

On the Banks of the Ganges

(The First Part of an Unfinished Novel)

“YOU tsee this place, Sajid?”

Sajid turned his eyes to where Adda Mian had pointed with his hand: an open parade ground with army barracks strung out in rows cutting across it on the left and the right. The ground narrowed and squeezed itself between the barracks and then spread out again on the other side like the broad, full chest, slim waist and wide, heavy hips of a woman.

“The prisoners were kept here.”

“Which prisoners?”

“You can’t be serious!” He was sitting in the front part of the tonga, next to Shabrati who kept spurring the horse on every now and then, though there was no need for it. Adda Mian turned around and faced Sajid. “You know, your Pakistanis. What do you call them in English... prisoners of war. Who else!”

The wheel of the tonga went over a rock or into a pothole. Sajid was thrown up and his head bumped against the metal frame of the tonga’s canopy. The pain made him take a quick gulp of air.

Shabrati struck the horse with the whip and then offered his apologies in his own characteristic manner. “You’re not hurt are you Mian?”

“No!” Sajid was still rubbing his head. “The thing is, Shabrati, I’m not used to sitting in a tonga anymore. A passenger has to be alert at all times in one of these. Especially if the road is bumpy.”

“That’s certainly so Mian!” Without meeting his eyes Shabrati looked towards Adda Mian and said: “I told you we should have taken the station road.”

“O, stop your carping or I’ll give you one!” And Adda Mian even raised his right hand as if he was about to give him a slap. “There’s noth-

ing wrong with the road! The wheel just went over a rock or something, that's all!"

Shabrati put his free hand behind his head, which was covered with a dirty and greasy cap, to protect himself, as if Adda Mian really was going to slap him, and let out a giggle.

Adda Mian turned towards Shahid who was sitting next to Sajid in the back, winked and then smiled. Shahid answered his smile with a smile, as if to convince Adda Mian that this little joke which his age and status permitted him had amused him.

Suddenly Sajid understood why Adda Mian had insisted on taking this route to Farrukhabad. He wants to test me by showing me this spreading and narrowing parade ground.

"I swear, Adda Mian. I really didn't know that Pakistani prisoners of war were kept here as well. All I know is that about a hundred thousand surrendered."

"Did you hear that Shabrati? Sajid Mian says he had no idea, and he even swears on it! He knows what's going on all over the world but he didn't know that soldiers from his own army were guests here. In his own Fatehgarh!" It was clear from Adda Mian's tone that he was having a hard time believing what Sajid had said.

The front of the tonga was rising up. Shabrati slipped forward onto the shaft of the carriage. "Mian can't get all the news from here so many thousands of miles away, can he! Isn't that so Mian?"

"Yes."

Just then two images came up from the cellar of Sajid's memories, wiping their faces, straightening their hair and brushing down their clothes, and it was as if he had found an answer to Adda Mian's incredulity and teasing.

"It's true Adda Mian, I really didn't know! Maybe it's because in those days I stayed away from the news and the papers. I just listened to the news on TV once in a while. And I certainly didn't hear this news reported there."

Adda Mian remained silent.

"One day—this was just after the surrender—I saw a lot of people standing on both sides of a road, like a crowd that gathers to watch a wedding procession. Pakistani soldiers were passing in a line between them, like animals. And an Indian soldier was hitting each one of them with something, something made of cloth, maybe an army cap. And they also showed—I think on the same day—an army officer, an Indian army officer, standing on a tank or some military vehicle, shouting at Pakistani

soldiers, swearing at them in English. ‘You Pakistani bastards!’”

For no particular reason Shabrati brought the whip down on the back of the speechless animal.

“Bastard means...”

Adda Mian cut Sajid short. “Even I know that much English, Sajid Mian! The same as *harami* in Urdu, someone who’s illegitimate.”

He looked at Shahid from the corners of his eyes. Shahid smiled again. Adda Mian looked pleased.

“I refused to come anywhere near this place in those days. And they say that here people cursed at them like that every day!”

“I’d end up going by here to Farrukhabad once or twice every fortnight.” Shabrati addressed the feathered plume on top of the bridle on the piebald horse’s head. “The passengers would be sitting quietly, or they’d be talking to each other. But as soon as we got to the prison camp, they’d forget about everything else, lean out and start swearing. It didn’t matter if the sound carried all the way over there or not. You should’ve heard the things they said!” He turned to look at Sajid but did not offer any examples. “Really filthy stuff! Made my ears burn. And the ones who came from over there used to swear in Urdu. You mother... your sister...”

“Listen stupid, you can only really enjoy swearing in your own mother tongue. And whoever is receiving the abuse must speak the same language, that’s also essential!” After explaining this fine point about the giving and receiving of abuse to Shabrati, Adda Mian turned and spoke to Sajid. “No matter how fine a language your English is, it just isn’t a language for swearing. ‘Bloody fool, you bastard!’” He stopped. But either he did not know any other English terms of abuse or he could not remember any. “Call that swearing! I give worse to Shabrati in Urdu just out of affection!” He sought confirmation from Shabrati. “Well, do I or don’t I?”

Shabrati nodded his head with pride. “All the time!”

“Dimwit, shithead, ass, mother...!” In the middle of presenting his examples Adda Mian remembered something. “Shabrati, do you remember the day when Kherati was locked up for swearing?” And before Shabrati could reply, he said: “No, you won’t remember. You must have been very little then.”

But Shabrati said with great confidence, “I remember very well.”

“If you remember so well, then tell us...” There was a note of sharpness in Adda Mian’s voice.

“I was little, but not that little. I was more than ten. I remember very well. My mother just cried and cried.” Shabrati remembered everything.

He remembered that the whole town was talking about his father that day. And he also remembered that when his father was let out of custody, Divan Ji had said, after “giving him a good hiding on his bum with his cane” and hurling a few choice insults at him, “Thank your lucky stars that the Inspector is so kind; if it’d been anyone else they’d have had you put away.”

“But what happened?”

And before either Shabrati or Adda Mian could open their mouths, Sajid answered Shahid’s question. “It was during the war. Kherati—Shabrati’s father—must have been in a hurry. He was taking someone to Kacheri. The horse was all skin and bones. The tonga was crawling along. He lost his temper right in front of the main police station. ‘You sonofabitch, you’re trotting along like the English! March like Hitler!’ That did it; they grabbed him right there.”

“That’s amazing!” Shabrati said with genuine surprise. “Even Sajid Mian remembers!”

Sajid did an impersonation of Shabrati and said, “I remember very well!”

Sajid opened his eyes. Outside, trees, orchards, fields, houses of mud and of brick, electricity cables, pylons. Flickering lights were dancing closer and closer and then moving away. The torpid moonlight appeared even more lifeless through the cloudy glass of the window. *Distance is a shroud of tears around this comely world.* For a little while he tried to make the train run on the beat of the shroud of tears but the wheels did not listen. He closed his eyes again.

“This is the grave of your great-great-grandfather.”

On the other side of the black tarmac road the walls of a solid brick house with its tall wooden door, and on this side the graveyard, an old tamarind tree at its center, its branches giving shade to several graves. And the most conspicuous and highest among them a grave of brick and mortar, green mold on its plastered surface and with a tombstone rising up at least three feet above the ground.

“What number am I after my great-great-grandfather?”

Sajid did a quick calculation. “Your grandfather’s grandfather. If you

start with him you are number five.”

“It looks like the oldest one,” said Shahid, his gaze fixed on the grave. The plaster had fallen off in one or two places and the earth-colored bricks were peeping out.

“Yes, this was the very first grave here, in our family cemetery,” Sajid said, as he carefully removed the dry tamarind leaves from one corner of the grave. He had spoken to Shahid many times of the past glory and honor of the family and he had told him that this “enemy of the English” and pride of the family had been hanged during the “Mutiny.” But perhaps he had not told him where the scaffold on which this brave man was hanged had been erected.

“They hanged Hashim Ali Khan right here.”

“Here? In the graveyard?”

“Yes! Your grandfather used to tell me that this wasn’t always a graveyard. It was just a small, open field. The English set up scaffolds here during the time of the Mutiny. Hashim Ali Khan was buried here and that’s how it became our family cemetery.”

Sajid was silent for a few moments. Then he said, “Our family line doesn’t start from Iran or Turkestan; it starts from this grave.”

Neither of them spoke for a while. Then Sajid took Shahid’s arm and said, “Come here!” And they both went towards a grave which was six or seven yards from Hashim Ali Khan’s and whose epitaph Sajid had read as soon as they had entered the graveyard. “This is your grandfather’s grave.”

The grave was in good repair and it looked as if it had been cleaned only a day or two before. Sajid took out a handkerchief from his pocket and covered his head with it. Shahid did the same.

“Do you remember the prayer for the dead, the opening of the Qur’an?”

Shahid answered him with a blank stare.

“*Praise be to God...*!”

“Yes!” Shahid said quickly. “I remember that!”

They both lifted their hands and Sajid thought, I wonder if he really remembers or if he said it just to please me. He felt a kind of restlessness. His lips began to move and gave sound to the prayer for the dead till it could be heard clearly. Several times during the prayer Sajid’s eyes wandered to the group of houses on the other side of the graveyard where the fakirs lived and where, in front of one of the mud houses, a woman was sitting on a charpoy under the shade of a thatched roof. She had been sewing something at first but now her hands were still and her gaze was fixed on the two of them. When Sajid finished the prayer, he passed his

hands over his face, took the handkerchief from his head, folded it and put it back in his pocket. Then he turned and found the woman standing next to him, dressed in a straight pajama patched together from pieces of red chintz, and a red twill *qamis*. Standing next to her was a man in a black *tahmad* and a black waistcoat over a dirty white *kurta* of coarse cloth. His hair was white and his eyes were streaked with red. They both said salaam to him together.

“Recognize me Sajid Mian?” the man asked.

“Forgive me, I don’t remember!” although Sajid had recognized both of them as soon as he had seen them.

“I’m Badshah, Sajid Mian, Badshah!”

“Oh, Badshah!” Sajid said and embraced him. “Then this must be Batulan!” he said pulling himself away from Badshah as quickly as he had pulled him towards himself. Badshah’s clothes smelled of *ganja*.

Even at her age Batulan appeared a little shy at hearing her name from Sajid’s mouth; she blushed and then laughed.

“Say salaam to Mian!” Badshah commanded her.

Batulan said salaam to Sajid once more.

“And this must be your little one!” Badshah said.

“Yes,” said Sajid, “His name is Shahid.”

“Looks just like his grandfather!” commented Batulan.

Shahid said salaam to both of them, their faces lit up and they showered him with their blessings.

“How is Shahansha?” Sajid asked.

Badshah instantly looked tearful. “It’s been ten, no twelve years since he passed away!” He looked towards Sajid’s father’s grave. “He didn’t wait long after your father’s death!” as if to say that had Sajid’s father not died, his own father might still be alive too.

Batulan failed to bring tears to her eyes. She contented herself with sniffing her dry nose.

Sajid said, “I’m very sorry to hear that!” And it made him remember that father and son never did get along. Fighting and bickering all the time.

Badshah wiped his eyes with the back of his right hand and said, “Yes! It’ll be my turn soon!”

“Don’t be silly, Badshah!” Sajid felt obliged to disagree with him. “You’ve got many years in you yet!”

It was Badshah’s turn now. He thought it necessary to contradict Sajid. “No, Sajid Mian, no! You can’t be sure of anything in this lousy life! Just look at your father. He died so suddenly!”

The heads of women, young and old, had started to appear from behind the doors of some of the mud houses, and several children too—one with muck in his eyes, another with a running nose, another with an amulet around his neck, another naked from the waist down and all of them with dirty, greasy hair, all of them barefoot. They had slowly edged closer and closer to the graveyard.

Sajid felt as if an attack was imminent. He put his hand into the inside pocket of his jacket, folded a hundred rupee note and then took it out so expertly that even Badshah did not see it, although his eyes had not left Sajid's hand from the moment it had gone towards the inside pocket. Sajid turned away from Badshah and Batulan and gave the folded note to Shahid, telling him in English to give it to the woman. Shahid stepped forward and gave the note to Batulan. Batulan half unfolded the note and looked at it. Then she unfolded it completely and brought it up close to her eyes. Her tiny little eyes opened wide. She quickly folded the note again and closed her hand tight. Then, without moving an inch from where she was standing, with one hand closed and the other raised in the air, she once again showered Shahid with blessings. May he live a thousand years, may he have every comfort in life and many children, may he have the most beautiful wife in the world, may the evil eye never fall on him, may he live like a lord, and may he become a great man one day. This last prayer for high accomplishment had been uttered by Badshah who had, this time, been unable to keep pace with Batulan in calling down blessings and whose eyes were again and again going towards Batulan's closed hand.

"We'd better be off now," he begged leave of Sajid.

"Yes."

"Everything is all right?" he asked before turning, with an indistinct gesture towards Sajid's father's grave.

"Yes."

All four said salaam to each other. Badshah turned to leave but Batulan hesitated. Maybe she wanted to make a further display of her gratitude. But she could not think of how to do it. "Are you coming or not?" Badshah looked at her with angry eyes.

Batulan quickly said salaam to Sajid and Shahid again and followed after Badshah who was shouting at the children gathered at the edge of the graveyard, telling them to get away.

Moving towards the grave of Hashim Ali, Sajid said, "They'll fight now," as if he was forecasting the weather. He was smiling.

"Why?"

“Badshah will tell her to give him the note. Batulan will refuse because she knows he’ll only drink it all away. He’ll threaten her with a beating. She’ll say, you can break every bone in my body but you won’t get a penny out of me. He’ll probably hit her with a shoe. People from all the nearby houses will gather and they’ll try and calm things down. And I think they’ll agree to split the money half and half. Whatever they decide, I’m sure that after he’s had a rest Badshah will certainly treat himself today.”

“Does he take drugs?” Shahid asked in English.

“And how! Even now you could smell the *ganja* on his clothes. With these people,” Sajid pointed towards the mud houses, “it’s quite a common habit.”

“Isn’t it illegal?” Shahid asked in English again.

Sajid smiled. “*Ganja*, cannabis, hemp, opium—these have been used here for thousands of years, especially among people like these. No one takes any notice. You can forget about any restrictions, legal or social!”

Shahid looked towards the mud houses. A few eyes were still fixed on Sajid and him. Then he looked across the graveyard in which there were no new graves.

“Can they survive by just digging graves?”

“They don’t just dig graves. They also beg. I don’t know about now, but before they also used to play music at weddings. With red and yellow uniforms, all crumpled up, a couple of sizes too big or too small, all dangling and loose or tight and riding up their legs, and English hats hanging down to their ears. They couldn’t keep time or hold a tune. You felt like stuffing your fingers in your ears. At the weddings they used to get enough food to satisfy them, and some cash too. But they used to have to wait a long time, the poor things. Their turn wouldn’t come until everyone else had eaten.”

“And this Badshah, is he their head?”

“If not official then at least unofficial. His family has been looking after this graveyard for decades, and in return our family has looked after them. At first they used to receive a monthly allowance, with extra on holy days, religious festivals and weddings. Adda Mian must also give them something every month, if for no other reason than just to keep up the family tradition. Do you think he recognized me when he saw me?”

“It looked that way.”

Sajid laughed. “He’s very slippery. Quite an actor! Adda Mian must have told him. The graves wouldn’t have been this clean otherwise. It looks as if he’s swept out the whole graveyard. Did you notice one thing?”

Shahid remained silent.

“He didn’t ask a single question about your mother. His wife didn’t either. If Adda Mian hadn’t told them, she would have asked straight away if she was with us and how she was. In fact she would already have been at the house before now to pay her respects. And they both also knew that you weren’t married yet.”

“That’s why she was praying for the most beautiful wife in the world for me. She said *binnu*, what does that mean?”

“It’s a word for wife. But around here it means bride, a new bride in fact.”

All of a sudden Sajid was taken far away by his memories.

“His father was a great actor too. One day right here, right in front of these houses, he was quarrelling with someone. Actually, he was hitting someone, with a shoe. He was saying it’s been two months now since he borrowed a rupee from me. I’ve asked for it back twenty times, but he still won’t pay up. He was swearing at him too. Then he grabbed his leg and began to drag him, on this very road. It used to be a pebbled road then, with holes in the surface everywhere. He was saying he was going to throw the man in the gully.” Sajid stopped for a moment. He remembered what Badshah’s father had called the man when he threatened to throw him in the gully. He stopped himself from repeating it just before it reached his lips. “I remember it clearly. I was standing nearby watching the whole spectacle and I was very angry that he was beating this man like this and all for just one rupee. With a shoe. He was humiliating him. I couldn’t have been more than eight or nine then. When Shahansha dragged him right to the edge of the gully and I thought that he was about to throw him in, I couldn’t contain myself any longer. I picked up a dry lump of clay and hit him with it. It just so happened that the lump of clay, or it might have been a stone or a piece of brick—whatever it was, it hit him right on the head and his head started bleeding. That was it! He forgot all about the man and headed for our house, coloring up the hem of his *kurta* with a good coating of blood, moaning and groaning, his head in his hands. He kept repeating ‘Mian smashed my head open! Mian smashed my head open!’ My father wasn’t at home just then so the whole matter went to my mother for judgment. One of the servants was sent out to see what kind of injury it was. He reported back that Shahansha really was bleeding from the head but that the wound wasn’t very deep. My mother sent him five rupees and told the servant to take him to Dr. Pursotam Das, who was the only doctor in Fatehgarh at that time, so that he could get the wound dressed. But that rascal wasn’t one to be put off

that easily! Five rupees are not enough. Look at how much blood I've lost! I'll need a pint or two of milk everyday for at least a month before I can get back to normal. In the end he wouldn't budge until he had managed to squeeze out another five rupees from my mother."

"I bet you got a telling off!"

Sajid smiled. Why is it that children are so happy to hear that there was a time when their parents were also scolded. Especially their revered fathers....

"I guess you'd call it a telling off. But not the usual kind. I was in the room up on the roof. Your aunt came up. 'You better come down. Mother is athking for you.' Sajida used to lisp in those days. So anyway, I presented myself before my mother. She politely asked me to take a seat. My ears pricked up because she only used the polite form of address with us when she was angry, otherwise she always used the familiar form. With my father it was exactly the opposite. He would only use the familiar form when he was angry. Otherwise always the polite form. My mother said 'So I'm told that that fakir Shahansha came here complaining that you smashed open his head!' I immediately pleaded guilty. But at the same time I tried to explain that I had done it in order to stop him from doing something really bad. But she wouldn't hear me out and the case was decided against me. 'If other people want to disgrace themselves, let them. What concern is it of yours? Just keep to yourself and don't stick your foot into other people's business. Don't you dare let something like this happen again.' And court was adjourned."

Sajid did not say anything for a while.

"Badshah's father really was a great actor! A long time afterwards I reminded him that because of me he had earned ten rupees. Do you know what he said? 'Not just ten Mian, the full eleven! I wasn't going to let my one rupee go, was I! I made sure I got it back.' Ten rupees was a lot of money in those days, especially for a fakir or a beggar. People usually gave a paisa and if someone gave an *ikanni* they were thought to be excessively generous. An *ikanni* was four paisas. Not new paisas but four old paisas. There used to be sixty-four in a rupee. Father and son never got along. At each other's throat every time you saw them." He paused. Should he say it or not? He's grown up now, educated, and he's seen something of the world. And a grown up son is like a friend. He decided to say it. "I don't know how much of this is true or not, but they say that one night he raped his daughter-in-law. This same Batulan. He might have been drunk. They also say that he was having a regular affair with Batulan and that's why father and son were always quarreling. God

knows. Though things like this were quite common among people of their class.”

“I thought that sort of thing only happened in the West,” Shahid said in English.

“No. But even here the whites are ahead of the rest!” Sajid remembered a program he had seen on TV. “In Britain alone thousands of cases like this reach the courts every year. And experts believe that many more cases never make it to the courts. Here you get to hear about something like this once every twenty or twenty-five years. And even then you can’t be sure if it’s true or not!”

“It’s the same in America.”

“Another thing,” said Sajid. “Here, whatever you hear, true or false, is almost always about a father-in-law and daughter-in-law. But there, it’s fathers, brothers, grandfathers, uncles and kids as young as five or six years of age. I remember one case. There were three sisters and their own father had raped them one after the other. He’d continued doing it, for years.”

Sajid shivered and fell silent. After a while he took Shahid to three or four other graves, one of which was that of his sister Nafeesa, who was two or three years older than him and had died young. As they were leaving to head back towards the house they again passed by the grave of Hashim Ali Khan and Sajid said, “Wouldn’t it be good if I could be buried at the foot of his grave!”

“Prayag Raj” began to slow down rapidly and despite the sharp complaint of the wheels the train finally came to a stop. The woman lying on the berth opposite turned over. Her back, from which the white sheet had slipped, was now towards Sajid. She passed her hand over her rounded thigh and then turned over on her back and covered herself up to her neck with the sheet.

Sajid’s eyes turned away from the woman’s covered body and looked out through the misted window. Everything in view was awash in a feeble moonlight. The narrow, crooked, criss-crossing railway tracks; behind them two buildings that looked like railway quarters; behind these buildings planted fields spreading out into the distance; in the middle of the fields a pylon standing like *Rawan*, the demon of the *Ramlila* plays; on the other side of the fields a few mud houses; on the right a mango orchard, on the left a small, dried out pond. *Wherever the eyes turn, a*

country blooming with dew. He wanted to get out of the carriage and walk into the fields. Barefoot. But the train had not stopped at a station; it was waiting at a signal. Still he lowered his legs from the berth. And if I get left behind? He laughed silently at the foolishness of his idea and drew his legs up again. Travelers are always worrying about being left behind. What if I miss my flight! What if the train leaves! My bus! Always anxious, always worrying. Though if you think about it with a cool head, you should be more concerned about the dangers of the actual journey than about being left behind or missing a connection. But journey's end always beckons, always calls. And to reach their destination people run about as if distracted. Still they get there in the end. But when, overcome with joy, they reach for the object of their desire with trembling hands, those forms of gentle flesh that once seemed to call to eyes, hands and mouth, turn out to be burning sores. What appeared to be the smile of parted lips, really a wound running with blood and pus. And those honest eyes which looked like pools of cooling light prove to be raging fires whose dancing flames are restless to burn you to ashes.

When the train broke its rhythm, Shahid began to stir in his sleep; and when it came to a complete stop, he woke up. He waited for a moment or two. The train did not move. He took a look below. Sajid was sitting on his berth with his legs spread out. His face was turned towards the window.

“Didn’t you sleep, *Abbu*?”

“Just couldn’t get to sleep!”

Shahid climbed down. Sajid pulled his feet back and Shahid sat down in the space next to them.

“Which station is this?”

“We haven’t gotten to a station yet. It’s just stopped at a signal.”

“Fatehpur,” the woman on the berth opposite said. “Fatehpur will come next.” And satisfied that the sheet covered her body fully, she turned over unconcerned, her back towards them.

“Fatehpur is well known in Urdu literature,” Sajid said. “A famous literary journal used to come out of here before Partition. No, it was actually published in Lucknow, and I think before that in Bhopal. But its editor was from here. Niaz Fatehpuri.”

“What was it called?”

“*Nigar*. It was a very good journal!”

“Was it discontinued?”

“Yes. It emigrated to Pakistan. But it didn’t last long there.”

“Why?”

Sajid said nothing for a few moments. “I don’t know.”

“And if it hadn’t gone from here?”

A line from a poem flashed across Sajid’s mind. Then after remaining silent for a while he said, “Who knows. Maybe it wouldn’t have survived even then. Try and get a little more sleep.”

“You should try too,” Shahid said climbing back to his berth.

“Yes.” But instead of closing his eyes Sajid lit up a cigarette. The train began to move. And when Fatehpur had been left behind, Sajid heard the train galloping along to the beat of that line of verse which had just then flashed before him. *Restless in exile and his own land left behind.* He put out his cigarette in the ashtray and closed his eyes.

Sajid had told Shahid about the place of Farrukhabad in the history of Urdu literature. Sauda and Nasikh stayed here on their journey from Delhi to Lucknow. Ghalib stopped here on his way to Calcutta. And Mir might also have passed through on his way to Lucknow. Insha’s father is buried somewhere around here, so it’s likely that he too knew Farrukhabad. And Jan Sahib, he was actually born here. But along with all this Sajid also had to explain why so many Urdu poets had left Delhi and settled in Lukhnow, why Ghalib had travelled to Calcutta, that *rekhti* wasn’t the old name for Urdu but a particular form of Urdu verse, and that, yes, Farrukhabad was also mentioned in the famous Urdu novel, *Umrao Jan Ada*. And Mahadevi Varma, who is a distinguished Hindi poet, is from Farrukhabad too. She may still be alive.

And now father and son were walking along an unusually clean street in the neighborhood known as *Sadvara*. They were looking at the large houses on either side, built on raised foundations. Their tall, wooden doors were covered in many places with leaves of beaten brass, sparkling in the sunlight, and they were studded with large nails, also of brass. Sajid was telling Shahid that this area was called *Sadvara* because *saads* lived here. *Saad* was the name of a particular group of Hindu tradesmen and merchants who were, Sajid thought, found only in Farrukhabad. They make printed quilts, quilt covers, blankets, curtains, things like that. There aren’t many of them but they’re very rich. The collective wealth of the *saads* must be hundreds of millions of rupees. “Farrukhabad used to be famous for its printed fabrics. I don’t know if it’s still the case, but in the early days all the workers used to be Muslims. And printed quilts from here were famous all over, even in other countries.”

They were on their way back to Ghumna Bazaar where they had left the tonga at the tonga stand. As they passed by a confectioner's shop, Sajid remembered another famous thing from Farrukhabad. "In the summers you used to be able to get a kind of *laddu* here. The 'snowball' *laddu*. You'd put one in a glass full of water and within seconds you'd have yourself a cool sherbet. No need for ice. It really did look like a big snowball!"

At the stand Shabrati was feeding grass to the horse. "Adda Mian remembered something important he had to do. He's gone off to the fort or somewhere. And he said not to wait for him. He said whenever Sajid Mian is done, just take him back."

They left town through the main gate, which was built during the time of the Mughals, and Shabrati turned the tonga onto the three-mile long cement road that went straight to Fatehgarh. But they hadn't gone very far before Sajid said, "Go back the same way that we came." Shabrati turned the tonga around and came onto the road which passes through the cantonment further ahead. Sajid started to tell Shahid that Fatehgarh's cantonment was quite large. The area it covered couldn't be much smaller than the town. At first there was just one regiment stationed here. The Seventh Rajput. General Kiri Appa, who later became Commander-in-Chief or Chief-of-Staff of the Indian army, was stationed here during the war. Now there is a second regiment here as well, the Sixteenth Sikh. There used to be a good number of Muslims from around the Jhelum area in the Seventh Rajput, and it was because of them that Sajid had first encountered the Punjabi song form of the *beer*.

"The voice of one of these soldiers used to rise up out of the quiet of the night and spread over the whole village. Always the same melody, like a lament. I remember it clearly. When I first heard that song I felt a strange restlessness, and when I asked my father who was singing, and what he was singing, I was introduced to the Punjabi poet Waris Shah. He told me that whenever Punjabi soldiers think of home, they sing this *beer*."

The tonga was now within the confines of the cantonment and Sajid could see the barracks and the parade ground where the Pakistani soldiers had been held prisoners. A thought started to trot through his mind to the beat of the horse's hooves. People from around here have been going into the army since the time of the East India Company, generation after generation, father followed by son. The Mutiny, the Frontier, the First World War, the Second World War, the Arabian Peninsula, Palestine, Iraq, North Africa, Italy, France, Burma, Singapore, Malaya and who

knows where else. Among the prisoners there must have been at least a few whose fathers, grandfathers or some other close relatives were stationed at this cantonment at one time or another. Wouldn't they have heard of this village and this cantonment from those relatives before joining up and being sent to East Pakistan, and before surrendering and being imprisoned here? And when they were released and sent back, they must have told their families and relatives back home. What would they have told them? Well what do you know! We've been and stayed at that very cantonment you used to tell us about! A scene played out before Sajid's eyes to the beat of the horse's steps. A small railway station. Fields of swaying wheat in every direction. A train comes to a stop. Three or four men, dressed in army uniforms, get down. On the platform there are several men in turbans and *saafas* and some girls and women wearing *chunnis* and *dupattas* of every color, with garlands of flowers in their hands. They go forward quickly and the garlands fall around the necks of the travelers who have reached their destination. The eyes of Sajid's imagination closed and when they opened again another scene was before them. The same station, the same train. A man in an army uniform, covered in dust, gets down from the train. He looks this way and that. The platform is deserted. He comes out of the station and takes a dirt path that winds its way through the fields. On both sides women, girls and men are working. For an instant or two they stop what they're doing and look at the weary, bedraggled man who is walking by with his head bowed, and then they go back to their work.

"Tell me Shabrati, were they allowed to sing *heers*?"

Shabrati turned and looked at Sajid. "Who?"

"The Pakistani prisoners."

"I don't know." Then he asked, "What's a *heer*?"

"*Heer*!" Sajid could not think of a way to explain to Shabrati the real meaning of the connection between the *heer* and Pakistani prisoners. "It's the name of a poem. A Punjabi poem."

The tonga was now passing by the barracks and the parade ground.

"D'you know Mian, many of them got away?"

"Who? The prisoners?"

"Yes! About forty or fifty."

They must have been caught again thought Sajid. "They must have been caught!"

"That's what's so surprising! They didn't catch any of them. All of them managed to get to Pakistan in one piece."

Sajid heard the laughter in Shabrati's words. "Really?"

“Yes, really! They say they tunneled their way to the other side of the Ganges. Transport was ready on the other side. They piled in and off they went!”

“That really is remarkable!” Shahid said to Sajid in English. “In all the films and TV serials I’ve seen about British or American or other Allied soldiers escaping from prisoner of war camps, the soldiers usually end up back in the camps sooner or later.”

“But it’s not the same situation here.” Sajid also switched to English. “There is every variety of language, all manner of dress, people of every kind of appearance. Neither language nor clothes pose a problem. How could anyone recognize them? It’s not as if they would be discovered as soon as they spoke their own tongue or as soon as they wore a pajama.”

Then Sajid spoke to Shabrati. “Who arranged for the transport?”

The tonga was now passing through that part of the cantonment where the officers’ bungalows were spread out. At the gate of one of these there was a Sikh guard in full uniform. He was sitting on a cane or wooden stool and was staring in the direction of the tonga.

“Sajid Mian, I forgot to tell you one thing!”

“What?”

“People coming from Pakistan aren’t allowed into the cantonment!” said Shabrati without taking his eyes off the Sikh guard.

“You should have told us before,” Sajid said with great seriousness.

“I’m really sorry! I just thought of it now.”

“We could be in trouble,” Sajid said glancing towards the Sikh guard who was beginning to stand up, looking unsure of himself. “He’ll order you to stop the tonga now.”

“Shall I turn it around?”

“What good would turning around do now?” Sajid’s tone of voice said let’s see what happens. The tonga was passing in front of the bungalow. Shabrati’s eyes were looking down his nose straight ahead at the road. The Sikh guard was standing. He came to attention and saluted. Sajid immediately answered the salute with a salute. Shabrati turned and looked at Sajid. His eyes were wide with amazement. Sajid smiled. Shahid had to struggle to control his laughter.

“That was a very close call!” said Sajid.

“Yes it was!” said Shabrati. But he was still staring at Sajid in amazement.

Now Sajid could no longer control himself. He laughed. Shahid with him. Laughter burst from their mouths the way birds take flight from an opened caged.

“It’s not stamped on our foreheads that we’re Pakistanis, is it!” said Sajid controlling his laughter.

“No, but that salute he gave you, why did he do that?” Shabrati was still as surprised as before.

“Just in case,” said Sajid and explained it to Shabrati more fully.

Then Shahid told Shabrati that there was no need to worry. “We don’t have Pakistani passports, ours are British.”

“Sajid Mian scared the life out of me for a bit there!”

“You shouldn’t be so scared!” Sajid said.

“Who’s scared!” said Shabrati waving the whip. “Shabrati isn’t scared of anyone, except Him up above!”

Sajid smiled.

A couplet had been trying unsuccessfully to emerge from the depths of Sajid’s mind for several minutes. A fragment would appear, then another, but never the whole in one piece. Finally one fragment broke free from the endless sinking and rising and came to rest on the surface. *The eyes were filled with tears.* But the other pieces were still buried below. He began to search for the pattern of rhymes that would connect the couplets. The woman on the berth opposite turned over and her back was now towards Sajid. The white sheet had again slipped and that part of her back between her plump hips, wrapped in the sari, and her blouse was tugging at Sajid’s eyes. *Appeared before him.* Other rhymes and other fragments. His mind went back towards *appeared before him.* *The first light of dawn...* Sajid saw that the moonlight outside had begun to lose its strength. *The first light of dawn.... The first light of dawn.... The first light of dawn and a new life appeared before him.* This was not a line from the couplet he had been trying to piece together. He turned the line over in his mind for a while but could not remember the accompanying line. *New life my foot!* He listened to the silent echo of his own irritation. His eyes became fixed on the woman’s fleshy, naked back. The woman quickly turned over, as if she had felt the touch of Sajid’s eyes on her bare skin. She opened her eyes and looked. Sajid’s eyes were closed. The woman again covered her body up to the neck with the sheet and closed her eyes. Sajid opened his. The woman was lying on her back, her feet spread apart and the sheet sunk in the hollow between her legs. The lights of some small train station rushed past.

The place where Sajid and Shahid were standing was about twenty-five or thirty feet above the surface of the river. To the left, about a hundred and fifty or two hundred yards on the other side of the line of short trees, some soldiers were playing volleyball. About twenty-five or thirty yards to the right and set back a little, there were three or four officers' bungalows. In front, below, flowed the Ganges. Silent, weary, its surface gentle. It was evening. The sun was edging towards the horizon. Its yellow shafts of light were playing upon the water.

"This place," Sajid said pointing towards the bungalow behind him, "used to be empty ground before. The bungalows were built afterwards. It's such an ideal place. You can sit at home and look out across the Ganges! Come on, let's go down."

They went down the twenty or twenty-five brick steps and reached the edge of the river. They could now see that the water which looked still from up above was in full flow. On the other side of the river there was open ground which stretched as far as the eye could see and which appeared golden in the fading light of the sun.

"Right now you could just walk across," Sajid said. The two of them were walking on the wet sand by the edge of the river. "But in the rainy season you can't see the banks of the Ganges for miles."

"It's such a peaceful place!"

"Yes!" Sajid stopped. His eyes looked up at the trees growing on the bank above where they had been just a few minutes before. "I used to come here a lot. I'd grab a book and come out here to sit and read for hours under one of those trees. I think I first understood the meaning of calm in this place."

As they turned Shahid caught sight of the shrine on the other side of the flight of steps. It was built on a raised platform and looked like a large doll's house. Even in the dim light of the evening you could clearly see the flowers scattered by worshippers at the feet of the idol inside.

"*Abbu*, these are the same steps, aren't they!" The pleasure of knowing rang in Shahid's voice.

"Which steps?"

"The one where the priest from the shrine used to play that one-stringed instrument of his. What's it called?"

"*Iktara?*"

"That's it, *iktara!*"

"How do you know about that!"

“Mum used to tell me. Grandmother wrote about it in one of her letters.”

“...he sneaked back there without telling anyone and then sent the very important news that the priest who used to sit on the terrace of the Rani Ghat shrine and play his *iktara* was dead....”

“Yes” said Sajid. He was looking not towards the shrine but towards the sinking sun.

When they turned to go a man who had been squatting behind a sand dune, with the top of his shaved head and his long, broad braid of hair peeking out above the dune, stood up and let down the thread wound around his ear.

“What was that around his ear?” Shahid asked as he put his foot on the first brick step.

“*Jainio!* It’s a sacred thread worn by Brahmins. When they go to the toilet they wrap it around the ear.” Sajid thought Shahid would ask why, but he remained silent. “It’s for the sake of cleanliness. It’s part of their creed. The fire-worshippers in ancient Iran used to wear a thread like this as well. It was called a *zunnar*. When they worshipped the sun in the morning they would take it in both hands, between both thumbs, just the way Hindus say *namaste* when they greet you. This worship of theirs was called *namashat*. Later when Islam spread throughout Iran, this same *namashat* was distorted and became the Muslim word for prayer, *namaz*. A lot of the words and phrases in which we use *namaz* come from Persian, not Arabic.” They were on the last step now. “And *khuda* too, the word for God, is a present-day version of an ancient Persian word.”

Sajid’s eyelids were becoming heavier. He thought he was about to fall asleep. This is hardly the time to sleep! Only an hour or an hour and a quarter to go. He forced his eyes open but his eyelids started to grow heavy again. He was left hanging between surrender to sleep and the decision not to sleep.

“The name of this area is Gari Khana,” Sajid said. “And you see that house there,” he pointed towards a house on the right. “I used to come and go there quite a lot once upon a time.” A large veranda; iron pillars, painted green; two doors, one large and one small, also green. There were

layers of dust settled on the veranda. An open drain flowed in front of the house. A small, whitewashed mosque adjoined it. "I don't know who lives there now. In those days a landowner lived there. His wife and my mother were very good friends. I used to call her Auntie. She had a daughter, Anjum, who was studying in Aligarh. I called her Appia. She died, the poor thing!"

"Anjum?"

"No, the landowner's wife. And he married again. The second wife was only six or seven years older than Appia. Appia was never the same after that. Then she got married, to a relative in Lucknow."

Appia had come back home for the summer holidays and I had started going to the landowner's house more often. That day I was flying a kite on their roof when Appia called. Sajid! Yes Appia. Come here a minute. I quickly brought the kite down and ran downstairs without even winding the string back on the spool. Appia wasn't in the courtyard. The old maid happened to be in the kitchen kneading dough in a clay bowl and she pointed towards Appia's room with her dough-covered hand. When I entered the room I saw that Appia was threading a trouser string through a loose pajama and that there was a gathered *dupatta* coiled on the bed. Next to it was a folded towel with a rose-colored ribbon peeking out of it. Yes Appia? I went and stood right next to her. I could smell the perspiration on her body. I loved the smell of her perspiration. Will you do me a small favor, little brother? Your wish is my command! She had laughed. Cheeky! And she had hugged me. How you've grown! My head was touching her chest. Then Appia had picked up the purse on the table, given me some change, darted a quick look towards the open door through which you could see the courtyard, and said, "Run and get me a razor blade." I said all right and leapt towards the door but immediately turned back and put the change on the table. I've got money. Don't be silly. I can't very well let my little brother spend money on me, can I! Then I won't go! And she had said, "That's naughty. You shouldn't make a fuss." And when I still refused, she said, "All right, all right, but make it quick. And listen." Her mouth had come right up to my ear. "Don't tell anyone." I was so happy that Appia had entrusted me with this secret. I ran all the way there and all the way back. And I hid the blade carefully when I handed it to her and so lived up to the trust she had placed in me. Only after she had picked up the *kurta*, pajama and towel and gone into

the bathroom did I think about what she was going to do with the blade.

“Did they go to Pakistan as well?”

“No. I heard that they sold the house and went to their son in Etawah.” Sajid turned and took one last look at the house. “They were solid Muslim League supporters.”

It was winter. The middle of the afternoon. I must have been about fifteen; I think I was in ninth grade. The door was locked from the inside although it was often left open. I knocked. The landowner’s second wife opened the door. How did you manage to find your way here today then! My mother said to ask when Appia was coming. She’s not coming; a letter just arrived. She says she needs to prepare for her finals. She won’t be able to come during the vacation. There wasn’t a sound in the house. Where’s Uncle? He’s gone to Etawah. And without my asking she also told me that he had taken their servant Salaam Baba with him and, as luck would have it, the old maid had gone to see her granddaughter and said she wouldn’t be back before sunset. There’s some lentil *halva*. Do you want some? And when I said yes, she said let me have a wash first, then I’ll warm it up for you. She picked up the bucket full of hot water, but I quickly took it from her hand and put it in the bathroom. She followed me into the bathroom, wearing a pair of tight pajamas and no *dupatta*. And as I was coming out of the bathroom I bumped up against her. Look where you’re going she had said. I was embarrassed and she had smiled. I went to Appia’s room and took *A Woman of Pleasure*, which I had covered in newspaper, from my coat pocket and, lying down on her bed, I started to read at the page I had marked. The sound of splashing water started to come through the open door and for a while I fixed my ears on it. Then I went to the door and closed it. Sitting down on the armchair by the bed with the mosquito net, I picked up the novel which was lying face down on the bed. But after reading only a few lines I put it down on the bed again and started to stare at the closed door. Then I stood up and opened the door and remained there for a few moments staring, at the panels of the bathroom door. Then I crept over towards the door and bent down to look through a crack in the wood. The landowner’s second wife was sitting on a wooden stool and her right hand

was raised. In her raised hand there was a copper-plated pot and from the nozzle of the pot water was falling on her and flowing to the ground, slipping over her limbs which were shining in the grey darkness. Her eyes were closed and her face was tilted up a little, her mouth slightly open. Then the water in the pot ran out and she opened her eyes. I straightened up and rushed away. Her voice came after me, who is it? Quickly but quietly I was back in Appia's room. I had already closed the door, picked up the novel and hidden my face behind it. I was out of breath and scared. But I wanted to go back and peep into the bathroom again. Then I heard her call from the other side of the door, Sajid! And in answer to my yes the door had opened and she had come in. Still afraid, I looked up from behind the book and saw that she was wrapped in a sheet from the top of her shoulders to down below her knees, and the sheet was covered in wet patches. Wherever it was wet it stuck to her plump body and you could see her well-shaped calves. Her face was glowing and the whole room was filled with a perfume that seemed to be coming from her body. She said, "Let me get dressed, then I'll get you some *halva*." I said all right and closed the book. I watched the sheet covered in wet patches cross the courtyard, go onto the veranda and then disappear into the room behind it. When, after a little while, I heard the rattle of pots and pans in the kitchen, I put *A Woman of Pleasure* back in my coat pocket and stood up with the intention of slipping away quietly. But just then she had called me. Come on Sajid Mian, the *halva* is warmed up. And my feet had turned towards the kitchen, although I really didn't feel like eating *halva*. She said sit down and I sat down on a low stool. She put the small plate of *halva* on a salver and handed it to me. I put a spoonful in my mouth; it was very hot. I swallowed it quickly. She said, "What's the hurry, let it cool down." She covered her mouth with her hand and laughed. Then she stretched out her hand and patted me on the cheek. I ate the next spoonful after blowing on it two or three times. Suddenly she said I'll be back in a second and she crossed the courtyard and went to the front door. By the time she came back I was standing up. She took one look at the *halva* still left on the plate and asked, "What's the matter? Isn't it any good?" I said the first thing that came into my mind. No, that's not it. I have a headache. I'll eat it some other day. She said why didn't you tell me before. Then she took me by the wrist and said, "Come with me, I have some medicine that's very good for headaches." Willingly and unwillingly I crossed the courtyard with the landowner's second wife and entered that darkness into which I had seen the sheet covered in wet patches disappear ten or fifteen minutes earlier. She let go of my wrist,

took a jar of balm from the small built-in closet on the opposite wall and told me to lie down. At the head of the bed there was an embroidered pillowcase with a red rose in the middle of green vines, and at its foot there was a folded, printed-silk quilt. I lay down though what I really wanted to do was run and not stop until I had reached the street. She let out a quiet laugh. What's the matter with you, Sajid Mian? Why don't you take off your coat! I took off my coat and she sat down on the bed by my head. She bent down a little over me and started rubbing the balm on my forehead. What were you reading? Just a course book, and I quickly opened my eyes and saw that the coat was still folded as before on a nearby chair. You shouldn't read so much. Reading too much can also give you headaches. I gave no answer. I was finding the touch of her oily fingers on my forehead and temples pleasant now and my eyes had closed. A faint smell of attar was coming from her clothes. She asked, "Any better?" And I said yes, it's completely gone now. I took hold of her wrist, which was covered in glass bangles, and removed her hand from my forehead. She made no effort to free her hand. In fact I myself said it's a very good balm and let go of her wrist. But when I tried to get up she put the same hand on my chest and made me lie down again. She said, "Rest for a little while before going." And she stood up and closed both panels of the door. The room became completely dark. Light always irritates the eyes when you have a headache. She also said, "I think I'll stretch out a little as well." Even though there was another bed in the room, only three or four yards away, she lay down on the same bed and pulled the folded quilt over herself and me up to our waists. I felt as if a wave of electricity had left her body and entered mine. I remembered a dream I had had two or three days before in which I had somehow managed to clamber up, slipping and sliding, onto the tin roof of the blind lawyer's house and all the way up one of the very greasy, round pillars. I was clinging on, trying not to slip off. Just then I felt as if something drained out of my body, gathered itself into a single point and was about to be shot out like a bullet from the barrel of a gun. The deliciousness of this dream was so painful that I had woken up. That same painful pleasure gripped me in its trap now. I wanted to turn over, but I couldn't. I wanted to slip away, but I couldn't move. I wanted to get up, but I couldn't get up. I wanted to cry out but no sound came. I have had a nightmare again and again in which I am standing on the parapet of a very high roof. My foot slips and I fall and keep on falling and falling but I never actually hit the ground. I want to scream but have no voice. Finally I wake up and I'm lying on my back in bed, taking quick, short breaths. I don't know how or when I

managed to get free from the trap but I found myself standing next to the bed, taking quick short breaths. The very next moment I picked up the coat lying folded on the chair, opened the door and was out of the room. Then the courtyard, the front door and its bolt. I stopped to rest only after I had reached the street. I remembered then that when I had entered the house, neither she nor I had bolted the door. The street was deserted. After I put on my coat I felt in my pocket to make sure that *A Woman of Pleasure* was still there. And as I was leaving I caught sight of the green flag of the whitewashed mosque fluttering over the house and heard the call to afternoon prayer.

As a tape of a Hindu hymn started playing on the train's public address system, Sajid thought perhaps they'll start something like this on the trains in Pakistan as well. A hymn to God or a eulogy on the Prophet to start and end each journey. He searched his memory but he could not remember a single verse from such a hymn or eulogy, except one or two verses of praise sung by fakirs passing through the streets. Sajid also knew one or two of the blessings read at the end of the celebration of the Prophet's birth. But he was searching his memory for poems of literary standing and distinction. He was surprised. How can it be that poems of such worth exist in Urdu and I have no knowledge of them whatsoever. Surprise turned to understanding. It's that, if not all, then at least the principal part of the best Urdu poetry is almost entirely secular! Elegies, odes, Hali's *The Flood and Ebb of Islam*, Iqbal's "Complaint" and the "Answer to the Complaint." He turned over page after page. The train was slowing down. Sajid decided there was no real need for him to alter the conclusion he had reached. But just then his mind turned towards Hali's "Petition" and he remembered its opening:

*O Messenger of messengers, the time has surely come for prayer;
Strange days when your faithful lie crushed, vain without care.*

He smiled. Hali was an extraordinary poet. Like so much of his nationalist and religious poetry, this verse seemed just as relevant today as it did a hundred or more years ago.

Sajid opened his eyes. The woman on the opposite berth was now sitting up, her feet dangling down. It was daylight outside. He stood up and shook Shahid by the shoulder.

“What is it?”

“Get up! We’re coming into Allahabad.”

And when Sajid sat down on his berth and lit up a cigarette, that fugitive verse which had for so long eluded the grasp of his memory gave itself up to him:

*Though the fields were spread like the smile of a spring dawn,
The eyes were filled with tears in her arms at journey’s end.*

But there was only a burning in his eyes, the burning of sleeplessness. □

(1991)

—Translated by Shamooin Zamir