

She stole the SHOW



A tender love story that may not excite you but is bound to please.

THE hall resounded with the endless ping-pong of the ball, as players practised on every table in the room. They were oblivious of the sweltering heat, on a typical summer afternoon in Lahore.

By MRS. HABEEB

Some boys and girls sauntered over to the table where Nilofar and Asif were practicing their mixed-doubles with Bashir and Violet. All four were going to participate in the National Table-Tennis Tournament, to be held in Karachi.

Pert Nilofar and Asif formed a brilliant pair, and their fans were quite sure that if they were in good form, as at present, they would bank on them to win the doubles event.

"Today is the last of our afternoon practices" announced Nilofar, "let's rest." "I am feeling too hot and too tired to do anything else" grumbled Violet good-humouredly. Discussing their play and game Violet said "Nilofar, if you keep up those back-hand shots of yours, you will give them something to worry about." "And coupled with Asif's fast service, you two should do well," remarked Bashir. Asif said, "It's high time we went home, we have to pack and leave by the morning train, so Nilofar don't you be late!"

On reaching Karachi station, besides others who were there to receive the Lahore players were Nilofar's cousins Laila and Zarin. They were absolutely thrilled that their Nilofar was going to play with the "Oh, so handsome Nadir". "How I envy you Nilofar", said Laila with a sigh. "He is just too good to be true" said Zarin, "and his style is wonderful, his forehand shots are like lightning, no one can return them. Besides he has such a touching way of running his fingers through his hair when the game is tough."

Zarin just prattled on and on about Nadir's charm and attractiveness which got on Nilofar's nerves. Without any reason at all she disliked him! Zarin was saying that she would meet him in the evening, and thought Nilofar was as excited about it as she was.

Nilofar changed the topic by inquiring after Laila's sister who was to be married in two days. "I suppose



Baji's trousseau is ready?" "Yes" said Laila "and you should see some of the gorgeous sarees that she has bought; Zarin, don't you think the blue one is the best" "Yes I love the blue" said Zarin as the car came to a stop at the house.

The three girls found Baji and her fiance on the lawn. They looked a very happy pair. Baji dressed in white with her hair drawn back in a chignon looked cool and contented as a lily in the breeze.

Her fiance, a jovial young man, was informally dressed. After the introductions were over the rest of the family joined them in the garden for refreshing glasses of lemonade.

At the Club next evening Nadir came to meet the guest players. He introduced himself to Asif and Bashir who seemed to be pleasant young men and Nadir was sure he would enjoy making their acquaintance. On being introduced Violet greeted him spontaneously and was soon chatting nineteen to the dozen. She informed him that Nilofer was late and would join them presently. A good ten-minutes later, he heard Violet hailing Nilofer with, "Late Jane, we have been here for the last half hour!" Nadir saw a delicate girl, her dark hair cropped short, which gave her a pixieish look. The navy blue dress she wore set off her fair skin to advantage. Her step, as she walked down the room, was quick and gay though a little timid. She seemed self-conscious on having all eyes on her, as Violet grumbled loudly about her unpunctuality.

She started apologising, before she even reached them, but was cut short by Asif as he introduced Nadir to her. Nadir had been looking forward to meeting her but felt rebuked by her cold acknowledgement.

She thought, "he looks exactly as I imagined him—he is tall and good looking, and knows it too!"

He thinks I am waiting to see his charming smile. But his smile is too attractive to be sincere and his teeth a little too white!

Nadir was chatting and exchanging news with them unaware of the impression he was making on Nilofer.

"We have heard so much about your firstclass game" enthused Asif. "Oh, I am not all that good" Nadir said modestly as he turned to answer Violet who was asking if he had been the National Champion for

two consecutive years. "Yes, I hold the National Championship for the last two years."

At this Nilofer wondered how nice it would be to puncture his ego, by not letting him become the star of this year's show.

"I will try my best not to let him get the triple crown at least!!!" she thought.

Asif and Violet started practising and Nadir asked if Nilofer would like to join him for a mixed doubles. On missing a couple of easy shots, Nilofer felt Nadir watching her with an amused look, and it annoyed her to be found making silly mistakes, "Fancy making such clumsy mistakes," she said, and repented the minute the words were out of her mouth more so as he replied, "Nobody can play perfectly all the time; and you are no exception to the rule, I guess." "I must be an exception as I don't usually make such mistakes" she retorted, turning away to serve, but not before she saw his sarcastic shrug. She thought "How I hate him!"

Next evening Nilofer dressed in a lovely cherry pink sari, which brought a glow to her face and a lustre to her eyes, flitted among the guests at *Baji's* wedding, like a bright flame.

The bridal couple was leaving and with them the last guests. Nilofer and a few family members awaited their turn in the cars. She strolled across the grounds to the other side of the terrace and sat down on a comfortable chair. She did not notice Nadir, when he came to join her, a couple of minutes later.

He feasted his eyes on her for a minute before she saw him. She looked so detached and faraway, regal like a swan. The folds of her pink sari cascading around her and the diamonds in her ears glittering in the light, while the cool breeze caressed her smoothly rounded face, and gently lifted a curl here and there of her soft hair. It took away his breath. He vowed that they would not bicker again, not here, not tonight in this calm and beautiful setting.

"A penny for your thoughts Nilofer", startled out of her reverie Nilofer look up. "I am only thinking how late it is, and I am very tired. I don't think the car will be back so soon, so why don't you pull up a chair."

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Nilofer feeling rather lost and depressed after the excitement of the day, was in no mood to parry words with him.

He was surprised at her friendliness.

“Did you know many of the guests this evening?” he asked, “No, even though we have a few relatives here. My parents and I have been in Lahore for so many years now, that we are almost strangers here.”

“This is the Beach Luxury Hotel, and further there is the Boat Club” went on Nadir showing her the places round about visible from the terrace.

Nilofer found its atmosphere pleasant and said so. “Yes’ after a tiring day I find it most refreshing to spend the evening here.” said Nadir.

Nilofer felt his presence had a soothing effect on her and enjoyed their little tete-a-tete but decided that it was due to Nadir’s forgetting to act like a Valentino and a show-off.

The days followed one another in quick succession with practices and matches and more often than not Nadir and Nilofer got on each others nerves. Nilofer behaving every bit like a member of a rival team.

The undercurrents of dislike and clash of tempers mingled with shots, smashes and services. Nadir tried to capture a part of the magic they had shared at the wedding that night, when they seemed so much in harmony and was afraid that he would have no time before she returned to Lahore to tell her of his love for her. The Quarter-finals were over.

“What about a movie to break the monotony?” he asked amiable Violet, sure of acceptance.

“What a lovely idea” cried Violet. “I was hoping to see “Barefoot Contessa.” “Being a morning show it would suit us fine and we could have lunch together after the show,” suggested Nadir.

“Aye, aye, Sir,” said Violet as she went to tell Asif, Bashir and Nilofer who had to be persuaded to join them.

At lunch later Nadir reprimanded the waiter for bad service and Nilofer could feel the pleasure of a well enjoyed movie oozing out of her at this scene of haughtiness displayed by Nadir. “How can you get away with such rudeness Nadir ” exclaimed Asif. “Look at the Manager’s apology! .

“I have learnt one thing in life, the more tolerant you are, the more you have to tolerate and if you believe in training yourself to be patient and reasonable you have to live a lifetime practising it! It is only the demanding voice that gets the best things in life, it works right from the cradle to the grave, you know. Look at two babies at mealtimes, the noisy one always gets his share before the one who waits quietly. ”

“You are such a cynic, I don’t believe you really think like this. ” Said Asif

“It has been proved to me, my father was a motor mechanic at a service station and repeatedly experimented with various oil mixtures to find the best one for a car engine. Eventually he found the right mixture but found no opportunity to speak to the boss about it. One day some other mechanic was being fired for some blunder and he got around the boss by passing on my father’s tip as his own suggestion. He had heard my father explain it to his fellow workers quite often. Well it was tried and became very popular with all the clients and the sales went up, the servicing became popular and this mechanic got a double bonus in gratitude and later as this was the only service station supplying the lubricant it flourished and the mechanic got a partnership! My father’s dull routine continued while that won-derful creative idea of his was stolen and sold at such a high price. He lost his initiative and was quite broken by this blow. He wanted money badly for my mother who was dying of cancer.”

“Whew! that must have been quite heartbreaking” said Asif as Nadir changed the subject as soon as possible. He hadn’t meant to say such a lot about his ideas and his father. . . . still everything had come tumbling out, he himself hadn’t realised how much this incident had effected his life till this moment.

While the party continued, Nilofer found it hard to concentrate. She wanted to be alone to think things out for herself as she felt she didn’t know what was happening, what was this tumult within her?.