

The Girl

Hameed's billy goat, had he been human, would have committed suicide. Or, instead, he might have assumed the role of an Urdu critic, and pronounced a sentence of death by beheading on the ghazal that was now being read to him, declaring that all such poetry was barbarous. This was because the ghazal was being read to him by Hameed. But then, billy goats are neither suicidal nor critical. (Of course, it's possible that had the goat been human, he would have beheaded Hameed himself, and not the ghazal.)

Hameed finished reading and went on to the next ghazal. The goat tried to bite a mouthful of green grass, but Hameed rapped him on the head. The ghazal was left incomplete, for Hameed switched over to prose:

"You poor, contemptible fellow! Aren't you ashamed of eating grass like an idiot when you're wearing an English-style felt hat on your head? Just look at how much progress the Japanese have made; the Chinese, too, have made long strides along the road to development. But you—you will never be anything but a billy goat."

It was about nine o'clock on a winter morning. Colonel Faridi was sitting in a lawn chair a little distance away, reading the newspaper. He was enjoying the feeling of being out in the open, with the sun flooding the lawn.

Hameed was of the opinion that if everybody in the world tried to study the newspaper with such concentration, at least half of them would go mad. Therefore, instead of reading the newspaper, he spent his mornings reciting ghazals to his billy goat, and lecturing it on progress and morals.

Faridi raised his head once, drew a deep sigh, and, after putting the paper away on a side table, began to light a cigar.

Hameed continued to lecture his billy goat. "Wandering all over the place following the other goats is a sign of low morals. If I see you winking at another goat again, I'll have you skinned and send your hide to an orphanage. At least they'll make some money out of it."

"Billy goats don't heed an ass's admonitions," Faridi said.

"That's why I never kept an ass," Hameed answered.

Faridi was about to say something when a car entered the compound. When Hameed caught a glimpse of the person in the front seat, he put his hands over his eyes and stuck out his tongue. Then he turned towards Faridi.

A pretty girl got out of the car. She couldn't have been more than eighteen.

"What's this tomfoolery?" Faridi growled softly at Hameed, who pulled in his tongue but kept his hands over his eyes.

The girl observed them from near the car. She started to walk over to them, but then hesitated. Finally, standing where she was, she said: "I wish to see Colonel Faridi."

"No one ever comes to see Captain Hameed," Hameed muttered. "May God punish all the girls in the world by making them lose their minds!"

"Put your hands down," Faridi said through clenched teeth. Then he addressed the girl: "Please, come." The girl,

slightly flustered, went to Faridi, who gestured towards a lawn chair. "Come, take that chair," he said gently.

"I...I w-wish to see Colonel Faridi," she repeated, casting a furtive, sidelong glance at the goat. The felt hat was fitted to its head so that its horns jutted out from it. A loosely knotted tie hung from its neck. Pyjamas, made of the same red serge used for boys' blazers, covered its rear end.

"What can I do for you?" Faridi asked.

"Please take me to Colonel Faridi."

"You are talking to him."

Hameed was dragging the goat by its ears back to the porch.

The girl was startled. "Oh! S-so sorry. I didn't know."

"No matter. Tell me why you want to talk to me."

"Sir, a terrible disaster has befallen us. We are in very great trouble."

Faridi said nothing; he kept looking at some point above the girl's head. Her head was bent, and with her sandaled toe she was gently nudging an empty matchbox that someone had dropped on the ground. Eventually, she spoke: "You know Sir Fayyaz Ahmad?"

"Sir Fayyaz Ahmad, the businessman? Yes, I know him."

"He is my grandfather," the girl said.

"I see. Well...?" Faridi said, clearly curious to know more.

"I'm here for his sake, actually."

"Excuse me, but I don't follow."

"Oh, I don't know where to begin my story. But I'm quite sure I'm not mistaken when I say that the current state of affairs cannot be improved without your help."

"So tell me about the current state of affairs."

"Yes, I'll tell you... It began like this. Yesterday evening, we went to Fun Island in our motor launch. Grandfather

was with us. When we got to the Fun Island pier, we noticed a big white boat anchored near where we were planning to tie our own boat to the wharf.”

Faridi gave a start. “A white boat?”

“Yes. And all of a sudden my grandfather began to tremble uncontrollably. Strange, meaningless sounds emerged from his throat, as if he were a frightened child. It was like he was trying to say something, but his tongue failed him.”

“Uh-huh... I’m listening. Please go on.”

“Then he fainted. We were obliged to return home. Perhaps he noticed someone in the white boat and lost his nerve for some reason. Now, I’m not sure—it might have been my imagination—but I *think* I saw a very tall, powerfully built man in the boat trying to hide his face behind his felt hat, as if he wanted to avoid being seen.”

“It might very well not have been your imagination. What happened then?”

“My grandfather regained consciousness a full three hours after we brought him back home. But his mental state is still not back to normal.”

“What do you mean, not back to normal?”

“Every few minutes he screams, ‘Oh, there’s the drop! There! It’s going to drip down on me!’ When we ask, ‘What drop? Where?’, he just rubs his head with his index finger and cries, ‘There it is!’”

“Oh!” Faridi puckered his lips as if he was about to whistle.

“Three months ago,” the girl went on, “he lost his mind in just the same manner. He kept on shouting about some drop that was going to drip down on him. He got better, though, after treatment, which went on for quite some time.”

“Did something happen to cause the problem the first time?”