

The Lady of the Outhouse

by Suchita Malik

MY husband's female colleague, a member of the elite service and a good friend, is a jovial, happy-go-lucky sort and humane to the core. Needless to say that she is hard-pressed for everything, especially time and energy. As with her male counterparts, she passes through the same rut of nitty-gritty of bureaucratic hassles and unhesitatingly suffers the strains of being in a high-tech job, much to the envy of many of her colleagues. She endures a lot herself, trying to strike a balance between her professional and private lives and comes out pretty clean in the endeavour. She can make others run for their lives or for a dollop of patience, whenever her "diktats" are not carried faithfully and diligently whether at home or office. Her word carries weight and she herself can weigh down others with her infectious laughter and almost perfect-to-a point sense of hospitality.

Yet, as is the rule, comes a weak

point or spot in the lives of the "high" and the "mighty". It so happened that a family stayed at the backyard of her house and assisted her in carrying out the daily household chores as a part of the deal. The arrangement was "negotiated" keeping in mind the mutual difficulties as well as benefits of both the parties. The maid or the "Lady of the Outhouse" as she preferred to refer to her, would take care of the school-going children of "Madam" and the "Madam", in turn would provide shelter, clothing and medical assistance etc to the family 'in need'.

The "perfect" arrangement continued smoothly and lingered on to get to a couple of years old. Need, habit and routine make strange bed-fellows together and, when continued beyond a point, acquire a tendency to take one other for granted and acquire complacency. The "genuine" Lady and the lady of the "Outhouse", by now, had come to share an intimacy which may be common to all

the women and mothers too. The mutual dependence gradually increased till the family at the "Outhouse" was "elevated" to the status of being the members of the same family itself.

Joys were shared in terms of birthday parties as well as the festivals as were the sorrows, the food, the fruits galore, the gas and the clothes, the house and the medicines too. So much so, the "outhouse" relatives came to barge in more and more and became frequent visitors on one pretext or the other and also demanded some attention and care.

The original home appeared rather ransacked; the husband became more and more irritable and the children had never before looked so very neglected and downcast. All this courtesy the "outhouse family"! All the remonstrations of "Madam" fell on deaf ears. Rather, a polite "threat" was issued by the "outhouse" family that they may like to vacate the premises as the neighbours had offered them many more (read

"plum") facilities. The "Madam" not only put up with this indignant behaviour with silence but also called for truce. The harmony returned and so did the disorder and the pilferage galore.

One day, I happened to invite this friend to an evening meal with us along with her family members. To my surprise, she expressed her inability to do so because of a prior engagement. I coaxed her again and again till she revealed that her maid's mother-in-law's nephew had died and she had gone to her village leaving her own brood in the protective care of "Madam". Since, she didn't have a substitute for the Maid; she had to comply to preserve the "unity" and "integrity" of the family.

"Yo...u? In charge of the Maid's children?" was all I could mutter in disbelief. "Well, Suchita, mine is not a maid but a lady....the lady of the Outhouse, you know," roared my friend with her ever familiar laughter before putting the receiver down. ■