

NAIYER MASUD

The Myna from Peacock Garden

I

IT WOULD HAPPEN every day. I'd get home and knock on the door. Jumerati's Mother's coughing and hacking would be heard moving closer and closer from the other side. But even before that, I'd hear small feet run up and then stop right behind the door, and I'd call out from my side, "Open the door! Kale Kale Khan is here!" I'd hear gay laughter from behind the door, and then I'd hear the little feet running away again. Some moments would pass, and Jumerati's Mother would reach the door and open it. I'd go inside the house acting as if I were looking for something I'd lost—I'd peer into every corner and call out, "Hey! Where's the fair, fair daughter of Black, Black Khan?" Sometimes I would call out, "Does a Princess Falak Ara live here?" And sometimes I'd shake the branches of the night-blooming *kamni* tree and ask, "Has anyone seen my pet, my little hill myna?"

Glancing out of the corner of my eye I'd see little Falak Ara, breaking into giggles, run from her hiding place in a corner of the house, into another. But I would pretend to be blind and deaf and keep looking in all the wrong places. When at last I heard her laughter right behind me, and I'd turn and pounce on her with a cry and sweep her up into my arms. Her chirps of delight really did sound like a hill myna's then.

Such was the daily pattern which had been set on the day the *Darogha* of the royal animals, Nabi Bakhsh, found me a job in the Peacock Garden of Qaisar Bagh, the grand royal complex of palaces and gardens. Before I found employment there, I had been in the habit of wandering aimlessly around the animal parks on the banks of the Gomti river, watching tigers and leopards pace behind the high wooden fences. I often wished that one of the tigers would leap over the fence, tear me to pieces and eat me up. And *that* was the everyday routine which began on

the day my wife had died, leaving behind eleven-month-old Falak Ara.

And before *that* particular event, I had been an employee at the Holy Endowment of Husainabad. It had been my duty to look after the lights in the Imambara building. The salary was low but we got by. My wife was quite efficient; out of the money I earned, she managed to run the household and indulge in her hobby of keeping birds as well. She had deftly trained several parrots raised from chicks in our house. We also had mynas, the ordinary kind, but she had set her heart on a hill myna because she had heard that birds of that particular breed could talk exactly like human beings. To make her happy, I promised I would bring home a hill myna next time I got paid.

But four days before I received my salary a pain started in her chest, and the very next day she died. Life stopped mattering to me after that. I stopped going to work. I stopped looking after myself, so I could hardly take proper care of Falak Ara! If it wasn't for Jumerati's Mother, our baby daughter wouldn't have survived. Jumerati's Mother lived in an outer room of my house. Six months ago her breadwinning son Jumerati had gotten caught in an eddy of the Gomti River and drowned. My wife had looked in on the older woman regularly after that event. Jumerati's Mother considered herself responsible for Falak Ara's care second only to my wife. She'd stay in my house during the hours I was out and do some cooking as well; I gave her a bit of money, enough for two square meals a day and a little betel and tobacco too.

I lost my job. The Darogha of Husainabad, Ahmad Ali Khan, had sent a man after me a few times, but I refused to have anything to do with him. The poor Darogha had no choice but to suspend my pay. Then, I began to take loans on interest from the bazaar moneylenders to make ends meet. I would go home only at night, and by then Falak Ara would be fast asleep. First thing every morning the parrots would rattle off the things my wife had taught them and thus make it too painful for me to remain in the house. Finally one day I got up, went to the bird market and sold all the birds.

One day during that particular period of my life Darogha Nabi Bakhsh summoned me for a talk. He had been watching me loitering by the animal parks for a number of days. He took such a warm interest in my welfare that I ended up telling him all my troubles. The Darogha was very comforting, but he was also furious about my taking loans from the moneylenders. I was mortified by the picture he drew of the future if I couldn't pay back the loans, and I envisioned myself either banging my head on prison bars, or begging in the lanes and alleys of Lucknow with

my little daughter's hand held in mine.

"Look, Kale Khan, it's still early in the game," said the Darogha. "Get a job or something somewhere, and start thinking about paying off your debts. Or else!"

"But Darogha Sahib, *where* can I get a job?"

"Why?" he asserted. "For starters, the doors of the Holy Endowment of Husainabad are open to you."

"Yes, there might be a job there. But how can I ever face Darogha Ahmad Ali Khan? Do you know how many times he sent a man to fetch me, and I wouldn't even have anything to do with him? How can I possibly face the Darogha now and ask for a job?"

"All right. Can you work in the gardens?"

"I don't see why not," I said. "Even if it's ripping grass out of the ground, I'll do it."

"Then come with me right now," he said. "There's a job open."

The Darogha took me immediately to the palace secretariat, the Badshah Manzil. My name and description were entered in assorted documents. The Darogha had his own name entered in the space left for the guarantor's. Then we reached the gate called Lakkhi Darvaza. There was a crowd of officials, sentries, and such gathered there. The Darogha exchanged formal greetings with several people, and then said to me, "Wait right here. Your name will be called out soon." And gently lifting the maroon brocade curtain hanging in front of the doorway, he went inside. Meanwhile, I stood and marveled at the artistry of the Lakkhi Darvaza. Finally my papers were complete and were sent back from the offices. My name was called out. A *khwaja-sara* asked me several questions and matched my answers to the information entered in the documents. Then, he pointed towards the maroon curtains and said, "Go to the Peacock Garden."

I stood on the other side of the curtain a moment later. I was too flustered at the time to notice the splendors of the place, but I saw peacocks prancing and roaming on the grounds and figured that this indeed was "The Peacock Garden." But Darogha Nabi Bakhsh was nowhere to be seen. I had no idea which way to go. The entire place seemed completely deserted except for the many birds in the trees and in huge pavilion cages. From time to time the cooing of pigeons and the songs of nightingales could be heard, and every once in a while an elephant would trumpet from its distant enclosure, and those were the only signs of life. I was looking around nervously when I noticed several enormous green peacocks standing stock-still. When I looked at them more attentively, I

realized that they were shrubs which had been trimmed into peacock shapes. “The Peacock Garden!” I exclaimed to myself and dashed over to the spot.

Peacocks had been fashioned out of beaten silver even on the gateway to the garden. The Darogha was inside the entrance, standing next to a pile of marble slabs. “Come on in, Miyan Kale Khan,” he called out when he saw me waiting outside the gate, and I walked over to him. In the middle of the garden, several masons were building a low platform. The Darogha gave them directions, then grabbed my arm and took me on a quick tour. I was astonished at the shapes the shrubs had been trimmed into. They were formed so exactly like peacocks that it seemed like the plants had been melted down and poured into some kind of mold! Even the triangular crests and pointy beaks could be made out clearly. The most wonderful peacock was the one that had its head twisted around to preen its feathers.

Each peacock had been crafted by bringing together the branches of two thin-trunked shrubs planted side by side. The woody trunks served as legs for the peacock, and some of the roots had been allowed to emerge from the surface of the ground in such a way that they looked exactly like peacock feet. The Darogha explained to me that every morning at the crack of dawn a troop of gardeners propped up ladders, set up bamboo scaffolding, and trimmed every single shrub. The Darogha laughed when I gushed compliment after compliment for the work.

“You’re bowled over just looking at the plain shrubs!” he said. “This month their vines have been taken down. When the new vines have grown over them again and flowered, you should see the colors of the ‘feathers’ then!”

After that he took me into another nearby garden in which all the trees were shaped like lions. “This is the Lion Garden,” he explained. “The Badshah has given these trees names as well.” Then he led me back to the Peacock Garden. “Your job is to keep the Peacock Garden as spotless as a mirror,” he said, and pointed to the half-finished platform. “Once that’s finished there will be a bit more work, but even then it won’t be more than half a day’s worth. Your shift will be from sunrise to noon for a week, and then the next week from noon to sunset.”

He laid out further details of my duties, and finally said, “From today you are an employee of His Majesty the Badshah. May God bless you! That’s all for now—you can go home. Start coming to work tomorrow, and stop loafing around!” I showered him with grateful blessings.

“The things you say!” he retorted, and set to directing the masons.

For the first time since my wife died, I took a good look at my Falak Ara that day. She had her mother's face and coloring. It was hard to believe that this girl who looked like a white china doll could be the daughter of a black devil like me whom people took to be a Negro slave from Africa. I felt pity for Falak Ara, and anger at myself that not only had this tiny being been torn away from her mother, she had been deprived of her father's love as well for so long. But in two or three days' time she took to me so completely that it was hard to imagine that she could have ever been more attached to her mother. As for me, some days I too would come straight home from work instead of strolling through the bazaars, and would wait at the door for the sound of those little feet.

I never brought Falak Ara anything from the markets. Even though I got a higher salary than in Husainabad, so much was taken out every month to repay the moneylenders' loans that just enough was left to cover the cost of our daily meals. Meanwhile, Falak Ara had not learned to ask for things on her own yet. But one day while we were chatting, she suddenly said, "God, Abba how I want you to bring me a myna!"

There was nothing I could say. After my wife died I had taken a sort of oath that I wouldn't keep any pet birds; yet when I saw my daughter looking at me with eyes full of longing I heard myself say, "Of course I'll bring my little hill myna *her* little hill myna!"

Falak Ara would wait for her hill myna every day after that. I even took a turn through the bird market one day. Hill mynas cost more than the domestic variety, but not so much more that I couldn't imagine buying one. I just couldn't buy one with the fraction of my salary that came into my hands those days. I moved away from the birds and went over to the cage sellers. There was a big crowd of prospective buyers, and among them that day I heard the Royal Minister's Wondrous Cage mentioned for the first time. I found out from the things people were saying that the Minister had been occupied for a long time with a huge cage he was having built as a gift for the Badshah. I also learned the Cage was being talked about all over Lucknow. Several customers in the bird market made claims to seeing it under construction, and they also said that they didn't understand how such a big cage could be brought inside Qaisar Bagh. Hearing this, an old-timer said, "Look, Miyan, these are matters for ministers to worry about. When they want, they move entire sultanates

from here to there. Why are you getting all worked up about a little bitty cage?”

Everyone laughed. One of the men who claimed to have seen the cage said, “Elder sir, you are speaking without having seen it. A little bitty cage! If you had only seen how tall it was...!”

“How tall could it be? Taller than the Rumi Darvaza?”

“Maybe not the Rumi Darvaza, but it’s just as high as the gates of Husainabad!”

“Is that all?” the elderly gent asked. “Then he’ll just hook it on the little finger of his left hand and *lift* it over the Rumi Darvaza.”

Loud laughter broke out and I started towards home.

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The very next day I heard about the Minister’s wonderful Cage in the Peacock Garden as well. The platform was already finished. Its shining stony whiteness amidst the greenery of the garden was both pleasing and painful to the eyes. Darogha Nabi Bakhsh related that the cage would be placed on top of this platform.

“But Darogha Sahib,” I asked, “how can such a large cage be brought inside the garden?”

“It’s coming in separate pieces, understand?” The Darogha further explained, “Then it will be put together here. The Minister’s men should be here any moment. For the time being they will take over the Garden completely. They’ll work all night, and tomorrow the birds will be released into the cage ...”

“Released, or shut up?” I asked with a laugh.

“It’s all the same. For Heaven’s sake, stop playing word games and pay attention to the important things! The Minister himself is going to come, so it would not be of any surprise if Hazrat Sultan-e Alam, our Badshah, also graced us with his presence. Your real work will begin tomorrow. Understand? You’ve been appointed to look after the Wondrous Cage and the birds inside it. So make sure you show up tomorrow. Don’t go taking the day off for any reason.”

At that moment a *chobdar* entered the Peacock Garden and, going up to the Darogha, said a few words to him in hushed tones. By way of an answer, the Darogha said, “May he oblige us by coming! Our work is done.”

He gestured towards the platform and said to me, “Let’s go, my friend. Let’s make way for the Cage.”

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The next day I started out from home well before the normal time. Like every other day, little Falak Ara reminded me as I was leaving, “Abba, my hill myna ...”

“Yes child, I’ll surely bring it.”

“But you always forget!” she had said with childish stubbornness, as I went out the door.

After walking a little ways, I turned to look. She held one of the door panels and gazed steadily after me, exactly the way her mother used to when I went off to work every day.

Walking by way of the animal parks, I went in through the northern gate of Qaisar Bagh; from there I went through the Lakkhi Darvaza and reached the Peacock Garden straight-away. A major commotion had started there. Sentries stood outside the garden, and Darogha Nabi Bakhsh was talking to them. As soon as he caught sight of me, he said, “Come my friend Kale Khan. I told you! His Highness the Sultan is indeed going to grace us with his presence! You did the right thing by arriving good and early today. I was about to send someone running to get you.”

He took me with him as he entered the Peacock Garden. The Minister’s Wondrous Cage was the first thing one saw. I had thought that it would be just some biggish, prettyish birdcage, and that’s all, but once I laid my eyes on the real item I couldn’t look away. Cage? This was an entire building! The frame was made of rails some four fingers in width; they were red when seen from one side and green from the other. I didn’t know whether they were made of wood or of iron, but the high gloss on them could deceive one into thinking the material to be ruby or emerald. The wall consisting of rails that were red outside and green inside had a wall across from it made from rails which were green outside and red inside. Thus, if you looked at it from one side the whole cage appeared red. Look at it from the other side and it would appear to be entirely green! In the spaces between the rails flowers and birds had been shaped from thick silver wires, and between the wires there was delicate netting of gold metal threads, and tiny doors and windows set in on all sides. The main door of the Cage was taller than a man, and on its lintel mermaids held aloft the royal crown of Lucknow. A huge crescent moon was placed above the bulbous spire of the dome. The smaller spires over the smaller domes in the corners were set with stars.

Four rows of ten small round birdcages each—with one hill myna in each cage—had been set up a short distance from the main doorway of

the Wondrous Cage. The Darogha said, "Take a good look at them, Kale Khan. They're authentic hill mynas. In fact, they're not mynas, they're birds made of solid gold! The Badshah had them ordered especially for the Wondrous Cage. You should think of them as royal princesses!"

In front of the Cage, there was a high and dainty-looking sandalwood table inlaid with ivory flowers, leaves and different kinds of birds.

"Now look over here," said the Darogha, pointing at the table. "Each cage will be placed on this. His Majesty will look over each bird. You will stand here next to the door. After His Majesty inspects it, each cage will be passed along hand to hand until it reaches you. Your job will be to take each little creature out of its small cage and put it into the big one. This is a job requiring you to be very alert—go slack for a moment, and the bird flies off!"

"Fear not, my Master," I said. "Even if I transferred a thousand birds from one cage to another, there's no chance of a single one slipping out of my hands."

"You're right, my friend," said the Darogha. "But still, you'll be face to face with His Highness—try to keep your wits about you."

He then went outside, and I began examining the Cage again. It looked like a miniature Qaisar Bagh inside. Red volcanic gravel was spread on the floor. In the middle there was a pond filled with water in which tiny golden boats floated, each of them with a little bit of water inside it. On the floor shallow china basins of red and green held low shrubs with long thin branches. Clinging to the walls were flowering creepers of *basant mali*, *basant kanta*, jasmine and some European varieties as well. The vines had more flowers than leaves, and were trimmed so that they brought out the artistry of the Cage rather than hiding it. Small star-shaped mirrors had been scattered through the Cage, and because of them, wherever one looked one just saw flowers and more flowers. Basins of water, bowls of birdseed, clay pots, little swings, revolving perches, tiny scaffolding platforms and nests were set all about: these were the only indications that this was a place designed for birds.

A breeze was blowing and the whole cage rattled faintly. I felt a sudden silence sweep through the Peacock Garden and I started out of my reverie. I saw that His Majesty the Badshah and the Minister were entering the garden with the favorites of the court. Darogha Nabi Bakhsh brought up the rear, walking with his hand placed on his breast and his head bowed low. The Badshah stopped when he arrived at the sandalwood table, and gazed at the Cage for a long time.

"Excellent job!" he said, and looked at the Chief Minister. "O Noble

Minister of the Realm, was all this work done within Our own borders?”

“O Refuge of the World,” responded the Minister, bowing low with a hand over his heart, “each and every wire was twisted by a Lucknow craftsman.”

“So, did you reward them with something extra?”

“Seven generations of each craftsman’s family will be blessed with plenty due to His Majesty’s graciousness.”

“Good, you did the proper thing,” said the Badshah. “Increase that a little and make it a gift on Our behalf as well.”

The minister bowed even lower. I wasn’t looking at the Sultan’s face. No one was looking at his face. All the courtiers stood with eyes lowered and a hand held over the heart. A bit later I heard the Badshah’s voice:

“All right, Nabi Bakhsh—you can bring them on now.”

I looked at the Darogha. With a very subtle movement of his head and eyebrows he signaled me to ready myself. A servant brought forward the first cage. The Darogha took it in both hands and advancing two steps, placed it on the table with the utmost care, as if it were a delicate glass vessel, and then stepped back. The Badshah picked up the cage in his own hands. The myna inside the cage fluttered around. The Badshah laughed and said, “Why not relax a bit, Miss Feisty?” and put the cage down on the table again.

A courtier picked up the cage and handed it to another, the second handed it to a third and finally the cage reached me. I brought the small cage up to the chink of the door of the much bigger Wondrous Cage and with great alacrity, put Lady Feisty inside the Wondrous Cage. Yet another servant took the empty birdcage away from my hands. Meanwhile another birdcage had arrived on the table. The Badshah picked it up as well—the myna in this one was sitting on the perch with her head bent low. The Badshah made gentle kissing noises at her and she lowered her head even further. The Badshah said, “Dear madam, won’t you let me see your face?” Then he put the birdcage down on the table and said, “This one will be called Bashful Bride.” The birdcage came to me and I placed Bashful Bride inside the Cage with the others. Thus all the mynas came up to the Badshah one by one in their individual cages, and he gave a name to each one. One was given the name “Dainty Steps,” one “Gazelle Eyes,” one “Renunciant.” A particular cage reached the Badshah and the myna inside it began to flap its wings and chirp; he named it “Fairy Venus.”

The cages kept arriving for a long time, and the new names of the mynas kept ringing in my ears. I felt less flustered in the presence of the

Badshah than in the beginning, and I would even take a quick look at each myna before putting it into the Cage. All the mynas looked the same to me but the Badshah saw something unique in each one and named it accordingly. After twenty-two or twenty-three cages, I suddenly heard the Badshah's voice say, "Falak Ara"—Ornament of the Sky! And a cage reached my hands. Deep in my heart I repeated, "Falak Ara," and looked intently at the myna. It seemed to be just like the other birds. I didn't understand why the Badshah had named *this* one "Ornament of the Sky." I must not have heard the things he had said when he first looked at the bird. She sat in her cage with her neck craned out. She looked back at me too and I felt as if I were gazing at my own little daughter, Falak Ara. All this took a bit of time, and I was still holding her cage and the bird was still in it when I saw the next cage moving toward me. Flustered, I put Falak Ara into the Cage so clumsily that she almost slipped out of my hands. It was lucky that no one saw me, and that once inside the Wondrous Cage, Falak Ara settled down on a swing.

There were sixteen or seventeen more cages to go. Before putting each myna into the Cage, I would be sure to glance at Falak Ara. She was still perched on her swing the same way, and was still gazing back at me. I realized with some surprise that although I wouldn't be able to point out the precise differences between her and the other mynas, I could tell her apart from all the others. All forty mynas had been put in the Cage and were flitting around inside. After a while Falak Ara, too, took a little flight from her swing and landed on a branch in the eastern portion of the Cage. The Badshah was explaining something to the Darogha in a low voice when the sound of a tiger's roar came from one of the wild animal parks. He stopped in the middle of what he was saying and asked, "Nabi Bakhsh, with whom is Mohini displeased?"

Stealing a smile, lowering his head and casting a sidelong glance at the Badshah, the Darogha said, "If this slave felt certain that his life would be spared, he'd venture an answer to His Majesty's question."

"Speak! Speak!"

"She's upset with Your Majesty the Sultan."

"But what have We done, my man?" the Badshah inquired, and then his face flushed with pleasure. "I see! I see! I know what it is! We came here directly today without visiting her first. That's it, isn't it?"

The Darogha placed his hand on his heart, and bowing low, said, "Who knows her ways better than your Royal Majesty? It's true that her pride has been hurt on your account. And besides, she's just recovered from an illness and is feeling irritable. She doesn't even heed what this

slave of yours says to her ...”

“You are right,” said the Badshah. He looked at the courtiers, at the Minister, and finally at Nabi Bakhsh again, and said, “Well then, let us go and coax her into a better mood.”

The royal party left the Garden with the Darogha following behind. Meanwhile workers had placed sacks of seed and large jugs of water by the doorway of the Cage. I opened the door ever so slightly and turning sideways, went inside. I reached through a smaller door and got the sacks and jugs and filled all food and water containers. The mynas were flying from one branch to another. They all looked the same, but I had no difficulty recognizing Falak Ara. I stood near her for a while and made chirping noises.

“I’m going to call you Falak Myna,” I told her in confidence.

I came out of the Cage and went over to the planted beds which formed the boundary of the Peacock Garden; they were fenced with latticework panels and roofed with lattice as well. Thousands of birds of every kind were cheeping and chirping inside. I filled the food and water dishes here too, swept away the debris on the ground, sprinkled the little bushes with water and then went back inside the Peacock Garden.

Meanwhile, the Darogha had returned from the animal parks, and was standing by the Wondrous Cage, perhaps waiting for me. “Thank goodness we’re finally finished with this hazardous enterprise,” he said, and began walking around the Cage to check it.

“What craftsmen there are hidden away in our own city, Darogha Sahib!” I said. But the Darogha was preoccupied. He kept gazing at the Cage and strolling around it. “I’ll say this much,” he said finally, “the Minister really put his heart into getting this made.”

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My job in the Peacock Garden was not a difficult one. In a matter of a days I got the hang of my chores. I would finish up quickly and spend the resulting spare time in further cleaning and scrubbing the Wondrous Cage. The mynas knew me quite well by now and as soon as they caught sight of me they would come and perch on the rims of the empty food vessels. Falak Myna may have guessed that she was a special object of my attention. She had become quite fond of me, and when she saw me at the door of the Cage she’d be the first one to come up close and chirp at me.

One day, who knows what was going on in the royal quarters, but no

one came to stroll in the Peacock Garden or to see the Wondrous Cage. I had finished all my work and stood examining the Cage from a few steps away. Two of the little boats floating in the tank had run into each other and didn't look right. I went back inside the cage and separated the boats, then came back to the spot where I had been standing.

The chattering mynas flitted here, there and everywhere inside the Cage. They all had full crops so none of them paid any particular attention to me. But Falak Myna would come to me again and again, call loudly, and then fly off to sit on a distant perch or swing. Again, she'd take flight from that spot over to where I was, let out another call, and then fly far off again. Sometimes my little Falak Ara played with me in exactly the same way! I felt terrible for her, especially when I thought of how these days, when I got home from work, instead of running and hiding from me, she'd meet me at the door and ask, "Abba, did you bring me my myna?" Then she'd see my empty hands and her spirits would fall. Her disappointed face floated before my eyes. Suddenly, wickedness arose in my heart and I began to think differently. Forty mynas flitted around in the Wondrous Cage—it was not easy to take an exact count of them. Easy—it was impossible! The star-shaped mirrors made each bird appear to be ten. And anyway, what was the difference between forty and thirty-nine? If there was one myna less, no one would even know. Just at that moment Falak Myna came close and chirped, and with a swift yet gentle movement of the hand I caught her. While stroking her feathers, I retreated into a corner of the Cage and tried to count the mynas still flying around me. Even after counting them several times, I couldn't tell if there were forty mynas or thirty-nine. I felt reassured. I placed Falak Myna on a swing, gave it a gentle push, and left the Cage.

That day, while coming out through the Lakkhi Darvaza, I made a firm decision to bring Falak Myna home, and moreover considered it to be a straightforward sort of thing which would cause me no shame or remorse later. Rather, if I was ashamed of anything, it was of facing my own Falak Ara after making her futilely crave a myna of her own for so long. If I had any regrets it was only that I hadn't taken Falak Myna out of the Cage today!

I stopped in the bird market, and after a bit of bargaining I bought an inexpensive cage. "What kind of bird is it for?" the cage-seller asked while counting his money.

"A hill myna," I said as my heart pounded softly.

The cage-seller answered, "If you've kept a hill myna as a pet, Mr. Abyssinian, you should have bought a suitably fancy cage for it. But do as

you please.”

I took the cage and went onwards, but I must have gone only a few paces when my arms and legs began to tingle and my throat began to dry up. I seemed to hear someone saying in my ear “Kale Khan! Stealing one of the Badshah’s birds!”—all the way home I kept hearing this voice. More than once I decided to return the birdcage, then I got the notion that somehow I would distract Falak Ara with just the empty cage. By the time I reached home I was amazed at myself and at the fact that I had even had the idea of doing such a dangerous thing. I was also relieved that I hadn’t already extracted Falak Myna from the Wondrous Cage. I was still sure that the theft of a single myna could not be detected, but nevertheless it seemed as if I had just escaped the jaws of death. When I got home, Falak Ara saw the cage in my hand and screamed, “My myna is here!” But when she ran up close and saw that the cage was empty, her face fell. She looked into my face and her eyes welled up with tears. I took her into my arms and said, “Look, the cage arrived today. Tomorrow the myna will be here!”

“No! You’re always lying!”

“It’s not a lie, child. You’ll see tomorrow,” I said. “I’ve even bought your myna already.”

“Are you really telling the truth?” she chirped and her face suddenly shone with delight. “So where is she?”

“She’s in a really big cage,” I said. “She insisted on coming to live with her sister Falak Ara immediately, but I said, ‘Look, today I’m going to buy you a cage. Then Falak Ara is going to wash it, decorate it nicely, and put your food and water dishes in it—and after that I’ll take you home with me.’”

Falak Ara’s joy was something to see. She climbed down from my lap immediately and hugged and kissed the cage over and over; without delay, she washed and wiped it carefully, laid a carpet of *kamni* leaves inside, and put in a clay water bowl and a small pot for seed. She wanted to know every little thing about the myna: the shape of her beak, the color of her feathers, what phrases the bird could already say. Falak Ara didn’t sleep well that night. She kept waking up and talking about her myna.

The next day when I left for work I kept hearing her voice until I was quite far from the house—“My myna is coming today! My myna is coming today!”

All along the way I thought about what excuse I could give Falak Ara when I returned home empty-handed that night. Even as I fed and

watered the mynas in the Peacock Garden, I kept thinking up all kinds of excuses. I couldn't concentrate on work that day, but still everything was finished by the time of the sunset prayers, and I turned around once more to go inside the Wondrous Cage. It occurred to me that I hadn't even looked at Falak Myna that day. At the moment she was perched on one of the little filigreed platforms on the western side of the Wondrous Cage, and was quietly gazing at me. When I went up close, she turned her head and looked away. I made squeaky noises with my lips. She ruffled her feathers softly and gazed at me again. I glanced all around the Cage once more. All the mynas had settled down quietly in their own places. Yet counting them was still not easy because nearly half of them were hidden in the branches. The fear I had felt the previous day about stealing a royal myna suddenly went away and the excuses I had thought up to console Falak Ara with also vanished from my brain; stealing the myna seemed once more like a normal thing to do. I looked this way and that. The Peacock Garden was desolate; the gardeners had finished their work and left. No one was watching me. I made chirping noises at Falak Myna again. Once more, she gently ruffled her feathers and looked at me. In the blink of an eye, I reached out and grabbed her. She struggled to free herself, but when I made chirping noises and stroked her feathers, she shut her eyes and let her body go limp. For a while I held my breath and just stood there, then I put her in one of my long *kurta* pockets and came out of the Cage.

Up to the Lakkhi Darvaza, I encountered several sentries on guard at their respective posts, but they already knew that I was on the evening shift at the Peacock Garden. No one asked me anything and I left Qaisar Bagh and started for home with my hand stuck deep in my pocket the whole time. I felt an intense desire to run as fast as my feet could carry me, but somehow I managed to walk along with measured steps.

Falak Ara was already asleep. Jumerati's Mother was waiting up for me. Giving her some food, I sent her off for the night. I shut the door from inside, took the myna out of my pocket and carried it to the cage. Falak Ara's decorations had become even fancier today. She had attached silver flowers between the bars, and had stuck a scrap of colored cloth to a tiny piece of broomstick and, following her own fancy, had made a little banner which now leaned crookedly against the wall of the cage. Inside the cage, the water dish was brimming, pieces of bread lay soaking in the clay feeding pot, and there were a couple of pieces of rolled up cotton to serve as bolsters for the royal myna to lean against. I gently put the myna inside and hung the cage from a peg. The myna fluttered around inside

for a while, and then settled down in one place.

The next morning I opened my eyes to the sounds of Falak Ara's giggling and the myna's chirping. Who knows when Falak Ara had dragged the wicker stool under the peg and taken the cage down. She had now set it on that same stool, and kneeling on the floor, kissed the cage over and over as the myna chirped again and again. As soon as she saw me, Falak Ara announced the news, "Abba, my myna has arrived!"

She spent a long time explaining the things the myna said to her. I sat down by the cage and said a few words to the myna myself, but the bird looked at me as if she didn't recognize me at all. Meanwhile, Falak Ara asked, "Abba, what's her name?"

"Falak Ara" was about to escape from my lips, but I stopped and said, "Falak Ara, my child, her name is 'Myna.' "

"But, she *is* a myna!"

"That's why her *name* is 'Myna.' "

"But 'Myna' is what they're *all* called."

"And that's why her name is Myna as well."

In this way, I confused my daughter's little mind. In reality, my own mind was confused. Several days in a row, I would arrive at the Peacock Garden only to come back a frightened man. I would feel on edge the whole time. If anyone looked at me hard while I was anywhere inside Qaisar Bagh, I'd want to break into a run. At home, I'd see Falak Ara sitting with the cage in front of her and chatting about a whole world of things. She'd report everything the myna had said to her that day as soon as she saw me. Slowly, my terror abated, and one day when Falak Ara was talking about the myna, I said, "But your myna won't speak to *me*."

"You don't speak to her, either. She was complaining about that."

"Really? What did she say?"

"She was saying, 'Your Abba is fond of you, but he's not fond of me.' "

"But the myna has a *sister* who is very fond of her ..."

"Which sister?"

"Princess Falak Ara!"

She laughed so gleefully at this that my fear completely evaporated and the next day I entered the Peacock Garden without anxiety. When evening came, I counted the mynas several times but I couldn't get an accurate count. On the pretense that the mirrors needed cleaning, I removed all of them from the Wondrous Cage and counted again, but once more the number came out wrong. After that, I would summon a couple of the gardeners over to the Peacock Garden every day on one pre-

tense or another, and have *them* count the mynas. The numbers they came up with were so preposterous that I couldn't help but laugh.

I enjoyed making the gardeners count the mynas as much as Falak Ara did talking with her pet. It had become a daily ritual when one day the Badshah visited the Peacock Garden once more. Stopping near the Wondrous Cage, the king spoke with his courtiers and Darogha Nabi Bakhsh. There was no reason for me to fear, but my heart was pounding. The Badshah was saying something to Nabi Bakhsh about the elephants in the royal animal parks. From time to time, he'd throw a glance towards the Cage and look at the mynas flitting from one spot to another. One particular time he looked at the mynas a bit longer, and then asked Nabi Bakhsh, "Have you begun their training?"

"O Refuge of the World, Mir Daud comes every day at the time of sunrise prayers to teach them."

Then the Badshah fell into conversation about the Cage with his courtiers. The skills the craftsmen had displayed in making it were mentioned. Some of the craftsmen's names were mentioned too, and several of them were famous Lucknow goldsmiths. My worries were gone by now. I was thinking about how our Badshah spoke to even his servants so cordially, and how extremely gentle his voice was. Just at that moment I heard the Badshah's mild voice say, "Well, Nabi Bakhsh, I don't see Falak Ara today."

I felt as if someone had drained the blood out of my body all at once. The Darogha said, "Refuge of the World, she must be hiding in a branch somewhere. She was flying all over just a little while ago."

The Badshah smiled gently and said, "She's not feeling too shy to come out before me, is she? And look at this one, Bashful Bride! How she's jesting and teasing! Bashful Bride, if this is going to be typical of your behavior we'll have to change your name to Mischief Maker!"

All the courtiers present bowed their heads, put handkerchiefs over their mouths and laughed soundlessly. If it had been any other occasion, I too would have been pleased to no end to see the Badshah in such an engaging mood, and I too would have repeated every single one of his words to all my acquaintances later. But this time only one phrase echoed in my ear— "Well, Nabi Bakhsh, I don't see Falak Ara today."

The Badshah was talking about the elephants again, and I was standing a few paces away from the Cage. When the Badshah's words had first fallen on my ears, I had felt as if I had shrunk to less than a hand's breadth in height. But now it seemed as if my body had expanded and become so large that I couldn't hide myself from anyone. I kept clenching

my fists to make myself shrink again. Struggling this way, I wasn't even aware of when the Badshah left. When I came to, the Peacock Garden was deserted and there was just the sound of the mynas' wings as they flew around inside the Wondrous Cage.

I didn't have it in me to dash home instantly to get the royal Myna to put back into the Cage. I somehow finished my work and went home by the time of the sunset prayer. All along the way I only worried about how I could quietly return the myna to the Cage. But when I reached home and Falak Ara began her chitchat about how the myna's day had gone, I developed another worry. I could take the myna back, well and good, but what would I tell Falak Ara? That night I tossed and turned, and didn't get to sleep until very late.

When day came and I awoke, it occurred to me that starting the next day my shift at the Peacock Garden would begin in the morning. Then for a whole week, returning the myna to the Cage would not be easy. Whatever had to be done had to be done today. Falak Ara was playing with the myna right then as well. It troubled me to have to separate them, but a solution instantly came into my head. I sat down next to the bird-cage, looked intently at the myna, and said, "Child, don't your myna's eyes look a little funny?"

"They're all right," said Falak Ara while looking into the myna's eyes.

"They're not all right at all! They look dirtyish, and the corners are yellow. Aha, she's caught jaundice too!"

"What's *chaundice*?" asked Falak Ara worriedly.

"It's a very terrible disease. Who knows how many mynas from the Badshah's garden have died from it!"

Falak Ara looked even more worried, and said, "So go get some medicine from Hakeem Sahib."

"And you think the Hakeem Sahib would prescribe a cure for a *bird*? Certainly not!" I replied. "We're going to have to take her to Nasiruddin Haidar Badshah's English hospital. She *might* be saved if we can get her there. She's in very bad shape, but still ... let's see whether we can keep her alive until we get to the hospital."

In short, I frightened that innocent child to the point of making her cry, until she herself began to insist, "For God's sake, Abba, please take her there! And go quickly!"

"The hospital must be closed right now," I explained to her. "I'll take her along with me when I go to work tomorrow."

When it was time to go, I took the myna out of the cage. Falak Ara said, "Abba, take her right in her cage!"

“Birds aren’t kept in cages there. There’s a whole house that’s been made just for them. You clean this cage up—when she gets better and comes back from the hospital, she’ll enjoy living in her own home again.”

Falak Ara took the myna from my hand. She caressed the bird for a long time, then said, “Abba, say a good luck prayer over her.”

“I’ll do it on the way,” I said. “Here, hand her to me. It’s getting late, the hospital’s going to close.”

I took the myna from her and put it in my *kurta* pocket and quickly left the house. I knew that like every other day, Falak Ara would cling to one door panel and watch me walk away. But I didn’t turn around to look back.

*

My luck was with me and I got my chance as soon as I entered the Peacock Garden. None of the gardeners paid any attention to me. When I entered the Cage, every gardener was busy with his own work. I coughed loudly once to clear my throat, but still no one looked at me. I entered the Wondrous Cage and went over to one side, and taking Falak Myna out of my pocket, tossed her gently into the air. She flapped her wings and steadied herself in flight, then alighted on a swing, and flew from there to a little scaffolding platform. From the platform, she plunged downwards and ended by sitting at the edge of the pool. Wherever she alighted, several other mynas came and perched next to her and chirruped as if to ask, “Sister, where have you been all this while?”

This was the first day since the mynas had arrived in the Peacock Garden that my heart was completely free of burdens. Even on the way to work, I had thought up all kinds of things to distract little Falak Ara with, and I was sure that at least for a while she would be satisfied with the notion that her myna was getting better in the hospital, and after that would more or less forget about the bird. Today I looked intently at the mynas in the Wondrous Cage and noticed some differences in them, and I knew I could have picked Falak Myna out from among thousands of others. She was sitting off by herself on a gently swaying branch at the moment. I went closer, puckered my lips and made noises at her. She gazed at me silently.

“Do you miss Falak Ara?” I asked her.

She kept looking at me the same way.

I said, “You’re not angry with me, are you?”

Suddenly, I realized that I sounded exactly like the Badshah. I felt a secret rush of fear and quickly finished up my work in the Wondrous

Cage and left.

4

Just as I thought, at home there was no problem convincing Falak Ara. With great relish, I told her how her myna had refused to take the bitter-tasting medicine at the hospital and how sweet medicine had to be mixed up for her.

“And, listen, when they gave her mung bean *khichri* to eat and she flatly refused, saying ‘No way I’m going to eat that!’ the doctor had to ask, ‘Well, what *do* you eat?’ ”

“She must have said, ‘*Jalebis* and milk, that’s all we eat!’” Falak Ara interrupted.

“Yes,” I said. “The doctor didn’t understand. The poor fellow’s an Englishman, you know. He began to ask me all kinds of things, like, ‘Well, Mr. Kale Khan, what *is* this *jalebi*?’”

Falak Ara was rolling on the floor with laughter. She picked up the empty birdcage and hugged it, repeating the phrase “What *is* this *jalebi*?” and chuckled to herself for a long time. I told her tales about the hospital and her myna all night long. When she fell asleep, I took the birdcage together with all its decorations and hid it amidst the clutter of the store room. I wanted Falak Ara to forget the myna completely.

When she woke up the next morning Falak Ara seemed subdued. After a long time she just asked, “Abba, is my myna going to get better?”

“Yes, she’ll get better,” I answered. “But child, one shouldn’t talk too much about someone who’s sick, because that makes the illness worse.”

After that she didn’t even ask me what happened to her Myna’s cage. I was thinking of ways to distract and amuse her when there was a knock at the door. I came outside. One of Darogha Nabi Bakhsh’s men was standing there.

“Is everything all right, Muharram Ali?” I asked.

“Darogha Sahib has summoned you to come in early this morning,” he said. “His Highness the Badshah is going to grace the Garden with his presence.”

“Today?” I asked with astonishment. “Just the day before yesterday he ...”

“The birds have been taught to speak, you know,” said Muharram Ali. “He’s coming to hear them perform.”

“All right. You go on ahead.”

I changed clothes hurriedly. Leaving the house, I told Jumerati's Mother to go stay with Falak Ara and hurried towards the Peacock Garden. Along the way I took the opportunity to congratulate myself several times for having taken Falak Myna back to the Wondrous Cage beforehand.

A small green satin canopy with metallic-thread fringe had been erected on ornate silver posts in front of the Wondrous Cage. The Darogha and many other employees had gathered in front of the Cage. In the center of them all the elderly Mir Daud stood stiffly at command as if he were the Badshah and we his slaves. Tales of Mir Daud's finicky temperament and pompousness were known all over Lucknow, but everyone also knew that he had no rival in training birds to speak.

"There you are, Kale Khan," said the Darogha as soon as he saw me. "Take care of the Cage, quickly, please ..."

I had just cleaned the floor, sprinkled water on the plants, gathered up the fallen flowers and leaves, and come out of the Cage with great alacrity, when *shehnais* and kettledrums began to play in the *jelo-khana*.

I heard Mir Daud's voice, "I'm going to say it once more! No one should speak in the middle of the performance, or else the birds will become shy and clam up!"

The Darogha was a little irritated by this, and said, "Mir Sahib, I've already told you once, who on earth would have the nerve to make even a peep in front of His Highness? But there you go repeating the same thing over and over since God knows when!"

In response, Mir Sahib placed his finger on the Darogha's chest and placidly repeated the same thing once more: "No one should say anything in the middle of the performance or else the creatures will refuse to talk!"

"For Heaven's sake, Mir Sahib!" the Darogha made a face and exclaimed. "You're going on like a parrot!"

Mir Sahib was all set to make a testy reply when the royal procession appeared in the distance. We all lined up in two rows at the gate of the Peacock Garden and in a short while the procession arrived. Today there were some English officers from the Residency with the Badshah, in addition to the Minister and the courtiers. The Minister promptly busied himself pointing out each and every feature of the Wondrous Cage to the visitors. Then the Badshah said something to him in low tones and signaled Mir Daud with a look. Mir Sahib bowed and came up to the Cage. He made a whistling noise with his lips. The mynas flying around in the Cage came towards him, settled on swings and perches, and began to chirp loudly. Mir Sahib puffed out his cheeks, then squeezed in again

until a strange noise came out. The mynas were silent for a moment, then all of their throats swelled and their voices were heard as one:

*Long live King Akhtar, Beloved of the World!
Solomon of our times! King of the World!*

Each word was pronounced with such crystal clarity that I was astonished. It sounded exactly as if a sizable group of women were singing songs together at a family celebration. The mynas recited the verse again, paused for a moment, and this time using a heavy voice and masculine intonation, recited in English:

“Welcome to the Peacock Garden.”

The British officers enjoyed this so much that they raised their fists in the air and jumped up and down with joy. The mynas recited the first couplet again, and then another one, and then another. From time to time the Badshah would smile appreciatively and look at Mir Daud, who was putting on quite a show himself. He would spread and puff out his chest and then immediately lean forward and bow so low that he seemed about to turn a somersault.

The mynas recited a new verse, and then recited the first rhyme all over again—

“Long live King Akhtar, Beloved of the World—”

But the verse wasn't finished yet when from the eastern part of the Cage came a loud childish voice, *“Falak Ara's a princess sweet!”*

Suddenly all the mynas fell silent and Mir Daud stood there with his mouth hanging open. Falak Myna was sitting alone on a branch and her throat was swollen; she intoned again:

*Falak Ara's a princess sweet!
Milk and jalebis is what she eats!*

It was exactly my little daughter Falak Ara's voice! Darkness seemed to spread before my eyes. I don't know how those words struck the others, but I myself was horrified at the mere thought of the mares in the palace stables condescending to eat “milk and *jalebis*,” and this heartless myna was ready to feed *princesses* the same thing! And in front of the Bad-

shah at that! I heard a few people speaking softly, but I couldn't understand what they were saying because there was whistling in my ears. And then I heard a separate whistle-like voice even sharper than the other whistling,

*Falak Ara's a princess sweet!
Milk and jalebis is what she eats!
She's the fair, fair daughter of Black, Black Khan!*

Then there were sounds of Falak Ara's giggling and clapping, and then the same:

*She's the fair, fair daughter of Black, Black Khan!
She's the fair, fair daughter of Black, Black Khan!*

Even before my vision had cleared completely, I could make out Darogha Nabi Bakhsh staring wide-eyed at me. I saw the Badshah look at the Darogha and then slowly turn his head and fix his gaze on me. My body trembled violently and my teeth chattered. It seemed as if at that moment the white stone platform under the Wondrous Cage leapt up and hit me on the head.

*

When consciousness returned to me the next day, I was lying in the English-style hospital of Nasiruddin Haidar, and Darogha Nabi Bakhsh was bending down to look into my face. The instant I saw the Darogha I remembered everything and I tried to raise myself, but the Darogha placed his hand on my chest and stopped me.

"Lie down, lie down," he said. "How's the wound on your head today?"

"Wound?" I asked, and when I ran my hand over my head I realized that several bandages were wrapped around it, and that it hurt a bit too. But at the moment I didn't care about pain. I grabbed the Darogha's hand and said, "Darogha Sahib, please tell me the honest truth about what really happened there!"

"You'll find out all about it, my friend, you'll find out all about it. First, get well."

"I'm just fine, Darogha Sahib," I said, "I swear."

The Darogha put off giving me an answer for as long as he possibly could.

“What are you asking, Miyan Kale Khan?” he began. “You did well to pass out right there. You have no idea what befell us afterwards ... But first tell me this, when did you give her that training?”

“Whom?”

“The myna Falak Ara, who else?”

“I didn’t teach her anything, Darogha Sahib, I swear.”

“Then?” he asked. “Where else did she hear such coarse and idiotic words?”

I hesitated a while, and finally said, “In my home.”

The Darogha’s jaw dropped in amazement. “Are you serious?”

I told him the whole story from the beginning to the end. The Darogha was stunned. For a long time not a single sound came out of his mouth. Finally, he said, “You’ve really wreaked havoc, Kale Khan. Stealing a royal bird! Listen, was the bird still at your house when his Majesty said that Falak Ara wasn’t to be seen the other day?”

I hung my head.

“You’ve slaughtered me!” the Darogha said. “I had no idea! I said to His Majesty that she had been flitting around right here just ‘a moment ago!’ My friend, you were about to get me fired from my job as well! It all became clear to His Majesty when she started babbling all that nonsense in front of the Englishmen. My God!—what His Majesty said when he heard her showing off like that! All I can say is that I too was astonished that His Highness could be uttering such words.”

“What?” I sat up. “What did His Majesty say?”

“He just said, ‘Darogha Sahib, please don’t send Our birds outside,’ ” related the Darogha, following with a long sigh. “‘Darogha Sahib!’ Until now his Majesty never used ‘Darogha’ with me in place of ‘Nabi Bakhsh,’ let alone ‘Darogha Sahib!’ After all this time in his service, I had to hear such a thing because of you! My ears are still cringing from those bitter words!”

“Darogha Sahib,” I pleaded, “I’m guilty of the offense. Whatever punishment I deserve ...”

“All right, then.” He raised his hand to silence me. “His Majesty left, along with the English officers from the Residency. Meanwhile, a veritable tumult broke out in the Peacock Garden. The Royal Minister was ready to devour each one of us alive, while Mir Daud leapt up and down like a maniac and claimed that his enemies had deliberately brought in an outside bird and stuck it inside the Wondrous Cage to startle the mynas. I kept telling him, this was no outside bird, it was a myna His Majesty was familiar with! Mir Daud took no account of the fact that the Royal

Minister was standing right there, and began to shout 'I didn't train her! I didn't train her!' On top of that, the Royal Minister sprinkled pepper on the wound by saying 'Mir Sahib, it's clear that you didn't train her, for the simple reason that she talks better than your mynas!' Then Mir Sahib ... what more can I tell you, Kale Khan? ... He hit his head on the Cage right then and was sent home with an escort of sentries, but he tried to leap into the Gomti River on the way. And into any well that he passed ... He pretty much *did* jump into Darshan Singh's stepwell—"

What on earth had I to do with Mir Sahib's jumping and leaping? I said, "Darogha Sahib, just tell me this—what was decided about me then?"

"What else could have been decided?" he said. "His Majesty put the Royal Minister in charge of punishing the offense, and left. It was plain to everyone that this was some mischief of yours, since that erudite bird didn't leave anything to the imagination. The Royal Minister decided your fate then and there. But I begged—I took my hat off and laid it at his feet. Well, he cooled down somehow, and accepted my assurances. He rescinded the order for your arrest. Now he'll write up the charges and take depositions from the witnesses. Wait and see what decision he takes; you can assume that there'll be a fine, and beyond that ..."

"Darogha Sahib," I said nervously, "I don't have a single rusty coin to my name. Where will I find money to pay a fine?"

"Come now, my friend. Why get so anxious?" the Darogha said. "What am I here for? If only everything could be settled with a mere fine. The Royal Minister has been embarrassed in front of the English officers—who knows, he might lock you up, or have you exiled to the other side of the Ganga into British territory."

I was more terrified of exile than of prison. I had spent my entire life in Lucknow; if I had to live anywhere else I'd go mad. I said, "Darogha Sahib, it would be better if the Minister had me shot out of a cannon! For God's sake, think of a way out!" Then I had an idea. "Should I write a petition to the Badshah? He might forgive me ... What do you say?"

"My friend, as if petitions actually reached the Badshah!" said the Darogha with a sigh. "Every single piece of paper first comes under the Minister's scrutiny. The Minister does as he pleases—pronouncing verdict on some himself, and submitting some to His Highness."

The Darogha stood up. As he was leaving, he paused and said, "But one thing is certain, Kale Khan. This petition idea of yours is good."

"But Darogha Sahib, for God's sake get me out of here," I said, "or the fumes from the drugs will kill me!"

“You have a point. I’ll get you out right away. You go home and rest for a couple of days. Then, have a decent petition-writer write up an appeal for you. Don’t try to write it yourself!”

“I’m not an educated man, Darogha Sahib. Why should I write it myself and ruin any chance of success I might have?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying.”

Darogha Sahib talked to the hospital people and just left straight away. I was released in a little while and went home. Once in my own house, I drew little Falak Ara into my lap and entertained her with stories and tales for a long time, but I have no idea what I said to her or what she said to me.

5

The very next day I went out looking for a decent petition-writer. There were a number of famous “writers” in Lucknow those days. The Munshi Kalka Prasad lived right in my neighborhood and I knew of three other writers who had direct access to the Badshah’s presence. One was Mirza Rajab Ali Sahib, another was Munshi Zahiruddin Sahib, and the third was Munshi Amir Ahmad Sahib. Mirza Sahib was something of a celebrity around town, and at one time his pen had commanded great renown. I couldn’t muster the courage to talk to him. As far as Munshi Zahiruddin, I asked around about his whereabouts until I finally located his house, only to find out that he had gone off to Bilgram.

Now there was only Munshi Amir Ahmad left. I couldn’t find anyone to show me the way to his house, but I did learn that every Friday evening he showed up at Shah Mina’s shrine without fail. As luck would have it, it was a Friday, and a new-moon Friday at that! So at the time of the sunset prayers, I walked by the Machchi Bhavan Castle and arrived at the Shrine of Shah Mina. There was a huge crowd of people, but somehow I managed to get inside. A *qavvali* performance was underway and Munshi Sahib’s own verses were being sung at that very moment. He himself was there—I had seen him several times in Qaisar Bagh and had no trouble recognizing him. I stood in a corner and listened to the *qavvali*. When the gathering broke up late at night, people surrounded Munshi Sahib and a general conversation ensued. At long last, the Munshi Sahib managed to leave. I fell in behind him. Munshi Sahib turned from one alley into another, then into a third, twirling his prayer beads, and I followed right along like a shadow. He stopped in his tracks

finally, and I approached him and uttered a greeting. He greeted me back, then peered intently at my face.

“I crave your compassion,” I said.

Munshi Sahib reached for his pocket. I joined my hands and said, “Your Honor, I am not a beggar.”

“What is it, then?”

“I’m even more lowly than a beggar. But I can be saved from ruin by your will.”

“My good man! Why talk in riddles? Use plain language!”

Standing in that very spot I began my tale of woe, but Munshi Sahib stopped me. We were near his house by then and so he took me there. I said many times to him that it was very late at night, and that I would come back the next day, but he listened to the whole report right then, and expressed regret from time to time, and from time to time amazement. Sometimes he’d break into laughter, and sometimes he’d chime in with praises for the Badshah. He fell into thought after I told the whole story and confided my plan to him. He said, “Listen, my friend Kale Khan, your story has touched my heart. I’ll write the petition for you all right, and I’ll put my heartfelt effort into it, but will it ever reach the Badshah ... that’s the question. That’s something you don’t have power over. Do you have other means of getting it to him?”

“Means?” I asked. “Munshi Sahib, you’re all the means I have. If you yourself could appear in His Majesty’s presence ...”

“Yes, my friend, from time to time I do appear in His Majesty’s presence. It is due to His Majesty’s generosity to the humble that he calls for me.”

Somewhat cheered yet still fearful I said, “Then, Munshi Sahib, if you yourself ...”

Munshi Sahib laughed.

“My friend Kale Khan! ... but then, what would you know of how the Badshah’s court functions? It doesn’t happen just like that, you know, showing up and saying ‘Your Gracious Highness, Greetings! Please look at this letter,’ and His Majesty reaches for it and ...”

My face flushed with embarrassment. I said, “Munshi Sahib, that’s not what I meant. The truth is that there’s no one I can ask except you to deliver the petition to the Badshah.”

“Even if the petition reached the Badshah, it would do so only after passing through a thousand other hands. And besides, your case has been entrusted to the Minister. He wouldn’t like it if—”

Munshi Sahib stopped and thought about something. He talked out

loud to himself every once in a while, and mentioned names of several people—Miyān Sahibān, Maqbul-ud-Daula, Rahat-us-Sultan, Imaman and God knows who else. Finally he said to me, “Look, Miyān Kale Khan. If God wills, your petition will come before His Highness; after that, fate ...”

I thanked the Munshi many times, but when I praised his own excellences, he looked embarrassed and said, “My friend, my friend! Why are you making a sinner out of me? The One who sees the task through to the end is God. That’s plenty for now. Why don’t you go home?”

He stood up and came to the door to see me off. I said to him in farewell, “Munshi Sahib, God will reward you for this. I am a poor man. Your payment ...”

“God forbid!” the Munshi bit his tongue in remorse. “Don’t even allow that word to leave your lips!” He put his hand on my shoulder and repeated the sentence. “The truth of the matter is, Kale Khan, your story has touched my heart.”

The last part of the night was being chimed in at the *naubat-khana* of Asaf-ud-Daula’s Imambara. I thought of Jumerati’s mother. The poor thing must have fallen sleep while waiting for me to come home. It didn’t seem right to wake her up, so I wandered around the city until daybreak.

6

Three or four days must have passed when whom should I see standing at my door but Darogha Nabi Bakhsh. I was startled, but he didn’t give me a chance to speak. He began, “Listen, Kale Khan! You’re the living end!”

Even more worried, I said, “Darogha Sahib, for Heaven’s sake, I don’t know anything! What has happened?”

“What has happened?!” the Darogha asked. “What’s happened is that your petition reached the presence of His Majesty the King, and as soon as it passed under his gaze, a judgment was pronounced on it forthwith!”

“A judgment?” I asked impatiently. “What judgment was that, Darogha Sahib?”

“Is a royal decision going to be announced to lowly folks like us? What things you say, Kale Khan! But write this down ... Wait! First tell me this—did you have all that business written up in the petition? That your little girl is motherless, how she pestered you for a hill myna, and all the rest?”

“From the beginning to the end. I haven’t seen the petition myself

but Munshi Amir Ahmad Sahib said he would put his wholehearted effort into writing it.”

“Munshi Amir Ahmad Sahib?!” asked the Darogha with amazement. “You got hold of him? My goodness! I didn’t know you had it in you! That explains it ... I was wondering how this petition reached His Highness at all!”

“Darogha Sahib, what was that you were talking about just now?”

“Good grief, I’m still talking about the same thing I was talking about then.”

“No, what was it you were saying? Something like ‘Write this down’ ... ?”

“Oh, that,” The Darogha remembered. “I was telling you to write down that you’ve received a pardon and your little daughter a myna.”

“My little daughter a myna?” I asked with astonishment. “You can’t possibly mean that, Darogha Sahib!”

“You still don’t know the Badshah’s true nature,” said the Darogha. “I figured it out when his *chobdar* Bande Ali came this morning to ask the way to your house. My friend, it really brightened my day.”

But I could well see that the Darogha was not very happy. He seemed hesitant, and as if he wanted to say something more. I felt a little worried. I said, “Darogha Sahib, you’ve always looked out for me like a father. If you’re not happy at a time like this then how could anyone else be? But ... Darogha Sahib, is there something else?”

The Darogha shifted uneasily, then said, “I can’t say, Kale Khan. It could be nothing at all, or it could turn out to be something really big. Either way, it will all be to your benefit.”

“Darogha Sahib, *tell* me for God’s sake!”

Now the Darogha Sahib looked positively worried. “My friend,” he said, “let me tell you about the latest event. Today three of Nawab Sahib’s men came to the Peacock Garden.”

“Nawab Sahib?”

“Oh, you know, The Royal Minister, the Holder of the Regime, the Support of the Kingdom, the Defender of the Realm, the Nawab Ali Naqi Khan Bahadur—understand?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Or maybe it was four men who came ...” the Darogha tried to remember. “Well, anyway, they had me summoned to the Peacock Garden. When I got there I saw them standing at attention in front of the Wondrous Cage. As soon as they saw me they asked me in a most forward manner which among the mynas was Falak Ara. I got a little heated up

myself and told him that she must be one of the mynas inside the Cage! I could hardly be expected to remember each of their names! These people seemed to think rather highly of themselves, and shot back things like ‘You’ve been the Darogha for so long but you don’t know your own animals?’ I said, ‘All right, I do recognize them—I just won’t tell anyone which is which. What business is it of yours, anyway?’ It went on from there. One of them seemed to have gotten his position in the Minister’s official retinue only recently. His mustache hadn’t sprouted completely, and he was pretty good-looking too. He started throwing his weight around a bit, so I said, ‘Hold your horses, young man! I’m the descendant of Pathans—until your beard and mustache are fully grown you should watch your backside around me!’ “

I laughed. “Darogha Sahib! God save us from your tongue!”

“What of it?” Darogha Sahib was really hitting his stride now. “That young fellow was braying at me by then. I said, ‘My Prince, we feed choicest pieces of meat to our tigers. That’s enough out of you! Shut your trap or else I’ll pick you up with my bare hands and throw you into Mohini’s enclosure first and ask your name afterwards!’ Hearing the hulloaloo, many people came out of the royal palaces and calmed things down again.”

For a while we were both sunk in our thoughts. Then I said, “That was quite an incident, Darogha Sahib!”

“Incident?” the Darogha asked. “My dear friend, you haven’t even begun to hear about the real event. Now listen—there were also friends of the Nawab’s men among the palace denizens who came out and they took them off to one side. It was then that the secret was revealed—one of the British officers from the Residency who had come to the Peacock Garden that first time had been charmed by the out-of-place babbling of your myna. He later spoke complimentary words about her to the Nawab, and the Nawab Sahib promised then and there that the myna would be sent over to the Residency! And not only that, he already had had a smaller cage made for her which was a miniature of the Wondrous Cage!”

In this short time, I had already begun to consider Falak Myna my personal property. “But His Majesty graciously granted the myna to my daughter,” I protested.

“That he did, but the Nawab too has made a promise to the Great White Officer Sahib!”

“But is the Nawab going to disobey His Majesty’s command and go by that...?”

“All right, all right, that’s enough, Kale Khan. Don’t say any more.

You have no idea what's going on in Avadh. While the Nawab can't override the Badshah's decision, what he can do is *buy* the myna from you, which he certainly will, and that at any price that you demand. Well, all right—royal gifts are given out just for such purposes, so that a fellow can sell them and make himself a little money. But remember this, Kale Khan: if the myna ends up in the residency, the Badshah will feel bad.”

“May his enemies feel bad!” I said. “If Nawab Sahib makes a move to buy the myna from me I'll tell him that my daughter doesn't agree to the sale, that the bird is like a sister to her!”

“And you think that alone will shut the Nawab Sahib's mouth?” the Darogha immediately retorted. “What kind of world do you live in, brother? Now listen carefully—do you remember Chote Miyan?”

“Which Chote Miyan?”

“For goodness' sake, the one who has an English box that makes pictures! Come on, what was his name? I just remember his nickname.”

“Oh, *that* Chote Miyan! Darogha Ahmad Ali Khan,” I said. “How could I ever forget him? I have worked at the Holy Endowment of Husainabad!”

“Fine. When the Myna has arrived at your house, he'll come over. Do whatever he tells you to do and don't resist in the slightest. And look, stop worrying. Everything will turn out well for you in the end. All right, I'm off! Chote Miyan will explain the rest.”

“Darogha Sahib, please tell me at least a little about what's going on yourself!” I asked. “I'm already terrified.”

“Then listen, Kale Khan. We don't want one of the royal birds to end up in the Residency. You wouldn't want that to happen, would you?”

“Never in my life.”

“That's all. Now sit back and relax.”

The Darogha took his leave and I came back inside. I looked at Falak Ara carefully for the first time since the Peacock Garden mishap. She looked wan and pulled down. I knew that she was pining for her myna but was afraid to mention her by name. I had an urge to say “Your myna is going to come back to you,” but I myself didn't know anything—what could I tell her? So I just picked her up in my arms and paced around the house for a long time.

*

Darogha Nabi Bakhsh's hunch had been correct. First thing the very next morning, the royal *chobdar* and two court officials showed up at my door. The Darogha himself had come along with them. After having the

Darogha verify my identity, one of the officers began to read out the royal decree which went a little like this ...

Let Kale Khan, son of Yusuf Khan, be informed that his petition has been submitted to the Royal Presence. Whereas, on account of the following and by virtue of his own confession, it is proven that he committed the offense of stealing a myna by the name of Falak Ara from the Peacock Garden and then took it to his own home...

Let it be further known that he is therefore being removed from the employ of the court but will continue to receive his salary ...

As a reward for training the myna named Falak Ara, the selfsame bird has been granted to Lady Falak Ara, daughter of Kale Khan ...

In addition, for the feeding and care of the above-mentioned myna, a monthly allowance of one ashrafi from the royal treasury has been set ...

Furthermore, let it be known to Kale Khan, son of Yusuf Khan, that stealing is called for only in a house where requests go unheard.

The last phrase made me cringe with shame. I stood fixed to the spot and hung my head. Meanwhile, the other officer took the cage, slip-covered in red serge, from the *chobdar* and handed it to me. Then he took a small sack out of his cummerbund and had me count out the twelve *ashrafis* that were in it. He said that this was for a year's expenses for the myna, and after finishing the brief business of writing out a receipt, he congratulated me. Darogha Nabi Bakhsh also congratulated me, and then said to the *chobdar*, "Well, Miyan Bande Ali, is my work done now?"

"Our work is done as well," he answered. "Why, Darogha Sahib, won't you come along?"

"No my friend, I think I'm going to go pay my respects at the Holy Endowment of Husainabad."

"Yes, yes. Please go ahead." Bande Ali added warmly, "Say a prayer for me too."

"Will you listen to that! Did you think you had to ask me?"

The Darogha looked at me and with a slight gesture of the head asked me "Remember?" I too gently nodded back to say, "I remember."

They left and I went inside the house feeling like a dreamer walking on air. Falak Ara was still asleep. I put the cage in the courtyard and took off the cloth cover. My eyes were dazzled! "Gold!" I blurted out and the pure exquisiteness of the cage suddenly became obscure. I tried to guess what it might be worth. Just then I heard Falak Myna's faint voice. She looked at me with squinting eyes. She bobbed her head up and down,

flapped her wings and chirped. I ran into the storeroom and brought out her old cage. I had switched the myna from one cage to the other and was putting the new cage away in the storeroom when I heard Falak Ara's voice outside.

"My myna's all better! My myna's all better!"

When I came out of the storeroom she cheerfully told me the news as well. But I was worried about other things.

"Now go wash your hands and face first, and then you can chat with her as much as your heart desires," I said, and went and stood outside the front door.

The sounds of the myna's chattering and of Falak Ara's delighted laughter drifted out from inside the house. It really did seem like two sisters had reunited after a long separation. The voices stopped for a moment and then I heard:

*Falak Ara's a princess sweet!
Milk and jalebis is all she eats!
She's the fair, fair daughter of Black, Black Khan!*

Then there was laughter, and then the sound of clapping. I couldn't tell if the voice was Falak Ara's or her myna's.

7

That whole day long, I sometimes came inside and sometimes went to the door. Every other minute I would have a nervous premonition that Darogha Ahmad Ali Khan—Chote Miyan—was about to show up any moment, but after waiting for him by the door for a long time, I would come back inside again. Finally, around evening, I actually saw him coming. There was another man with him who looked to be a bit of a country bumpkin, dressed as he was in a *lungi* and a rough *kurta*, with a shawl wrapped around his waist and a bulky turban on his head. He had wrapped the end piece of the turban around his face so that only his eyes and the bridge of his nose were visible. The gleam in the man's eyes frightened me a bit. The two of them arrived at the door and greetings were exchanged. Ahmad Ali Khan quickly inquired after my health and welfare and then gestured towards the man with the turban and asked, "Do you recognize him, Kale Khan?"

"Perhaps I'd recognize him if I could see his face."

“No—do you recognize him just like this?” he asked, and then asked, “If you ever saw him again somewhere, would you recognize him?”

“If I ever recognized his headwrap again, I would.”

“You said the right thing,” nodded the Darogha in approval. “Now, this is the buyer for the royal myna and the cage you were rewarded. What do you say?”

I was about to refuse flatly when I stopped myself. I said, “What can I say, Darogha Sahib? It is all in your hands.”

“So you’ve made me into your agent?”

“I have.”

“Well then, I’ve sold your myna to him, and I’ve sold the cage as well. We’ll think about it carefully before setting the price.” And then Chote Miyan said to the other man, “Now come give him a deposit to hold the sale, and your oath.”

The man put a rupee in my hand and said, “Kale Khan, son of Yusuf Khan, swear on the Holy Qur’an that you will never tell anyone how much you sold the myna for. You can mention the price of the cage however. If anyone asks about the price of the myna, say that you’re under oath.”

I took the oath. Chote Miyan said to me, “Go, distract your little daughter somehow and bring out the myna and the cage.”

I went inside the house. Falak Ara was sitting next to the cage. I said to her, “Falak Ara, it’s time for her to take her daily rest. If you don’t let her sleep, she’ll get sick again. I’ll take her out for some fresh air. The doctor told me to.”

Falak Ara got up quickly and went into the hall. I took the royal cage out of the storeroom, picked up Falak Myna’s cage too, and came outside. Darogha Chote Miyan asked happily, “Did you switch cages? You did the right thing, Kale Khan.”

He handed both things over to the man and asked, “Got the cage?”

“Yes,” was the answer.

“Got the myna?”

“Yes.”

“Now get going.”

The man turned around with both the cages in his hands and set off. I was about to run after him but Chote Miyan grabbed my hand. I said, “Darogha Sahib, without the myna my daughter ...”

“Just hold on for a bit, Kale Khan, just hold on,” he said and pointed ahead.

The man with the cloth wrapped around his face was coming back

again. He carried the royal cage on his head, wrapped in the shawl previously around his waist; he looked exactly like a washerman. When he came near, he put the cage with the myna in it into Chote Miyan's hands and walked away rapidly.

The sun was setting and I couldn't see Chote Miyan's face clearly. He gave me the cage. I felt a little worried. He said, "Only good will come out of this for you, Kale Khan, as long as you speak with a level head. Don't get angry yourself and don't make anyone else angry. And, my friend, don't go to bed early tonight."

"Early?" I queried. "Could anyone sleep at a time like this, Darogha Sahib?"

"My friend! As I said, it will all turn out to be for your good. Just remember to remain calm."

He went away. I picked up the cage and went inside the house. While hanging it on the peg in the courtyard, I looked out of the corner of my eye. Falak Ara was peeking from behind one of the pillars of the hall. I went and laid her down on a *takht*. She went to sleep pretty quickly while talking about the myna. I had just gotten up to find something to cover her with when Darogha Nabi Bakhsh knocked softly on the door.

"Everything's been arranged," he said. "Don't say anything, just come along with me! Bring your little daughter and her myna. There's no one else at home, is there?"

"No one else," I said and then I remembered, "except for Jumerati's Mother."

"And who might that be? Well, bring her along as well, I've had a palanquin brought too. And please, Kale Khan, hurry!"

"And the household furnishings, Darogha Sahib?"

"But you're going to come right back again, Kale Khan. Just bring a few of the little girl's and So-and-so's-Mother's things. If you want, bring a couple of items for yourself as well."

8

There was a small house from Muhammad Ali Shah's reign on a low patch of ground covered with reeds behind the Seven-Pillared Mansion, the Sat-Khandha of Husainabad. We alighted there. It was a well-kept place. The floor had been swept out, the clay pots and pitchers had been filled with fresh water, and a shaded oil lamp was lit over the sitting platform in the front hall. Falak Ara was fast asleep. I laid her down on a cot

and hung the myna's cage at the head of the bed. It didn't take long to unload and put away the scant belongings we had brought with us.

Darogha Sahib had dropped us off and had gone somewhere. He came back after a while and called me to the door. He took a pouch out of his cummerbund and said, "The cage has been sold. The money has been entrusted to Chote Miyan. Here, count it—a hundred rupees of spending money. Or should I have the entire amount given to you now?"

"No, Darogha Sahib," I said worriedly. "My heart is about to stop just seeing this much silver!"

Darogha Sahib began to laugh, and then he said, "Have you forgotten about the gold allotted for the myna's food and water?"

I actually *had* forgotten. Or rather, I couldn't even remember at that moment what I had done with the *ashrafis*. Darogha Sahib saw my confusion and asked, "What's the matter, my good man?"

Immediately it came back to me. I ran into the house, opened a bundle, picked up the *ashrafis* which were wrapped up in the cloth cover of the royal cage, then came outside and held the coins out towards the Darogha.

"Darogha Sahib, where can I put them?" I asked. "Please keep them with you. Or if you wish, give them to Chote Miyan to keep."

"Don't put so much trust in other people, Kale Khan," he said.

"Don't shame me, Darogha Sahib," I said. "Are you all 'other people?'"

"You really are a wonder," said the Darogha, and tucked the *ashrafis* into his cummerbund. Then he said, "Well, your dinner must be on its way. Go, eat and then go back to your own house. You should spend nights there, but what you do in the daytime is up to you. And if the Minister's men come, talk to them with confidence and take care that Chote Miyan's name doesn't come into the discussion. He's a man of fearless temperament, and while he says that he doesn't care if his name comes up, what's the use of displaying unnecessary impetuosity? Anyway, you watch your words. Act like he never came to see you at home. Good-bye for now."

It wasn't long into the night when I arrived home. It didn't feel right without Falak Ara. I lay down and kept tossing and turning. My heart told me that something was about to happen. In the end I couldn't lie in bed any longer. I got up, went out of the house, and started pacing in front of the door.

When a little more of the night passed, I saw the lights of two torches approaching my house. I quickly went back inside, shut the door and lay

down on the bed again. After a while there was a knock on the door.

There were four other men in addition to the torchbearers. They asked me my name, congratulated me curtly on receiving the royal reward, and then asked where the myna was.

"It's been sold," I said.

"Sold?" one of them asked with amazement. "In one day?"

"I'm a poor man. Where in my house could I keep an imperial myna?"

At this point, the men showered me with questions. The light from the torches fell straight on my face and my fear was growing but I kept my courage up and answered all the questions with promptness.

"Who bought it?"

"I don't know—his face was hidden."

"Would you recognize him if you saw him?"

"No, his face was hidden."

"How much did you sell it for?"

"I can't tell you, he made me swear."

"Why?"

"Only he would know."

"Did Chote Miyan come with him?"

"Which Chote Miyan?"

There was silence for a while, and then again the same question.

"Has the myna been sold?"

"Yes, it's been sold."

"What did you do with the money?" one of them asked. "We're Madar-ud-Daula Bahadur the Minister's men. Be careful what you say! What did you do with the money, Kale Khan?"

"So far I've just taken an advance."

"How much?"

"One rupee," came out of my mouth.

Then I began to sweat. Could anyone ever believe that I had put a gold cage and an imperial bird in the hands of a total stranger in exchange for one rupee? At this moment one of them thundered out, "Kale Khan! Be careful what you say!"

The sound of that voice made people come out of several houses in the alley. I stood there silently. The torchbearer in front shifted his torch from one hand to the other, and the flame wavered and the light fell on the face of the man who was speaking. He was a young man. Not just young—one should say that he was in reality only a boy. His mustache hadn't even sprouted completely. His face was handsome. Again, he

roared, “Kale Khan, wouldn’t you recognize that man?”

Suddenly my fear melted into the air.

“All right, I *would* recognize him,” I said. “But I wouldn’t tell anyone if I did. Who are you to ask?”

The men stood around silently for a while, staring at me. Then they all turned around at once and went away. The people from the neighborhood came out and approached me. They asked, “What happened, what happened?!”

“Nothing,” I said. “Bad times are upon us.”

I didn’t even close the door of my house from the inside. I lay down on my bed preoccupied in my thoughts.

“Things are all fouled up, Kale Khan,” I finally said to myself.

And I had spoken the truth. Early in the morning the next day, I was arrested. A gold-and-silver bowl from the Wondrous Cage had been recovered from my house.

9

I forget how long I spent in prison. It felt as if my entire life was passing by in that cage. Most of the prisoners were members of Lucknow’s low life or were petty thieves. I didn’t hit it off with them at all. I stayed aloof from everyone. I missed Falak Ara very much. Sometimes it seemed as if I heard the sound of her laughter and Falak Myna’s chirping from somewhere very close by, and that would unsettle me, but I’d end by feeling a little consoled thinking that she at least had her myna to amuse herself with, and that Nabi Bakhsh and Chote Miyan must be looking out for her welfare better than I could. Above everything, I felt at ease about the issue of money. Of course, I wouldn’t have my salary any more but Falak Myna’s monthly allowance with the price of the imperial cage added in seemed like so much wealth to me that I couldn’t imagine how to ever spend it. Then again, I would wonder if I would ever get out to spend it, or would I die suffocating in prison? I really wished I could send another petition to the emperor. The case against me hadn’t even been prepared yet. I had no idea when my trial would begin and after that, if I got a prison sentence, how long it would be.

But one day I was suddenly released without explanation. It occurred to me that perhaps Darogha Nabi Bakhsh had gotten hold of Munshi Amir Ahmad Sahib, but when I actually came outside, I saw that, like me, other prisoners—perhaps all the prisoners—had been freed. It was very

noisy but I kept to one side and came out and headed for the Sat-Khanda straight away.

I went along for some distance preoccupied with my own thoughts. Then everything appeared somehow different. A strange deathly desolation lay over the city. On the high roads, white military troops were patrolling; the entrance of any alley I turned into would be guarded by two or three British soldiers standing sternly at attention. People had formed small clusters and talked in hushed voices among themselves in the alleys. I was in a hurry to get home so I didn't stop anywhere. But all around the same thing was being talked about, and even without stopping to ask I realized that the Badshah's reign was finished in Avadh. Sultan-e Alam Wajid Ali Shah had been removed from the throne. He had left Lucknow and gone away. Avadh had come into the hands of the British and in celebration they had released a large number of prisoners.

I was one of that multitude. It seemed as if I had come out of one cage only to be shut in another. I had an urge to turn around and go back to the prison, but then Falak Ara came to mind and I began to run along the straight road of Sat-Khanda.

When I arrived at home everything seemed the same as before. At first Falak Ara shied away from me a bit, but then she climbed into my lap and began to tell me the latest stories about her myna.

*

My not taking to life in the city of Lucknow again, my coming to live in Banaras within a month, the war of '57, the Badshah Sultan-e Alam's imprisonment in Calcutta, Chote Miyan's clashing with the British, the destruction of Lucknow, the British overrunning Qaisar Bagh, the hunting of the royal animals inside their enclosures, a certain tigress' wounding her British hunter and escaping, the British in their rage shooting Darogha Nabi Bakhsh—those are all other stories, and there are stories within those stories as well.

But the story of the Myna from Peacock Garden ends right here, with little Falak Ara sitting on my lap telling me the latest tales of that bird's antics. □

—*Translated by Sagaree Sengupta*