

The Boss Came to Dinner

Mr. Shamnath had invited his boss to dinner. Neither he nor his wife could pause even to wipe the perspiration from their faces. The wife, in a dressing gown, her tangled hair tied in a knot, her make-up all smudged, and he, pencil and paper in hand and smoking cigarette after cigarette, ran from room to room, ticking off items in a long list.

By five, they had succeeded in putting some kind of order into the arrangements. Chairs, tables, side tables, napkins, flowers, they were all there in the verandah, neatly arranged. Now they turned their attention to the bric-a-brac in the room, either shifting them behind the almirahs or shoving them under the bedsteads. Suddenly a problem reared up before Shamnath. What about mother? Till now neither he nor his wife had thought of it. Shamnath turned on his heels and asked his wife in English: 'And what about mother?'

The wife, interrupting her work, did some hard thinking. 'We'll send her to the neighbours. She can stay there for the night. We'll bring her back tomorrow.' Shamnath, screwed up his eyes and looked at her thoughtfully. 'No, that won't do. I want to give a wide berth to that next-door hag. If mother stays the night with her, she will again start coming to our house. I tell you what. We will tell mother to finish her meal early and retire to her room. The guests won't start coming before eight.'

The proposition sounded right. But suddenly the wife said, 'But if she falls asleep and starts snoring! Then? Her room is next to where dinner will be served.'

'We'll ask her to close the door and I'll lock it from the outside. Or, better still, I'll ask mother not to fall asleep. She must keep awake and sitting.'

'But suppose she does fall asleep. You never know how long dinner will last. In any case, you can't leave the bar before eleven.'

Shamnath threw up his hands in irritation. 'She was going to visit her brother and you stuck your nose in. Wanted to keep up appearances before your friends. Now what do we do?'

'Tchah! Why should I earn a bad name by coming between mother and son? I wash my hands of this affair. Do as you please.'

Mr. Shamnath held his peace. This was no time for bandying words, but for cool thinking. He turned round and looked at mother's room. Her room opened onto the verandah. As his gaze swept over the verandah, a thought flashed through his mind, 'I've got it!' he said. Promptly he strode towards mother's room. With her back against the wall, mother was sitting on a low wooden chowki, her face almost covered with the dopatta. She was telling her beads. Since morning she had been nervous at the goings-

on in the house. The big boss from her son's office was coming to their house, and she was anxious that everything should go well.

'Mother, finish your meal early this evening. The guests will be here at seven-thirty.'

Mother slowly uncovered her face and looked at her son. 'Son, I won't take my meal today. You know very well I don't eat when flesh is cooked in the house.'

'Anyway, anyway, retire to your room early.'

'All right, son.'

'And, mother, I will receive the guests in the drawing room; till then you stay in the verandah. When we move into the verandah, you will quietly slip into the drawing room through the bathroom.'

For an instant mother looked at her son; then she said faintly, 'All right, son.'

'One thing more, mother. Do not go to sleep early, as you do. Your snores carry far.'

'I can't help it, son,' she said, ashamed. 'I have difficulty in breathing since my last illness.'

Mr Shammath had fixed everything. But he still felt anxious. The arrangement did not seem foolproof. What if the boss took into his head to step into the verandah? There would be about ten guests, mostly his Indian colleagues and their wives. Any one of them might like to use the bathroom. Oh, what a nuisance! He brought up a chair and placing it by the door said, 'Mother, let's see how you look in this chair.'

Mother nervously fingered her beads, adjusted her dopatta over her head, and sat down in the chair.

'He Bhagavan! No, mother, no! Not like this. Not with your feet up. It's not a cot. It's a chair, a chair.'

Mother dangled her feet.

'And please, please, mother, don't walk about barefoot. And don't wear those wooden sandals of yours. One day I'll throw them away.'

Mother was silent.

'And what will you wear, mother?'

'I'll wear what I have. I'll wear what you ask me to.'

Mr Shamnath inspected his mother with half-closed eyes, trying to decide what his mother should be made to wear for the occasion. He was a stickler for discipline in the house; he had the final say in everything. Where the pegs should be fixed in the walls, in what corner the bedsteads should be placed, what should be the colour of the curtains, which sari his wife should put on, what should be the design of the tables- Mr Shamnath was meticulous about the smallest detail. He looked at mother from head to foot, and said, 'Better wear white kameez and salwar. Just go and dress up. Let's see how you look in them.'

Mother got up slowly and went into her room.

Shamnath turned to his wife and said in English, 'Mother is a problem! There's no end to her oddities. If something goes wrong and the boss is offended, you know what will happen.'

Mother came out in white kameez and white salwar. Short, shrivelled, lack-lustre eyes, only half of her sparse hair covered with the dopatta, she looked only slightly improved.

Shamnath looked at her dubiously. That will do. If you have any bangles, put them on too.'

'I have no bangles, son, you know that. I had to sell all my jewellery for your education.'

'All right, all right! Why do you make a song about it, mother?' he said. 'Why carry on about it? Just say that you don't have any. Why bring in the question of my education? The jewellery was sold to good purpose, wasn't it? I'm not a loafer, am I? I'll pay you back double what you spent on me.'

'May my tongue be reduced to ashes, son! Does a mother ever ask a son to pay back? I did not mean it. Don't misunderstand me. Had I the bangles, I would have worn them all the time. But I don't have them.'

Now it was past five-thirty. Mr Shamnath had to take his bath and get into his dinner suit. His wife was getting ready in her room. Before leaving, Shamnath again instructed his mother, 'Mother, don't sit silent as you always do. If the Sahib comes your way and asks you anything, reply to him properly. I'll tell you what to say.'

'I am illiterate, son. I can neither read nor write. You can tell them that your mother is ignorant, if that helps.'

As time passed, mother's heart started pounding heavily. If the boss came to her and asked her some question, what would she say? She was scared of English Sahibs even from a distance, and this one, they said, was an American. God only knew what sort of questions American Sahibs asked. She felt like going away to her widow-friend,

but she lacked the courage to defy her son's orders. She kept sitting there, dangling her legs from the chair.

Mr Shamnath's dinner had reached the crescendo of success. The topics changed with every change of glasses. Everything was going superbly. The Sahib liked the Indian dishes and the Memsahib the curtains, the sofa covers, the decor. What more could the hosts ask for? The Sahib had shed his reserve and was regaling the audience with anecdotes. He was as jovial now as he was strict in the office. His wife, in a black gown, a rope of pearls round her neck, wearing a loud perfume, was the cynosure of the female guests. She laughed, she nodded; she was *so* free with Mrs Shamnath and with the men; as if they were old friends.

Nobody realized how time flew; it was now ten-thirty.

They came out of the drawing room, Mr Shamnath leading the way and the boss and the other guests following.

Reaching the verandah, Mr Shamnath stopped short. What he saw made him weak in the legs. His smile vanished. Outside her room mother was sitting exactly as he had left her, but both her feet were on the seat and her head swayed from side to side. She snored heavily. When her head fell to one side, her snores became louder, and when she awoke with a jolt she again started swaying from side to side. The end of her dopatta had slipped from her head and her thin hair lay in confusion over the bald portion of her head.

Mr Shamnath seethed with anger. He felt like giving her a wild shaking and then pushing her into her room. But the boss and the other guests were standing by what could he do?

The wives of the other guests tittered and the boss said, 'Poor dear.'

Mother woke up, flustered. Seeing so many people around her, she got so confused that she could not utter a word. She covered her head, and getting up awkwardly she stood before them with downcast eyes. Her legs shook; her fingers trembled.

'Mother, go to sleep. Why do you keep awake so late?' Ashamed, he looked at the boss.

The boss was in an expansive mood. He smiled, and said, 'Namaste.'

Mother almost shrank into herself. Hesitantly she tried to fold her hands in greeting. But one hand was inside the dopatta, with which she held her beads, and her effort looked clumsy. Shamnath was annoyed.

The boss extended his right hand. Mother looked at it, alarmed.

'Mother, shake hands with the Sahib!'

But how could she? She was holding the beads in her right hand. In confusion, she placed her left hand in the Sahib's right hand. Someone giggled. Shamnath was furious.

'Not like that, mother! Don't you even know how to shake hands? Your right hand, please!'

But by now the boss was pumping her left hand saying, 'How are you ? How are you?'

'Mother, say, "I am quite well, thank you." '

Mother mumbled something. Someone giggled.

But the crisis passed. The boss had saved the situation. Shamnath's anger started ebbing.

The Sahib was still holding mother's hand and she standing still, utterly confused.

Shamnath said, 'Sir, my mother's from a village. She has lived in a village all her life. That's why she's feeling so shy.'

'Is that so?' the Sahib said cheerfully. 'Well, I like village folk. I guess your mother must be knowing folksongs and folk dances.' The boss nodded his head and looked approvingly at mother.

'Mother, the Sahib wants you to sing. An old song. Any old song. You know so many.'

'I can't sing,' mother said in a weak voice. 'Have you ever heard me singing?'

'Mother,' he said, 'does one ever refuse a guest? If you don't sing, the Sahib may feel offended. Look, he's waiting.'

'But I don't know any song. I know nothing of singing.'

'Come, mother. Just sing a couplet or two. The pomegranate song, for instance.'

The Indian colleagues and their wives clapped their hands at the mention of this song. Mother looked with imploring eyes, first at her son, then at her daughter-in-law;"

'Mother!' The son was getting impatient. She could detect a touch of asperity in his tone.

There was no way out. She sat down in the chair. In a feeble cracked voice she started singing an old wedding song. The ladies burst into laughter. After singing two lines, mother pathetically trailed into silence.

The verandah resounded with applause. The Sahib would not stop clapping. Shamnath's anger suddenly changed into joy. Mother had introduced a new note into the party.

When the clapping stopped, the subject suddenly veered round to village industry products of the Punjab; the boss wanted to be enlightened on the point.

Mr Shamnath was bubbling with joy. The sound of clapping was still ringing in his ears. 'We have so many of them,' he said enthusiastically. 'I'll collect a complete set for you. I'll bring it to the office, sir. You'll like it, I am sure.'

'No, no, don't get me wrong. I'm not talking of those bazaar things,' the boss said, shaking his head. 'I mean those things which are made in Punjabi homes, things which the women make themselves.'

Mr Shamnath thought for a moment. 'The girls make dolls, sir, and . . . and women make phulkari.'

Mr Shamnath inefficiently tried to explain that a phulkari was a sort of embroidered piece of cloth and then, giving the effort up as hopeless, he turned to his mother. 'Mother, do we have an old phulkari in the house?'

Mother went in and returned with one.

The boss examined it with keen interest. It was an old phulkari, its threads had come off in several places, and the cloth almost crumbled at the touch. Shamnath said, 'Sir, this one is almost threadbare. It's useless. I'll have a new one made for you. Mother, you will make one for the Sahib, won't you? Make one for him.'

Mother was quiet. Then she said, 'My sight is not the same as it used to be. Old eyes feel the strain.'

'Of course mother will make one for you,' Shamnath said, interrupting her. 'You'll be pleased with it.'

The Sahib nodded his head, thanked mother and proceeded towards the dining table. Other guests followed.

When they had settled down to dinner, mother quietly slipped into her room. No sooner had she sat down than her eyes flooded with tears. She kept wiping her eyes with the dopatta, but the tears wouldn't stop, as if the flood-gates of years of old pent-up feelings had suddenly burst open. She tried to control herself, she folded her hands before the image of Krishna, she prayed for the long life of her son, but like monsoon showers the tears kept flowing.

It was now midnight. The guests had departed one by one. But mother kept sitting with her back set against the wall. All the excitement was over and the quietness of the locality had also descended on the house.

One could hear only the rattling of plates in the kitchen. Someone knocked at the door. 'Mother, open the door.'

Her heart sank. Had she made another blunder? She was making mistakes. Oh, why had she dozed off in the verandah? Had her son not forgiven her for it? She opened the door with trembling hands.

Shamnath hugged her wildly. 'Ammi, you have done wonders today. The Sahib was so pleased with you, Ammi. my good Ammi!'

Her frail body looked even more small against Shamnath's heavy frame. Tears came to her eyes. Wiping them, she said, 'Son, send me to Hardwar. I've been asking you for a long time.'

Shamnath's face darkened. He let go of her. 'What did you, mother? Again the same thing?'

He was getting angrier. 'So you want to discredit me before others so that they will say that the son cannot give shelter even to his own mother!'

'No, son, don't misunderstand me. You live with your wife, in joy and comfort. I've come to the end of my life. What will I do here? The few days that are left to me, I would like to spend in meditation. Please send me to Hardwar.'

'If you go away, who'll make the phulkari for the Boss? I promised him one in your presence. You know that.'

'Son, my eyesight has become feeble. It can't stand any strain. You can have the phulkari made by someone else. Or buy a ready-made one.'

'Look, you can't let me down like this, mother. Do you want to spoil the whole thing? If the Sahib is pleased, he'll give me a raise.'

Mother was silent for a minute. Then suddenly she said, 'Will he give you a lift in the office? Will he? Did he say so?'

'He did not say anything. But didn't you see how pleased he was with me? He said when you start making the phulkari, he'll personally come and watch it being made. If the boss is pleased, I may get an even higher post. I may become a big official.'

Her complexion started changing, and gradually her wrinkled face was suffused with joy.

'So you are going to get a lift in the office, son.'

'It's not so easy, mother. You don't understand. If only I could please the boss. . . There are others too, all wanting to get promoted. It's all a rat race, mother. But I'll have a better chance.'

'In that case I'll make one for him, I'll. . . I'll somehow manage it, son.' Silently she prayed for her son.

'Now go to sleep, mother,' Mr Shamnath said as he turned towards door.

- **Bhisham Sahni**

About the Story

'The Boss Came to Dinner' is a study of human character in ordinary, everyday situations with great psychological insight. The story renders very powerfully Shamnath's anxiety to please his American boss whom he has invited for dinner. His mother, a very loving and kind one but 'an old fashioned woman', appears to stand in his way and he wishes to get rid of her to avoid any kind of embarrassment. But it is the mother who eventually emerges as a savior for Shamnath and his wife.

The story 'The Boss came to Dinner' is written by Padma Bhushan Sahni, a well known Hindi writer, playwright and actor. Among his novels, the best known is *Tamas* (1974), set against the background of communal riots in the west of Punjab before partition. He received India's highest literary award the Sahitya Akademi fellowship in 2002.

Glossary

bric-a-brac: bits of furniture, ornaments, etc. of no great value

turned on his heels: turned sharply round

bedstead: the framework of a bed

screwed up his eyes: contracted the muscles of his eyes

give a wide berth to: avoid

hag: vicious old women

threw up his hands in irritation: expressed annoyance

stuck your nose in: interfered

keep up appearances: maintain an outward show of prosperity

wash my hands of: no longer responsible for

held his peace: kept quiet

bandying words: exchanging words sharply

goings on: behavior of people

dangling: hanging or swinging loosely

regaling: royal

anecdotes: small interesting tales

sparse: small in number

shrivelled: dryer and smaller

foolproof: incapable of failure

stickler: person who insists upon the importance of something
oddities: strange acts
make a song: make a fuss
crescendo of success: climax or the highest point of success
décor: all that makes up the appearance of a room
cynosure: centre of attraction and admiration.
jolt: shake
tittered: laughed in a silly manner
expansive: grand, heroic
asperity: harshness
shoving: pushing

COMPREHENSION

(A) Tick the correct alternative:

1. Shamnath's boss is a/an _____
 - (a) Dutch
 - (b) American
 - (c) British
 - (d) German
2. The Boss asks Shamnath's _____ to sing.
 - (a) wife
 - (b) son
 - (c) daughter
 - (d) mother
3. 'Suddenly a problem reared up before Shamnath'. The problem is related to
 - (a) food
 - (b) mother
 - (c) wife
 - (d) servant

(B) Answer to the following questions should not exceed 10-15 words each:

1. Why don't Shamnath and his wife want the mother to appear before the boss?
2. Why is the mother unwilling to make phulkari?
3. Why does Shamnath's mother sell her jewellery?
4. At what point does the boss want to be enlightened?
5. Where does the mother want to go?

(C) Answer to the following questions should not exceed 20-30 words each:

1. Why does Shamnath cancel the idea of sending his mother to her room and lock it from outside?
2. Why is the mother afraid of her son when he knocks at the door after the boss has departed?
3. Why does Shamnath's anger suddenly change into joy?
4. Why does the mother agree to make phulkari for the boss in spite of all her handicaps?

5. Why doesn't the mother want to have her meal the day the boss is to come?

(D) Answer to the following should not exceed 60-80 words each:

1. 'Mother is a problem! There is no end to her oddities'. What do these lines reflect about Shannath's character?
2. What is so disturbing about the story?

(E) Say whether the following are True or False. Write 'T' for true and 'F' for False in the bracket:

1. The Boss is invited for lunch. []
2. Shannath has great respect for his mother. []
3. The mother's eye sight is not feeble. []
4. Phulkari is a sort of embroidered piece of cloth. []
5. The mother agrees to make phulkari. []