

GHULAM ABBAS

The Aficionado

CERTAIN people are naturally fond of music. They may sing out of tune themselves, but would give anything they owned to hear a melodious voice. Ragas affect them like magic. Over time they become addicted to them, just like someone hooked on an intoxicant. If well-to-do, they support singers all their lives; if not, they satisfy their craving by providing menial services to one music maestro or another. The saying “music is food for the soul” was meant for such people. In the parlance of the musicians, however, they are called “kan-rasya.”

Providence had bestowed such an appreciation for music on Fayyaz. But, as luck would have it, he was born to a poor scrivener, who was, moreover, both overly strict with him and overly religious. Fayyaz’s interest just couldn’t be nurtured, although between his childhood and youth he managed somehow to keep it alive.

Now and then he’d be asked at school to lead the boys in a chorus of *hamd* chanting. What a nice scene it made: Fayyaz chanting a line, the boys standing behind him in a row taking it up in chorus in the early hours of the morning.

He’d also started to attend *qavvali* and *sama* sessions in his early childhood. These his father did permit him, provided they were held somewhere in the neighborhood. Once in a while, he also tagged along after wedding processions that had a band playing in front, the drummer clad in a glittering outfit with a tiger skin draped over it, beating with all kinds of acrobatic gestures the drum strapped to his neck. Whenever he came to the couple, who would be sitting on a dirty-looking bedsheet spread on the pavement under a gas lamp, he would listen enraptured to the husband play his harmonium and the wife sing in her crisp, *koel*-like voice, her *ghunghat* drawn over her face and her kettle-drum tucked under her knee. A desire would seize him to buy a harmonium, even a cheap one, and practice on it at home. But he knew he couldn’t satisfy his

wish, at least not in his father's lifetime.

During his student days, one evening when his father had gone to another city to take care of some important business, a friend took him to the theater. A famous Parsee company with many celebrity actors and vocalists was putting on a play. It was filled with songs, and Fayyaz listened to them absolutely dazed throughout. For years afterward he could hear those songs distinctly in his ears.

After Fayyaz finished school, his father, despite his strained situation, had him enrolled in college. The more education his son got, he thought, the better his chances of landing a nice job. At college Fayyaz felt relatively free. Above all, away from his father's surveillance, he could now, perhaps, find some satisfaction for his interest via the college's *Bazm-e Mausiqi*.

It was his father's nightly routine not to go to bed before making sure that Fayyaz had done the same. Even then, he stole over to his son's bedside at least a couple of times during the night. Once, in the latter part of the night, he heard Fayyaz mumbling in his sleep. He got up and walked over to his son's bed. Strange words were coming from Fayyaz's mouth, some in English, some in Urdu, punctuated by a sigh, sometimes a moan. The old man looked on dumbfounded, and spent the rest of the night assailed by all kinds of frightening thoughts. The very next day he started looking for a suitable match for his son. Shortly thereafter he found a young woman, good-looking but from a poorer family, and had Fayyaz marry her, thus eliminating any possibility of his son taking an errant path in life.

Fayyaz was in the third year of college when his father died suddenly. His mother had died a year earlier. He was truly free now. But the newfound freedom came with a slew of responsibilities attached. Since his father had left neither property nor money, the biggest problem was how to support himself and his wife Asghari, who had meanwhile become the mother of a baby girl. So the next day, instead of going to college, Fayyaz went to different offices looking for a job. He loved his wife and daughter dearly, indeed so much that he felt no shame in taking on the lowliest of jobs for their sake, and somehow he managed to provide for them. Finally, after months of fruitless toil and being shooed away from office to office, he landed a temporary job as a clerk in the Irrigation Department.

Unflinching hard work and sheer ability eventually helped him secure a permanent position in the same department. Next he strove to augment his income, as the birth of a second daughter had added to the family's

expenses. He began tutoring children at their homes in the evening after work, and thus managed to keep the family afloat.

During this period his love of music remained buried under stacks of files and bookkeeping and turned into a distant memory. Even so, the rich loud voice of a coachman crooning some folksong in the stillness of the night as he drove his tonga along their street never failed to pierce his heart—that is, if he were still awake at that late hour.

Gradually his situation improved. Thanks to his ability, hard work and pleasant disposition, within ten years he had become head clerk in his department. His bosses were satisfied with his performance and he was content with his condition. His salary was adequate for the needs of his family. He no longer had to tutor children in their homes.

Being head clerk, however, meant more work. He'd stay on after everyone in the office had left for home, and go over his subordinates' work, especially the accounts. This invariably took a couple of extra hours, but at least it put his mind at ease. He rarely left for home before dark, and usually took the garden path that ran along the city walls. His house was in a narrow and densely populated neighborhood deep inside the city. The garden path added a mile or so to his return trek. Yet he preferred it over the path that cut through the city with its noisy bazaars and terribly narrow lanes.

The spacious garden path, topped with a carpet of fine red gravel, was closed to vehicles, and he could mosey along, taking his time to reach home. The stroll relaxed his tired mind, and he usually arrived home fairly refreshed. His family had become used to his returning late in the evening.

One Saturday evening he got out of the office unusually late. It was a mild winter day, the sky was overcast, and a few stray raindrops fell on his face now and then. As usual, he was walking leisurely along the garden path. Electric poles ran along one side of the path, and the string of lights curving gently along it in the distance looked very pleasing.

Lost in his thoughts Fayyaz strolled on. Suddenly the gentle sound of a musical instrument filled his ears. It became clearer as he moved forward. When he was quite close he spotted a man under the street light. He was wrapped in the tattered *gudri* of a fakir and sat squatting on a bench under a tree in a corner of the park, playing some instrument.

The notes spilling from his instruments were filled with a sad ardor. The song made straight to the heart, penetrating to its deepest recess. In the limpid stillness of the night each note sounded distinctly clear and separate from the others. Fayyaz stopped involuntarily. His eyes were

glued to the player and he listened to the music in total rapture.

The man was strumming with obsessive concentration, indifferent as to whether anyone was listening. His fingers glided over it with consummate skill and ease, now on one string, now on another, never tiring, and with his other hand he plucked on the instrument with such speed that the air around him seemed to tremble continuously. A strange, enchanting scene it was!

The music affected Fayyaz so powerfully that he began to breathe heavily. Slowly his nerves relaxed and a feeling of lassitude swept over his body. A tear fell from his eye involuntarily.

The last ten or eleven years of Fayyaz's life had been so flat that scarcely a whiff of music or any other fine art had wandered into it. He had defined his life's purpose as earning an honest living and taking care of his children, and he was discharging himself of these obligations happily. If his life lacked something, it was more than made up for by his passionate attraction to Asghari. But hearing those strains that evening, he felt as though something that had lain dormant in his heart had suddenly sprung back to life.

After a while the bard stopped playing. Fayyaz felt that the spell that had kept him enthralled had broken, and if he wanted to he could go on his way. Just that instant the bard's eyes popped open and he noticed, for the first time, his lone auditor. Afraid that he might leave, the bard hurriedly raised a cry, "Babu-ji, may all be well with you! Spare me a half, a quarter paisa for *nasha-pani*. Just a little so that I can get my daily fix."

Fayyaz's feet froze. He stuck a hand into his pocket, but could find only a two-anna coin. He felt genuinely embarrassed offering such a paltry sum to such an accomplished master. At last, he plucked up his courage and stepping toward the bard said, "Maestro, this is all I have on me at the moment. Please accept it. But if you'd like to eat, come with me. My house is nearby."

The bard hesitated for a minute. He had been playing long on his instrument and was both tired and nicely hungry. A home-cooked meal, and served warm—he couldn't have asked for more!

"I'll come along, Babu-ji. May God bless you!"

He got up from the bench, tucked the instrument under his arm and held his tattered *gudri* carefully in his hands and started off with Fayyaz. He was a middle-aged man, tall and slim, who sported a grubby-looking tallish fez with its tassel missing. Pieces of dry grass and straw were stuck in his long curls, and his speckled beard had several days of growth. His eyes were terribly red and drippy, as if from some ailment. His outfit,

composed of *kurta*, *pajama*, and a black waistcoat, was worn and dingy. The boots he was wearing were much too large for his feet and were broken, so that he had to drag his feet as he walked. His back was slightly rounded, perhaps from playing hunched over his instrument.

“This thing you play—what is it called?” Fayyaz asked as they started walking.

“It is called a sarod. May God keep you well, Babu-ji.”

“Sarod?”

“Yes, sarod.”

“You play it to perfection, Ustad!”

“Perfection belongs to God alone, Babu-ji.”

“I’ve never heard anyone play so well.”

“That’s all due to the kindness of Kilerwala Baba. I deserve no credit, Babu-ji.”

“I’d no idea that music could be so lovely.”

“You can say that again, Babu-ji. Once you get into it, you’re hooked for life. Take me for example. What have I come to? Worse than a fakir. It’s an affliction.”

“How long have you been playing, Ustad?”

“Forty years. Babu-ji, I’ve been practicing for forty years. I started when I was four years old. My Bawa had a tiny sarod made for me to play with, because I used to throw such tantrums wanting to play his. So I played with my toy sarod, and made some stupid sounds now and then.

“And what do you know—may God keep you well, Babu-ji—early one morning the late Ustad Dildar Khan came to visit with my father. Ustad Dildar Khan’s virtuosity with the sarod was famous throughout the land. But, may God bestow His forgiveness on him, a millstone had fallen on his left wrist and disabled him so that he himself could not play. He only gave lessons now, mostly in the *rajwaras*. He was great friends with my Bawa.

“Anyway, Babu-ji, the two of them were smoking hookah seated on a charpoy in the courtyard and having a pleasant chat, while I was playing on the ground with my toy nearby. Suddenly Ustad Dildar Khan interrupted my father and cried out: ‘Hey Miyan, listen to that! What is that kid playing?’

“Well, Babu-ji, may God keep you well, when the two paid attention, they discovered that I was playing the tune Gunkari. Bawa lifted the Qur’an and said the Holy Book might punish him if he had taught me the tune, or even if he had ever accompanied me on my toy sarod. Whereupon Ustad Dildar Khan told my Bawa, ‘Miyan, give this lad to

me. Listen, my hand is disabled now. In my heart I've a whole host of desires that remain unfulfilled. Instead of me, this little boy will now show the world who Dildar Khan was.'

"So, Babu-ji, may God keep you well, a good deal of argument followed. At last, Bawa relented, because he had two other sons older than I. The Ustad took me with him, and I kept myself ready at all times to serve him. I nearly burnt my fingertips filling his *chilams* with embers. And he was absolutely merciless in beating, Babu-ji. If I'm appreciated by a few today, it's all due to the blessings of Ustad Dildar Khan's feet."

Fayyaz heard this account with unflagging interest. Afterwards they walked for some time in silence. Suddenly the sarod-player asked, "What's your name, Babu-ji?"

"Fayyaz."

"You're truly '*fayyaz* (generous),' *masha'allah*. The name fittingly describes your nature. What do you do, Babu-ji?"

"I work in an office."

"How much you make, Babu-ji?"

"Not much. But thank God, we get by."

"Even so, how much?"

"About a hundred and fifty."

"And how many children, God bless you?"

"Two."

"Boys or girls?"

"Girls."

An absurd phrase nearly escaped from the player's mouth, but he caught himself in time and said, "Well, may they live and prosper. Allah gives whatever He desires. And Babu-ji..."

The man's constant badgering with questions put Fayyaz out of sorts. To put a halt to it he decided to turn the interrogation back on the man. Now it was Fayyaz who asked questions. He learnt that the sarod-player went by the name of Haidri Khan and was the younger brother of Pyare Khan, who worked in some Maharaja's *darbar* for a salary of "five hundred rupees." He had another older brother, who too had worked in a *rajwara*, but someone had poisoned him out of enmity. Because of his ill-temper the sarod-player couldn't get along with any of his family. He didn't want to live under anybody's thumb. By nature he loved the care-free life of a dervish. All reasons why he had neither home nor wife or family.

It must have been around ten o'clock when they left the garden path and entered the city through a narrow *guli* running from the city wall.

Walking ahead of Haidri Khan through a number of *gulis*, Fayyaz finally led him to a spot below his home, which was on an upper story.

“Ustad, you stay here in the alley a bit,” he said, “meanwhile I’ll go and see to the *purdah*.”

“But don’t be long, Babu-ji. May God look after your well-being.”

Fayyaz climbed the stairs and got in. His daughters had gone to bed, but Asghari was waiting for him as usual. In a few words he told her the story of his encounter with Haidri Khan and that he had brought him along, and urged her to warm up the food quickly. Then he picked up the lantern, went down into the alley, and escorted Haidri Khan up into the *bethak*. The house had a kitchen and two rooms, one large one in which he, his wife and their daughters slept; the other, somewhat smaller, directly across the staircase, served as the *bethak*. Fayyaz often did his office work here. It had an old cotton rug on the floor and a small table, two chairs, and a bookcase.

With the greatest care Haidri Khan placed the sarod in a corner of the room, sat down on the cotton rug and started to look around inquisitively.

“How much rent do you pay for this, Babu-ji?” he began again.

“Fifteen rupees.”

“My, fifteen rupees! For this hole! You pay too much, Babu-ji. It doesn’t even have electricity.”

His weak eyes were riveted on the old brass lamp standing on the small table, its chimney smoking a bit.

“Yes, Ustad, it’s a bit much,” Fayyaz said. “But what can I do? I’ve been living here for a long time. I’ve become fond of this neighborhood.”

It was quiet for a minute, and then Haidri said, “Now go bring the food, Babu. Quickly. May God keep you well.”

Minutes later a small tablecloth was spread on the rug and food was laid out on it before him. It was nothing special but had been prepared with such culinary skill that Haidri Khan soon began to smack his lips.

“Eat your fill, Ustad,” Fayyaz said and went in and brought over his own share of the food, which he placed before the bard. Still under the spell of Haidri Khan’s sarod, he wasn’t feeling hungry at all.

“That’s enough, Babu-ji. Stop!” Haidri Khan said. “Two morsels are good enough to fill this fakir’s stomach. Now, please, if I may, a cup of tea. God bless you!”

“It’ll be here soon. I’ve already had the kettle put on.”

Dishes were cleared away. Fayyaz took his place on the rug beside Haidri Khan and looked at his sarod with thirst in his eyes. Haidri Khan

immediately guessed his longing. Presently he got up, took the sarod from the corner and offered it to Fayyaz, saying, "By all means, Babu-ji. Look at it all you want. You'll have rarely seen the likes of it. The legacy of my master the late Dildar Khan." And he touched his earlobes out of respect. "Many sarod-players have offered stupendous sums to buy it from me, but I turned them down straightaway. My life is in it, Babu-ji, just like the jinn in the fairytale whose life was inside a parrot. I'm not going to part with this sarod even if they gave a *lakh* of rupees for it."

Fayyaz laid the instrument in his lap. So this was the wondrous instrument that brought forth such heavenly melodies! He examined it closely. Its strange shape, dozens of pegs, large bulbous resonating chamber covered with skin, its ivory bridge over which the strings rested—in short, everything about it struck him as a wonder.

"Say, how do you play it?" Fayyaz involuntarily asked.

"Here, Babu-ji, I'll show you how," Haidri Khan said. "First, you must sit cross-legged, just as I'm sitting. Now place the sarod in front of you, like this. Take this plectrum and hold it like this in the fingers of your right hand and strike the strings with it, like this."

Fayyaz did as he was told. A thin, feeble sound rose from the instrument.

"Pluck again."

This time it sounded a little better.

"Good! Keep plucking. Now stretch your arm under the sarod. Like this. Hold this string down with your index finger as you strike it with your right hand. There, a completely new note, did you notice?"

The lesson had progressed thus far when the chain sounded at the back of the door which opened into the other room.

"Khan Sahib, here, hold the sarod for a bit until I'm back with the tea."

The lesson resumed as soon as they had their tea. Haidri Khan had Fayyaz produce these four notes of the scale—*kharj*, *rkb*, *gandhar*, and *maddham*. Fayyaz was so excited his whole body was visibly shaking in a surfeit of joy. He was having difficulty believing that he, in fact, was producing those *surs*. In his sarod-strumming he totally forgot that the night was slipping by. At last, when the chain sounded again, he got up unwillingly and went into the other room, where Asghari said, "Bravo! Midnight and no end to your tan-tan! Aren't you going to let anyone sleep? This is a respectable neighborhood, surely you know that. Think of what people will say."

"You're absolutely right. I'm about to finish."

When he returned to the sitting room, he found Haidri Khan already stretched out on the floor under his *gudri*. He had returned the instrument to its corner, which disappointed Fayyaz somewhat.

“Babu-ji,” Haidri Khan spoke from inside his *gudri*, “I thought since it’s already gotten quite late, why leave now? I might just as well spend the night here. I’ll leave first thing in the morning. May you be well, just lower the wick in the lamp, but don’t put it out.”

“All right,” Fayyaz said. He lowered the wick and repaired to his room.

Well before sunup the next morning, Fayyaz got out of his bed and came into the *bethak*. By now it had gotten quite cold and Haidri Khan, all bundled up in his *gudri*, was fast asleep. Fayyaz, however, did not even feel the cold. He picked up the sarod and sat squatting on the floor, playing the same four *surs* Haidri Khan had taught him the previous night. The bundle moved at the sound of the instrument. Haidri Khan poked out his head from the *gudri* and peered at Fayyaz’s face. A faint smile appeared on his dried lips, and once again he pulled his head back into the *gudri*.

Fayyaz continued practicing in a state of complete absorption. He was experiencing an inner peace he had not experienced before in his life. When he still hadn’t finished after quite a while, his daughters, Najma and Salima, came over and sat beside him. They had both covered their heads and ears with colorful woolen mufflers. Najma was eleven years old, Salima nine, both very lovable. With an innocent air of astonishment mingled with a trace of derision, they gawked at their father playing the strange-looking, gigantic instrument. Time and again they wanted to laugh, but held back.

“Aren’t you going to office today?” Asghari asked from behind the lattice.

“It’s Sunday. Isn’t it?” Fayyaz said, and returned to playing again. Noticing Haidri Khan fast asleep with his head tucked inside his *gudri*, Asghari, arranging her *dupatta*, walked into the *bethak*, brought her face down beside Fayyaz’s ear and whispered, “When is that pest going to leave?”

“For God’s sake, be quiet, or he’ll hear! He’s a very accomplished man.”

“That he may well be. When is he going to leave, that’s what I want to know!”

“Let’s give him some breakfast first. Then we’ll send him away. You go now, lest he should be awakened.”

About ten o'clock Haidri Khan got up, yawning and cracking the joints of his swarthy fingers whose terribly long nails were filled with grime. Fayyaz was still engrossed in playing. In only three or four hours of diligent practice he had learnt to play the four *surs* well enough, and they were pouring out with ease and vigor. Haidri Khan was surprised at his utter absorption in his playing.

"Well, Babu-ji, It's time you thought about having the *ganda* tied on you." Amazing! I can't believe you're already playing. So far I've had only the slowest pupils. But someone as clever as you I could turn into a virtuoso in three months flat, or you can shave off my mustache. But mind you, I charge a hundred rupees a month for lessons, and I mean a hundred rupees!" He started laughing. "To tell you the truth, this instrument becomes a strapping man like you. You look like a lion not quite grown. Exactly, a young lion!"

Breakfast was already over but it didn't look like Haidri Khan would be leaving any time soon. Asghari rattled the chain again. Fayyaz got up and went in.

"Aren't you going to get the groceries today? This music-making has taken you over so completely you can scarcely think of eating or drinking. Fine. But at least don't starve the children."

"Good God, I completely forgot. Right this minute. I'll go to the market."

When Fayyaz returned to the *bethak* after changing his clothes, Haidri Khan—his dingy, tassel-less Fez stuffed on his head, sarod tucked under his arm, and *gudri* draped over his shoulders—was all set to leave. Fayyaz's face fell.

"Well, Ustad, you're leaving? Where to?"

"Oh, I've got to go get my fix—the usual *nasha-pani*," Haidri Khan said, yawning. "You wouldn't happen to have a rupee, would you?"

Fayyaz quickly went in and brought him a rupee.

"May you be well, Babu-ji." He deposited the rupee in the pocket of his waistcoat and then said, "I may come back in the evening."

He yawned again. He was clearly coming out of his semi-drunken state of the night before. He strode toward the door, and Fayyaz stood at the door watching him until he had climbed down the last of the stairs. After he was gone, a strange restlessness suddenly came over Fayyaz. If only Haidri Khan had left his sarod behind! He could have spent the whole of today, a holiday, practicing! Feeling distracted, he stretched out on the bed. Ever since the previous evening he had been experiencing a strange disquietude. He hadn't slept well either.

Asghari sensed his unhappiness and said, “What is this sudden craze? You’re not thinking of becoming some low-caste singer, are you? And this wretched fakir—”

Fayyaz cut her short. “Wretched fakir? He’s second to none in the entire country.”

“So what? He can go to hell! What bothers me is that now that he knows our house, he’ll show up here everyday.”

“If only he would!”

“You aren’t thinking of taking music lessons, are you?”

“I wish I could afford to pay him the hundred rupees’ tuition!”

Asghari’s mouth fell open.

Groceries were bought. Food was cooked. They all sat down to eat. But Fayyaz withdrew his hand only after a couple of mouthfuls. Now Asghari was really worried. She felt he had changed a lot in the last few hours. No more loving glances at her, or attention to what she said, or proper answers to her queries. He seemed to be neglectful even of the girls.

The day waned. Evening set in. Lamps were lit. Still no sign of Haidri Khan. Fayyaz would peek into the staircase every so often, then come back and lie down on his bed, only to get up again. His restlessness was getting the better of him. At last, around eight, the sound of someone clearing his throat rose from the staircase. It was Haidri Khan all right. He was swaying, eyes redder than the evening before, hardly in his senses. He’d had far too much *nasha-pani* today, it seemed. The sight of the sarod brought out a gleam in Fayyaz’s eyes.

“Well, Miyan, I’m back. You should really be thankful,” Haidri Khan said as he sat down on the floor and crossed his legs. “Fayyaz Miyan, please ask Bahu to make some tea. Just tea. I’m not having any dinner.”

Then some fancy struck him and he began to play his sarod. He started energetically enough, but within minutes his fingers began to go limp. By the time the tea arrived, he was already snoring away, slumped over his sarod. Fayyaz grabbed his shoulder and shook it, but he was so thick with intoxication that he could not be awakened at all. Fayyaz removed the instrument from his grasp and laid him down gently on the floor, tucking him under his *gudri*. Then he picked up the sarod with great eagerness and started to play.

Haidri Khan woke up quite early the next morning. He saw Fayyaz sitting nearby practicing the same four *surs* he had taught him and couldn’t help but praise him. “Fayyaz Miyan, *masha’allah*, what pure *surs* you’re making! Bravo! You’ve made me very happy! Today, I’ll teach you

the remaining three *surs* as well. That will complete the *saptak*.”

Sure enough Haidri Khan had Fayyaz producing the notes *panjum*, *dhaiyat* and *nikhad* in no time at all. Fayyaz’s eyes swelled with tears of joy. Unhappily, though, he had to end his music lesson as it was getting on for eight o’clock and he had to get ready to leave for work.

After breakfast Haidri Khan picked up his sarod. This time he didn’t have to ask for a rupee. Fayyaz, of his own accord, went in, returned with a rupee, and gave it to him.

“May you be happy, Miyan,” Haidri Khan said. Then, after hesitating for a few moments, he said in a grave tone of voice, “Listen, Miyan. If you’d like me to give you music lessons, you will have to accept my three conditions. They may seem easy, but if you think them over, they can be really daunting. Why? Because I’m known to be eccentric. If the slightest thing goes against my wishes, I become testy. It’s because of my bad temperament that I’ve accepted living in poverty. Well, now, you must hear the conditions: One, in the morning you’ll have to give me breakfast and provide for my daily *nasha-pani*. I won’t need any lunch. Mornings, as you leave for the office, I too will slip out, returning from my wanderings in the evening after you’re back from work. Two, we will eat dinner together. And three, I’ll sleep here in the *bethak*. That hundred rupees of tuition fee I spoke about, that was merely in jest. If I had a craving for money, I’d have built myself quite a few mansions by now. Well then, there are my three conditions. If you accept, we can get started.”

For a while Fayyaz stood thinking with his head bent. When he lifted it, his eyes fell on the lattice. It was not just Haidri Khan, but Asghari too who was waiting to hear his answer.

“Khan Sahib,” he began softly but firmly, “I accept. From this day forward, you’re my *ustad*.”

The very same evening Haidri Khan moved over to Fayyaz’s with his meager belongings: a discolored metal chest with the hasp missing, which the Khan had secured by tying a rope around it, a dirty earthen hookah, and a drinking-bowl.

It did hurt Asghari, and she shed a few tears. But she was by nature one of those women who consider their husbands gods, figuratively speaking, and who at all events seek only to please them. Seeing how crazily her husband loved music, she didn’t resist too much and consented to let Haidri Khan live with them. Addict that he was, a lecher he was not. He wasn’t given to eyeing other people’s wives and daughters. He always addressed Asghari deferentially as “Bahu” or “Beti” and never came anywhere near the door for as long as Fayyaz remained out of the

house.

First off, Fayyaz took steps to improve Haidri Khan's appearance. The old bard resisted, but he paid no heed to his protests. He had a brand-new suit of clothing made for Khan Sahib. He had a *shervani*-coat of some fine black fabric which he wore now and then, but it had become a bit torn. Fayyaz took it to the tailor and had him alter it to fit Khan Sahib. Next he sent out his fez to the cleaner's and had a new tassel put on it. He also bought him a strong pair of shoes. He put all these items in a suitcase and then led Khan Sahib to the *hammam*. First he had the barber shorten the bard's curls, give him a shave, trim his mustache, and pare his nails, and then had the *hammam*-walla give him a thorough scrubbing, during which the water tank had to be filled several times. Now he had Khan Sahib change into his new clothes. By the time Haidri Khan walked out of the *hammam*, he looked like a proper gentleman.

By now it was already noon. Zuhr prayer was at hand. As the two walked home, a mosque appeared on the way. Haidri Khan stopped short. In a voice choking with emotion, he said, "Fayyaz Bete, for the first time in a long time, today I'm clean in body and clothing. I feel like prostrating myself before my Lord. May I?"

A bit surprised, Fayyaz nonetheless let Khan Sahib have his wish. The two entered the mosque with other worshipers. A little later, as Haidri Khan stepped out of the mosque, there was a gleam in his eyes. The change in dress had produced a corresponding change in his demeanor. No more benedictory phrases with every sentence; instead, a note of authority had appeared in his manner of addressing Fayyaz. Walking through the bazaar with him, Fayyaz looked like an obedient pupil following his revered master.

Asghari was literally swept off her feet when she saw Haidri Khan in this new incarnation. The aversion evoked in her earlier by the very sight of the man slowly evaporated. Haidri Khan treated Najma and Salima with great affection. He would save a few annas from the rupee Fayyaz gave him every day for his *nasha-pani* and buy sweets or fruits for them. Within a few days the girls had become quite attached to him and started calling him "Khan Sahib-ji."

Haidri Khan would also praise Asghari for her cooking, and his praise always sounded sincere. "Beti," he would say, "God be praised, you cook such tasty food! Even rajas and nawabs don't get food like this. Theirs may look elaborate, but there's hardly any taste in it."

Slowly Asghari started to enjoy the praise. Whenever she cooked something special, she would think, "Let's see what Khan Sahib says

today.”

Now Khan Sahib went freely to any part of the house he liked. Asghari, with her husband's approval, had dropped the formality of observing purdah before him. She would often tell Haidri Khan, “Khan Sahib, you should think about returning home for lunch. Really!” But the bard preferred to spend his day-time at *takiyas*.

Noticing Fayyaz's eagerness and unrelenting diligence in learning to play music, Haidri Khan began to teach him with his full attention. Within a month and a half he had already taught him *alaps* for a couple of ragas as well as a few *gats*. Fayyaz was making tremendous progress at the sarod. Although the entire burden of Haidri Khan's expenses had fallen on him, which had put severe strain on his financial condition, Fayyaz was happy as never before.

As Haidri no longer played in the markets for handouts, he kept the instrument mostly at home. He had given Fayyaz permission to use it freely. Fayyaz practiced hard for two hours every morning before leaving for work. At the office, too, his fingers tapped and slid over the files the whole day long as though he were playing the sarod. Now he would leave the office promptly at five and hasten home, taking the shorter city route through the noisy bazaars and narrow side streets. And on holidays, it was impossible to get him off the instrument at all.

Before long Haidri Khan's attachment to Fayyaz grew enormously and he began to treat him like a son. He stopped hanging out at *takiyas* for too long; instead, he'd come back an hour or two before Fayyaz returned from office, lay a cot outside in the alley and sit on it and wait. Mostly he'd be by himself, but sometimes he'd return with a couple of friends, and they would start in on long and convoluted discussions about music.

“Miyan,” Haidri Khan would say to his friends, “do you know the meaning of the word ‘*mausiqi*’? Ustad Dildar Khan, may God place him in paradise!”—and he would touch his earlobes as he blessed him—“used to say that it is a Greek word that means ‘to tie air in knots.’ Can you imagine how difficult such an art would be?”

He would poke his head into the staircase and call out, “Najma Beti, have a few pans sent over.”

Sometimes Fayyaz too would have to sit down in the side street to please his mentor. On such occasions, Haidri Khan would say to his friends, swelling with pride, “Miyan, this gifted man will now teach you, all of you. He's a *maulvi*'s son all right, but God gives to whomsoever He wishes. His hands have a touch you won't find in the children of profes-

sional sarod-players.”

Fayyaz would break into perspiration out of embarrassment, and would listen to all this with his head bowed.

Passersby would involuntarily glance at this strange gang and walk on, looking back at them again and again for some distance. This was a respectable neighborhood. Its residents were mostly middle-class, a few even affluent, and there were also some *maulvi* and “proper” families. It had not one, not two, but three mosques, despite its rather small size. *Azans* blared from the mosques every morning to the accompaniment of the usual “cock-a-doodle-doo,” imparting an aura of holiness to the whole quarter.

Fayyaz had been living here for ten years. During this time he had not given anyone cause to complain. The residents thought of him as a quiet, decent individual who pretty much kept to himself, and they liked him for those qualities. Now, though, the musical hullabaloo rising from his house nightly since Haidri Khan’s arrival gave them pause. What surprised them most was how Fayyaz could put up with these dubious characters exercising absolute control over his house. Then, too, he seemed to be unaware of the grievous effect these people’s coarse activities were likely to have on the morals of his *zoja’e muhtarima* and innocent girls. Rumor mills started to grind everywhere. The undercurrent of displeasure steadily gathered momentum until one evening, as Fayyaz was returning from work, at a bend in the road he ran into the Imam Sahib of the largest neighborhood mosque.

“*Assalamu alikum*,” Imam Sahib greeted him, then shook hands with him, reverently rubbed his outspread hand on his chest, and said, “Brother, I’ve been thinking of meeting you for some time now. It seems that you have become very fond of music. Granted, sweet voices and chanting are looked upon with favor in Islam, but this nonsense, *astaghfarullah*, that goes on at your house night and day is not permissible under any circumstances. Surely you’re free to choose your actions as you will, and you will account for them before your Lord, but this matter doesn’t concern you alone. It is affecting the entire neighborhood in a very bad way. I hope that you will think about what I’ve said with a cool head and will put an end to these frivolities forthwith. That’s all I have to say.”

Fayyaz reached home heartbroken. By chance, Haidri Khan had not come back yet. He went straight to his room and lay down on the bed. Although his heart longed to play the sarod, he couldn’t muster the courage to do so. He kept turning over in bed for a long while, prompt-

ing Asghari to ask:

“Are you not feeling well?”

“Oh, no, I’m all right,” he replied, but didn’t bother to get up from the bed.

When it got dark Haidri Khan finally arrived. Hearing his footfalls on the staircase Fayyaz quickly sprang up from the bed, grabbed the sarod, and started to play. He had begun to fear Haidri Khan. He didn’t want him to know that he had wasted the last two hours idling.

“Fayyaz Bete,” Haidri Khan said just as soon as he stepped into the *bethak*, “catch your breath awhile if you feel tired. Thanks to a friend I’ve finally managed to get you a fine instrument of your own from Bombay. Now, God willing, we’ll soon find you a *tabalchi* too.”

Fayyaz gave the Ustad a look of deep gratitude, but still said nothing. Haidri Khan started to talk about this and that. Meanwhile it was time for dinner. And so Fayyaz didn’t play the sarod that evening at all. Inside he was writhing with anger against his neighbors and the *imam* of the mosque.

The next day, Fayyaz left for the office a bit early. At about noon Haidri Khan returned. He had a man with him who looked like a pandit by his outfit and manner. Purdah was arranged and the two men sat down on the floor in the *bethak*. Just then Najma and Salima walked in from school. They greeted Haidri Khan, who invoked blessings on them, “May you live long, my daughters.” And then he said to them in an affectionate voice, “Now go and put your satchels away and hurry back. We’re going to give you a test today.”

Both girls handed their satchels over to their mother, came back, and sat down respectfully in front of Khan Sahib. He picked up the sarod and twanged it a bit and asked Najma, “All right, *beti*, try to sing in tune with it. Come on.”

Najma felt a little shy. But at Khan Sahib’s insistence, she made an effort.

“Loudly, daughter. Like this: ‘aa, aa.’”

She was a clever girl, and with very little practice she was able to sing in harmony with the note, which made Haidri Khan give his companion, the pandit, a meaningful look. “So what do you think, Kalka Parshad-ji?” he asked.

Kalka Parshad nodded his head as he sized up Najma with appreciation. It was younger sister Salima’s turn now. She’d seen what her older sister was required to do, so it didn’t take her long to perform the test. Once again Haidri Khan looked at his companion meaningfully and

asked, "Well, Kalka Parshad-ji?"

A smile appeared on Kalka Parshad's lips. He hemmed and hawed a couple of times, after which Haidri Khan told the girls, "Excellent! Excellent! Go now. Freshen up and eat your lunch."

After the girls had left he told Kalka Parshad, "I'll bring it up with their father in the evening when he returns from work."

A short while later he left with his friend.

In the evening when Fayyaz came, Asghari, who had already been seething for hours, rained fury on him. "Listen to me, I've gone along with you so far. But now it's gone too far. I shall not—I repeat, I shall not—let my girls learn singing."

"At least tell me what happened. You've started talking in riddles."

"Khan Sahib was here around noon today. Some pandit-ji was with him. Just then Najma and Salima returned from school. First Khan Sahib made the girls sing, then the two started talking in whispers about God knows what. I was watching everything from behind the lattice. I'm telling you, if Khan Sahib thinks that he can have my girls sing and dance like common prostitutes, he is wrong, even if it means the girls and I must go and live with my parents for good."

Fayyaz was about to say something when Haidri Khan too returned. "Fayyaz Bete," he said the instant he stepped inside the *bethak*, "may God prolong your life! I've an important matter that I want to discuss with you. And Asghari Beti, may God keep you a happy wife, you too must listen carefully. Has it ever occurred to either of you that both your girls will reach puberty in two or three years? Have you made any plans for their marriage? I don't see that you've collected anything for their dowry. Then again, how can you? A hundred and fifty rupees—how far can they go? Just how are you going to arrange for the marriage of these innocent girls? I don't suppose you're thinking of wedding them to some horrid vegetable peddler or lowly butcher. As for office clerks, who hardly make a salary of thirty or forty rupees, marrying your daughters to them would be like throwing them into fire. The girls, *masha'allah*, are like slivers of the moon, fit to be queens at some appreciative aristocrat's. But, Miyan Sahibzade, rich people are very picky when it comes to marriage: the girl should be pretty, she should be educated, must bring a lot of dowry, and must also be skilled in some art, like singing or painting. But your girls, what have they got besides good looks!"

"I've been worrying over this for several days now. While the two of you slept, I spent whole nights tossing and turning, thinking about this. After much thought I believe I've found a way: why not teach them to

sing and dance? I'm sure you've noticed how a liking for singing and dance has swept over gentlemen of the nobility these days. Hindus started it, but now Muslims have picked it up. They too are teaching their daughters these arts.

"I brought Pandit Kalka Parshad over at noon today. He is the most celebrated music and dance teacher in the city. Nawab Shamshir Ali Khan's daughters, Rai Bahadur Santanm's daughters, Chaudhri Nek Alam's daughters are all taking lessons from him these days. I personally know of these three families. But there must be many more.

"Well, Miyan Sahibzade, God is my witness that you're dearer to me than a real son, and Asghari Beti, you too are no less than a blood relative. What I've planned is for your own good. I don't have a family of my own. You are my family. Why would I intend evil for you?"

His voice was overcome by emotion as he uttered the last sentence, and tears began to fall from his eyes. Finally he got up, wiped away his tears with the edge of his shirt, and said as he walked toward the staircase, "You think it over. And give it some good hard thought. If you're agreed, the girls can get started tomorrow. ... Well, I should be leaving now. Some friends of mine are waiting outside. I've got some business with them. I'll be back late tonight."

After he left, both Fayyaz and Asghari sat speechless and motionless for quite a while, staring at each other. Finally, Fayyaz broke the silence: "So what do you think?"

"I have no idea what to think."

"I think Khan Sahib has a point. We really haven't been thinking at all about our daughters' future. If you feel bad about it, consider that we'll be around—what possible harm can occur? If you ask me, I'd say it's a good opportunity and we must take advantage of it."

"I don't know. You're in charge. Do as you please."

Haidri Khan returned around ten in the evening. Asghari warmed up the food for him and Fayyaz. Over the meal Fayyaz told him about his encounter with the mosque's imam. Haidri burst into a laugh, "Bete, I'd guessed as much," he said. "But don't let it bother you. Keep to your business. We will leave this neighborhood if it comes to it."

Fayyaz picked up some courage from these words and started practicing the sarod.

Two days later the girls' song and dance instruction began. From midday till afternoon, all the neighbors could hear was a litany of "*ta-tat-thai-thai*, *ta-tat-thai-thai*, *ek-do-tin-char*—one, two, three, four; *ek-do-tin-char*—one, two, three, four; *ta-tat-thai*, *ta-tat-thai*, *ek-do-tin*—one, two,

three”; mixed in with the tinkling of ankle-bells.

The next day Najma and Salima were sent back from their schoolteacher in five minutes flat. They were told not to return to the school anymore. The same evening, the landlord paid Fayyaz a visit, his head hung low, so embarrassed he found it hard to speak. After all, this tenant had given him absolutely no trouble in the last ten years, had never even asked for repairs or whitewash, and paid the rent on time every month by bringing it over to him personally at his shop.

“Excuse me, Fayyaz Sahib,” he began, at long last. “I respect you, indeed I respect you a great deal, even if you may be fond of music. To tell you the truth, I’m fond of it too. But what can I do? The neighbors have made my life hell; they keep coming to my shop plying me with complaints. They paint such dreadful pictures of your home, as though it’s put every neighborhood woman’s virtue in jeopardy. I know it’s a lie, an out-and-out lie. But I can’t hold my own before so many of them. I’ll be truly sorry to lose so noble and honest tenant as you, but my hands are tied. I hope you know what I mean.”

“I do,” Fayyaz replied. “Please don’t worry. We’ll be out of here within a week.”

When Haidri Khan heard about this, he exclaimed, “Good, this problem too is out of the way! Fayyaz Bete, I myself don’t want to live in this house. There is no dearth of houses in the city, one better than the next, and cheaper to rent as well.”

“But Khan Sahib, when do I have time to look for a house!”

“Don’t you worry, my dear. Today is Thursday, right? I’ll find you a house myself before Sunday. You’ll be free that day, so we’ll have no problem hauling the stuff over.”

True to his word, Haidri Khan found a house before Sunday. He took Fayyaz over to show it to him. The area was a bit removed from the city and had a suburban feel to it. Fayyaz had never been here. There was a spacious bazaar, tall houses facing each other, and shops at the street level in which a *banya*, a *qassab*, a *kunjra*, a *bisati*, a *tanboli* sold their wares—items for which Fayyaz now had to walk through a maze of long and tedious *gulis*. There were also shoe shops, tailor shops, cleaners, a drugstore; there was even a biscuit factory, next to an orphanage. In one spot there was also a signboard announcing “Hakim Bhure Miyan’s Matab [Dispensary].”

Above the row of shops stood nice-looking brick houses, some three stories high, some four. The doors and windows of most of them were closed or had jalousies drawn.

Haidri Khan had found a two-room flat for Fayyaz in this area. It was on the second level of a building with an Irani's tea shop below it. Both the rooms were clean and spacious. The flat came with tap water and electricity. It had tile floors, fairly wide doors and large windows, with transoms of stained glass shaped in the form of flowers. A lovely balcony opened facing the bazaar. Fayyaz was overjoyed. He would sit here on summer days on a small *chauki* and practice his sarod, he mused. He was so carried away that he impulsively hugged his mentor.

"Fayyaz Bete," Haidri Khan said, guessing what was going through his mind, "here no one will bother you. You can play the entire night if you want."

Fayyaz returned home happily and gave Asghari the good news. Hearing such praise for house, Asghari, Najma and Salima also became eager to see it, but Haidri Khan said, "Oh, what's the point? You'll see it when you've arrived there for good. Come now, start packing, so we can be moved in by mid-afternoon."

After lunch Fayyaz, Haidri Khan, Asghari and the girls started to pack hurriedly. They had accumulated a lot of stuff, some essential some useless, over the last ten years. It was difficult to pick and choose. So they put off going through it until after they'd arrived in their new home, and right now concentrated on getting it all moved there. Even so, by the time the packing was done and the *thela* had arrived it was getting on towards four o'clock. They arrived as evening was setting in.

Fayyaz, Asghari and the girls had been working since morning and were too exhausted even to explore their new home. They spread out a big cotton rug in one of the rooms and all four lay down on it. But oddly, Haidri Khan's face showed no signs of fatigue. He was thinking of going out.

"Fayyaz Bete, don't forget to latch the door," he said as he went toward the stairs. "I'm going out to take care of something important. Don't open the door until I'm back. And don't be anxious if I'm late." And he climbed down the stairs.

Sleep assaulted the four the minute the bard had left, and for the next two, two and a half hours they slept soundly. Fayyaz woke up first. He found himself in pitch darkness. He knew where the light switch was on the wall. But, afraid of disturbing his wife and daughters' sleep, he didn't turn it on. Picking his way carefully in the dark, he proceeded toward the balcony. He leaned over its guard-rail and started to look around. Up, down, right, left, forward, no matter which way he looked, a completely new and unexpected atmosphere greeted him. The flats around his were

all flooded with strong electric light; the doors and windows whose blinds had been lowered during the day were now wide open. The room directly opposite their flat had a shining white cloth spread over the carpet on the floor. Large pillows and bolsters were neatly laid out, as well as covered dome-shaped metal boxes for betel leaves and *pan*-paraphernalia, and hookah-snakes. In short, everything needed for a party. But the room was as yet empty of visitors.

He next directed his gaze at the bazaar below. It had undergone a complete transformation at this hour. All those shops that sold flour, pulses, ghee, meat, vegetables, fabric, gold, silver, copper, and brass during the day were closed, and flower sellers had set up shop in front of them, displaying a profusion of floral ornaments in large, flat wicker baskets, alongside perfume sellers whose tiny, colorful vials of different attars could be seen sparkling from a distance.

In one spot all kinds of sweetmeats were tastefully displayed in large platters, and *barfi* squares and *imartis* were stacked neatly in an arrangement resembling a castle wall. The gate of the orphanage was closed, and a magician was performing his tricks in front of it. A young man sporting a Gandhi cap, who was perhaps blind, was singing as he played his harmonium, and paisa, two-paisa, anna and two-anna coins were scattered on the sheet spread near him. Everyone appeared courteous and good-natured. The street looked like a country fair. The bazaar was quite crowded and every time a big shiny car honked its way through it people got out of the way like foam in front of a steamer.

The empty room directly across from Fayyaz was beginning to fill up and come to life. People were coming in and taking their places on the floor, leaning against the bolsters. Suddenly there was a thump on the *tabla* and with a "*chham*" a veritable Venus wearing a silvery *peshwaz* began to swirl in the middle of the room. Her leg and hand movements were so fine that her slightest gesture wrung the hearts of her audience and made them break into loud applause. But the dancer was so proud of her beauty and confident of her art that she seemed to be beyond all thought of praise.

Fayyaz was watching this sight spellbound when he felt something like a shadow creep up behind him and stand at his back. For a few moments he stood motionless. The shadow did not stir either. At last he turned around. It was his wife Asghari. □

—Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon

Glossary

- alap* (*alāp*): a musical term, “modulation, or rising of the voice in singing, tuning up; prelude to a song” (Platts,* p. 73).
- assalamu alikum* (*as-salāmu ‘alaikum*): “Peace be with you!”—a Muslim greeting.
- astaghfarullah* (*astaghfaru ‘-Lāh*): “God forgive me!”—used when confronted with an unseemly or morally reprehensible situation.
- azan* (*azān*): Muslim call to prayer.
- Babu-ji (*bābū-jī*): a term of respect for a stranger assumed to be socially higher than oneself.
- Bahu (*bahū*): daughter-in-law.
- banya*: a Hindu caste whose members generally sell provision and lend money on interest.
- barfi* (*brfī*): a sweetmeat made of milk, sugar, and cardamom.
- Bawa (*bāvā*): a variant of *bābā*, father.
- Bazm-e Mausiqi (*bazm-e mūsīqī*): Music Society.
- bethak* (*bēṭhak*): sitting-room.
- Bete (*bēṭē*): vocative of *bēṭā*, son.
- Beti, *beti* (*bēṭī*): daughter.
- bisati* (*bisāṭī*): a huckster.
- chauki* (*čaukī*): a very low square wooden stool.
- chilams* (*čilam*): the earthen bowl atop a hubble-bubblr or hookah that holds the tobacco and the fire.
- dupatta* (*dōpaṭṭa*): a length of fabric draped over the head and chest by South Asian women as a sign of modesty.
- darbar* (*darbār*): the court of a prince, king, or ruler.
- ganda* (*ganḍā*): refers to a “string which teachers of particular arts or crafts (as singers, dancers, conjurers, etc.) bind round a finger or the wrist of the right arm of their pupils” (Platts, p. 918) as a formal induction

into the art and cementing of the teacher-pupil relationship.

ghunghat (*ghūṅghaṭ*): “the corner or edge of a wrapper or mantle drawn over the face (by a woman)” (Platts, p. 940).

gudri (*gudrī*): “a beggar’s bedding, quilt, etc.; a beggar’s tattered garment, a quilt of rags and patches” (Platts, p. 898).

guli (*galī*): a narrow street or lane, an alley.

gut (*gat, gati*): a quaver (in music), an air.

hamd (*ḥamd*): a poem in praise of God.

hammam (*ḥammām*): a public bath.

Imam, Imam Sahib, *imam* (*imām*): one who conducts the Muslim prayer service in a mosque.

imarti (*imartī*): a kind of sweetmeat soaked in sugar syrup.

koel (*kō’il* or *kōyal*): the black or Indian cuckoo.

kunjra (*kunjrā*): one who sells vegetables and fruits.

kurta (*kurtā*): a knee-length, collarless Indian shirt.

lakh (*lākḥ*): a hundred thousand, lac.

masha’allah (*mā shā’ l-Lāh*): “Whatever God wills!”—an exclamation of praise or appreciation, similar to “How wonderful!”

maulvi (*maulvī*): a Muslim learned in Islamic religious sciences; a devout individual; a priest.

nasha-panī: *nasha* (intoxication) and *pānī* (water); together any of a variety of intoxicants to which one is addicted.

pajama (*pajāma*): Indian trousers secured with a waistcord.

pan (*pān*): a betel-leaf, used for chewing, with added ingredients such as cardamom or tobacco.

Parsee (*pārsī*): the South Asian term for a Zoroastrian.

peshwaz (*pēshvāz*): a dress reaching a little below the knee worn by brides and female dancers.

qassab (*qaṣṣāb*): a butcher.

qavvali (*qavvālī*): religious music performed at shrines for attaining a state

of religious transport and ecstasy.

rajwara (*rajvāra*): Hindu princely state.

sama (*sama*): listening of hymns and religious music to induce mystical ecstasy.

saptak: the musical scale, score.

shervani (*shērvāni*): a knee-length coat with an inch-high collar running along the neck and having the front completely buttoned; worn generally by South Asian Muslims.

sur: a note of the musical scale.

tabalchi (*ṭabalchī*): a drummer, *tabla*-player.

tabla (*ṭabla*): an Indian drum.

takiyas: Shrines, tomb-sanctuaries.

tanboli (*tanbōli*): a *pān*-seller.

thela (*ṭhēla*): a push-truck.

Ustad, *ustad* (*ustād*): a teacher; mentor.

zoja'e muhtarima (*zauja-e muhtarima*): grandiose way of saying “‘respected’ lady-wife.”

*John T. Platts, *A Dictionary of Urdu, Classical Hindi, and English* (rpt. Oxford University Press, 1968).