

THE CROW EATERS

CHAPTER 1

Fareedoon Junglewalla, Freddy for short, was a strikingly handsome, dulcet-voiced adventurer with so few scruples that he not only succeeded in carving a comfortable niche in the world for himself but he also earned the respect and gratitude of his entire community. When he died at sixty-five, a majestic grey-haired patriarch, he attained the rare distinction of being locally listed in the 'Zarathusti Calendar of Great Men and Women'.

At important Parsee ceremonies, like thanksgivings and death anniversaries, names of the great departed are invoked with gratitude; they include the names of ancient Persian kings and saints and all those who have served the community since the Parsees migrated to India.

Fareedoon Junglewalla's name is invoked in all major ceremonies performed in the Punjab and Sind - an ever-present testimony to the success of his charming rascality.

In his prosperous middle years Fareedoon Junglewalla was prone to reminiscence and rhetoric. Sunk in a cane-backed easy chair after an exacting day, his long legs propped up on the sliding arms of the chair, he talked to the young people gathered at his feet:

'My children, do you know what the sweetest thing in this world is?'

'No, no, no.' Raising a benign hand to silence an avalanche of

suggestions, he smiled and shook his head. 'No, it is not sugar, not money - not even a mother's love!'

His seven children and the young visitors of the evening leaned forward with popping eyes and intent faces. His rich deep voice had a cadence that lilted pleasurably in their ears.

'The sweetest thing in the world is your *need*. Yes, think on it. Your own *need* - the mainspring of your wants, well-being and contentment.'

As he continued, the words 'need' and 'wants' edged over their common boundaries and spread to encompass vast new horizons, flooding their minds with his vision.

'Need makes a flatterer of a bully and persuades a cruel man to kindness. Call it circumstances, call it self-interest, call it what you will, it still remains your need. All the good in this world comes from serving our own ends. What makes you tolerate someone you'd rather spit in the eye? What subdues that great big "I", that monstrous ego in a person? Need, I tell you, will force you to love your enemy as a brother!'

Billy devoured each word. A callow-faced stripling with a straggling five-haired moustache, he believed his father's utterances to be superior even to the wisdom of Zarathustra.

The young men loved best of all those occasions when there were no women around to cramp Faredoon's style. At such times Freddy would enchant them with his candour. One evening when the women were busy preparing dinner, he confided in them.

'Yes, I've been all things to all people in my time. There was that bumptious son-of-a-bitch in Peshawar called Colonel Williams. I cooed to him - salaamed so low I got a crick in my balls - buttered and marmaladed him until he was eating out of my hand. Within a year I was handling all traffic of goods between Peshawar and Afghanistan!

'And once you have the means, there is no end to the good

you can do. I donated towards the construction of an orphanage and a hospital. I installed a water pump with a stone plaque dedicating it to my friend, Mr Charles P. Allen. He had just arrived from Wales and held a junior position in the Indian Civil Service, a position that was strategic to my business. He was a pukka sahib then – couldn't stand the heat. But he was better off than his memsahib! All covered with prickly heat, the poor skinny creature scratched herself raw.

'One day Allen confessed he couldn't get his prick up. "On account of this bloody heat," he said. He was an obliging bastard, so I helped him. First I packed his wife off to the hills to relieve her of her prickly heat. Then I rallied around with a bunch of buxom dancing-girls and Dimple Scotch. In no time at all he was cured of his distressing symptoms!

'Oh yes, there is no end to the good one can do.' Here, to his credit, the red-blooded sage winked circumspectly. Faredoon's vernacular was interspersed with laboured snatches of English spoken in a droll, intent accent.

'Ah, my sweet little innocents,' he went on, 'I have never permitted pride and arrogance to stand in my way. Where would I be had I made a delicate flower of my pride – and sat my delicate bum on it? I followed the dictates of my needs, my wants – they make one flexible, elastic, humble. "The meek shall inherit the earth," says Christ. There is a lot in what he says. There is also a lot of depth in the man who says, "Sway with the breeze, bend with the winds";' he orated, misquoting authoritatively.

'There are hardly a hundred and twenty thousand Parsees in the world and still we maintain our identity – how? Booted out of Persia at the time of the Arab invasion 1,300 years ago, a handful of our ancestors fled to India with their sacred fires. Here they were granted sanctuary by the prince Yadav Rana on the condition that they did not eat beef, wear rawhide sandals

or convert the susceptible masses. Our ancestors weren't too proud to bow to his will. To this day we do not allow conversion to our faith - or mixed marriages.

'I've made friends - love them - for what could be called "ulterior motives", and yet the friendships so made are amongst my sweetest, longest and most sincere. I cherish them still.'

He paused, sighing, and out of the blue he suddenly said, 'Now your grandmother - bless her shrewish little heart - you have no idea how difficult she was. What lengths I've had to go to, what she has exacted of me! I was always good to her though, for the sake of peace in this house. But for me, she would have eaten you out of house and home!

'Ah, well, you look after your needs and God looks after you . . .'

His mellifluous tone was so reasonable, so devoid of vanity, that his listeners felt they were the privileged recipients of a revelation. They burst into laughter at this earthier expatiation and Faredoon (by this time even his wife had stopped calling him Freddy) exulted at the rapport.

'And where, if I may ask, does the sun rise? No, not in the East. For us it rises - and sets - in the Englishman's arse. They are our sovereigns! Where do you think we'd be if we did not curry favour? Next to the nawabs, rajas and princelings, we are the greatest toadies of the British Empire! These are not ugly words, mind you. They are the sweet dictates of our delicious need to exist, to live and prosper in peace. Otherwise, where would we Parsees be? Cleaning out gutters with the untouchables - a dispersed pinch of snuff sneezed from the heterogeneous nostrils of India! Oh yes, in looking after our interests we have maintained our strength - the strength to advance the grand cosmic plan of Ahura Mazda - the deep spiritual law which governs the universe, the *Path of Asha*.'

How they loved him. Faces gleaming, mouths agape, they

devoutly soaked up the eloquence and counsel of their middle-aged guru. But for all his wisdom, all his glib talk, there was one adversary he could never vanquish.

Fareedoon Junglewalla, Freddy for short, embarked on his travels towards the end of the nineteenth century. Twenty-three years old, strong and pioneering, he saw no future for himself in his ancestral village, tucked away in the forests of Central India, and resolved to seek his fortune in the hallowed pastures of the Punjab. Of the sixteen lands created by Ahura Mazda and mentioned in the 4,000-year-old Vendidad, one is the 'Septa Sindh', the Sind and Punjab of today.

Loading his belongings, which included a widowed mother-in-law eleven years older than himself, a pregnant wife six years younger, and his infant daughter, Hutoxi, on to a bullock cart, he set off for the North.

The cart was a wooden platform on wheels - fifteen feet long and ten feet across. Almost two-thirds of the platform was covered by a bamboo and canvas structure within which the family slept and lived. The rear of the cart was stacked with their belongings.

The bullocks stuck to the edge of the road and progressed with a minimum of guidance. Occasionally, having spent the day in town, they travelled at night. The beasts would follow the road hour upon hour while the family slept soundly through until dawn.

Added to the ordinary worries and cares of a long journey undertaken by bullock cart, Freddy soon found himself confronted by two serious problems. One was occasioned by the ungentlemanly behaviour of a very resolute rooster, the other by the truculence of his indolent mother-in-law.

Freddy's wife, Putli, taking steps to ensure a daily supply of fresh eggs, had hoisted a chicken coop on to the cart at the very

last moment. The bamboo coop contained three plump, low-bellied hens and a virile cock.

Freddy's objection to their presence had been overruled.

Freddy gently governed and completely controlled his wife with the aid of three maxims. If she did or wanted to do something that he considered intolerable and disastrous, he would take a stern and unshakeable stand. Putli soon learned to recognise and respect his decisions on such occasions. If she did or planned something he considered stupid and wasteful but not really harmful, he would voice his objections and immediately humour her with his benevolent sanction. In all other matters she had a free hand.

He put the decision to cart the chickens into the second category and after launching a mild protest, graciously acceded to her wish.

The rooster was her favourite. A handsome, long-legged creature with a majestic red comb and flashy up-curved tail, he hated being cooped up with the hens in the rear of the cart. At dawn he awoke the household with shrill, shattering crows that did not cease until Putli let the birds out of their coop. The cock would then flutter his iridescent feathers, obligingly service his harem and scamper to the very front of the cart. Here he spent the day strutting back and forth on the narrow strip that served as a yard or standing at his favourite post on the right-hand shaft like a sentinel. At crowded junctions he preened his navy blue, maroon and amber feathers and crowed lustily for the benefit of admiring onlookers. Putli spoiled him with scraps of leftover food and chapati crumbs.

Quite hysterical at the outset of the expedition the cock had, in a matter of days, grown to love the ride. The monotonous, creaking rhythm of their progress through dusty roads filled him with delight, and each bump or untoward movement thrilled his responsive and joyous little heart. He never left the

precincts of the cart. Once in a while, seized by a craving for adventure, he would flap across the bullocks and, juggling his long black legs dexterously, alight on their horns. Good-naturedly, Freddy shooed him back to his quarters.

Freddy's troubles with the rooster began a fortnight after the start of their journey.

Freddy had already devised means to overcome the hurdles impeding his love life. Every other evening he would chance upon a scenic haven along the route and, raving about the beauty of a canal bank or a breeze-bowed field of mustard, propel his mother-in-law into the wilderness. Jerbanoo, barely concealing her apathy, allowed herself to be parked on a mat spread out by her son-in-law. Sitting down by her side, he would point out landmarks or comment on the serenity of the landscape. A few moments later, reddening under her resigned and knowing look, he would offer some lame excuse and leave her to partake of the scene alone. Freddy would then race back to the cart, pull the canvas flaps close and fling himself into the welcoming arms of his impatient wife.

One momentous evening the rooster happened to chance into the shelter. Cocking his head to one side, he observed Freddy's curious exertions with interest. Combining a shrewd sense of timing with humour, he suddenly hopped up and with a minimum of flap or fuss planted himself firmly upon Freddy's amorous buttocks. Nothing could distract Freddy at that moment. Deep in his passion, subconsciously thinking the pressure was from his wife's rapturous fingers, Freddy gave the cock the ride of his life. Eyes asparkle, wings stretched out for balance, the cock held on to his rocking perch like an experienced rodeo rider.

It was only after Freddy sagged into a sated stupor, nerves uncurled with languor, that the cock, raising both his tail and his neck, crowed, 'Coo-ka-roo-coooo!'

Freddy reacted as if a nuclear device had been set off in his ears. He sprang upright, and the surprised Putli sat up just in time to glimpse the nervous rooster scurry out between the flaps.

Putli doubled over with laughter – a phenomenon so rare that Freddy, overcoming his murderous wrath, subsided at her feet with a sheepish grin.

Freddy took the precaution of tying the flaps securely and all went well the next few times. But the rooster, having tasted the cup of joy, was eager for another sip.

Some days later he discovered a rent in the canvas at the back of the shack. Poking his neck in he observed the tumult on the mattress. His inquisitive, little eyes lit up and his comb grew rigid. Timing his moves with magnificent judgment he slipped in quietly and rode the last thirty seconds in a triumphant orgy of quivering feathers. This time Freddy was dimly conscious of the presence on his bare behind, but impaled by his mounting, obliterating desires, there was nothing he could do.

His body relaxed, unwinding helplessly, and the cock crowed into his ears. Freddy leaped up. Had Putli not restrained him he would have wrung the fowl's neck there and then.

When the whole performance was repeated a week later, Freddy knew something would have to be done – and quickly. Afraid to shock his wife, he awaited his chance, which came in the guise of a water buffalo that almost gored his mother-in-law.

At dawn they had stopped on the outskirts of a village. Jerbanoo, obedient to the call of nature, was wading into a field of maize with an earthenware mug full of toilet water when out from behind a haystack appeared a buffalo. He stood still, his great, black head and red eyes looking at her across the green expanse of maize.

Jerbanoo froze in the knee-high verdure. The domestic

buffalo is normally very docile, but this one was mean. She could tell by the defiant tilt of his head and by the intense glow in his fierce eyes. Cautiously bending her knees, Jerbanoo attempted to hide among the stalks, but the buffalo, with a downward toss of the head, began his charge.

'Help!' screamed Jerbanoo, dropping her mug. Lifting the skirt of her sari with one hand, she fled towards the cart.

'Get to one side, change your direction!' yelled Freddy, gesticulating with both arms.

Terrified into imbecility, Jerbanoo continued to dash in a straight line ahead of the buffalo.

'Move this way, move away!' shouted Freddy, waving his arms east and west and running to her.

Just then a man popped up from the maize stalks and bellowing for all he was worth, waving his shirt to attract the attention of the buffalo, diverted the stampeding animal. Being the owner of the beast, he quickly brought it under control.

Distraught and disarranged, Jerbanoo fell sobbing into Freddy's arms. It was the last time he ever felt a wave of tenderness and concern for his mother-in-law.

Putli was grateful and pleased with Freddy's gallant effort in rushing forward to help her mother. Taking advantage of her sentiments, Faredoon delicately presented his case for the elimination of the rooster.

'God has saved us from a great calamity today,' he declared after supper. 'We owe Him thousands, nay millions of thanks for His grace in preventing bloodshed. As soon as we are settled near a Fire Temple, I will order a *jashan* of thanksgiving at our new home. Six *Mobeds* will pray over enough holy fruit, bread and sweetmeats to distribute amongst a hundred beggars . . . but it might be too late! We have been warned, the earth thirsts for blood! I intend to sacrifice the cock tonight.'

Putli gasped and paled. 'Oh, can't you sacrifice one of the hens instead?' she pleaded.

'It has to be the cock, I'm afraid,' said Freddy, permitting his lowered head to sink sadly. 'We all love the charming fellow, I know, but you cannot sacrifice something you don't care for - there is no point in it.'

'Yes, yes,' agreed Jerbanoo vehemently. After all it was her blood the earth thirsted after - her life they were talking about!

Putli nodded pensively.

Next day they ate a succulent chicken and coconut curry.

But the dashing sprint had proved too much for Jerbanoo's sluggish muscles. Her body ached horribly, and her initial gratitude was replaced by a sullen rancour. She blamed Freddy for having undertaken a journey that exposed her to the buffalo charge and to many subsequent vicissitudes.

Jerbanoo had been against the journey from the very start. Unnerved by the uprooting and by the buffalo, by the imper-turbably polite stance adopted by her unfeeling son-in-law, she had ranted, moaned and finally resigned herself to martyrdom. Arms akimbo, black, vindictive eyes snapping, she never failed an opportunity to castigate him. And the journey, fraught with mishap and mild disaster, had given her plenty.

As on that pitch-black night when the wooden wheel of the cart collapsed on the outskirts of the Rajasthan Desert and a jackal suddenly howled into the stillness.

Jumping from the cart, palms on hips, Jerbanoo planted herself solidly before Freddy. Her winged eyebrows almost disappeared in her hairline. 'So, now we are to be devoured by wolves! Why? Because your majesty wishes it! We are to spend the night in this forsaken place, at the mercy of wild beasts! Why? Because our simple village ways were not good enough for you! But don't imagine I'm going to dance to your tune all

the time. I've come for my daughter's sake and I'm not going to stand this nonsense any longer! You turn right back! You hear me?' she bawled, her eyes shining triumphantly in the glow of the lantern swinging from Freddy's hand.

Freddy turned away silently.

'You obstinate fiend, have you no idea how we are suffering? Have you no care for your wife and child? Oh, how can they live at the mercy of your whims . . . you heartless demon!' she cried.

Putli slept through unconcerned. Her mother's screeching tirades had grown so commonplace that the uproar hardly stirred her dreams.

Ignoring Jerbanoo, Freddy set about repairing the wheel. The slighted woman bounced back into the cart and sat quivering on her mattress.

The jackal bayed, his mournful notes amplified by the nocturnal stillness.

Jerbanoo's spine grew rigid and out of sheer disgust and frustration, she howled back.

The jackal caterwauled eerily.

'Owooooo!' went Jerbanoo.

Excited by the discovery of a mate, the jackal launched an abysmal moan.

'Yieeee!' yowled Jerbanoo, and between the two rose the most ghoulish duet imaginable.

His flesh creeping, his beautiful, white teeth on edge, Fare-doon leaped on to the cart and scrambled into the hut. Hurling himself within an inch of his mother-in-law's face he hissed, 'Stop it . . . Stop that horrible noise or I'll leave you right here . . . I swear!'

Jerbanoo subsided at once. Not so much at the ominous pledge as at the demented gleam in his eyes.

Within two hours they had resumed their journey, soothed

and lulled by the hollow toll of the bell hanging from each bullock's neck.

At other times the child had dysentery, Jerbanoo got cramps bathing in a canal, and Putli, stung by a scorpion, almost fell into a well. On these occasions, attracted by Jerbanoo's strident, scolding outcries, the entire populace of several villages was entertained mercilessly to the shortcomings of her son-in-law.

Tiring of this, Freddy addressed himself exclusively to his wide-eyed, diligent wife, and Jerbanoo slumped into a restive, martyred silence.

Two dust-grimed, mosquito-bitten months later, Freddy led his worn beasts into the fertile land of the Five Rivers.

They passed through several villages, green with wheat and gold with mustard. They spent a few days in the golden city of Amritsar and finally came to Lahore.

Fareedoon Junglewalla fell in love with Lahore straightaway. His mother-in-law, the corners of whose set mouth had drooped progressively as the journey had gone on, surveyed the bustling, steaming city with bleak eyes. She withheld her comment for the moment, glad of a chance to rest her rattled joints.

Freddy toured Lahore all day, and each hour strengthened his initial love of the ancient city. That evening they parked the cart beneath a shady tree near the Badshahi Mosque. The horizon cradled the sun in a pink fleece, touching the poetic assembly of white domes with a blush, filling Freddy's senses with serenity. The muezzin's cry, suppliant, plaintive and sensual, rose in the hushed air among the domes. Bells tinkled in a diminutive, Hindu temple, snuggled in the shadows of the mosque. A Sikh temple, gold-plated, gleamed like a small jewel in the shadows, and Freddy, responsive to all religious stimuli, surrendered his heart to the moment.

In the morning, having decided to adopt the city and try his luck, Freddy approached his wife for the gold. Putli, who had been laying out feed for the bullocks, glanced around with wary eyes.

‘Even trees,’ she advised sternly, ‘have ears.’

Placing a cautionary hand on Freddy’s arm, she led him into their room on the bullock cart.

The baby slept in one corner and Jerbanoo sat cross-legged on her mattress, battling the enervating heat with a palm-leaf fan. At Freddy’s entrance she wrinkled her nose at the bazaar smells assailing her nostrils and, fanning herself into a froth, mutely advertised her displeasure of the city.

Freddy’s heart trilled in his chest. Jerbanoo’s disfavour set the seal on his inspired decision. Like hens settling on eggs, Freddy’s mind settled on a smug clutch of smiling thoughts. Right there he took a silent oath that he would never leave Lahore so long as he lived.

Turning his back upon his mother-in-law’s pointed histrionics, Freddy watched his wife unbutton the tight bodice beneath her sari blouse. Putli barely came up to his chest. Secure from prying, thieving eyes, she removed the cache that had pressed the flesh of her breasts from the onset of their travels. Carefully handing the cache to Freddy, she began buttoning herself back into her flattening, cotton bodice. Freddy eyed with chagrin the buoyant, little breasts as they disappeared. He reached stealthily for a last-minute touch, but her censorious stare, warning him of his mother-in-law, stayed his hand.

There was a certain fixed quality to Putli’s humourless eyes, set well apart in the stern, little triangle of her face, that often disconcerted and irritated Freddy. The only time he saw her unwavering gaze dissolve was in bed. Then her long-lashed lids grew heavy with sensuality and there was such dogged and

hedonistic devotion in her eyes for him, such a readiness to please and be pleased, that he became her slave.

As soon as Freddy left, Putli flung herself into an energetic orgy of work. In no time at all she had watered the bullocks, started a fire in the coal brazier and set a colander of vegetables and lentils to simmer. All this she did with such economy of motion and efficiency that her mother roused herself guiltily to give a hand. Taking the plate of rice from Putli she began to feed the child.

Freddy systematically found his way to the homes of the four Parsee families settled in Lahore: the Toddywallas, the Bankwallas, the Bottliwallas and the Chaiwallas. None of them practised the trades suggested by their names. The Toddywallas, a large extended family, were the proprietors of a prosperous tea stall, and the Chaiwallas ran a bar. Mr Bottliwalla was a teller in a bank, and Mr Bankwalla conducted classes in ballroom dancing.

An endearing feature of this microscopic merchant community was its compelling sense of duty and obligation towards other Parsees. Like one large close-knit family, they assisted each other, sharing success and rallying to support failure. There were no Parsee beggars in a country abounding in beggars. The moment a Parsee strikes it rich he devotes a big portion of his energies to charity. He builds schools, hospitals and orphanages, provides housing, scholarships and finance. Notorious misers, they are paradoxically generous to a cause.

The four families were delighted by Freddy's visit and enchanted at the prospect of another family come to swell their ranks.

In two days Freddy had ensconced his family in a flat atop his brand-new provision store in one of the most busy and commercially prosperous areas in town.

The very next evening, rigged out in a starched white coat-wrap that fastened with bows at the neck and waist, crisp white pyjamas, and a turban, he drove his cart to Government House.

Parking his splendid bullocks next to restive tonga horses, Freddy strode confidently up to the resplendent guards at the huge iron gates. The guards allowed him in almost at once and Freddy signed his name in the Visitor's Register.

Having thus paid homage to the British Empire, established his credentials and demonstrated his loyalty to 'Queen and Crown', Freddy was free to face the future.