

ISMAT CHUGHTAI

An Excerpt from *Kaghazi Hai Pairahan*
(The “Lihaf” Trial)

It must have been about four, maybe four-thirty in the evening when the doorbell rang loudly. The servant opened the door and stepped back aghast.

“Who is it?”

“The Police!”

If there’s a robbery in the neighborhood servants are the first to be questioned.

“The Police?” Shahid got up hurriedly.

“Yes sir.” The servant was trembling. “But Sahib, I haven’t done anything, I swear Sahib.”

“What’s the matter?” Shahid asked at the door.

“It’s a summons.”

“Summons? But ... Alright, give it to me.”

“Sorry, we can’t give it to you.”

“But ... summons? Who for?”

“Ismat Chughtai. Please get her.”

The servant heaved a sigh of relief.

“At least tell me ...”

“Please get her. The summons is from Lahore.”

I was cooling the formula I had just prepared for my two-month old daughter Seema. “A summons from Lahore?” I asked, shaking the bottle under cold tap water.

“Yes, from Lahore,” Shahid said, sounding quite irritated.

I came out in my bare feet, still holding the bottle in my hand.

“Arre, what kind of a summons is this?”

“Read it yourself,” the police inspector said dryly.

On reading the opening phrase written in bold letters I burst out

laughing. It said: ISMAT CHUGTAI VS. THE CROWN.

“*Arē*, what have I done that His Majesty has slapped me with a court case?”

“Don’t joke,” the Inspector Sahib said harshly. “Read it and sign it!”

I read the summons further. It took a while to figure out that I had been charged with obscenity for my short story “*Liḥāf*” (quilt) and that I was to appear in the Lahore High court in January. Severe action would be taken against me if I failed to show up on the appointed day.

“Look here, I’m not accepting this summons,” I said. Handing the paper back to the inspector, I continued shaking the bottle of milk in my hand. “Please take it back.”

“You have to accept it.”

“Why?” Out of sheer habit I began arguing with the man.

“*Arē*, I say, what’s going on?” Mohsin Abdullah said as he hurriedly came up the stairs. God knows where he had been roaming about.

“Look, these people are forcing this summons on me. Why should I take it?” Mohsin had studied law and had passed with high marks.

“*Hunh*,” he said after perusing the summons. “Which story?”

“Oh God, there is a wretched story, it’s become such a bother now.”

“You’ll *have* to accept the summons.”

“Why?”

“As much a wrangler as ever. There’s that same obstinacy again!” Shahid flared up.

“I *will* not take it. Never!”

“You’ll be arrested if you don’t,” Mohsin yelled.

“Let them arrest me. But I will not take the summons.”

“You’ll be thrown in jail.”

“I will? Can’t ask for more. I’m dying to see a jail. Haven’t I asked Yusuf many times already to take me to a jail and show me around? But the wretch always laughs off my request. Inspector Sahib, please take me to jail. Have you brought any handcuffs?” I asked amiably.

The Inspector Sahib’s anger mounted. But he held it back and said, “Please don’t joke about the matter. Just sign.”

That was when Shahid and Mohsin both lost their tempers. I hadn’t taken any of it at all seriously and had been laughing throughout. When Abba Mian was a judge in Sanihar the court used to be held next to the men’s quarters of the house. We would sit in the window and watch the thieves and dacoits being brought in handcuffed. Once the police captured a band of extremely dangerous dacoits. A ravishingly beautiful woman in britches and a coat, with the eyes of a hawk, a supple waist and

long black hair, accompanied them. She had made a tremendous impression on me.

Shahid and Mohsin made me very nervous. I stuck the milk bottle out toward the police inspector so that I could free my hand to sign the summons. But he shrank back as if I had pointed the muzzle of a gun at him. Mohsin quickly snatched the bottle from my hand and I signed the paper.

“Please come to the station to post the bail, which is five hundred rupees.”

“I’m afraid I don’t have five hundred rupees at the moment.”

“Not you, someone else will have to put up bail for you.”

“I don’t want to involve anyone else. If I don’t appear in court the bail will be forfeited.” I tried to impress the inspector with my knowledge. “You can arrest me.”

This time the Inspector Sahib didn’t lose his cool. He smiled at Shahid, who was sitting on the sofa with his head held between his hands, and said to me gently, “Please come along, it won’t take more than just a few minutes.”

“But the bail?” I said, softening a bit. I was embarrassed by my foolish behavior.

“I’ll post the bail,” Mohsin said.

“But my daughter is hungry, her ayah is new and is only a young girl.”

“You may feed her first,” the Inspector Sahib said.

“Well in that case, please come inside.” Mohsin led the policemen in. The Inspector Sahib turned out to be a fan of Shahid’s and talked so amiably to him that Shahid’s mood improved.

Shahid, Mohsin and I went together to the Mahim Police Station.

After signing all the required forms I asked, “Where are the convicts?”

“You want to see them?”

“Absolutely.”

A dozen or so men were lying crisscross in a cramped space behind bars.

“They’re criminals, not convicts. They’ll be presented in court tomorrow,” the Inspector Sahib explained.

“And what are their crimes?”

“Brawling, rioting, pick-pocketing, creating a disturbance while drunk.”

“And what will they get?”

“Fines, maybe a few days in jail.”

What a bunch of uninspiring nobodies—I was hugely disappointed. A couple of dacoits and murderers would have been a more exciting fare.

“Where would you have kept me?”

“There’s no arrangement for women here, we take them to Grant Road or Mitanga.”

After we came home Shahid and Mohsin fought bitterly with me. And Shahid, all night long. We almost came to the point of considering divorce. I silenced Mohsin by threatening to disappear if he didn’t stop pestering, which meant that he would lose his five hundred rupees, but Shahid wouldn’t be mollified. He couldn’t bear the thought of the dishonor, the disgrace such a trial would likely bring nor the thought of how his parents and older brother would react when they heard what had happened?

When the news hit the papers a very sad letter from my father-in-law arrived. “Give *dulban* some advice, tell her she should write something about Allah and the Prophet so that her afterlife may be blessed. A trial and one for obscenity to boot—we are all very worried, may God have mercy on us all.”

A phone call from Manto informed us that he too had been charged with obscenity and his case was also scheduled for the same day in the same court. He and Safia came over immediately. Manto looked so happy, as if he had been awarded the Victoria Cross. My heart was heavy with regret, but I was putting on a brave front. However, Shahid felt reassured after he talked to Manto, and so did I. I had been feeling very apprehensive, but Manto’s exuberance banished all my fears.

“Manto Sahib, you’d better stop now,” Safia said, feeling nervous.

Then the letters filled with profanities began arriving. Directed not only against me but also against my whole family, Shahid, and my two-month old daughter whose birth had been announced somewhere in the news, were insults that were so unusual and coarse that if uttered before a corpse it would spring back to life and bolt.

I’m terrified of slippery mud, lizards, and chameleons. A lot of people put on a great show of bravado but are scared out of their wits if they happen to see a dead mouse. I was terrified of my mail. I felt as if the envelopes contained snakes, scorpions and pythons. I would open a letter gingerly and if I glimpsed the dreaded snakes and scorpions, I would read it quickly and burn it immediately. If any of these letters fell into Shahid’s hands we would be talking of divorce again.

Add to this the tenor of the articles appearing in the newspapers and the discussions taking place in private gatherings that only someone as

hardened as I could endure. I never responded to anything. I never refused to admit my mistake. Yes, I had made a mistake. I was confessing to my crime. Manto was the only person who found my cowardly behavior absolutely horrible. I was going against myself. And he still stuck up for me. All our friends, Shahid's and mine, didn't think much of the incident. If I'm not mistaken, [Khwaja Ahmed] Abbas even had an English translation of the story published somewhere. The Progressives neither berated nor commended me, and I found their attitude very reassuring.

When I wrote this story I was living with my brother. I wrote it at night and read it to my sister-in-law the next day. She didn't say, "This is a filthy story," but she did recognize the protagonist in the story. Then I read it to my fourteen-year-old cousin. She said, "What have you written? I don't understand any of it." I sent the story to the journal *Adab-e Latif*. The editor made no comments and published the work immediately. About the same time, Shahid Ahmad Dehlavi included it in the collection of my stories which he was about to publish. "Liḥāf" was first published in 1942, a time when my friendship with Shahid had culminated in the decision to marry him. Shahid read the story and expressed his dislike for it after which we did have an argument. But the attacks on "Liḥāf" hadn't reached Bombay as yet. The only literary periodicals I received in those days were *Sāqī* and *Adab-e Latif*. So Shahid had little reason to be worried and we got married.

The summons to appear in High Court had come in December, 1944. Everyone said that there was no question of being jailed and I would be let off with just a fine. Excitedly I started to have warm clothes made for the upcoming trip to Lahore.

Seema was very young and frail and cried in a very loud voice. The pediatrician assured us that she was a perfectly healthy child and her bawling indicated nothing. All the same, it was not advisable to expose her suddenly to the Lahore cold. She wouldn't be able to take it. And so I left her with Sultana Jafri's mother in Aligarh. Shahid Ahmad Dehlavi and the gentleman who had calligraphed my book, who had also been indicted, joined us at Delhi. The case had only been brought against the collection that Shahid Ahmad Dehlavi had published and not against the journal *Adab-e Latif*.

Sultana came to pick us up. She was working for the Lahore Radio Station in those days and lived in Luqman Sahib's bungalow, a grand sprawling place. His wife and children were visiting her parents, so we had the complete run of the place.

Meanwhile Manto had also arrived and soon we were attending one party after another. Most of our hosts were actually Manto's friends, but they invited me because they saw me as some strange creature. Our case was presented on the appointed day. Nothing much happened. The judge asked my name and whether I had written the story in question or not. I confessed to my crime. That was it!

I was very disappointed. For the rest of the time our lawyer held forth, not a word of which could we catch as we were constantly whispering among ourselves. And then a second date was set. Feeling free, we embarked on having a good time. Manto, Shahid and I would get into a *tonga* and spend all day shopping. We bought Kashmiri shawls and shoes. At the shoe shop I felt a stab of envy beholding Manto's delicate and fair-skinned feet. The sight of my own ungainly feet made me want to lament like the peacock.

"I'm repelled by my feet," Manto said.

"Why? They're so attractive," I argued.

"They're so feminine."

"But you have a special interest in females, don't you?"

"That's an upside down argument. I love women as a man. That doesn't mean I should become a woman myself."

"Well, let's drop this discussion about feminine and masculine. Let's talk about people. Do you know that men with delicate feet are very sensitive and intelligent? Azim Baig Chughtai, my brother, he too had very beautiful feet, but ..."

I suddenly remembered my brother's repulsively swollen feet just before he died. And the Lahore that was decorated like a new bride with apple and apricot blossoms was transformed into the rocky, sand-swept cemetery of Jodhpur where my brother slept under tons of earth, and on whose grave thorny bushes had been planted to keep away badgers that might burrow through it. Those thorns swam through my veins, and I put the soft lamb's wool shawl back on the shop's counter.

How beautiful Lahore was. Still invigorating, full of laughter, its arms spread out in welcome, embracing all those who arrive here, a city of cheerful people who love unconditionally, without reserve, the "heart of the Punjab."

We roamed around the city, deep in conversation, our pockets filled with pine nuts. We walked and walked. At a street corner we ate fried fish. How much one eats when one is walking! And how quickly whatever one eats metabolizes! We wandered into a restaurant. The sight of hot dogs and hamburgers made our mouths water.

“Hamburgers contain ham, that is, pig’s meat, but we can eat hot dogs,” Shahid suggested. And like good Muslims we kept our religious faith intact by eating our fill of hot dogs, and drinking the juice of Qandhari pomegranates.

Only later did we discover how crafty the white race can be: hamburgers don’t have pig’s meat in them but hot dogs are really pork sausages! Even though it had been two days since we had eaten those hot dogs, Shahid suddenly began to feel nauseated. Then a *maulvi shāhib* issued a *fatwā* that pork eaten unknowingly didn’t amount to sin. Only then did Shahid cease to be sick.

But whenever Shahid and Manto got very drunk in the evening they came to the joint decision that hamburgers were not at all safe and hot dogs were better on all accounts. The argument threatened to take a rather dangerous turn but finally it was decided that for the time being we should abstain from eating both because no one could guarantee what the source for either was, and which was *ḥalāl* and which *ḥarām*. So, chicken *tikkas* were the best, we decided. We roamed in Anarkali, wandered about in Shalimar, saw Nurjahan’s mausoleum, and then more receptions and parties followed by God’s grace.

That was when words of spontaneous praise poured out of my heart for the king of Britain because he had brought a case against us and thus afforded us the golden opportunity to have a festive time in Lahore. We now waited impatiently for our second appearance in court. We no longer cared if we were to be hanged. If we were hanged in Lahore we would attain the status of martyrs and the *Lahorewallahs* would take out our funeral processions with great pomp and show.

The second appearance was scheduled for the pleasant month of November, in 1946, that is. Shahid was busy with his film. Seema’s ayah had become very efficient and Seema was now very healthy and robust, so I left her in Bombay and flew by plane to Delhi, continuing on to Lahore by train, accompanied by Shahid Ahmad Dehlavi and his calligrapher. I felt very embarrassed before the calligrapher. The poor man had been dragged into all this for no reason at all. He was always very quiet, sat with his eyes lowered, a weary expression on his face. Every time I looked at him I’d be overwhelmed afresh by a feeling of guilt.

“What do you think?” I asked him, “Will we lose the case?”

“I can’t say, I haven’t read the story.”

“But Katib Sahib, you calligraphed it.”

“I see the words separately and write them, I don’t pay attention to their meanings.”

“Amazing! And you don’t even read it after it has been printed?”

“I do. But only to catch printing errors.”

“Each word separately?”

“Yes.” He lowered his head in contrition. After a short pause he said, “You won’t mind if I say something?”

“No.”

“You make a lot of spelling mistakes.”

“Yes, I do. Actually I confuse ‘*sīn*’ with ‘*ṣē*,’ there’s a lot of confusion between ‘*zō’e*,’ ‘*zūād*,’ ‘*zē*’ and ‘*zāl*,’ and it’s the same story with ‘*hē*’ and the other two ‘*hēs*.’

“Didn’t you write *takhtīs*?”

“I did write *takhtīs* a lot and often got punished for these very mistakes, but ...”

“Actually, just as I pay attention only to words and ignore meanings, in the same way it seems you are so involved with what you’re saying that you don’t pay attention to spelling.”

May God bless calligraphers, they will keep my honor intact I thought, and dropped the issue.

I stayed at M. Aslam’s house with Shahid Sahib. We hadn’t even greeted each other properly when he began scolding me, denouncing what he called my obscene style of writing. I was furious. Shahid Sahib tried his best to stop me but I was soon embroiled in a battle.

“And what about the filthy sentences you have written in *Gunāh kī Rātēn* (nights of sin), actually giving explicit details of the sex act, just for titillation?”

“It’s different in my case, I’m a man.”

“So is that my fault?”

“What do you mean?” He reddened with rage.

“I mean that God has made you a man and I have nothing to do with that and he has made me a woman and you have nothing to do with that. You haven’t asked me to give you the right to write what you want nor do I consider it necessary that I should ask you for the right to write freely.”

“You are an educated girl from a respectable Muslim family.”

“You too are educated and from a respectable Muslim family.”

“You want equality with men?”

“Not at all. I used to try to get the highest marks in class and often I got higher marks than boys.”

I knew that I was resorting to my hereditary penchant for tortuous reasoning. But Aslam Sahib’s face had become flushed and I was afraid that he might slap me or that an artery might burst in his brain. Shahid

Sahib was beginning to panic. He seemed about to break into tears any minute.

Using a mild manner and a tone of entreaty, I said, “Aslam Sahib, in reality no one ever told me that writing on the subject I deal with in “Lihāf” is a sin, nor did I ever read anywhere that I shouldn’t write about this ... disease ... or tendency. Perhaps my mind is not the brush of Abdur Rahman Chughtai but only a cheap camera instead. Whenever it sees something, it releases the shutter on its own and the pen in my hand becomes helpless. My mind tempts my pen, and I’m unable to interfere in the matter of my mind and pen.”

“Didn’t you get any religious education?”

“Arē Aslam Sahib, I’ve read *Bahishtī Zēvar*. There are such frank matters mentioned in it.” I assumed an expression of innocence. Aslam Sahib seemed rather disconcerted by this.

“When I read those things as a child my heart suffered a jolt. I thought they were filthy. Then I read the book again when I was in B.A. and discovered those things were not filthy at all. They were matters every intelligent person should be aware of. However, if people wish they can also call medical texts and books on psychology dirty.”

Once the one-on-one was over we started talking amicably enough. Aslam Sahib had cooled down. Breakfast arrived. The food laid out for the four of us was so elaborate and extensive that it could easily have fed fifteen people. Three or four types of eggs—plain, fried, omlette, and boiled—*shāmī kabābs* and *qīma*, *parāṭhās* and *pūrīs* along with toast, white and yellow butter, yogurt and milk, honey and dry fruits, egg halva, carrot halva and halva *sōhan*.

“For God’s sake, you don’t wish to kill us, do you?”

Because I had tormented him so much I now began to compliment some of his work. I had read only *Nargis* and *Gunāh kī Rātēn* and I praised both to high heavens. Finally he was all but convinced that in some cases expressions of explicit sexuality act as plain talk and can be instructional. Then he began to find something to praise in each and every one of his own books. Before long he had settled into quite a pleasant mood. He said, gently, “Offer your apology to the judge.”

“Whatever for? Our lawyer says we will win the case.”

“No, the wretch is lying. If only you and Manto could apologize, the case would be over in five minutes flat.”

“So the respectable class here has pressured the government to build this case against us, is that it?”

“That’s nonsense!” Aslam Sahib said, but he wouldn’t look me in the

eye.

“Well, then, are you telling me that the government or the king of Britain read these stories and decided to indict us?”

“But Aslam Sahib,” Shahid Sahib said mildly, “it is true that a few writers, critics and some of the respectable citizenry directed the government’s attention to these books, suggesting that they were morally damaging and hence should be seized.”

“Are you saying that morally damaging books should be exalted instead?” Aslam Sahib exploded. Shahid Sahib looked rather embarrassed.

“In that case we definitely deserve punishment,” I said.

“There you go again with your stubborn arguing.”

“No Aslam Sahib, it’s not right that we should commit a crime, lead virtuous people astray, and then make a clean exit simply by saying we’re sorry. If indeed I have committed a crime and it is proven that I have, only punishment will appease my conscience.” I was not saying this derisively, I really meant it.

“Don’t be obstinate. Just apologize.”

“What will we get for punishment—a fine?”

“And disgrace too.”

“There’s been plenty of disgrace already, how much more can remain? This court case is nothing. How much will the fine be?” I asked.

“About two or three hundred rupees, I should think,” Shahid Sahib said.

“That’s all?”

“It could be as high as five hundred,” Aslam Sahib tried to scare me.

“That’s ... it?”

“So you have a lot of money it seems.” Aslam Sahib lost his temper again.

“With your blessing. And even if I didn’t have it, why, wouldn’t you have given five hundred rupees to save me from going to jail? After all you are among the affluent of Lahore.”

“You talk too much.”

“Exactly what Mother used to complain. She would say, ‘All you know is shoot off your mouth and stuff your belly.’”

Good humor prevailed and the matter was put aside. But after a short while it was back to “apologize” again.

I felt like bashing his skull and mine, but I checked myself and said nothing. Suddenly he shifted gears.

“Why did you write ‘Dōzakhī’ (one condemned to hell/hell-bound)?”

There was an explosion in my head.

“What kind of a sister are you, you called your real brother a *dōzakhī*?”

“It’s irrelevant whether he was a *dōzakhī* or a *jannatī* (one destined for heaven), I wrote what I wanted to. Who are you to criticize what I wrote?”

“He was my friend.”

“He was my brother.”

“God curse a sister like that.”

I have never told anyone what I had to go through as I was writing “*Dōzakhī*,” what flames of hell I had to pass through, how much of what I possessed was gutted by fire, reduced to ashes. I completed the essay at two o’clock in the morning. What a ghastly night that was. The ocean had risen up to the level of the stairs of the house; this was before the boundary wall had been put up. I was strangely distraught. Whatever I had written played around me like a movie reel. Whenever I turned off the light I started feeling suffocated and had to quickly turn the light back on. I was suddenly terrified of the dark. I couldn’t sleep by myself in a room because I kept thinking of the grave I had just visited. I felt apprehensive sleeping alone in my bed and got my younger cousin to sleep with me. I was terrified of Jodhpur, so I fled to Bombay. One column out of ten had crumbled. Who could gauge the depth of the void that had been created?

But I didn’t respond. I went to my room, packed my belongings and called Sultana to come and pick me up immediately, instructing her to insist on taking me along. I said, “If Aslam Sahib stops you, pretend to be offended and get really upset.” Sultana said, “What’s the matter? I’ll be there as soon as I get off from work at five.”

“By that time there may be one or two murders. Come right away.”

Sultana arrived without delay. But Aslam Sahib declared that I couldn’t go. Sultana kept insisting stubbornly and I couldn’t control my amusement at the drama unfolding before my eyes. Shaking with laughter, I finally took off with Sultana.

We appeared in court on the appointed day. Witnesses were presented. They were to prove that Manto’s “*Bū*” (odor) and my “*Liḥāf*” were both obscene. My lawyer explained carefully that until I was questioned directly I was not to open my mouth. He would say whatever he deemed proper. “*Bū*” was taken up first.

“Is this story obscene?” asked Manto’s lawyer.

“Yes sir,” the witness said.

“What word indicates that it is obscene?”

Witness: "Bosom."

Lawyer: "My Lord, the word 'bosom' is not obscene."

Judge: "Correct."

Lawyer: "The word 'bosom' is not obscene then?"

Witness: "No, but the author has used it for a woman's breasts."

Suddenly Manto rose to his feet.

"What else did you expect me to call a woman's breasts—peanuts?"

A loud laughter swept across the courtroom. Manto too started laughing.

"If the accused indulges in this type of tawdry humor again he will be thrown out for contempt of court or be fined."

Manto's lawyer whispered in his ear reminding him to behave and he listened. The discussion then continued and the witnesses kept returning again and again to the single word "bosom," but it was proving increasingly difficult to establish that it was obscene.

"If the word 'bosom' is obscene, then why aren't the words knee or elbow obscene too?" I asked Manto.

"Rubbish!" Manto became incensed again. Arguments continued. We came out and sat down on the wobbly benches on the verandah. Ahmad Nadeem Qasmi had brought a basket of oranges. He showed us how to eat them gracefully. Squeeze the orange gently until the inside becomes soft, make a small hole at one end the way you do in a mango, and then suck on it with ease. We finished off the entire basket as we sat there. Once we had eaten all the oranges we felt really hungry so during lunch break we raided a restaurant. After Seema's birth I had lost a lot of weight and could now gorge myself on rich food. The chicken pieces were so large they seemed to have come from a vulture or an eagle. Chicken sprinkled with coarse black pepper, eaten with steaming hot *qulchas* and washed down with the juice of Qandhari pomegranates instead of water—good wishes for those who had dragged us to court arose involuntarily from our hearts.

In the evening Luqman had invited us to a gathering of some of Lahore's poets and writers. There I met Mrs. Hijab Imtiaz Ali for the first time. A lot of makeup, tons of *kājal* around her eyes, looking a little melancholy, a little sullen, and when you talked to her she responded by staring vacantly into space.

"She's a fraud," Manto whispered in my ear, widening his big eyes further.

"No, she's lost in the very atmosphere that gushes from her pen like a puff of imaginary smoke and weaves a rainbow-colored shell around her."

Mrs. Hijab Imtiaz Ali continued staring into space and I sought out Imtiaz Ali and struck up a conversation with him. How different the temperaments of the husband and wife were. Imtiaz Ali was a very loquacious, jovial and open-hearted man. Thanks to him the gathering had become very lively and festive. It seemed as if I had known him for years. His conversation was even more refreshing than his writings. (Recently when I visited Pakistan I met Mrs. Hijab Imtiaz Ali again. She was lightly made up this time around, looked younger than before, and was very talkative and relaxed. It seemed she had been reincarnated.)

I had been dying to see an *arghanūn*, a musical instrument mentioned a lot in Hijab's *afsānas*. I had never seen one before. When I went to Hijab's house I said, "Do you really have an *arghanūn*?"

"Yes, would you like to see it?"

"I'd love to. That's a word in your *afsānas* that immediately puts one in a special mood, one becomes sad and tearful." I also told her that once I had tried to write prose poetry in her style but later burned it all.

The moment I set eyes on her *arghanūn* my excitement and the romantic notions I associated with the instrument were crushed. What, this is that same childish baby piano which De Milo plays in his recordings of film songs, often taking abuse from the recording engineer for failing to tune the instrument! The same De Milo who transformed the heroine's passion, her mental and emotional tempest into a song. Organ! What a crude name! Yet how elegant and melodious like a *rāg* of longing, when the "*ghain*" is added to it!

There was a big crowd in the court. Several people had advised us to offer our apologies to the judge, even offering to pay the fines on our behalf. The proceedings had lost some of their verve, the witnesses who were called in to prove that "Liḥāf" was obscene were beginning to lose their nerve in the face of our lawyer's cross-examination. No word capable of inviting condemnation could be found. After a great deal of searching a gentleman said, "The sentence 'she was collecting '*āshiqs*' (lovers) is obscene."

"Which word is obscene," the lawyer asked. "'Collecting,' or '*āshiqs*'?"

"The word '*āshiqs*,'" the witness replied, somewhat hesitantly.

"My Lord, the word '*āshiqs*' has been used by the greatest poets and has also been used in *na'ẓ*. This word has been given a sacred place by the devout."

"But it is highly improper for girls to collect '*āshiqs*,'" the witness proclaimed.

“Why?”

“Because ... because ... this is improper for respectable girls.”

“But not improper for girls who are not respectable?”

“Uh ... uh ... no.”

“My client has mentioned girls who are perhaps not respectable. And as you say, sir, non-respectable girls may collect *‘āshiqs*.”

“Yes. It’s not obscene to mention them, but for an educated woman from a respectable family to write about these girls merits condemnation!” The witness thundered.

“So go right ahead and condemn as much as you like, but does it merit legal action?”

The case crumbled.

“If you apologize we will even pay all your expenses ...” a man—God knows who—came up and whispered in my ear.

“Well Manto Sahib, what do you say, shall we offer an apology?” I asked Manto. “We’ll use the money to do a lot of shopping.”

“Rubbish!” Manto widened his peacock-feather eyes.

“I’m sorry, but this crazy Manto will not agree.”

“But even if you, if you alone ...”

“No, you don’t know what a troublemaker this man is. He’ll make it impossible for me to live in Bombay. The punishment I’m supposed to receive here will be several times better than his anger.”

The gentleman’s face fell when we didn’t receive any punishment. The Judge called me to his chambers and greeted me very warmly.

“I’ve read nearly all your stories and they’re not obscene nor is *‘Liḥāf*” obscene. But there’s a lot of dirt in Manto’s writing.”

“The world too is filled with a lot of dirt,” I said meekly.

“But is it necessary to fling it about?”

“Flinging it about makes it visible and one’s attention can be drawn to the need of cleansing it.”

The Judge Sahib laughed.

We were not troubled by the case nor did winning it make us happy. As a matter of fact we were saddened because who knows when we might have the opportunity to visit Lahore again.

Lahore. What a savory word it is. Lahori salt! Like gems. White and pink. I feel like stringing the tiny bits into a glimmering necklace and draping it around the slender white neck of a Punjabi belle.

“*So dim, so dim, the light of the stars.*” In Surender Kaur’s throat the gems of Lahori salt have melted to become a melody and when her husband Sodi’s voice accompanies her it creates a strange harmony, like

the rustling of satin and silk brocade. Surrender and Sodi's melodies come to life when one sees Lahore, creating a gentle storm that moves one to tears. The memory of an unknown beloved rises like a current of pain in the heart. There is a glow in the atmosphere of Lahore, silent bells tinkle, and the orange blossoms of Mrs. Hijab Imtiaz Ali's *afsānas* fill the air with fragrance. Then one remembers being overcome by her sweet, twilight-hued *afsānas*. □

—Translated by Tahira Naqvi and Muhammad Umar Memon

Glossary

arē: hey! (interjection used chiefly to call somebody's attention); *arē bhā'ī*
Oh brother!

afsāna: the Urdu term for short story.

dulhān: a bride.

fatvā: a legal opinion in conformity with the religious law of Islam.

ḥalāl: permissible or lawful according to Islamic law.

ḥarām: impermissible or unlawful according to Islamic law.

maulvī śāhib: a Muslim well-versed in religious knowledge and law.

nā'ī: a poem in praise of the Prophet Muḥammad.

takhtī: a wooden board (like a slate) for children to practice writing.