

GHULAM ABBAS

## The Bath<sup>1</sup>

HER NAME was Farkhanda Begam but she was known as Farrukh Bhabhi and everyone addressed her as Farrukh Bhabhi. This form of address was simply a convention because no one here was related to or had even seen her deceased husband. Whether she was ever anyone's sister-in-law or not is beside the point, for, any observer of her dutiful nature would agree that the title suited her well. And she herself was not opposed to it. She was one of those women who are born with a singular eagerness to serve men. Such women adore their brothers in childhood, are a source of delight for their fathers as long as they are single, please their husbands in marriage and pander to the whims of sons in old age.

She was a short, petite woman with a face quite large for someone with her build. If you had never seen her before and saw her the first time sitting on the floor wrapped up in a shawl, you'd be surprised when she got up for some casual errand. Your eyes would wait for her to grow taller.

She was about twenty-eight years old but looked much younger. What grabbed your attention at first glance was the extraordinary sparkle in her eyes that was set off to advantage by the plainness of her other features. These sparkling eyes also covered up for her lack of education when she joined in discussions on subtle issues. Her complexion was the color of wheat and honey, and her hair sprang from her forehead thickly, forming a widow's peak and making it almost impossible to part it from the middle, so she often wore her hair swept back in a masculine style. She always wore a white shalwar kurta with a white dupatta, and this simple Hindustani style of dress was very becoming on her. When she sat down to pray in the fading evening twilight, a bunch of half-opened jas-

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<sup>1</sup>“Ḥammām Mēñ” was written in 1947 and is taken from the author's collection of short stories *Ānandī* (Lahore: Maktaba-e Jadīd, 1948), 65–133.

mine flowers on her prayer mat, an observer could not but be moved by the pretty picture she made.

Sometimes on the insistence of friends she wore a sari. But she carefully avoided bright colors. With saris she always wore a particular style of blouse, long-sleeved with a high neckline. She had designed the blouse herself. She also possessed a tiny gold ornament shaped like a miniature mandolin with tiny gems studded on it, and she wore it strung on a black ribbon wrapped high around her neck.

Her house was situated at the far end of the city in a foul-smelling enclosure. To access the stairway leading to the house you had to pass through a long, narrow hallway. After climbing a dozen or so worn-out irregular steps, you entered through a door into a large courtyard, one half covered with a sort of roof and the other half open to the skies. At one end of the open courtyard was a latrine and at the opposite end, adjoining the wall of the veranda, was a stove made of clay. On either side of the kitchen space there were single rooms. All together this constituted Farrukh Bhabhi's home.

The house was one of those structures that are whitewashed when they're newly constructed or when the property is being sold. Looking at this particular house you could guess that neither of the above applied to it. The state of the plaster peeling off the walls was a sure indication that the place hadn't been touched for at least twenty years or more. Smoke blacking had daubed the doors and the iron rings fixed on the ceiling with a patina that covered up many blemishes. Both of the small rooms had a recess in one wall. A close inspection showed that those recesses must have been very small, like the ones that you see in old-style houses meant for the lower classes, and their purpose was to hold an earthen lamp. But former tenants had widened these recesses by pulling out bricks now and then to suit themselves. At present the recesses looked like an abandoned cavity that a burglar might have been burrowing but left unfinished after being scared off by some noise. In spite of these shortcomings, the house had been the subject of many odes in honor of its splendor, described by numerous beautiful names, and its structure had been portrayed from every angle with an eye to praise.

Once you ignored the dilapidated outer structure, you couldn't fault Farkhanda's housekeeping. The place was sparkling clean inside and decorated in good taste. She swept the two little rooms and the courtyard morning and evening, and whatever time she could spare from cooking, washing and other chores she devoted to sprucing up the house. She chose the better of the two rooms to be the sitting room. On the floor

was spread a gleaming thick white sheet with bolster pillows to recline on. She had the walls covered with striped cloth up to a height of three feet to prevent dirt from clinging to clothes when someone reclined against the wall. The second room was her bedroom, bathroom and dressing room all in one. In one corner was the wooden settee on which she sat to read the namaz five times a day. Then there was a trunk containing her clothes, some pots and pans and other paraphernalia.

On occasion, her friends helped her in putting out and enhancing the evening meal by bringing such food as they could afford. For instance, a certain person would buy bread on the way back from work and bring it along; bread added to Farrukh Bhabhi's dal and vegetable. Another would bring half a dozen bananas or half a pound of peanuts. Yet another might send fresh goat liver and a message with a servant boy in the afternoon: "Mian sends his greetings and says that he and a friend will dine here tonight."

Sometimes there were more mouths and less food at the table. At such times, one of them produced a four-anna coin from his pocket and, giving it to the servant boy, told him to run and get four warm roti and four kabobs from the bazaar. Farrukh Bhabhi did not mind this at all. In fact she would exchange a look with the gentleman concerned to show her implicit approval.

She never felt demeaned. Whatever she had was there for all and what she couldn't afford she didn't care for. She never attempted to hide her income or her resources. She didn't try to compensate for sparse meals by talking about rich repasts. If someone helped her out she gracefully accepted, but she didn't go asking for charity.

Meals were not the only service she provided. She didn't shy away from helping her friends in many other ways as well. For example, a certain gentleman might land up at her place around ten in the morning, "Bhabhi, I've lost a button on my trousers. It came off just now on my way to the office. I could have gone to work like this, but your house is on my way so I thought I'd stop by and get it fixed. You know it's the button right on the waistband!"

Like an affectionate sister she would give him a look that was a mixture of reproach and fondness, saying without words, you naughty fellow, take better care of your clothes. And then she quickly sewed on the button.

Another gentleman might come knocking on her door at two in the morning, "Farrukh Bhabhi, Farrukh Bhabhi, my wife isn't letting me in. She's telling me to spend the rest of the night wherever I was. Please come

with me and talk to her.”

And she would at once rub her eyes, wrap her dupatta properly and set off with the gentleman. Mostly such missions failed and she would return dejected.

Occasionally she had company all day, but the real party would begin after 8 P.M. Mohsin Adil was usually the first to arrive. He was a thin young man of medium height, maybe about thirty years old or so, with a pale face and large, sad, wet eyes. His eyes seemed to be brimming with tears. If he were to pay attention to his appearance he would look quite presentable, but his hair was always long and tangled. The fingers of his right hand were permanently stained brown with nicotine. In fact they looked as if they had been dipped in a tincture of iodine. And his fingernails were jammed with bluish dirt. When he chanced to notice the filth, he would casually clean the stuff out from under his nails with a match stick or the edge of a cigarette packet. Winter or summer, he wore a grimy black sherwani, and an almost threadbare red cotton scarf hung around his neck at all times. When he looked unspeakably filthy, Farrukh Bhabi would say: “Adil Mian, I need your advice on something very important. Can you come to my place tomorrow afternoon? I would be so grateful if you could. Please don’t forget, it’s very urgent.”

And when Adil showed up at her place the next day in the afternoon she would talk about this and that and then slip in a comment about his clothes, “Adil Mian, do you care about what you wear? Look at your sherwani, it’s got a tear in it. Let me repair it or it will get worse.”

Adil’s pale pinched cheeks would become suffused with color. Hiding his obvious embarrassment, Adil would quickly say, “No, no please don’t bother now, some other time perhaps.”

But she paid no attention to his protests and would get the sherwani off his back. Then, instead of repairing it, she would dump it in a tub of water. Adil could only stare at her amazed while she swiftly took the garment out from the water and started scrubbing it with soap. In a little while the servant boy would come in with a barber in tow.

“Mian, the barber is here, get a haircut.”

By now Adil would realize what was happening. Tight-lipped and silent, hating it all, he would submit to her orders sheepishly. Like a lamb making a token protest and then surrendering to the will of his master, he would take off his clothes, tie a grubby sheet around his waist, and allow the barber to give him a shave and a haircut. Meanwhile, Farkhanda washed his kurta, pyjama and scarf, at the same time instructing the barber, “Khalifaji, make the hair really short and don’t forget to trim the

nails—hands and feet both.”

After his haircut, Adil was given a bath with hot water. She would personally scrub his back. When finished she would give him a clean white sheet from her box and say, “Here, Adil Mian, wrap yourself up and sit in the sun for a while. Your clothes will be dry soon. I’ll warm up an iron and keep it ready.”

Sitting on the string bed in the sun, Adil would look sadder than ever. He followed her bristling movements with mournful eyes. Now more than ever it seemed tears would begin to flow.

Thus, over the course of several hours he was restored as a human being.

Mohsin Adil was a novelist. Unfortunately his talent was yet to be recognized by the literary and social culture to which he belonged. It was five years since he wrote his first novel, but he still had to find a publisher. In his novel he had tried to explore the nature of sexuality. His prose style was eloquent and mature and his narrative ability was exceptional. Anyway, the subject itself was not particularly objectionable. The problem was that he had drawn extensively from the private lives of prophets and gods and goddesses to sustain his arguments. Therefore, if the book were to be published, it was a foregone conclusion that it would be confiscated or banned. And this was why no publisher dared to bring it out.

Book dealers had offered Adil reasonable sums as advance royalty with the stipulation that he should remove the offensive parts of the manuscript. But Adil was not willing to scratch out even a comma or a full stop. He said, “A true artist puts his soul into his work. My character might be good or bad but I’m not ready to compromise my soul for the sake of money.”

Adil had to suffer poverty for his stubbornness. Slowly his enthusiasm for writing and editing began to sour. When his languor became unbearable a friend would take him to a publishing house and get him a temporary proofreading job. In this way he could earn a few rupees.

Adil was Farkhanda’s oldest friend. Her husband had died leaving her a young widow. She got fed up with the relentless tyranny of her in-laws and ran away. She met Adil at the railway station. This happened about a year ago. Adil had rescued her from the clutches of the cunning old woman who had lured her away from home with the promise of finding her a governess’s job in a well-to-do family. Farkhanda had no parents or close relatives who would give her shelter. It was Adil who had arranged for her living quarters and suggested a possible livelihood. With Adil’s

advice she had bought a sewing machine on a monthly pay-back scheme and started making neckties and cloth purses with drawstrings. Long ago, when she was in high school, she had learned how to make these handicrafts from an affectionate teacher. Somehow Adil had also managed to find a twelve-year-old lad, a smart boy, who helped her with housework and went out every other day to sell the handicrafts. In short, Farkhanda respected Adil a lot and thought he was the country's most gifted writer.

After Mohsin Adil, her next dearest friend was Bhatnagar who was an agent for an insurance company, or maybe Dr. Hamadani, or perhaps both. Bhatnagar was a middle-aged heavily built man. He had a wheatish complexion and his small brown eyes always seemed lost in thought. Looking at him you felt that he was far away in another world finding ways to reach an impossible goal. When he arrived at Farrukh Bhabhi's he would remove his cream-colored trousers, fold them up carefully and put them in a corner. Then he would tie on an old dhoti that he kept at her place especially for the sake of this comfort. If he happened to arrive earlier than his usual routine and Farkhanda was busy cooking, he wouldn't sit around and gossip. He would produce a deck of cards from his pocket and become engrossed in dealing out a hand, playing by himself.

Insurance men are normally very sociable and always desirous of going to places where they can meet more people to whom they can possibly sell insurance. Bhatnagar too had turned up at Farrukh Bhabhi's place with the friend of a friend for this very purpose. But he didn't find any "catch" there. On the contrary, he became so captivated with the ambience of the place that he turned into one of the regulars, often choosing to spend his evenings there.

Dr. Hamadani was about fifty years old but looked not a day above forty. He was well built, clear complexioned and clean shaven. His hair had thinned to the point of baldness. Over one eye he wore a monocle with a dangling gold chain. A kurta made from fine muslin cloth, a *bosky* tehmad around his waist, slippers on his feet, and a thick cane with a silver head in his hand completed his sartorial attire. In winter, the only concession he made to his appearance was to add a woolen shawl of natural wool color. He wrapped it from under his armpit over his shoulder and draped it across his chest in a very idiosyncratic fashion. This gave him a persona like the one you associate with a politician, and he adopted an air to go along with it.

He was considered an expert on all systems of medicine: homeopathic, allopathic and native *yunani tibb*, though he had a degree in none. He had studied human maladies passionately, as a hobby, and had come

up with new methods of treatment based on his understanding of old and new styles of medicine, so he had acquired a certain degree of fame outside of conventional medical practice. He had his own little laboratory where he carried out secret experiments. Farrukh Bhabhi had once gone to him for treatment and that was how they got to be friends.

When light footsteps were heard on the stairs everyone would know that Deep Kumar was on his way. He was a handsome, shy twenty-two year old. Clear complexioned and curly haired, he was the son of a rich landlord and was in the capital for higher education. After failing his M.A. exams, he was so disheartened that he couldn't face returning home. He sent no replies to the countless letters and telegrams that his father sent him. He was always clad in a homespun cotton kurta and pyjama. He was bareheaded and wore slippers on his feet. In winter he wrapped himself in a black-colored blanket with a thin red border. This used to be his father's and now it was the token of his past.

Adil had brought him to Farkhanda's place. At the very first meeting Farkhanda had remarked, "You ought to be in films!" He had blushed deeply at this remark, even his earlobes had turned red. After some months, when he became more comfortable with Farkhanda, he asked her hesitantly, "Farrukh Bhabhi, do you really think that I ought to be in films?"

Farkhanda smiled. "Oh so you didn't believe what I said the other day?" Her reply silenced him and he never brought that matter up again.

When Adil, Bhatnagar, Dr. Hamadani and Deep Kumar assembled at Farrukh Bhabhi's, the intimate gathering would begin to warm up. After saying her evening prayers Farkhanda would join them. An old codger whom everyone addressed as "Maulana" and who hung around at Farkhanda's place mostly whiling his time away sleeping, would now get up, arranging the folds of his shawl, and join the party.

God knows what Maulana's actual name was. This virtuous title had nothing to do with old age or religiosity; his salt and pepper beard had probably played more of a role in the choice of this nickname. His beard grew thickly on his chin and the growth on his cheeks was sparse. He had small deep-set eyes and a straight nose. His ears were inordinately large. It was rumored that the instructor at the mosque had pulled at them so often and so hard that they had stretched out.

Maulana was originally from a village. In his middle age, he got inspired to study theology, so he bid the village good-bye and headed for the city. For a while he studied hadith and *fiqh* at different mosques, eventually being appointed the imam of a decrepit old mosque in a fara-

way desolate part of town. The mosque was near a railway line. Hardly anyone came to offer prayers there. Night and day trains screeched by. Maulana hung around all day lying on a sagging cot, tucked in the narrow alcove, staring gloomily at the passengers on the passing trains. On Fridays his routine was to bathe, put on clean clothes and attend the juma prayers at the principal mosque in the city. The prayers were led by a well-known scholar of Islamic theology who gave a discourse prior to the prayers. One Friday when he was leaving for the discourse he took all his books along. He listened to the two-hour lecture with absolute concentration and when it was over he was weeping inconsolably. Maulana cried so much that he began to hiccup. After that he gave away his books to a needy student who had no money to buy books. And he was never seen at that mosque again.

And here is how he met Farkhanda. One winter evening, a year ago, Farkhanda was out shopping when she noticed a man crouching by the municipal roadside water tap bundled up in a blanket but shivering uncontrollably. She paused by his side. The man said in a shaky voice, "I am ill and I have no one in this city. If only I could find some work. I can teach little children the Qur'an, some Arabic ...". In short, Farkhanda brought him home. In a week or so he recovered, but he never talked about giving tuitions or about leaving Farkhanda's place. He did odd jobs around the house. For instance, he would do the dishes, light the wood stove or fetch water from the well. If Farkhanda complained of a headache, he would massage her forehead for hours. He would mutter formulaic prayers and then blow on her forehead for relief as prescribed. Sometimes he ran errands for Farkhanda's friends. But he didn't enjoy doing those tasks. He sat down to dinner with everyone.

A young radical poet called Shakebi joined the gathering later on in the evening. He was a bookbinder but possessed a poetic temperament. He befriended a psychology professor who brought him books for binding. The professor influenced him enormously and encouraged him to write poetry. The pen name Shakebi was also the professor's idea. Shakebi's face was scarred from smallpox. He had a beautiful singing voice, and when he recited his poems in the singing style his face was transformed by an innocent radiance that enhanced his plain looks and transcended his lack of social status. He had written several poems on laborers and wage earners and such. Though the occasional verse was flawed in rhyme or meter, some of the poetry was truly exceptional. There was a poem about a poor daily-wage earner who goes to get a shave on his wedding day. The man is so excited he can barely sit still. His face



gets nicked in several places; eventually his lower lip gets badly cut. The poem is remarkably realistic and radical.

The intimate gathering remained incomplete without Qasim. He worked as a ticket seller for the tram company and was a short-story writer as well. He had agreed to work for the tram company because it was better than doing nothing. However, after a few days at the job he realized that it gave him the rare opportunity of observing people; and this was a godsend for his creative writing. He now applied himself wholeheartedly to his job and when a friend found him a better job he declined. He met diverse crowds in the tram every day. A person doesn't encounter such diversity in a railway carriage or in a ship, the reason being that travelers use those modes of transport for long journeys. In a tram, at almost every stop new passengers come on board.

Qasim was a tall, handsome young man. He looked as proud as an army cadet, even in the worn and not too clean uniform of a tram conductor. He had no family or relatives. He had lunch at a roadside eatery with fellow conductors, and for supper he bought nan and kabobs from a vendor near the tram station and ate standing on the moving tram. At the next stop he drank his fill of water from the municipal tap. In short, he was a hardy, hardworking man. Both Qasim and Shakebi were friends of Mohsin Adil who had brought them over to meet Farrukh Bhabhi. They formed the core of the group and came almost every day.

There were a few more gentlemen who joined the party off and on. These gentlemen weren't regulars; sometimes they turned up every day, often they disappeared for months. In this group was one Mr. Singha who was a talented painter and photographer. But he wasn't destined to earn a living from this art. He had no studio nor could he afford a good camera; to make a living he alternated between painting billboards for theatrical companies and signboards for small businesses. He fantasized about photographing Farrukh Bhabhi on horseback clad in a military outfit. He had expressed this desire several times. But it went unheeded.

Occasionally, uninvited, one Khan Saheb, joined them. He was once a sergeant in the police department but was suspended for some misconduct. He wore a turban tied in a fancy style with a fan on the top. His moustache was stiff and upturned and his eyes red-veined. There was a slim cane habitually swishing in his hand and Peshawari slippers were on his feet. God knows how he managed his expenses. Whenever he came by he was a little drunk and as soon as he was seated he began to ask for favors, "Farkhanda Khanum, you never sing for us."

"What are you saying," Farkhanda would reply, "who told you that I

sing?”

“By God, I know you sing, and I won’t leave until you do.”

“Khan Saheb, excuse me, I absolutely cannot sing.”

“I swear to God Farkhanda Khanum, you have a charming voice. You must sing. I’ll arrange for a tutor.”

“No thank you!”

“I have an excellent singer under my thumb these days.”

“Goodness me! I’m too old to learn.”

“I have free passes for the cinema in the special class. Want to come see a film? Maulana can come with us if you like.”

“Forgive me, if Maulana wants to go, by all means take him along.”

Khan Saheb would hesitate for a moment and then casting a look at the assembly softly ask Farkhanda, “Have you all eaten?”

“Oh, long ago.”

“Alright, give me a paan, and I’ll go.”

Farkhanda’s friends disliked Khan Saheb’s visits, but they thought it was prudent to ignore him. Everyone was relieved when he left.

When everyone had assembled, the discussion would begin. There were no set topics for conversation. Usually a newspaper story, some incident like a robbery or murder, the kidnapping of an important person, mosquitoes, anything could serve to get the dialogue going. No sooner had two people begun to talk than a third would join in with another story. And this would lead someone else to come up with a similar story which he couldn’t resist telling and then another person would have a question to ask and so on and so forth, until each one would have something to say.

Sometimes the conversation would begin at a scholarly level. Stories of the rise and fall of nations were told and retold. Thorny problems of history were unraveled. Policies of governments and monarchs were discussed. Opinions were expressed on economics, demography, psychology, even life after death, and Farkhanda would listen to her friends with absolute absorption. Most of it was beyond her comprehension but that didn’t affect her attentiveness. In her heart she marveled at their intellectualism and range of knowledge. And the thought that this river of knowledge and erudition was flowing in her humble house heightened the natural sparkle of her eyes and made her breathe fast.

Occasionally the conversation was about magic, the occult and related topics. This was the one subject that put Farkhanda off. In fact it made her uneasy. Maulana relished these discussions. He believed that in the occult one could find a way of mitigating the injustices and anxieties

of the present times. "There is a power superior to mankind and once it is captured, with its help, justice, brotherhood and peace can be established in the world," he used to say, though he admitted that he wasn't sure that black magic and the occult had played an important role in the progress of ancient civilizations and cultures.

"Maulana, do jinns and angels still exist?" Dr. Hamadani would ask.

"Yes, why not!"

"Then why don't we see them?"

"Because human perception is not so developed and perfect that it can perceive jinns and angels. The mind of jinns is superior and ..."

"How does one achieve the perfection of awareness?" Mohsin Adil would inquire.

"Through willpower and disciplined training," Maulana would reply.

"Have you ever seen a jinn?" Bhatnagar asked.

"Of course, but only once," Maulana replied easily.

And then he would launch into a story of the days when he used to live in the dilapidated mosque by the railway track and had recently acquired a taste for the occult. But his jinn had only half emerged from the water pot used for ablutions when Farkhanda, who had slipped away in the meantime, returned and cut him short, gently pressing his shoulder and saying, "My dear Maulana Saheb, leave these stories for later, can you please fetch me some water from the mosque."

"But whatever happened to the water I brought this evening," Maulana spluttered.

"Some dear old jinn, your friend, must have finished it all," Bhatnagar piped up, throwing out an invitation for laughter to the rest of the group.

"There was a dead cricket floating in it so I poured it out. That's the truth, really," Farkhanda would explain. "Please, my dear Maulana Saheb, the masjid doors are still open. Once they're closed we'll be thirsting for water for the rest of the night."

Maulana hated to leave his story unfinished, especially when it was an incident that he claimed to have personally witnessed. He would drag himself over to the water pitcher, pick it up ever so slowly and reluctantly step out from the foyer. Once he was outside, he was fired into action by the hope that, on returning, he could resume the unfinished story from where he was abruptly made to leave off. And this inspiration brought him briskly to the mosque where he quickly drew water from the well. However, when he reached home with a full pitcher he was greeted by an entirely different scenario. Instead of the hush that gripped the atmos-

phere when supernatural forces were being invoked, the eeriness in which the flutter of wings was heard or imagined, the air was now fluttering with songs.

The young rebel poet Shakebi was singing out his poem “Red Rain” for the forty-seventh time. It was a long poem and Farrukh Bhabhi loved to hear it. Poor Maulana was heartbroken and he spent the rest of the evening not talking to anyone. He retired early and lay wrapped up in his blanket.

Time and again the discourse revolved around politics and the economy, and the debate was always lively. But it was unusually vibrant and worth listening to if someone brought up a unique proposal. For instance, a suggestion that the nation’s press was in need of rejuvenation, that a good newspaper was the requirement of the hour. But a good newspaper could not be published without adequate funds. So they settled on a plan that required some money. Perhaps twenty to twenty-five rupees a day, and that’s not much. That amount could be raised from cinema advertisements. However, awareness of the rigors of daily responsibility, the unending work that it would entail, produced a lukewarm response to the idea of a daily newspaper. Soon the plan devolved from a daily to a weekly to a monthly journal. This would invite fresh suggestions. There would be heated debates on the name, the aim and the nature of the journal. They decided on an editorial board instead of one editor. In addition to his insurance work, Bhatnagar would also canvass for the journal. Dr. Hamadani would look for a possible publisher amongst his patients. And subscribers would be rewarded with low prices on Dr. Hamadani’s prescriptions. Getting publicity for the journal would be assigned to Qasim, who was a conductor with the tram company, and Shakebi, the poet. The title page and other matters of layout and design would be the responsibility of Mr. Singha. As for office space, that was not a matter of much concern. What location could be better than Farrukh Bhabhi’s house? Thus all the problems would be resolved, and observing the enthusiasm and fervor of the members of the assembly you could imagine that the journal would be out in a week or ten days at the most. But the filing of a declaration to publish would prove to be the most daunting task of all. And it delayed the publication plans to such an extent that the idea became stale and it lost its attraction altogether.

Another proposal was related to the declining health of their fellow countrymen. It was argued that health declined due to poor nutrition and that what was needed was a plan for providing butter and full-cream milk. Perhaps a dairy farm could be set up. But where would the money

come from? And who would bear the responsibilities of this venture? In the course of the discussion cows and buffaloes were replaced by hens and roosters. Soon the dairy farm would be reduced to a poultry farm, and the scheme would pass through innumerable revisions until eventually it was abandoned when someone emphatically enumerated the various diseases that affect chicken and other fowl.

Proposals for a laundry, a soup kitchen, and a khadi store met a similar fate.

Some days, especially on cold winter evenings, the assembly met purely for entertainment. On such evenings they forgot about the rest of the world and played cards. Mostly they liked playing *ghulam chor*. Unique and novel penalties were awarded to the loser. This is how the practice of playing cards on cold winter evenings began. One evening one of them felt really cold. They asked for Farrukh Bhabhi's satiny comforter and spread it out in the middle in such a way that everyone could tuck their legs under it. Then someone fished out the deck of cards from Bhatnagar's coat pocket and, without asking if anyone was interested in a game, quietly dealt the cards right there on top of the comforter. Thus the game would begin, just like that, and would continue into the night until the oil in the lantern ran out. On occasion the players heard the early morning call for prayer. They shelled roasted peanuts, munching on them as they played. There were shells all over the comforter, on the floor, in their pockets, even in the seams of their pyjamas. Eventually, all the peanuts were consumed and the only thing they got were shells!

Farrukh Bhabhi's friends were nonconformists as far as religion was concerned—even Maulana was deemed to have wandered off the straight path because of his unconventional beliefs. It was remarkable that she herself was deeply religious. This was an aspect of her personality that her friends could not influence. She strictly followed the prescribed prayer schedules. She may have been delayed a few times, but she never missed one entirely. She would unobtrusively withdraw to her little room whenever it was time for prayer and rejoin the group afterwards. Sometimes she would hold a string of prayer beads beneath her dupatta, telling the beads as she sat in their midst, watching the game and reciting a prayer.

Folks say that when bad times are upon us things happen of their own accord in a way that no one could have foretold.

One January morning, it was very dark when Farkhanda woke up. She normally got up at dawn for prayer, but it was still a while before dawn. She had heard some noise in her sleep, a clatter on the veranda in front of her room. At first she thought she had imagined it. Then it crossed her mind that maybe Maulana or the servant boy who slept in the adjoining room had gone out for something. Somewhat reassured by the thought, she closed her eyes, but sleep eluded her. Perhaps she should call out and ask them. So she called from her bed, "Maulana Saheb, Maulana Saheb, Ghaffar, hey Ghaffar."

Neither of them responded. She thought, "The door is shut and they're fast asleep. They probably didn't hear me call." But then she reminded herself that if one of them had stepped out, he couldn't have fallen asleep so quickly. Now she didn't want to get out of her cozy bed but a doubt had settled in her mind that compelled her to get up. She pulled down the warm shawl hanging from a hook at the head of her bed and wrapped herself up snugly. Then she lit the lamp and, holding it with one hand, unlatched the door of her room and came out.

It was bitterly cold and a strong wind was blowing. Firmly clenching her teeth to stop them from chattering and hugging herself in the folds of the shawl, she reached the door of the other room. "Maulana Saheb, eh Maulana Saheb!" she called loudly.

But Maulana did not stir. She had barely touched his door when it flew open with a sharp squeak. She was taken aback, but controlling her fears she held up the lamp and entered the room. In the lamplight she saw Maulana curled up on the floor tightly bundled in his blanket, as was his habit, but the servant boy Ghaffar was missing. She couldn't see his bedclothes either. Immediately she thought of her sewing machine that was kept in this room. Instinctively her gaze swept over to the corner of the room and her heart skipped a beat—the sewing machine wasn't there.

"Maulana Saheb! Maulana Saheb!" shaking him awake she spoke urgently, "Please get up, we've been robbed!"

"Robbery? What?" Maulana eventually got up in confusion. "When? Where?" he added and looked at Farkhanda with wide-open eyes.

"Here, where else," Farkhanda replied, "Ghaffar has stolen my sewing machine!"

"Ghaffar?"

"Yes, him."

"I don't believe it!"

"Then where is he? His bedding has also disappeared."

Maulana's eyes searched the tiny room. He was quiet for a moment

then muttered, "That rascal be damned!"

"I was only halfway with the installments! Oh my God, what will happen now? I did notice that he was behaving a little strangely the past few days. It even crossed my mind that I should have the machine transferred to my room, but my room is so crowded, and I depended on you to take care of it, after all you slept in the same room."

Maulana hung his head like an accused and sat silently. He was a little sleepy too. Suddenly he shook off his stupor and said, "Farrukh Bhabhi don't be anxious, we'll get the machine back, that rascal will be caught tomorrow."

"I woke up on hearing a noise. He must have gotten away only minutes ago. Probably, he hasn't gone very far. Oh I wish some brave man could catch him now."

"Don't you worry, I'll go after him this very minute." Maulana's masculinity surged unexpectedly. However, it was so piercingly cold outside that he had to amend his statement.

"Just wait for it to be light and I'll have him by the collar. Even if he hides in hell I'll haul him by the ear and drag him back here. At the moment it's too dark, that son of a swine can easily hide in the shadows."

"Oh let it be, Maulana Saheb," Farkhanda replied somewhat sourly. "There's no need for you to go right now. In the morning I'll send someone to the police station to lodge a complaint."

Maulana was not expecting this cold reply to his reasonable excuse. He sat with a bowed head and pondered the situation for a little while. Then he took his turban out from underneath his pillow, shook it out and tied it on his head. He shook out his blanket and secured it around his body, slipped on his sandals and went out.

After about half an hour he returned, shivering cold. Meanwhile, Farkhanda went and lay down in her room overcome with misery.

Maulana came up to her bed and reported, "I searched for that rascal everywhere. First I went to the train station and looked inside all the waiting rooms. I asked all the porters. When I didn't find him there I went to the bus station. I saw some travelers sleeping in a bus. All the other buses were empty. From there I went to the travelers' inn. On the way I searched the municipal garden. But the rascal wasn't there either ... don't worry my dear, your machine won't go anywhere. I've alerted all the watchmen and policemen I saw on the way, and by God's grace that unfortunate rascal will be caught soon."

Farkhanda didn't say a word. Maulana didn't feel the need to talk any further so he went back to his room and huddled up on the floor as

before.

That evening when Farkhanda's friends heard about the theft, they felt bad for her. Mohsin Adil was particularly upset and angry because he was responsible for having brought the boy there. He consoled Farkhanda.

"Bhabhi, I know Ghaffar's father and I know his village. Don't worry, if he doesn't show up in a few days then I will personally go to the village and find out his whereabouts."

That day a complaint had been lodged at the police station on Farkhanda's behalf. A plainclothes policeman with a constable in tow came by the house and examined the premises. For the moment there wasn't anything else they could do. All the friends advised her to be patient and assured her that they would each scour different neighborhoods in the city and make inquiries at tailors' shops. They agreed that Ghaffar couldn't have left the city with a sewing machine. They said that they knew for a fact that there were police officers at railway stations and in other strategic areas who interrogated suspicious characters, and a boy with an expensive machine was bound to attract attention. Her friends felt that the boy must have made a deal with a tailor before running away with the machine.

Farkhanda sat numb and dazed listening to their talk. The loss of the machine was a big shock. It meant the loss of her livelihood. How would she sew the neckties and little cloth purses? How would she sell what she had in stock? She spent the day in acute depression, eating nothing. When her friends heard of this they tried again to console her.

"Come now, Farrukh Bhabhi," Qasim said. "This is a bit much. I never thought you were one to get discouraged so quickly. Such is life; this doesn't mean that one should stop eating!"

"Farrukh Bhabhi," insurance agent Bhatnagar said. "I'm sure that your machine will be found. But suppose it isn't. I'll arrange for another one in a week. I promise. Don't despair, come on, have something to eat. Maulana Saheb! Please lay the tablecloth."

"What's the use of that? There's no food," Maulana said.

"So what if there's nothing at home, there's plenty to eat in the bazaar." Bhatnagar searched his pockets and took out a shiny eight-anna coin.

"I have some change too," Qasim added and took out some coins from his shirt pocket. There was a two-anna bit, two one-anna coins and some petty change.

"Here, I think I have two annas," the radical poet Shakebi said, fid-



dling inside his sherwani pocket. “Err, I’ve dropped ... n...no, here it is.”

So they sent for *salan*, roti and kabobs and the tablecloth was spread just as usual, and all of them sat down to eat. After a lot of persuasion and entreaties, Farrukh Bhabhi swallowed a few morsels and then got up. That evening the gathering was quite gloomy and dreary and everyone left early.

Four days went by and there was no trace of Ghaffar, nor was any arrangement made to sell the neckties and purses that were in stock. Bhatnagar, for some reason, couldn’t keep his promise to get another machine. Farkhanda, except for her initial slippage, kept her dejection to herself. From the very next day she lighted her stove morning and evening. She cooked some and her friends brought some, and together they shared the meal as before. Occasionally she would laugh and joke as well, but deep in her heart she knew that this state of affairs could not last for long.

On the seventh day, late in the afternoon when there was no one there but Maulana and herself, she said to him awkwardly, “Maulana Saheb, it just occurred to me, until we find someone else, how would it be if you were to take these neckties to the bazaar?”

Maulana gave her a look as if to say that he didn’t understand a word of what she said.

“My dear sweet Maulana Saheb, please, will you take them?”

“Well, I have no experience in doing such work.”

“Wah! It’s easy. All you will have to do is stand at a corner with the neckties. If someone pauses to look and inquires the price, just tell them.”

“That’s alright, but ...”

“But what?”

“I’d feel ashamed.”

“What’s shameful about honest labor? Is hard work a disgrace?”

“No, it’s not that, but ...”

After a lot of hesitation Maulana reluctantly took the neckties and the little cloth purses to the bazaar. Farkhanda prayed fervently in her heart and restlessly awaited his return. At last he came back around eight in the evening. He looked so tired and troubled that it seemed obvious he had had a hard time. He reported that he had managed to sell only one little purse for four annas. When Farkhanda counted the neckties she found that five were missing out of the two dozen she had given him. Maulana swore a thousand times that he had no clue what had happened to the neckties. He insisted that he brought back as many as were given to him, or that Farkhanda’s counting was wrong. Anyway, it was concluded that

he had either dropped them en route or that customers had stolen a few when he wasn't looking.

Two weeks went by. Mohsin Adil had still not found time to go to the village where the boy's father lived. He had promised Farrukh Bhabhi, but every day something or other cropped up that prevented him from going. The friends had searched the neighborhoods and inquired at police stations but they could find neither Ghaffar nor any trace of the sewing machine.

Farkhanda passed these days with a lot of patience and courage; she struggled hard to keep up appearances. She didn't want to share her troubles with her friends, so she didn't ask for favors or drop hints that she was in need of help. What her friends brought by way of food for the evening meal, she would put out, along with her own humble dal and vegetable, and happily eat along with them. After they were gone she would lie in bed thinking about her situation. She didn't complain of her misery to her friends because she knew only too well that their own lives were far from satisfactory. Some of them worked for ten days and remained idle for twenty, those who had permanent jobs barely made enough to take care of themselves and their dependants. None of them were in a position to help her financially. Her worries and problems kept her up all night until the muezzin's call at dawn made her get out of bed and get ready for namaz.

The modest savings she had put aside for hard times through her prudence and parsimony were exhausted in the first week of unemployment. Thereafter she began disposing of small household items, mostly kitchen utensils that she could do without. With Maulana's complicity she sold those things one by one. Maulana had stern instructions not to breathe a word of all this to her friends. Eventually, at the end of the month, when it was time to pay the house rent and the installment for the machine, she went with Maulana to the bazaar and sold the tiny gold mandolin at the jeweler's shop. The tiny ornament strung on a black satin ribbon used to adorn her neck on the rare occasions she wore a sari. In this way she paid the rent and the installment and no one heard a word about it.

Around this time, one evening, Maulana came home with a stranger. It was early yet and only a few of the regulars were there. Maulana had been away all afternoon and now, as he crossed the courtyard, he invited this friend in a voice full of warmth. "Mir Saheb! Welcome! Please feel at home." Maulana was animated. The friends exchanged puzzled glances. No one understood who this gentleman was or why he was there.

Farkhanda quickly adjusted her dupatta and tried to catch Maulana's attention, but Maulana avoided meeting her eye.

"Please come into our humble abode, your visit is our good fortune. Please wait a moment and allow me to straighten the floor arrangement before you sit down."

Maulana seized a discolored towel that was hanging on the clothes hook and promptly dusted a corner of the flooring. He straightened the heavy cotton sheet and then invited the stranger to have a seat in the freshly cleaned space. Meanwhile, the rest of the assembled folks reflexively shifted away from him a little, to give more room. All the while they looked at the stranger from the corner of their eyes assessing him from head to toe. And indeed the newly-arrived gentleman was a person who would excite critical appraisal. Tall, broad-shouldered, and long-limbed, he had a wheatish complexion and seemed to be forty years old or so. He had small eyes that were lined with surma, and a short but stiff moustache. He was dressed like a dandy, albeit one whose rustic background was obvious from his sartorial taste. He wore a kurta with gold buttons, a waistcoat made of red broadcloth, and a black sherwani. The sherwani was unbuttoned down to the chest so a person caught a glimpse of the red waistcoat and the kurta with gold studs. He carried a gold watch in the top pocket, its dangling chain fastened to a buttonhole; a miniature gold compass was affixed to the chain. He wore a wristwatch as well. To protect its gold polish, the wristwatch had a white celluloid cover. The buttons of his sherwani were fashioned in silver and were square shaped with a star and crescent moon motif engraved on them in blue. A silk handkerchief was stuffed in the left sleeve and on the pinky of his right hand there was a gold ring with a large, light blue stone. He wore a churidar pyjama by way of trousers, and red silk socks. A mauve velvet Rampuri topi completed his attire.

There was silence for a few minutes. Everyone in the room except Maulana was feeling restless. Ultimately Maulana broke the silence, "Gentlemen, this is Mir Navazish Ali, my most benevolent compatriot. He is the elder son of the honorable talukdar of my district. His friendship has been a source of pride for me since childhood ... and Mir Saheb, this is our Farrukh Bhabhi and these are her friends. I had mentioned them to you on our way here."

Farkhanda's friends thought the style in which the introductions were made was rather anomalous, some of them simply looked away, others screwed up their noses to express distaste.

"Our Mir Saheb is especially fond of poetry," Maulana continued in

the same vein. "By the grace of God, he is so intelligent, he completed his first reading of the Qur'an when he was only seven and he finished the *Gulistān* and *Bōstān* at ten. By the time he was eleven he had read the *Dīvān-e Hāfiz*."

"Err, twelve, bhai," Mir Saheb corrected in a low tone.

"Sorry, let's say twelve," Maulana smilingly accepted his mistake. "But twelve years is *so* young. In these days of "enlightenment," if you ask an educated person to recite one couplet of Hafiz, he'll find excuses not to do so. Now, Mir Saheb doesn't read English. It wasn't the family tradition. Besides, what use would it have been? He didn't have to serve the English. God endowed him with ancestral property worth lakhs of rupees. Scores of people like me run after him, hanging onto his every word...."

"Oh please don't go on about me," Mir Saheb interjected in a bored manner. He had guessed that the present company was fed up by all of this. He pulled out an engraved Moradabadi paan-box from his pocket and, flipping open the lid, proffered it to Mohsin Adil who happened to be sitting near him.

"Would you like to try some?"

"Thank you, but I've unfortunately been deprived of having a taste for these."

Mir Saheb extended the box towards Deep Kumar. "Please have some."

"Forgive me, I don't eat paan."

"Come along, try one my friend, if you don't like it spit it out," Maulana cajoled.

But Deep Kumar did not take one. Mir Saheb didn't dare offer a third time.

"I'll have one," Farkhanda said unexpectedly. She felt sorry for Mir Saheb and added, "I should be the one offering paan, I'm a poor hostess." And she accepted the paan-box from Mir Saheb with a special smile. Mir Saheb happily produced a little brocade purse containing supari from his other pocket and elegantly offered some to her.

"Mir Saheb, what a pretty purse!" Farkhanda said looking at the purse with a connoisseur's eye.

"Please accept the purse as a present. I will be honored."

"Thank you," Farkhanda said with a smile.

"Farrukh Bhabhi makes perfect little purses like these. If you provide the cloth, I can get her to make one," Maulana said to Mir Saheb.

Bhatnagar had been sitting silent all along but he could hold back no more. Suddenly, he produced a big yawn and turning to Mir Saheb

addressed him like one does an old acquaintance. "So Mir Saheb, what brings you to Delhi? Just amusement or a specific errand?"

But before Mir Saheb could reply, Maulana piped up.

"*Ajee*, there's no dearth of amusement at his estate. He's here for a court case."

"How did you meet up with him?" Bhatnagar persisted.

"Sheer coincidence," Maulana answered. "I was passing by the clock tower when I happened to glance at the cloth merchant's shop. I noticed stacks of brocade being displayed one after another in front of him, while my dear sir turned them down equally fast. Of course, he didn't recognize me at first."

"Maulana bhai," Mir Saheb interjected. "I really couldn't recognize you at first, do forgive me, I ask again."

"I didn't mind that he couldn't at first, but eventually he did and I insisted on bringing him here."

There was silence for a few moments. It was a welcome relief from the desultory conversation. It had become obvious from Mohsin Adil's manner that he resented Mir Saheb's visit, his relaxed entry into their circle and his style of talking with Farrukh Bhabhi. Adil was also extremely angry with Maulana who had, without warning or permission, foisted an unknown person on them.

"Talukdar Saheb, all is well at your estate I hope?" Mohsin Adil asked with mock sincerity.

"What do you mean," Mir Saheb asked, surprised.

"I mean, are there problems?"

"I'm sorry, but I still don't quite understand what you're implying."

"*Ajee* that new Movement that's mobilizing all the farmers."

"What Movement, by God, I know nothing about it."

"*Ajee* farmers are saying that they plow the earth, plant the seeds, tend the crop, bear the hardships of winter and summer, but when the harvest is ready the zamindar appropriates it all and they aren't even left with an adequate amount to feed their families. They say that the zamindars own the land but exploit the poor farmers who work on it. They want a fair share for the hard work they do. The Movement is spreading fast and soon all the farmers will unite under one banner and revolt against the tyranny of the zamindars and talukdars."

"God be praised," Mir Saheb said. "My district is free from such nonsense. By God's grace all our farmers are happy and loyal."

"How did you find out that they're happy?"

"I know they are."

“But what proof do you have?”

“Proof? Isn’t it enough proof that none of them have ever complained to me.”

“It’s possible that they’re afraid to approach you, or perhaps they’re so disillusioned with your heartless administration that they’ve given up all hopes of justice or mercy and kindness from you all.”

“*Ajee* forget about it now,” Maulana, who was close to bursting, spoke up at last. “What a subject to dwell on. I had brought Mir Saheb here to engage in discussions on poetry, recounting tales of the rose and the nightingale and such, so that Mir Saheb would be entertained and share his stories with us, and time would pass pleasantly for all. But this dry political discussion, ugh. Shakebi Saheb, will you sing for us? A light sweet song perhaps?”

“Please excuse me today, I have a headache since morning.”

Maulana saw his arrow missing the mark so he turned to Farkhanda.

“Farrukh Bhabhi, won’t you serve dinner tonight? Are we to starve?”

Farkhanda was taken aback by this unexpected request. Maulana’s odd behavior this evening had perplexed her. Either he had lost his senses or he had indulged in some intoxicant that had suddenly awakened his dormant capabilities. There had never been any doubt that Maulana’s position in Farkhanda’s household was, if not a servant’s, then that of a poor, needy relation who subsisted on the charity of reasonably better off relatives and worked harder than any servant would, for lesser benefits. He was mostly a subdued person, weary of being the butt of jokes, running errands grudgingly, and now he was the self-appointed host, ordering people about, full of exuberance. Farkhanda, who had a caring nature, was secretly delighted at Maulana’s transformation, but when he demanded dinner, she was incensed. That irresponsible Maulana knows what a hard time I’m having these days, Farkhanda thought to herself, yet he’s bent on embarrassing me in front of a stranger. Farkhanda’s friends were glaring at Maulana. But the stares, which openly portended the unpleasantness to follow, failed to frighten Maulana.

“*Arey* Farrukh Bhabhi,” he continued in his chirpy tone, “you look worried, just bring out whatever there is. Mir Saheb is one of us. We have nothing to hide from him ... and Bhatnagar if you have some change to spare, let’s get some kabobs.”

Bhatnagar’s face changed color perceptibly. He thrust his hand into the inner pocket of his coat, but he didn’t pull it out.

Seeing this, Mir Saheb cleared his throat and casting a fleeting glance at the assembly he said in a peaceable tone, “Gentlemen, forgive my

impudence, but Maulana has given me a very matter-of-fact description of the informality of this gathering and that's why I'm being bold enough to suggest that I should make my contribution to the dinner too. Please accept this small amount from your humble guest."

Before Farrukh Bhabhi or anyone else could protest, Mir Saheb took out a ten-rupee note from his wallet and put it on the rug.

For a moment it seemed that the storm of intermingled emotions of anger, hatred, humiliation and dreariness that had been brewing in their hearts would break through the barriers and wreak havoc, but the sincerity and goodwill which were apparent on Mir Saheb's face made them tongue-tied and no one said a word.

There was a long moment of silence. Then Mir Saheb said to Maulana, "Hazrat, go on, take the initiative."

"With all my heart," said Maulana, and picking up the bill he headed for the stairs without a word.

After he left, there was an awkward, painful silence in the group. Everyone was seething inwardly but said nothing. Farkhanda made her excuses and left to say the *isha* prayers. Mohsin Adil, who was reclining against the bolster pillow, turned over, put his head against the pillow and closed his eyes. Deep Kumar busied himself in reading the editorial of an English newspaper. The low light of the lamp was insufficient for reading, so his eyes began to water, but he kept on reading, wiping his eyes with his fingers. Bhatnagar took out his deck of cards and dealt a hand on the floor in front of him. Meanwhile, Mir Saheb also did not think it worthwhile to start a conversation. He placidly chewed on paan after paan, extracting each with finesse from the little box. When Farkhanda came back after praying, he offered her one and she accepted gracefully.

After three quarters of an hour, Maulana's voice was heard giving instructions to someone on the stairs to go up carefully. He was talking to a bearer from the hotel who was following him, carrying a huge copper tray balanced on one shoulder.

"Bring it here, into this room, good job," Maulana was confidently instructing the bearer. "I'll give you a handsome tip."

The tablecloth was being spread when Qasim the tram conductor's voice was heard from the courtyard.

"Aha! Farrukh Bhabhi, what's going on? Looks like you have a big feast here. By God the pilao's aroma is driving me crazy."

But as soon as he stepped into the room and saw a stranger seated there his happiness and good humor evaporated and he looked sheepish.

"Come on in Qasim," Maulana said in a slightly patronizing manner.

“You’re right on time. Meet my honorable benefactor, Mir Navazish Ali.”

Qasim was unaware of the annoyance and resentment that his friends had for this uninvited guest. To cover up his earlier embarrassment, he shook hands with Mir Saheb a little too warmly.

Now the food was laid out. Mohsin Adil and Deep Kumar said they had eaten already and excused themselves. The combined efforts of Maulana, Farrukh Bhabhi, Mir Saheb and Qasim succeeded in persuading Shakebi and Bhatnagar to join in. Over dinner Mir Saheb managed to get friendly with them. He recited some couplets of Sa’di that were hackneyed but won the appreciation of the company because they were topical, that is, food related.

After dinner, Maulana once again requested a poetry recital from Shakebi. This time Mir Saheb joined in pressing the request and Farrukh Bhabhi egged him on, so Shakebi relented and “Red Rain” was recited yet again.

Around 10 P.M. the party dispersed. Mir Saheb took his leave after warmly thanking Farkhanda and her friends. He asked permission for Maulana to accompany him.

Maulana returned the next morning around 9 A.M. or so. He walked with a swagger as he came in clutching a rooster under each armpit followed by a *jhaliwala* carrying a large basket on his head brimming with a variety of grains, vegetables and fruit.

“Hazrat, what’s this? Are you alright? Where did you get all this from,” Farkhanda asked, looking very puzzled.

“Let me catch my breath Farrukh Bhabhi. I’ll tell you everything.” Maulana said smiling, but without pausing to catch his breath he continued, “Mir Saheb sends his greetings. He was praising your good manners and hospitality but said that he didn’t care much for the hotel food last night. He wants to throw a dinner party for our friends but because he’s a stranger in the city, and is putting up at a hotel where satisfactory arrangements for such a dinner party cannot be made, he’s requesting you to help with the preparations. He’s very embarrassed and apologetic for taking advantage of your hospitality.”

The different dishes that were chosen for the menu were ready before evening. As for Mir Saheb, he arrived a little earlier than expected. Only Farkhanda and Maulana were at home and they were sitting by the stove. Mir Saheb was dressed in relatively unpretentious clothes today.

“Forgive me for arriving early but I thought I would help you with the preparations.” Having said that he casually took off his sherwani and topi, hung them on the clothes peg and presented himself before Far-



khanda with an innocent look on his face.

Farkhanda appraised Mir Saheb from head to toe. He looked very handsome and also at home there. She hesitated at first, trying to think what she could possibly ask him to do. A slow charming smile lit up her face.

Eventually she said, "Thanks for offering to help, but it's not necessary, really. I sent for a cook this afternoon and almost everything is ready. Please come, sit down and relax."

That evening when Farkhanda's friends heard about the dinner party, they were surprised, some of them disapproved. However, most of them thought of it simply as a treat to be enjoyed at a fool's expense. Anyway, except for Deep Kumar who had excused himself from dinner with the pretext of some urgent work, everyone else sat down to eat. The meal was delicious. Farrukh Bhabhi had cooked the food with special effort and extra care. Everyone ate heartily. Mir Saheb kept praising the food over and over again. He felt less awkward with the group now and talked and joked with them freely. The group members were also less hostile toward him than the previous day, or at least it seemed so. Mohsin Adil did make a couple of sarcastic remarks but they were so subtle that, except for Dr. Hamadani, no one else caught on to them. Dr. Hamadani was meeting Mir Saheb for the first time. And Mir Saheb really enjoyed his ready wit.

That night the gathering dispersed at 11 P.M.

The next day, Mir Saheb arrived early. Once again he was all dressed up. As soon as he came in, without any preamble, he said to Farkhanda, "Your kindness has made me bold. Now you must be thinking that I have latched myself onto you. But the fact of the matter is that I need your help. The reason is that my younger sister is getting married a couple of months from now, and, since I was coming to the city for a court case, my father asked me to do some shopping for the wedding. He said, 'you know that there are excellent fabric shops in Delhi,' and I couldn't say no to him although the fact is I'm quite ignorant about dealing with such matters. I will feel very obliged if you accompany me and help me in making the selections. Maulana tells me that you are an expert at shopping. In any case women are better at these things than men."

Mir Saheb made this request with such earnestness that the kind-hearted, forever helpful Farrukh Bhabhi simply could not bring herself to say no. So, after a little hesitation, she and Maulana set off with Mir Saheb. A taxi was waiting for them outside in the bazaar, a few minutes walk from the house. The three of them got in and left for Chandni Chowk.

By the time they returned it had become dark. Mir Saheb was not with them. He had gotten off at his hotel after asking the taxi driver to take Farkhanda and Maulana home.

That night when the friends gathered, Mohsin began by asking Farkhanda and Maulana a barrage of questions. "Where did the two of you disappear this evening? I came by twice but had to leave because there was a lock on the door."

Farkhanda narrated the whole story of how Mir Saheb needed help shopping for fabrics for his sister's wedding and how she and Maulana had accompanied him and helped him buy fabric worth more than a thousand rupees. She also mentioned that Mir Saheb insisted on buying a Benarsi silk sari for her that cost a hundred rupees. She said she had resisted accepting such an expensive gift but he had refused to listen and had bought Maulana a nice woolen sweater as well. Then Farkhanda went into her room and brought out the sari for them to see.

Adil looked at the sari quietly. After a long moment he said gravely: "Farrukh Bhabhi, the sari is very beautiful, but I would advise you to return it to him as soon as possible."

At this Farkhanda's face changed color, she stared at the floor but said nothing.

"Just think," Mohsin continued, "a person whom we don't know, whom we had never seen until two days ago!"

"But I know him," Maulana interrupted.

"You stay out of this ... a man who starts spending money on others so freely at the very first meeting, who knows what his intentions are?"

"God alone is the best judge," Maulana just could not keep quiet. "Adil Mian, I take exception to your comments. God forbid, Mir Saheb hasn't given this sari to Farrukh Bhabhi with any untoward intentions. I've always known him to be generous."

"We don't need his generosity," Bhatnagar flared up. "What will it lead to?"

Mohsin Adil turned to Farkhanda again. "Farrukh Bhabhi, did you hear what I said? Now when he comes here give him back the sari. Make some excuse. What right does he have to give such an expensive gift, and if possible let him know that we don't approve of his coming here. And if you won't tell him this then we'll have to perform this unpleasant task, and then who knows what may happen ... have you understood?"

"Alright." Farkhanda said softly and went back to her room taking slow steps. She did not join the gathering that night.

The next day, Mohsin Adil, Bhatnagar and Deep Kumar arrived at

Farkhanda's quite early. They sat around waiting for Mir Saheb, but Mir Saheb failed to show up. The following day they arrived early again, but once again Mir Saheb did not come. Either he was very busy with the court case or he had left town, so it seemed. A week passed and he did not show up at Farkhanda's place.

Farkhanda's friends breathed a sigh of relief at the unexpectedly easy resolution of the problem. Once again their former confidence was restored. Farkhanda sulked in her room for a few days but eventually the air cleared up and the gathering seemed as animated as ever.

But the confidence in their hearts was short lived. As the days went by a change crept over Farrukh Bhabhi's personality. They noticed that she was no longer averse to wearing makeup and dressing up. In fact, she was now quite made up when she joined them in the evenings. A mixture of fragrances wafted from her, attar and lavender, and her face was powdered and rouged. She no longer did housework but had employed a maid who came twice a day to cook and clean. Besides this, there was a lethargy in her movement and an indolence in her eyes that was noticeable. No one saw her sewing or mending these days. The one thing that she was very regular with was reading the namaz. Perhaps her religiosity was more pronounced than ever before.

Another change that her friends noticed in her was that instead of shying away from going out, she now disappeared in the afternoon several times a week, usually for a couple of hours. If they asked Maulana about it he would reply offhandedly: "I don't know, she doesn't tell me where she goes!"

And when Farkhanda was asked where she had been, she would blush but quickly regain her composure and say: "Oh, nowhere in particular, I have a new friend who lives nearby. She has asked me to teach her sewing. She is very considerate. When she heard that my sewing machine got stolen she offered to lend me hers. But I'm embarrassed to take advantage of her ..." And this explanation silenced her friends.

One day Farkhanda left in the afternoon and they did not see her when they gathered in the evening at around eight o'clock. She had never missed a gathering until today. Her friends began to grow anxious. It was winter and as the evening progressed so did the cold and their anxiety for her. At last, when the clock struck nine and she still hadn't returned, they decided to ask Maulana yet again if he knew where she was. But Maulana had the same old reply: how was he to know! Bhatnagar, Qasim and Deep Kumar decided to go out and look for her in the bazaar. But the problem was where should they begin and whom should they ask. Even-

tually, at ten o'clock the sound of footsteps was heard on the stairway and Farkhanda swiftly crossed the courtyard and slipped into her room.

Adil, Bhatnagar and the others were stung by her behavior. Here they had worked themselves into a state waiting for her, and she came back and went straight into her room without saying a word to them. Such indifference! She didn't care that they were anxious for her. She didn't think they deserved to hear where she had been or what had happened.

"I'll go ask," Qasim said suddenly.

"No, don't bother," Adil stopped him, "let her come out if she wants to."

But Farkhanda did not step out of her room that night. She didn't need to. She called to Maulana, "Maulana Saheb please bring the water pot to my room."

The next day she didn't step outside the house. She didn't dress up or wear makeup. That evening when her friends gathered she welcomed them warmly. However, she didn't say a word about what happened the previous night. They also thought it was tactful not to bring it up. But they were seething inside. Farkhanda prepared several dishes that night. She insisted on serving them big helpings on their plates. That night she didn't leave the gathering for a minute, and when anyone got up to leave, she would hold their hand and ask them to stay longer. Thus the group did not disperse until late into the night.

For several days she didn't leave the house. She was back to wearing her simple clothes and paid full attention to her friends, showing in many small ways that she cared for them. Thus misgivings were cleared. They thought that she was sorry for her cold and strange behavior and was making amends for it. No one said anything; after all, if one comes back to the right path after having strayed, they should be forgiven. So the friends forgave her and their confidence in her returned. Once again she became their cherished Farrukh Bhabhi.

However, one day she again dressed up and disappeared without a word to anyone. When it was late evening and she had not returned, Adil leaned back, stretched out his arms, and said: "Bhatnagar, this is beyond the limits now."

"I agree," Bhatnagar replied.

"For the past several days I've had this one persistent thought," Qasim said.

"And what's that?" Mohsin asked.

"That if you want to meet someone desperately you can meet them anywhere. It doesn't have to be at home."

“You mean Mir Saheb, don’t you?” Bhatnagar asked.

“Could be Mir Saheb or someone else,” Qasim replied.

There was silence for a while. Then Mohsin shook off his silence and said, “Perhaps you’re right.”

“But what can we do about it?” Bhatnagar said.

“Well, there’s only one thing we can do: stop coming here and drop our friendship with her,” Adil said.

But the thought of giving up Farrukh Bhabhi’s intimate gathering was unbearable. How lonely their lives would be without it. Each of them was lost in thought and there was no further discussion as to what should be done. When the clock tower struck ten, a strong wind had picked up and was raging outside. Suddenly Adil was aroused from his reverie. “Maulana, Maulana.” He shook Maulana who was huddled up in his blanket on the floor.

“What is it?” Maulana asked pushing the blanket away from his face.

“Maulana Saheb, I’m sorry to trouble you, but it’s something important.”

“What is it yaar? Let me sleep.” Maulana grumbled.

“Do we have firewood?”

“Yes, a couple of logs.”

“Then please light the stove.”

“*Arey*, why do you need a stove lit at this time?”

“Please get up and do what I say, I’ll tell you in a minute.”

Maulana was used to being ordered around by Mohsin Adil when Farkhanda was there. Now he got up mumbling, picked up the matchbox lying by the lantern and went outside. In a few minutes sounds of a crackling fire could be heard and Maulana said in a challenging tone, “The fire is ready, now what?”

“Put on a big pot of water.”

Maulana was beside himself with annoyance. He said, “Will you tell me what the water is for?”

Everyone was now waiting to hear Mohsin’s reply. Bhatnagar paused in the middle of dealing out his cards. Deep Kumar stopped reading the English detective novel, his eyes hovered on the page while his ears were hanging on to catch Mohsin’s reply. Qasim and Shakebi sat next to him lost in thought ... now they shook off their torpor, exchanged glances, and fixed their eyes on Mohsin.

Eventually Mohsin responded, “Bhai you don’t understand,” and his voice was almost a whisper. “The other day when she returned late at night, she bathed with cold water didn’t she? It’s very cold tonight. I

thought, we're just sitting around, why not heat up some water for her.”

Having said that, he turned over and, resting his head on the bolster pillow, closed his eyes. □

—*Translated by Mehr Afshan Farooqi*