

ASAD MUHAMMAD KHAN

## Turrets and Peacocks

SHORTLY after Partition Laji Bai Aseergarhvali moved here and set up shop in a flat on Napier Road.

Madam Laji had boarded a ship at Bombay's Ballard pier with her adopted son and one of her girls and after arriving had stayed for a fortnight in Moti Seth Shikarpuri's Mewal Mansion flat in Kemari.

She hadn't just upped and left, she'd come loaded. So on Moti Seth's advice, she bought this flat which was situated at the main intersection of Napier Road. In time the number of girls who worked for her grew to four and she ran her bawd-house with much enthusiasm. The pink shaded lights, the fans, the sofa set, carpets, and velvet cushions—worn out and dirty-looking now—all dated from those times of thriving business.

One rarely hears rumors about whores and bawds, one hears them about respectable women, spread with the intention of causing grief. But although it may sound strange, all kinds of rumors about Laji Bai were circulating on Janani Road and indeed all over the city:

"Her real name was Lila." "No, it was Laila, and she used to be the court singer of the Maharaja of Aseergarh." "Not at all. She was merely the Maharaja's keep. What does she know about singing? But she had taught herself every trick in the *shastras* of Pandit Koka Kashmiri, a past master in the arts of the boudoir, that is why the Maharaja had ..."

This last speculation seemed to appeal to people. As it was, no one had ever heard Laji sing. Her well-wishers had spread the story that back when she was young she used to coo like a *koel*, but her enemies fed her *sindur*, and she lost her voice forever. On her own part, though, Laji Bai never confirmed or denied this story.

However once, although no one remembers exactly what year, when someone very close to her, a man who is no longer alive, asked her to sing, Laji Bai had responded, "Deputy Sahib (the man had just retired as

a Deputy Subinspector of Police), “I used to sing for one or for one hundred thousand. But that one is no more, and neither are the one hundred thousand. What can I sing now. No one would even understand my lyrics here.”

Cunning words—all this!

The fact of the matter is, she couldn’t possibly have made as much by singing as she did by running four beds.

Gulbadan, Lajo, Bela, and Yasmin ... the girls would change every two or three years, though not the four names. The girls were probably taught a smattering of song and dance, just so the other business could go on under the guise of musical entertainment.

In short, Laji Bai had four “pupils” and the son mentioned above, whom everyone called “Lajivala.”

Everyone called me Lajivala Javed.

When we came over here and Laji Sahib bought this flat I must have been at the most sixteen years old.

I was forbidden to talk to the people who visited the flat. They weren’t allowed to recruit me to run their errands and I wasn’t permitted to accept anything from them. Laji Sahib was very strict in this matter.

Gradually I learned how to conduct myself around these people, and how to talk with them, but I didn’t mix with them very much. All except Mazhar Ali Khan, a bank officer, with whom I did develop a kind of friendship. I even went to his office to visit now and then, for though Mazhar Ali Khan did come to the flat, he was not a “pleasure-seeker.” He was just an “admirer” of Laji Bai. He must have been twenty-four or twenty-five at the time, about the same age that I am now.

It isn’t me, nor is it Laji Bai that impels me to tell you this story. It is Mazhar Ali Khan, and he alone. What a courageous man! Who knows where he is now!

It was afternoon, I remember, when he walked into the flat for the very first time. Somehow the door had been left open. Laji Sahib was sitting comfortably in the reception room propped against a cushion, with the table fan on. A wet muslin sheet was draped over her feet, and she was humming something. Just then a handsome young man, in a white shirt, red tie, black serge pants and shiny boots, tapped on the door as if it were a drum, said “hello” and walked in.

Laji was annoyed, “What craziness is this? Where do you think you’re

going, *mian*?”

This *mian* was Mazhar Ali Khan. He stepped forward and kissed Laji Sahib’s feet. Laji withdrew them quickly, her stunned expression riveted on Khan Sahib.

Mazhar Khan answered in a cheerful voice, “I’ve been wanting to see you for a long time. You are the doyenne of music, the queen of this art.”

Laji, her brows wrinkled in a frown, said, “Young man, you have come to the wrong place. *She* does not live here.”

Khan Sahib laughed, “For me, you *are* the queen of music. Here, only you rule; the rest are your subjects.”

This ingratiating lie, this absolute impudence made Laji burst out laughing. Mazhar Ali Khan began to laugh too. He said, “Madam, only this month I have been posted as Assistant Manager of the bank across the street. If I could get you to open an account with us at this time, that would help me a lot. You will, won’t you?”

Feeling at ease now Laji Sahib leaned back on her cushions but continued to look at him with interest. Then she laughed and said, “You must be in a tight spot, young man, why else would you come peeking into brothels for business. Right?”

“I have an absolute bastard for a boss,” he said. “He claims he won’t confirm me in my post unless I sign up x-number of accounts for such-and-such an amount.”

“So, have you any?”

Mazhar Ali Khan said, “I don’t know anybody here except you. And my manager, he doesn’t even know you. He’s so timid, so straight that he steps out of his car at a quarter to nine every morning, disappears into the bank, walks out again at a quarter to five and drives away going no more than forty miles per hour.”

“Amazing!” Laji Sahib remarked.

“Well then, let’s begin.” Mazhar Ali Khan said, “Call the girls. Let me explain about accounts to them as well.”

Laji was totally thrown off by the manner in which this barely twenty-four or twenty-five year old Khan Sahib said “girls.” She felt an uncontrollable urge to laugh, but held back, covering her mouth with her hands. In the end, she couldn’t restrain herself anymore, and bubbled over, while Mazhar Ali Khan kept looking innocently first at Laji then at me. As Laji was still laughing, Khan Sahib asked me, “*Bhaiya*, call everyone. There isn’t much time.”

I looked at Laji. She signaled her approval with a nod and continued to laugh.

Mazhar Ali Khan began to explain to the still-laughing Laji, “Madam, the matter is laughable, but then again it isn’t. Consider the fact that I have to solicit accounts worth hundreds of thousands of rupees, in just so many days. Now you tell me, if I don’t beg and plead, what else should I do?”

It was the time of day when the girls were free. They had heard Laji Sahib’s laughter and started to gather in the reception room. Khan Sahib began to explain to each one of them the benefits of saving and banking. “Look,” he said, “I don’t need to tell you how insecure man is, and women, as you already know, are even more so, especially ladies, like yourselves, who are given very little time to shine in their profession...”

“Ladies” and “profession” got every one laughing along with Laji. Meanwhile Khan Sahib continued with his speech: “For you especially it is essential to save and have a bank account. So that on rainy days ... when even a man’s shadow abandons him ... you do understand me, don’t you? When admirers, favor-seekers, those who lavish money on you and indulge your whims are gone, it is only money in the bank that you can depend on....”

Some of the girls were still laughing holding their hands to their mouths. Khan Sahib must have stopped for a second when Gulbadan started up like she was applauding at a *musha’ira*, “Well done Bhai-jan, well done! God be praised! You make good speeches!”

In imitation of a *musha’ira*-poet, Khan Sahib cupped his hand and raised it to his forehead in salutation and then resumed with the same momentum.

Gulbadan wasn’t about to let him off the hook so easily. “He is absolutely shameless and sneaky,” she said. “He’s been hanging out at brothels all too frequently ... must have been a *sarangi*-player sometime in the past.”

All of a sudden Laji Sahib’s laughter disappeared. She was glaring at Gulbadan.

In response Mazhar Ali Khan slapped himself on the cheeks and said, “Me? Heaven forbid, Bai, heaven forbid! The *sarangi* isn’t an easy instrument. Only the truly gifted can play it...”

What came out of Gulbadan’s mouth then was totally out of line. Looking at the other girls she said, “Well then, he must have been rounding up clients for brothels.”

All the girls were dumbstruck, aware that what Gulbadan had alleged was really rude. And Laji Sahib—she seemed to have suddenly turned pale. Mazhar Ali Khan’s fair complexion reddened. He cleared his throat,

jerked his head, licked his lips, and then looking straight into Gulbadan's eyes responded, "No, Bai-ji! Now I couldn't be as worthless as all that, could I? The fact is, my elders, God bless them, whored around quite a bit in their time. So you could say my blood has retained something of their daring, something of their fearlessness."

Gulbadan was mortified and became speechless. Laji Sahib extended her hand and patted Mazhar Ali Khan on the shoulder saying, "Young man, don't think anything of it. The wretch—she's crazy."

Khan Sahib stayed on for a while longer and then left, but not before extracting a promise from Laji that she would think about opening an account in his bank.

After he was gone Laji Sahib said softly, "What a fine boy! The lord keep him happy!"

Mazhar Mian visited a few more times. Laji Sahib had sent a message to the owner of the "Kashmir Milk and Lassi Shop," and he, along with the tinsmith who sold buckets and filters, had been the first to open accounts with Khan Sahib, followed in time by the Gujarati cigarette wholesaler.

When Mazhar Ali Khan came to thank Laji Sahib for all these accounts, he opened his briefcase the minute he sat down and took out a small flat box. It had Laji's favorite sweetmeats, purchased from the finest shop in town. He placed the box on his hands and presented it to Laji Sahib like an offering.

Laji asked, "For what?"

He replied, "A while back I had decided that I would offer Lila-ji sweets one day."

"But why, young man? Because the tinsmith and the proprietor of "Kashmir Milk" opened accounts?"

"No Lila-ji," Khan Sahib said. "Those accounts are of no consequence. It isn't that."

"Then what?" Laji asked, "Why are you speaking in riddles, young man? What *is* it?"

"Look it's like this," Mazhar Mian put the box of sweets on the chair, walked over to Laji Sahib and sat down beside her on the sofa. "It's like this, Madam, that I ... That day when I barged into your flat and chattered on, don't think that I was talking nonsense. I knew even then who you really are. I not only knew, by that time I already had five of your gramophone records in my possession. The sixth, which I've been searching for for a long time, was found yesterday. Lila-ji! I had decided that on the day I got hold of that record I would bring sweets for you."

The gramophone company released it after you came over here. I wouldn't be surprised if even you don't have it. The same hymn of *bilaval*, which goes like this: *daiya-ri kahan ga'e voh log ...*"

Laji was gazing at Mazhar Ali Khan, in a daze. Khan Sahib hadn't yet finished speaking when Laji repeated as if in her sleep, "*Daiya-ri kahan ga'e ...*" Then she seemed to be asking, "*Alahaiya bilaval!* Maestro Samdu's *alahaiya?*"

Mazhar Mian nodded, "Yes, the very same!"

Laji Sahib brushed her hands across her face and asked softly, "Who are you? How do you know me?"

"Me? I told you, I work at the bank, the bank on your street. ... And, Madam, how do I know you? Well, Lila-ji, many people know you. Thousands, perhaps millions ... Who else besides you has sung the *kajris* since 1932? Who? Who could have sung it? Who *can* sing like Lila-ji Aseergarhvali? ... Madam, I listen to your records every Sunday from morning till night. Aseergarh's youthful, strapping forests resound in your music, and Lila-ji, peacocks and peahens perched on the turrets of the Aseergarh fort can be heard in your melodies. I have not heard those sounds personally ... but an acquaintance, who has heard them many times described them to me. Lila-ji, Madam, God knows, I do not understand music all that well, but I can trace out each note of your *kajris* on paper and show it to you."

Laji Sahib, her hands pressed tightly across her face, was listening to Mazhar Mian. When he said Lila-ji Aseergarhvali, She brushed her hands once over her face and repeated, "Lila!"

A desolate silence echoed throughout the flat. I was leaning against the wall listening to everything. It seemed as though the corpse of bygone days was lying straight ahead in the reception room.

Mazhar Ali Khan saw Laji Sahib's tears. He stood up, taking hold of his briefcase.

Laji Sahib was sitting like a statue with her chin on her plump hennaed hands and her elbows resting on her thighs.

Swinging his briefcase from one hand to the other Khan Sahib gestured good-bye to Laji Sahib's "statue" and walked toward the door.

"Wait!" Laji called out softly.

Khan Sahib stopped.

Laji said, "You will come again, won't you?"

"Yes, Madam, I *will*. I'll bring the records and the player too."

"No! Please, don't."

"All right, I won't."

That day Mazhar Ali Khan crossed the threshold of the flat on his tiptoes, like someone who withdraws quietly after offering his condolences on the death of a loved one.□

—*Translated by Aquila Ismail and Muhammad Umar Memon*