was matched only by the shock of Hamid’s embrace.

Rasul and Hamid Khan never told anyone what words they exchanged in that long embrace. No one ever asked. But everyone who was there that day will tell you all about the time they learned the power that forgiveness has over revenge. They know why these two men now trust each other and share an undying loyalty to each other.

The most enthusiastic storyteller in the crowd that day was Mirwais. He alone had seen the apparition. And he told the story so many times that other youths, and even some rather small boys who could have not seen through the crowd, also claimed to have seen something.

“...and then, when we all were sure that Hamid Khan would strike his cousin with a mighty blow, he wrapped his strong arms around Rasul in a warm and forgiving embrace. That’s when I saw it. I thought that someone behind him was taking some naswar out of a mirrored case because I first saw a glimmer, and then a glow. I rubbed my eyes and looked again. It was there, glowing on Hamid Khan’s head, a golden turban with a golden shamla so tall and erect that the rays of its glowing reached up to heaven. I think it was from God. What do you think?”