



Very late in life, around 1938-39, Rabindranath Tagore wrote three long stories or novellas which were entirely different in character and technique from his earlier short stories many of which are well-known in English translation. The three stories in this collection, "Sunday", "Last Word" and "Laboratory" have been newly translated and published together in a single volume in English for the first time.

The language and structure of these stories mark in a sense the culmination of Rabindranath's

search for a truly modern prose. All three stories have an important male character who is a scientist or a technologist—quite unprecedented in his own fiction. However, it is not the men in these stories but the women they interact with who are unforgettable.

Always well-known for his delineation of strong female characters, there are none quite as remarkable and independent as the three women in these stories. Exceptional in their own way, it is they who control and build the relationship with the men in the stories. Vibha, Achira and Sohini—they are the three companions.

The English translation re-captures Rabindranath's late prose style, including both the nuances of his irony and subtle cerebral wit.

Cover : Bharati Mirchandani

Back cover photograph : A still from the film 'Robibar'.



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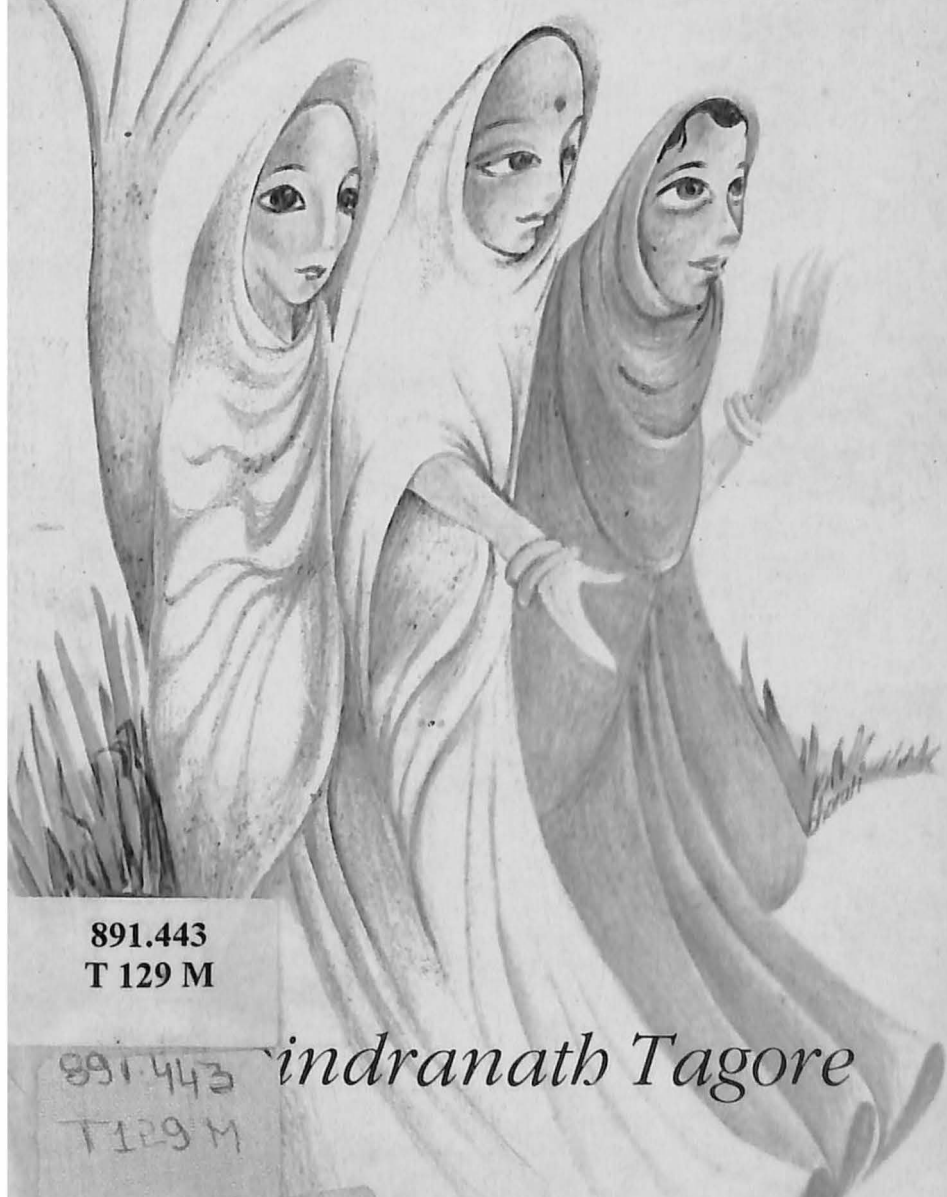
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# *Three Companions*



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Tagore

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) once told some of his admirers that one day they might decide to throw away much of his work but they would never be able to dispense with his songs, his short stories and his paintings. Considering that he composed over three thousand songs and painted nearly two thousand pictures, his output of short fiction was meagre—only about 85 stories altogether. Of these again, just over half were written during a notable creative period between 1891 and 1895. They began to be published in English translation from 1910 onwards, most often in the *Modern Review* of Calcutta. Among the early translators were Jadunath Sarkar and Prabhatkumar Mukhopadhyay and Sister Nivedita. The earliest collection of translated stories to appear as a book was *Glimpses of Bengal Life* (1913) published from Madras.

The three long stories that constitute *Three Companions* have been translated anew and are being published now for the first time in a collection.

Sujit Mukherjee, university teacher turned publisher's editor, wrote his doctoral dissertation at the University of Pennsylvania on the critical reception of Rabindranath in the United States. This was published as *Passage to America* (1964). He translates from Bangla poetry, fiction and criticism, and has also written about translating Indian literature into English in his collection of essays, *Translation as Discovery* (1982).



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# *Three Companions*

Rabindranath Tagore

*Translated by*  
Sujit Mukherjee



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To  
Rohini  
*third companion*

## *Acknowledgements*

To Visva-Bharati for permitting the publication of new translations into English of these stories, also for allowing further use of the essay which appears here as 'Afterword'.

To former student, now teacher, Bikash Chakravarty for help in locating dates and places of first publication of the originals.

To colleague Lata Krishnaswamy Shankar, for successfully putting this through press despite much translatorial interference; Vidya Rao, for improving the first draft and providing that definition of *satitva* on page 43; Sujata Sen, for furnishing in record time several stills from the film "Robibar" which awaits release.

## Translator's Note

The originals of the stories presented in this book in English translation were the last few Rabindranath Thakur [Tagore (1861-1941)] wrote in his own hand.\* The first of these, "Robibar" [translated here under the title "Sunday"], published in the 1939 Dasera special number of *Anandabazar Patrika* (Bengali Era 1346 Aswin), broke a six-year-long fast for readers of his short fiction.\*\* The second, "Seshkatha" [translated as "Last Word"], followed soon after and made two appearances in slightly different guises—one, with an introduction and entitled "Chhoto galpo" (meaning 'Short story') in a special issue of *Desh* (B.E. 30th Agraḥayan 1346) in 1939; the other, with a change of title to the present one and without the introduction, in the B.E. 1346 Falgun issue of *Sanibarar chithi* in February-March 1940. The third and longest of these stories, "Laboretari" [translated as "Laboratory"], appeared in the 1940 Dasera special number of *Anandabazar Patrika* (B.E. 1347 Aswin). Later the same year all three were collected by Visva-Bharati Granthalay in a book entitled *Tin sangi* (meaning 'Three companions'), priced at two rupees.

I am old enough to recall, however vaguely, having read without much understanding one of or all these stories in English translation soon after the original had appeared. But these counterparts are not

\* Four more, composed orally between 5th May and 25th June 1941, were transcribed by Smt. Protima Thakur and Smt. Rani Chanda.

\*\* The last story before this, "Chorai dhon", was published in 1933 (B.E. 1340 Kartik).

easy to trace today. The list of Rabindranath's short stories and novels in English translation which was published in the 'Tagore Number' (May 1961) of *Indian Literature*, mentions all three stories but not where the translations appeared or who translated them. More recently, when invited to write something for a volume being planned by Visva-Bharati, I chose to write on *Tin sangi*. I sought their help in locating the earlier translations but they were able to confirm an English version only of "Robibar" in the 1939 Puja Annual of *Hindustan Standard*. I have not been able to find it. However, while feeling uneasy about my failure to find this or any information about the other two translations, I felt strongly reassured about the necessity of new translations.

In fact, the time has come—or came long ago—for fresh translations, not only into English, of whatever of Rabindranath that has been translated earlier, also of whatever that has not. He is simultaneously one of our comfortingly great as well as perpetually modern writers of literature, and he can withstand any amount of translation into any language of the world. If my attempt to present him again in English finds new readers without turning away the old, my labour will have been justified.

# *Contents*

Translator's Note / vii

Sunday / 1

Last Words / 23

Laboratory / 49

Afterword / 91

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## *Sunday*

The principal character of my story belongs to a rather old family of brahman pandits. His father's material life had ripened to the core in the legal profession, while his spiritual life was steeped in the strong preservative of a shakti worshipper's rituals. The old man no longer needed to practise law in the courts. He gave legal counsel at home and also performed his *pūja* every day. He kept both these activities going alongside each other, and trod carefully along the demarcation between this world and the next. And he never lost his footing in this difficult passage. Should a thorny atheist choose to take root in even a small crack in the wall of such a solidly tradition-bound home, then its destructive growth begins to press dangerously against the ancient structure of brick and wood. Our hero appeared like an irresistible Kalapahar in this orthodox Vedic brahman family.

His real name was Abhayacharan. As soon as he was able, he erased the stamp of ancestral creed which was inherent in such a name. He changed it to Abhik Kumar. He knew that as a person he did not belong to any familiar type; hence he chose a name that would not rub shoulders with other names in a crowd and get soiled in the process. In appearance he was quite foreign. A tall, tight-muscled fair body, grey eyes and sharp nose; a chin thrust out in permanent protest against some opponent. And he carried strong medicine in both fists. Those few of his classmates who had occasion to sample a dose, thereafter avoided it like poison.

His father Ambikacharan was not unduly worried about his son's godlessness. Ambikacharan had before him the example of his own

father's elder brother, Prasanna Nyayaratna. This old gentleman commanded a whole arsenal of logic, from which he fired shell after shell of polysyllabic arguments against the existence of god. Hindu society was merely amused, digested the onslaught, and not a dent was made upon the battlements of settled belief. Communal harmony is not disturbed if one were to display the cage of customary ritual even after the bird of religious belief had escaped from it. But Abhik never lost an opportunity to relegate popular custom to the rubbish heap. The uninhibited perambulation of poultry birds outside his room gave constantly audible proof of the attraction they held for his inner man. Although news of such unconventional conduct did reach the father's ears, the old man did not pay much attention. When any well-wisher took the trouble to bring him such information personally, the visitor was unceremoniously asked to leave the house. As long as a violation of social practice does not obtrude, society does its best to ignore such acts. But at last Abhik over-stepped the mark and it became impossible not to notice. The household deity, Bhadrakali, had the reputation of being very alert and responsive, and Abhik's friend, Bhoju, was excessively apprehensive of this divinity's disfavour. To prove that Bhoju's undue deference had no basis, Abhik perpetrated something blasphemous in the puja room. His father flared into a rage and ordered him out of the house, vowing never to see the son's face again. Such a sudden and harsh reaction is possible only in custom-abiding brahman character.

The son went to his mother and explained, 'Don't worry, Mother. I had discarded this goddess long ago, so it is nothing special that I should have to go away from her now. But I know I shall have your blessings whenever I need them. This is one area which is outside the goddess's jurisdiction, no matter how alert she is'. The mother wiped away her tears and offered him a currency note which she had tied up in a corner of her sari. He refused it, saying 'I'll accept that when I won't really need it. I must fight bad luck with will power, not with bank notes.'

We need to know a few more things about Abhik. All his life he had nursed two very contrary passions—repairing machinery, and drawing pictures. His father owned three motor cars which he used to travel in the mofussil. Abhik had cut his mechanic's teeth on those vehicles. And one of his father's clients had a workshop where Abhik had put in a lot of unpaid labour. As for drawing, he

had taken formal lessons at the government art school. After a few lessons he was convinced that if he continued here, his hand would learn to draw mechanically, his imagination would get cast into a mould. To prove that he was already an artist, he began propagating the fact himself. He held a one-man exhibition of his drawings, and the newspapers carried advertisements proclaiming him as India's foremost artist, a Bengali Titian. Every time he called himself an artist loudly, the noise came back redoubled as echoes from a number of empty minds belonging to people who were captivated. Young men in large numbers, younger women in even larger numbers assembled around Abhik and countered his critics by calling them bourgeois philistines.

Eventually, when Abhik was turned out of his father's house, he discovered that the glitter of his fame as an artist was really the reflected light of his father's bank-balance. He also discovered that his female admirers did not suffer any let-down when his prospects of inheriting wealth disappeared. Till the end they widened their eyes and declared him an artist in high-pitched sweet voices. They did, of course, suspect each other of pretence, and each believed that all the others except herself knew nothing and understood even less of art.

The next phase of Abhik's career is long and obscure. He found employment in a Burn Co. factory, wore a dirty cap and oil-besmeared overalls, and rose from the status of an ordinary fitter to head mechanic. He mixed freely with Muslim workers, and lived cheaply on four-paisa parathas and even cheaper meat of animals forbidden by custom. People said that he had become a Muslim; he replied, Muslims must then be greater than even atheists. After he had saved some money, he emerged out of exile to start the Bohemian existence of a full-time artist. Disciples were not long in coming, men as well as women. The fumes rising from uninhibited discussions of modern psychology by young women in fashionable glasses who flocked to his studio mingled with the smoke of constantly burning cigarettes. They glanced quizzically at each other, pointed fingers and pronounced such behaviour as positively vulgar.

Bibha was entirely outside this circle. She had first met Abhik during their early days in college. Abhik was eighteen at that time, bright with the glow of recent manhood, and even older fellow-students readily accepted him as their leader. Brought up in the

Brahmo community as she was, Bibha was used to the company of men. But in college, things were different. Reactions to her presence would often be indirectly registered by boys in gestures, odd looks and muttered comments. One day, a (rather urbanised) boy made his reaction a little too apparent. Abhik noticed it, caught hold of the boy, and dragged him to Bibha so that he may apologise to her. The offender had no choice but to do as he was told, and did so stammeringly and without raising his head. From that day Abhik appointed himself as Bibha's protector. This naturally made him the target of a lot of comment all of which deflected off his broad chest without causing damage. Bibha was embarrassed, but at the same time there is no doubt she felt secretly pleased.

There was more grace than beauty in Bibha's appearance. It was difficult to say why she drew attention. Abhik tried to analyse it: 'Even when people turn up uninvited to a feast, they are given sweets. Your beauty is not like the sweets given to the uninvited. It is only for the artist, like the beauty of Leonardo da Vinci's women, inscrutable.'

At one of the college examinations Bibha outranked Abhik by many places. Afterwards, she was very angry with him and wept in disappointment, as if she herself had been slighted. She complained, 'Why do you waste your time drawing pictures and do badly at examinations? I feel ashamed.'

Abhik replied, 'Those who are learned because they have memorized learning, how will they know I keep on doing well at an examination where there are no marks. Your eyes are full of tears because I draw pictures; my eyes go dry of all tears when I look at your learning. You won't understand this. You are on the side of those who are spoken well of and you are content to sit at their feet with your eyes shut; I am the leader of those whom nobody thinks well of.'

They were sharply divided over this matter of Abhik's artistic aspirations. There is no doubt that Bibha understood very little of Abhik's art. When other girls made a lot of fuss over Abhik's drawings and organised public felicitations for him, Bibha regarded such adulation as the false enthusiasm of the uneducated. But when Bibha's praise was not forth coming, Abhik felt deprived and hurt. He could not bear the thought that Bibha had joined those many others who regarded his drawings as a mere craze. Abhik dreamed of going to Europe and winning fame there as an artist; then, perhaps Bibha would be convinced.

One Sunday morning Bibha came back from the Brahmo-mandir prayer meeting to find Abhik waiting in her room. He had fished out a brown paper parcel wrapper from her wastepaper basket and was drawing lines on it.

Bibha asked, 'What brings you here?'

Abhik replied, 'I have a reasonable excuse, but that would be the secondary cause. If I were to tell you the primary cause, you may not find it appropriate. Whatever it is, don't think that I came to steal something.'

Bibha walked across the room to her desk, sat down there, and said, 'Steal if you need to. I won't inform the police.'

Abhik said, 'Need is always there, staring me in the face. Stealing another's property often turns out to be a virtuous deed—which is why I don't steal. The purity of my atheism must not be marred even by such virtuous deeds. You know, saving our no-god's honour is much more difficult than the task of those who are god-fearing.'

'Have you been waiting long?'

'I have. But I've been struggling with an insoluble problem of human psychology. How can you—who are well-read and are not without intelligence, or at least so it seems—continue to believe in a god? I can't quite solve this problem. Maybe if I come often to your room to conduct my research, I shall arrive at some solution.'

'Must you tease me about my religion?'

'I must, because your religion teases me by standing between us. How can I forgive that? You won't marry me because I am clever enough not to believe in what you believe. But I would marry you regardless of whatever truth or falsehood you believe in. You can't take away an atheist's faith. That is where my religion is superior. There is not a single god who can replace the fact that you are much more of a manifest truth to me than any god.'

Bibha did not answer. After some time, Abhik said, 'Is your god somewhat like my father? Has he disowned me?'

'What nonsense!'

Abhik knew full well where the real difficulty lay in their getting married. He wanted Bibha to admit it in so many words, but Bibha wouldn't.

From the outset of her life, Bibha had been more completely her father's daughter than her mother's. She had not given any other

man so much love and devotion. And Satish, her father, had reciprocated in equal measure by pouring out inexhaustible affection upon her. Her mother was not a little jealous about this situation. When Bibha kept ducks as pets, her mother protested saying that they made too much noise. When Bibha got a sky-blue blouse made to go with a sari of the same colour, her mother said that the colour did not suit Bibha's complexion at all. Bibha was very fond of a cousin and wanted to attend her marriage, but her mother did not let her go saying that the village where the marriage was to take place had a reputation for malaria. Having her wishes countered at every step by her mother made Bibha all the more dependent on her father.

Her mother died earlier. Thereafter for a long time Bibha's sole preoccupation had been to look after her father. She anticipated all his wishes and had made them her own. After his death, the entire property was inherited by Bibha. But a trustee administered the property and Bibha received a monthly allowance. The rest of the money waited until Bibha made a suitable match. Bibha knew who this suitable match was, according to her father's ideals. She also knew who was entirely unsuitable. Abhik raised this issue once by saying, 'You want to spare pain to somebody who is dead, but you don't mind hurting somebody who is alive. You hesitate to wound the empty air, but you have no care about injuring flesh and blood.' Such a statement made Bibha turn away weeping. Abhik realised that he could argue about her god but not about her father.

It was nearly ten in the morning. Sushmi, Bibha's niece, came in and said, '*Pishima*, it's getting late.'

Bibha gave her a bunch of keys and asked her to take out the provisions for the day's cooking, saying she would follow soon.

There is no limit to the work of those who are not obviously employed. Bibha's household was rather like that. Because it did not have the usual quota of members of an immediate family, it was burdened with a number of distant relatives. She took it upon herself to look after the needs of this family she had herself created, because she was afraid that servants may not treat everybody equally well. When she assured Sushmi that she would follow soon, Abhik

\* *Pishima* is the term for one's father's sister; here it has been used in a more general sense for aunt.

protested, 'Your following soon isn't fair either to me or even to Sushmi. Why don't you let her take independent charge? Give her a kind of Dominion Status, at least for today. Meanwhile, I want to give you a test. I've never talked business with you, I want to today. It'll be a new experience.'

Bibha said, 'Why not? Let's leave nothing out.'

Abhik took out a leather case from his pocket and opened it. Inside lay a platinum wrist-watch with a golden band dotted with diamond chips. He said, 'I want to sell this to you.'

Bibha could not hide her astonishment. 'You want to sell this?'

'Yes, sell it. Why are you surprised?'

Bibha did not find the right words for a few moments, then said, 'Because Monisha gave you this watch on your birthday. I can imagine her aching heart ticking away still in this watch. Have you any idea how much she suffered, what nasty remarks she had to hear, by how much she exceeded her means to buy a present which would be worthy of you?'

Abhik replied, 'I did not know till the end who gave this gift. But I am no idolator that I should build a pedestal for this watch in my pocket and mentally blow conch-shells\* for it day and night.'

'You amaze me. It's only a couple of months since she got typhoid and...'

'But she is now beyond all joy or suffering.'

'Till her last breath she believed that you loved her.'

'Her belief was not wrong.'

'And yet?'

'And yet—what? She is no more,\* but if her gift of love continues to bear fruit for me, what can be better?'

Bibha's face showed clear evidence of her own dismay. After a minute or two of silence, she asked, 'Why did you bring it to me, of all people, for sale?'

'Because I know you won't haggle over the price.'

'You mean I am the only buyer in Calcutta who is ready to be cheated?'

'I mean love doesn't mind being cheated.'

One cannot really get angry with such a man, who insists on being childish. He had not the slightest notion of what may be embarrassing. Women were invariably drawn by this kind of

\* Conch-shells are blown on auspicious occasions by Hindus.

genuine lack of conscience, this effortless hurdling over the barriers between what is proper and improper. They are ready to respect those men in whom the sense of duty makes for responsible conduct; but women open their arms to those irrepressible men who have little sense of propriety.

Bibha doodled on a blotting-paper with a blue pencil for a while. Then she said, 'All right, if I have some ready cash with me now, I'll give it to you—but not in exchange. I refuse to buy that watch.'

Abhik's voice rose sharply. 'Charity? If I were as rich as you are, I would accept your money as a gift, and later give you a return gift of the same amount. Never mind, let me do a man's duty. Take the watch. I won't take a single paisa for it.'

Bibha said, 'No woman is embarrassed to take things. That is their right. But not this watch. Tell me, why are you selling it?'

'If you must know—you remember I have a very wilful Ford car. It is completely erratic in its behaviour. If it wasn't for me, that car would have been scrapped long ago. I can get an old Chrysler in exchange for the Ford and eight hundred rupees. That Chrysler I can do up and make almost new.'

'Why do you need a Chrysler?'

'Not for going to get married.'

'That I know. You are incapable of anything so proper.'

'How right you are. But let me ask again—do you know Sheela? Kulada Mitter's daughter?'

'I've seen her hanging around you here and there.'

'She won her place next to me in the face of stiff competition. She calls herself progressive and takes great delight in shocking conservative circles.'

'Is that all? Maybe she is equally delighted outsmarting the feminine circles.'

'That possibility did occur to me, and now you've put it nicely into words. Tell me frankly—don't you think that this girl is needlessly beautiful, as if the creator had overdone things?'

Do you believe in a creator only where beautiful girls are concerned?'

'Well, one has to set up some kind of an opposition for the purpose of criticism....'\*

\* Three sentences of the original have been omitted here in translation. These contained a highly local reference.

'Criticism what?'

'I was about to tell you. I had taken Sheela for a drive from the football ground, with the car rattling along and puffing smoke into the faces of people walking behind, when we crossed Mrs Pakrashi in a new Fiat. You know what she looks like—even to say that she is passable would stretch one's capacity for overstatement to the limit. She stopped us to exchange the usual pleasantries and kept glancing at the discoloured hood and worn-out footboards of my car. If your god had any faith in equality, he would have prevented so much heartburn among women by not allowing so many grades of looks.'

'And that is why....'

'Yes, that is why I must, as soon as I can, put Sheela in a Chrysler and confront Mrs Pakrashi. Tell me again—doesn't all this make any impression on your...?'

'Don't drag me in. The creator did not overdo anything when he made my looks, nor is my car any better in appearance than yours.'

Abhik quickly got out of his chair, sat down on the floor next to Bibha's feet, and caught hold of her hand. 'Whom are you comparing! I tell you, you are unique, unique. Sometimes I fear that as I keep knowing you, I might even begin to believe in your god. And then there will be no salvation for me in either world. I can't even get you to be jealous. At least you never let me know it. Yet you know that.'

'I don't know a thing—except that you are strange, strange, like the creator's laughter.'

Abhik now said, 'You may not admit it but I am sure you want to know what I think of Sheela. She's turning into a habit for me. Like the habit of smoking I had when I was younger. It made me dizzy, but I wouldn't give up—my mouth felt bitter, but my heart felt proud. Sheela knows how to make one's addiction grow gradually. The little wine that is present in the love of women, that is my inspiration as an artist. She is like the wind for my sail, without her my brush gets stuck in the sandbank. When Sheela is near me, I can feel her heart glowing red like a danger signal—but the fire enters my veins. Somebody as austere as you may think this to be mere self-indulgence. I assure you it is a necessity.'

'And that is the cause of your necessity for a Chrysler.'

'I suppose so. Sheela shines brighter when she feels triumphant.'

All women need clothes and ornaments for this reason. We want grace and beauty from women; they want wealth and prosperity from men. The golden fullness provided by men is the most suitable background against which women appear at their best. Nature has devised this means of provoking men to improve themselves. Isn't this true?

'It may be. But we shall disagree on what is meant by prosperity. If a Chrysler car is prosperity for some people, then I would say that they are provoking men to belittle themselves.'

Abhik got excited. 'Yes, yes, I know. You could have helped me to reach the peak of what you would regard as prosperity. But your god came between us.'

Bibha disengaged her hand from Abhik's grasp. 'Don't keep on saying that same old thing. In fact, I seem to have been hearing its very opposite for a long time—that marriage is a noose round the artist's neck, shutting off inspiration. If I had the power to make you better yourself, I could have—'

Abhik interrupted in protest. 'Not "could have", you have. My grievance is that you refuse to recognise that you have made me better myself. If you recognised that, then you would drop all these ties you have of duty and religion to become my partner and stand by my side. You wouldn't let anything come between us. Instead, you've reduced me to the condition of a pilgrim whose boat has reached the shore but he cannot find the place to disembark. Oh Bee, when will you allow yourself to discover me fully?'

'When you don't need me any more.'

'Empty words! Blown up with winds of untruth! Why don't you admit openly that you cannot do without me? How long will you hide this?'

'Why should I hide it? And why should I say it aloud? I don't want to be a beggar.'

'I do. I am a beggar, and I shall beg. I shall keep on saying all day, every day, that I want you and want only you.'

'And at the same time you'll say you also want a Chrysler.'

'Oh, that. That is just envy. *Parvato vahniman dhoomat*.\* The occasional smoke of envy goes to prove that the fire of love is out of sight but keeps burning. Your heart is not an extinct volcano; it is a live

\* This statement ('The mountain is on fire and is emitting smoke') illustrates a principal of logic relating to inference.

Vesuvius.' And he stood up, raised his hands and cried, 'Hurrah!'

'You're behaving like a child. You must have planned all this in advance and therefore came early.'

'Yes, I did. I'll admit the pre-planning. Otherwise, there are a number of admirers to whom I could have sold this watch at some inordinate price and without any explanation. But to you I didn't come only to get a good price. I wanted to strike at the source of your weakness and make an impression there in my favour. But look at my luck—I neither get a good price nor do I make an impression.'

'How do you know? Luck doesn't always behave as if life were a game of cards. But let me tell you one thing—you've often asked me whether your affairs touch me in any way. Shall I tell you the truth? They do.'

Abhik was plainly stirred to hear this. 'That is good news, indeed.'

Bibha said, 'Don't get excited. I am touched not because I am envious, but because it is an offence to all women. Your deliberate cultivation of some girls, the unrestrained way you behave towards them—all this expresses your lack of respect for womanhood in general. That is what hurts me.'

'But this is strange logic. Shouldn't respect be reserved for individuals? Should I go round showing respect to a whole species? Respect at wholesale rates, without scrutinising the article? That would be like protection of industry—enhancing the value of products by putting up artificial tariff barriers.'

'Don't argue for the sake of argument.'

'You mean you should argue and I should keep quiet. No wonder it is said that times are bad when only women speak and men have to keep quiet.'

'Abhi, you're just looking for pretexts to bandy words. You know very well what I meant—that it is proper for men to maintain a natural distance from women.'

'Natural distance or unnatural? We are modern—we don't observe false proprieties; we accept what is natural. When I take Sheela for a drive in my rattling Ford, it is natural for her to sit by my side, it would be insulting the natural if she were to sit several yards away.'

'Abhi, don't you realize that you have inflated the value of women to satisfy your vanity. If you now withdraw this value, you will only be devaluing your vanity and depriving yourself of the

high returns you had wrongly stipulated. But what is the use of arguing with you—we live in the shoddy era which you call modern times.'

'I won't call ours a shoddy era—rather we are uninhibited, without shame. The old-time Shiva shut his eyes when he sat down to meditate; the present-day Nandi looks into the mirror and makes faces at himself—what is known as debunking. We have been born to these times, so we can't shut our eyes and meditate like some chela of Bholanath. Instead, if we can imitate Nandibhringi's peculiar appearance, then we can become famous.'

'All right, all right. Go and become famous by making faces in every direction. But before you go, will you tell me this? When you encourage these girls to fall all over you, doesn't it dull the edge of your enjoyment? This sensation you readily call thrill—doesn't it get trampled under foot by the crowd?'

'Well, if you must know, Bee, that which is a thrill, an ecstasy, that is of the highest order, only rarely had. What you are describing as something for a crowd, that is stuff from a shop selling second-hand material. It is soiled, it is torn at places, but it also sells—at low prices. There aren't too many wealthy people around who can pay genuine prices for the best material.'

'You can, Abhi, you surely can, you have the means to pay genuine prices. But such is your nature that you are fascinated by the soiled and the tattered—perhaps it amuses and interests the artist in you. The fully evolved thing is not sufficiently picturesque to you. Anyway, let's stop arguing and do something about your Chrysler project.'

Bibha got up from the chair and went into the next room. She returned almost immediately with a sheaf of currency notes and offered them to Abhik. 'Here is your inspiration, stamped with the authority of the government. But don't ask me to keep that watch of yours.'

Abhik leaned his head against a chair as he sat on the floor, and did not say anything. Bibha knelt down near him, took one of his hands in her own, and said, 'You must not misunderstand. You are in need just now. Since I am not in need at present, why not—'

Abhik interrupted her. 'Yes, yes, I am in need, in tremendous need. And it is in your power to meet that need. What shall we do with just money?'

Bibha lightly caressed Abhik's hand, saying, 'For what I cannot

do, I shall have regret all my life. But for what I can do, why deny me the pleasure of doing it.'

'No, never. Do you really think I'll accept your help so that I can take Sheela for motor-drives? I thought you would be angry at the proposition, I thought you would at least reproach me.'

'Why should I be angry? Your naughty games don't last very long, do they? Your naughtiness may be dangerous for Sheela but it has no bad effect on you. I've watched you do these childish things so often, and laughed to myself. I know you can't do without these pranks. I also know that these pranks are not enjoyable if they tend to get permanent. Perhaps you hope to obtain something, but you can't stand the prospect of being obtained.'

'Bce, it's just because you know me so well that you never care to worry about me. You've seen through my fondness for girls for what it really is—devotion like that of the atheist, which imposes no ties. The atheist is not obliged to imprison his worship within the stone walls of a temple. I have seen how some people touch and fondle their women friends and melt in appreciation. Such heedless allegiance to women revolts me. Women to me are like the atheist's god—that is, of the artist. The artist does not flounder; he can swim, he always crosses the water. I am not greedy; that woman is greedy who is jealous of me. You are not greedy, so the greatest gift of your unattached heart is the freedom you allow others.'

Bibha laughed. 'Spare me your eulogy. Artist, let me grant that you are a grown-up child. But let me provide the toy for the game you are engaged in at present.'

'Never, never—although I am curious to know how you managed to squeeze this money out of the closed fist of your trustees.'

'If I told you the truth, you may not like it. Do you remember I am taking tuition in mathematics from Amar babu?'

'Ah, you want to leave me behind in everything, even in learning.'

'Let me finish. Aditya mama is one of my trustees. He got a first-class and a gold medal in mathematics. He is convinced that given the right opportunity Amar babu may turn out to be another Ramanujan. He sent one of his equations to Einstein and got a reply. I've seen that letter. Since a man like Amar babu won't accept direct help, I said I would like to study mathematics with him. Aditya mama was most pleased. He drew some money from the

amount in the trust fund meant for my education. I give Amar-babu a kind of stipend from that.'

Abhik's expression changed as he listened to the explanation. He made an effort to laugh and said, 'There may be an artist who, if he was given the right opportunity, might measure up to somewhere near Michaelangelo's beard.'

'He may reach there even without any given opportunity. Now tell me, will you take this money from me?'

'Price of the toy?'

'Why not? Aren't we women always paying for your toys?' I see no harm in that. There's always the trash-can when you've finished with the toy.'

Just for that the Chrysler project earns a funeral right now. The progressive Sheela will have to tolerate the uncertain advance of my erratic Ford. And now let's talk of more pleasant things. I hear Amar-babu is saving money so that he can go abroad and prove that he is no ordinary mortal.'

Bibha said, 'I hope and pray he will succeed. It'll be an honour not only for him, but also for his nation.'

Abhik said, his voice rising, 'And I'll prove the same thing, even without your hopes and prayers. His proving is easy, it lies along the measured path of logic. Art has to be proved on the route of taste, which lies along the private road of art-lovers. That is no Grand Trunk Road. I see no future for me in this land of ours where people go round and round in blinkers, I must go to another country where people have the freedom to see and judge for themselves. I hope the day will come when your uncle is forced to admit that I too am not an ordinary person, and also his niece—'

'Leave the poor niece out of it. She didn't take very long to know whether you are the equal of Michaelangelo or not. For her, you are extra-ordinary even without any proof. Now tell me, do you really want to go abroad?'

'I dream of nothing else night and day.'

'Then why don't you accept this gift—this tribute laid at the feet of genius?'

'I suggest you give up—you are beginning to sound out of tune. May the genius of the mathematics teacher prosper. This age may not appreciate me, but the next age will. Posterity waits for me. And I promise you there will be a time when you will whisper into your pillow some midnight that you might have added your name to

another name for eternity, but you missed the chance.'

'I don't have to wait until posterity, Abhi, my worst punishment has already begun.'

'I don't know what punishment you have in mind, but I know that your worst punishment is your failure to understand my art. You fail to see me in the highest chair the new age will offer to me when it acknowledges modern art.' Abhik got up as he was speaking and moved towards the door.

Bibha asked, 'Where are you going?'

'To a meeting.'

'What kind of meeting?'

'I thought of performing Durga-puja with students who are on holiday.'

'You will perform Durga-puja?'

'Yes, of course. It's easy for me because I have no allegiance to any god. This non-allegiance affords so much room to all the thirty-three crores of gods and demi-gods that they won't bicker over space. There is ample space in the sky to hold all the children's games about creation.'

Bibha realized that this jeer was aimed against her beliefs. Instead of rising to the challenge, she just kept quiet. Abhik stopped at the door and returned a few steps. 'You may be a whole-hearted nationalist, Bee, you may dream of the integration of India. But if anybody can harmonise all the religions of a land where people have always been ready to kill each other over religious issues, it will have to be a non-religious person like me. I can see myself as the saviour of India.'

Bibha knew very well why Abhik's atheism was growing so fierce day by day, so she could not take offence. But neither could she foresee its outcome. She could have given up everything else for Abhik's sake, if it were not for her father's injunction. Her father's wishes were—for her—not just opinions or convictions or matters which could be debated. They had become part of her being. She had often determined to cross that barrier of her being, but she invariably drew back at the last moment.

A servant came and announced that Amar-babu had called. Abhik immediately went out and clattered down the staircase. Bibha's heart turned over painfully. Her first reaction was to send word to the professor that she would not take her lessons today. But on

second thoughts she controlled her impulse and told the servant, 'Bring him up here and tell him I'll back in a few moments.'

In her room she lay face down on the bed and cried into a pillow. After a while she composed herself, washed her face, and returned to the sitting-room. She said with a smile, 'I thought of skipping lessons today.'

'Why, don't you feel well?'

'Oh no, I feel perfectly well. It's only that Sunday laziness has so mingled with my blood that I have occasional relapses.'

The professor said, 'My blood must be immune to this particular microbe. Even then, I should like to take the day off as well. I'll tell you the reason. This year, an international conference of mathematicians will be held in Copenhagen. I don't know where they heard of me, but I seem to be the only Indian to be invited. It's too good an opportunity to miss.'

Bibha said enthusiastically, 'You mustn't miss it, you must go.'

The professor smiled. 'My superiors in service, who could if they wanted have deputed me on their own to attend this conference, now they don't seem willing—they are afraid it might turn my head. So I must find the means elsewhere. I have to look for a person who is not too fastidious—because the only securities I can offer against a loan can neither be weighed upon scales nor be tested by a touchstone.'

Bibha said with some agitation, 'I'm sure such a person can be found—and he won't be fastidious, don't worry.'

The problem was not of the kind which could be solved on the spot. For the time being, a partial solution was agreed upon. Amarbabu was of average height, thin and dark, with a broad forehead from which hair was already receding. His face was pleasant and it belied his inability to make enemies. His eyes were full not of absent-mindedness but of a kind of far-mindedness, as if he was always thinking of something remote—as if when he walked along the road his safety was the responsibility of others. He had few friends, but they all had very high expectations of him; those who were mere acquaintances, they avoided him and regarded him as a high-brow. Because he had little to say, it was taken to be another proof of his lack of friendliness. In short, he had very little need of other people in order to live. The most comforting element in his

temperament must have been his total unawareness of what others thought of him.

When Bibha had brought eight hundred rupees to Abhik this morning, she had done it on blind impulse. The utter faith her uncle had in her sense of responsibility had never been betrayed until now. But a materialistic person like him would never be able to conceive of the kind of irresistible compulsion to break faith that could overtake a woman's rationality. Today such a storm had blown Bibha away—even though she could foresee the consequence of her unlawful decision to use money entrusted to her in an arbitrary manner—and forced her to make her offering to Abhik. That rejected offering had now retraced its steps along a conventional path. In the present case, at least there was not the pressure from the emotion of love. She did not yet dare to use her personal discretion and lend a large sum of money. Instead, she planned to sell the ornaments inherited by her from her mother and gift the proceeds away to a national cause for which Amar was the pretext.

Bibha used to help her wards—those children who were being brought up in her household—with their lessons. This being Sunday, she tutored the children after lunch for some time and let them off early. Then she spread a mat on the floor of her room, brought out her jewellery box and began sorting out its contents. She had sent word to the family jeweller to come and make an estimate. While she was doing this, she heard Abhik's footsteps on the staircase. At first she thought of hiding the ornaments. But then she let them lie where they were because it was against her nature to hide anything from Abhik.

Abhik stopped as soon as he had entered the room and took stock of the situation. He said, 'I see. Freight charges for shipping genius overseas. Where I am concerned you manage to delude me. But in the professor's case you want to solve his problems. Does the learned man know that the frail hands of a woman are helping him to cross the ocean?'

'No, he doesn't.'

'If he did, would it make any difference to the scientist's manly sense of self-respect?'

'All that I know is that the respectful gifts of the lowly are to be accepted by the eminent without hesitation. They are entitled to

such tribute, and they oblige us by accepting it.'

'All right, all right. But a woman's ornaments are meant to please men, no matter how ordinary we are—not to pay for their sea passage, no matter how extraordinary they are. Especially for men like me, you have already dedicated this jewellery to us by wearing it in our sight. Take this necklace, for example, this one with matching rubies and pearls. I saw you wearing this when I didn't know you very well; but it is embedded in my earliest memory of you. This necklace doesn't belong only to you any more, it also belongs partly to me.'

'Then let me give you the necklace.'

'How can I take it? Snatching it away from your being will be an act of robbery. I am waiting until I can get the necklace along with the neck. It'll be cheating me if, in the meanwhile, you part with the necklace.'

'My mother left me these ornaments, in anticipation of my marriage. Since there won't be any marriage, what significance should I attach to these? Anyway, I warn you not to look forward to this bride bedecked in jewellery at some auspicious or inauspicious hour.'

'I shouldn't? Does that mean some other bridegroom is in the offing?'

'There is—on the bank of Baitarani.\* But let me do this. Let me put aside some ornaments for the bride you will marry.'

'Is there no place for my bride on that bank of Baitarani?'

'Hush, don't say that. Numerous living brides-to-be are clutching your horoscope.'

'You may be right. The indication in my horoscope may turn out to be correct. Under the influence of Saturn, it is a time of danger for men when they feel excessively the absence of a female companion.'

'The appearance soon after of a female companion may prove to be no less dangerous. Or, if not a danger, it is a serious predicament.'

'Compulsory confinement, in other words. Even if the situation is hypothetical, it is so near probability that it is useless arguing about it. That's why I was saying that if it should happen that one day you suddenly see me draped in a red *cheli*\*\* being entrusted to other hands—'

\* A mythical river one crosses after death.

\*\* Silken cloth of pink colour worn on auspicious occasions.

'You can't frighten me like that. If what you visualize happens, maybe I shall also suddenly discover that there is no scarcity of other hands.'

'Shame on you, Bee. What you said just now doesn't sound right on your lips. Men are used to worshipping women as goddesses, because women are prepared to pine away in their absence. But no one ever makes the mistake of regarding men as gods. When men are in want, they don't hesitate to fulfil their want—quite unlike women like you who, to uphold your principle of steadfastness, are ready to die for a principle. Will you allow us men to undertake to safeguard Amar-babu's immortality?\* We too realize his value. Why should you offend all men by selling off your ornaments?'

'Don't say that. No glory is greater for women than the success of men. When the men of a country are eminent, the women feel privileged to belong to that country.'

May this country be one such. When I think of you, I keep hoping it may come true. As for me—never mind, we'll talk of that another time. There are enough petty persons in the province of Bengal who are jealous of Amar-babu's success. Most people here act like an epidemic virus on successful men. Don't count me among them, for heaven's sake. In fact, I have even committed a criminally good deed. I had all that money collected from Durga-puja donations. I've paid it into the fund being raised for sending Amar-babu abroad. I have done this without telling anyone. When it is found out, all my Durga devotees won't have to run to the market to buy a live sacrifice. I know what real worship is because I am an atheist; those who are religious, they cannot.'

'But, Abhik, how could you do this! Such an act is not worthy of your pure atheism. This is breaking trust.'

'I know. Then let me tell you how even my kind of faith got weakened. My disciples were very keen to celebrate this puja in great style. But the money they raised was pitifully little. It wouldn't cause any tragedy among goats, the fifth act wouldn't have any bloodshed. Personally, I didn't mind the prospect. I thought we could ourselves beat the drums in and out of tune, and sacrifice a gourd or pumpkin\*\* with our own hands. For an atheist that would

\* *Amar* means 'immortal' in Bengali; hence the pun in the phrase Amar-babu's immortality!

\*\* Under special circumstances, it is permitted to offer a large fruit as sacrifice.

be enough. But not for the dutifully pious. One evening, without telling me, one of these boys dressed up as a sadhu and five others as the sadhu's followers. Then they went to an affluent and elderly widow and told her that Mother Jagadamba\* had appeared to the sadhu in a dream and told him that if the puja was not celebrated properly with a goat sacrifice and other important rituals, then she would cause harm to the widow's son who works in Rangoon. They were able to extract five thousand rupees out of the old woman. As soon as I came to know of this I found a proper use for the money. I shall probably lose my position, but at least the money will be cleansed. This admission to you is my confessional. By admitting a sin I may even have washed it off. Twentynine rupees remain of that five thousand. I am keeping them to pay for the pumpkins.'

Sushmi appeared at this point to report that Bachhu bearer's fever had gone up and he was coughing a lot, so Bibha was needed to give instructions about what medicine to buy. Bibha would have gone immediately, but Abhik caught her by the hand. 'You take care of the whole world, you give all your time to looking after those who are sick—why can't you spare a thought for those who are disgustingly healthy?'

'Not the whole world, but just those in my own care. I have to make up all this work so that I can forget that healthy rascal. Let me go. I'll be back soon. You sit here and keep an eye on my ornaments.'

'And who will keep an eye on my greed?'

'Your non-religion.'

For some time after this, there was no news from Abhik, not even any letters. Bibha went about looking pale and drawn. She could not give her mind to anything. She could not organise her thoughts and sort out what had happened and what might happen. Days went by as heavily and painfully as if each was a weight dragged over her ribs. She kept thinking that it was her fault Abhik had gone away. He had left home long ago, he had none of the usual ties, perhaps he would never return. She said within herself again and again. 'Don't be angry any more. Come back. I won't refuse you again.' The more she recalled his whims, his sulking, his irresponsibility, the more she blamed herself for being hard-hearted and wept copiously.

\* Jagadamba is another form of Devi or Durga.

At last a letter came, in an envelope carrying the crest of a shipping line. Abhik wrote:

I am off to England as a stoker on this steamer. My job is to keep the engines supplied with coal. Shall I say, don't worry about me? But it is nice to feel that you are worrying. Let me assure you I am quite used to the heat emitted by engines. Are you still angry that I did not ask you for the fare? The only reason I didn't ask is that you don't have the slightest regard for my identity as artist. This has been my grievance for a long time. But I won't blame you for that. I somehow feel sure that I shall be acknowledged by knowledgeable people in those countries with developed taste whose appreciation has genuine value.

A number of stupid persons have praised my paintings without understanding a thing. Some others have lied when they praised, hoping to deceive me. You at least have not offered me false praise to make me happy—although you knew that even the slightest praise from you would be something I would treasure forever. The unshakable honesty of your character causes my greatest sorrow, yet I value this honesty above all other qualities. When the world is ready to pay me due respect, you too will offer me the truest respect I shall ever receive—because it will come from your heart. You will wait until your conviction reaches the status of undeniable truth. I keep this in mind as I go forward to try and achieve the impossible.

You must have realized by now that your necklace has been stolen. I couldn't bear the thought that you were going to sell it in some shop....\* In its place I have left a bunch of drawings in your room. Are you amused? I agree that these drawings don't have any better price today in Bengal than scrap paper. But wait a little, Bee, and you will get the better bargain. Let me boast that just as somebody digging for treasure suddenly strikes it with his spade, so will the priceless worth of my drawings suddenly manifest itself. Until then you can keep being amused. After all, no woman really considers a man as adult—at least, not the man she loves. I have filled my imagination with all the tenderness of your amusement and carry it over the seas with me. I have seen you pray for so many things to your god—will you hereafter add the prayer that the tremendous sorrow of my separating from you should one day justify itself.

I don't know if you ever, in the deepest privacy of your thoughts,

\* [One sentence has been omitted here in translation.]

felt jealous about me. It's true that I like the company of women. Some of them have loved me, and I feel grateful for that love. But surely you know that all these girls are the minor stars of a constellation that surrounds the pole star that is you. They are just appearance, you are reality. Does this sound sentimental? I can't help it, I am no poet. My language is like a raft of banana plants afloat on large waves, easily overturned. Truly profound grief ought to be dignified and sober. Mere weakness is restless, and you have often laughed at my weakness. You will find traces of the same weakness in this letter and smile, saying that all this really reflects your Abhik. But maybe you won't smile now. No matter how much I have fretted because I couldn't obtain you, it would be utterly unfair to accuse you of being miserly in what you gave from your heart. The fact is, I haven't yet been able to appear to you in my full development. Perhaps I never will. It's this acute want of satisfaction that reduces me to a beggar before you. I may end up by believing in reincarnation, even if I cannot believe in anything else. You have never spoken out your love for me, but what you have given every moment to me from the depths of your silence—that I could never define, and I preferred to treat it as something supernatural. It has drawn me in some manner along with you perhaps somewhere near to your god. Am I making all this up? I don't know. But isn't there a corner in our hearts where, unknown to ourselves, words are engendered by a hard enough blow? maybe such words tell a truth which I haven't yet grasped.

Bee, my Queen-Bee, I have loved you above all else in this world. If there is some infinite presence at the outset that love and if that presence is what you regard as divinity, then to this atheist your door and your god's door becomes one and the same. When I return—and someday I shall return—I shall close my eyes and hand over all my opinions and my beliefs to you, so that you may carry them to the end of the road you have chosen and leave no cause for any further separation between us which rises from our intellects. Having come away so far from you, love has taken on an inconceivable quality, and I can now cross over the barriers of logic and debate—I can see you in your transcendental glory. For so long I have wanted you only with my intellect, hereafter I hope to receive you with all my being.

Your atheist devotee  
Abhik

## *Last Words*

Long before a story actually emerges at a particular point in its own shape from the muddy and muddled current of life, its principal actors have already marked a trail of their identities. One must take up that pre-story trail from upstream. I shall therefore take some time to get started, so that I can introduce myself adequately. But I shall have to use an assumed name in order to forestall having to justify myself to my circle of acquaintances. I wonder what kind of name I should assume. I don't want to use a romantic name and thereby tune my story to the fifth pitch of Rag Basanta. A name like Nobinmadhav might do—although it is possible to wash off the dull realism of such a name and transform it to, say, Nabarun Sengupta. But that wouldn't sound right. Readers would be put off by the very presumption behind such a name. They would think that somebody is showing off in literary circles wearing borrowed clothes.

I used to belong to one of the revolutionary organisations of Bengal. The powerful gravitational forces of the British Empire tried to draw me towards the Andaman Islands, but I managed to elude the clutches of the C.I.D. and escaped to Afghanistan. I finally landed in America off a boat on which I had worked as an ordinary sailor. The peculiar obsessive element which forms the marrow of anybody whose home is in East Bengal did not let me forget even for a day that as long as I lived I would have to saw away at the shackles which bound India to foreign rule. But within a few months of living abroad I began to realize that the kind of revolutionary activity I had been initiated into at home was not much more than letting off

crackers at a fireworks display. One succeeded in burning one's hands or singeing one's own hair, but made not the slightest impression on Britain's imperial power. Of course the moth has a blind love for the flame. When I leaped into it in proud exultation, I did not know that I was feeding the flames, not of any yajna of history, but of the pitiful flickering of our own funeral pyres. In the meanwhile, the elaborate preparations for tremendous havoc of the European great war were already in view. There was no hope that this all-destroying force which was seeking to bring a whole yuga to a violent end would at all be amenable to being installed as a domestic deity in India. Nor did any occasion arise for me to enact an elaborate self-slaughter. Instead, I resolved to strengthen the foundations of the fortress of nationalism. I realised that the finger-nails of both hands may have sufficed in primitive combat, but much more equipment was needed to wage a modern struggle. In the present age, machines would have to be fought with machines. To die carelessly was much easier than to become a disciple of Viswakarma. I told myself it was no use feeling impatient since I would have to start from scratch. I managed to get a job in Ford's automobile plant in Detroit. I picked up the fundamentals quickly and got better at my job as days went by, but I couldn't shake off the feeling that I wasn't making much progress. It struck me one day that I ought to seek a meeting with Henry Ford himself, to tell him that my ambition was not self-advancement but service to my motherland. I thought that this might please such an advocate of freedom and a money-making wizard, and might even interest him into paving the way to my goal. But he suppressed a smile and said, 'My name is Henry Ford—an old British name. My British cousins have grown quite worthless. My ambition is to make them useful again.' I had thought that he might be interested in making Indians useful also, but I realized that those who are wealthy are able to sympathize only with others who have money. I also realized that the complicated methods of wheel-making I was learning here wouldn't take me very far. I began to see, in this connection, that I would have to start again at some stage predating the handling of machinery, start at the stage where I could learn how to obtain the raw material of which machines are made. The earth stores minerals deep inside her, accessible only to the strong who use what they find here to conquer the world. For the weak, there is only the crop available on the surface—hence their own ribs are visible to the eye, their bellies are sunken.

I engaged myself in the study of mining and metallurgy. Ford was right in saying that the British had become useless, as their achievements in India gave evidence. Once upon a time they innovated the cultivation of indigo and perfected the methods of growing and processing tea; they set up offices of administration and brought about law and order in the land. But they never succeeded in tapping the vast inner resources of India, whether of her people or of her nature. They were content to wring the last drop of blood from the bodies of jute farmers. I offered silent tributes to Jamshed Tata from across the seas. I decided that instead of setting off crackers I would break into the vaults of the underworld. I would not join those confirmed adolescents who had transferred their dependence on their own mothers to mere prayer and song to the Motherland. I would recognize the poor and the starving and the disabled as destitutes, not chant mantras in the name of Daridranarayan. When I was younger I used to be as proficient as any one else in concocting these idols out of words. Those tinsel-covered clay-images of nationalism that our poets made up in their pottery-sheds—I have sat before such images and wept. But no more of all that. In a country where the applied intellect was supreme, I accepted reality as real and set myself dry-eyed to learn how to work. I thought when I return home and begin to search for the hidden wealth of my Motherland with spade and pitchfork, the devoted disciples of poets will find it difficult to recognize my work as another form of worship of the land of my mother.

After leaving the Ford plant I spent almost nine years studying various aspects of mining and metallurgy in America as well as in Europe. I worked in several places and even innovated a couple of new techniques which not only earned me the praise of my teachers but also gained me a great deal of self-confidence. And it taught me to despise my previous worthless self which used to be so impressed by mere words.

There may not be much direct connection between my slight story and all these large statements. These could have been omitted, perhaps to advantage. But in this connection I must say at least one thing which needs to be said. Whereas in the early youth of most men the magnetism of feminine influence causes aurora borealis colours to appear in the polar sky of life, mine was an utterly detached existence and deliberately so. My heart was barred against assault with the notion that I was a *sannyasi*, a *karmayogi*. When the anxious parents of marriageable daughters made inquiries, I told them

plainly that only if the horoscopes of their daughters recorded the possibility of untimely widowhood should they think of me as a son-in-law.

Western countries are not equipped to provide protection against the company of women. I had special reason there to be afraid of dangers in this respect. That I am quite handsome in appearance lay outside my consciousness while I was in India because the appreciation of women was confined to the silent language of their glance and never got expressed in words. But once I went abroad I discovered that not only did I possess more than average intelligence but also that I was good-looking. The preliminaries of several experiences—which would be the envy of my Indian readers—happened, but I swear that I did not let these consolidate into any emotional lure for me. Perhaps I am temperamentally rough. I do not have the capacity for soft sentimentalism which is typical of West Bengal gentlemen of refined taste. I had made myself into a stone safe inside which I locked up my resolutions. On the other hand, it was against my nature to play games with women by indulging them upto a point, then backing out when it suited me. I knew that I endured on the basis of hard resolution which enabled me to dedicate myself so strongly; if I were to take even a single false step, I would be crushed to death under the weight of that very resolution. There was no escape route for me from this situation. Besides, I had grown up in a small community and never learnt how to get over my old-fashioned shyness towards women. I have always felt contempt for those who boast about how they have been loved by women.

The degree I earned abroad was an eminently respectable one. I knew that it would not fetch me a government job, so I sought employment in the estate of a Chandravamsi prince in the Chotanagpur region—let us call him Raja Chandavir Singh. Luckily for me, his son Devikaprasad had studied in Cambridge for a few years. I met him by chance in Zurich, where he came to know of my reputation. I told him about my plans, and he got so interested that he immediately engaged me to conduct a geological survey of the estate. That such work was not entrusted to an Englishman did cause some resentment in the higher spheres of officialdom. But Devikaprasad had his way in spite of the reluctance of the old raja, and I stayed on.

Before I joined duty here, my mother said, 'Son, now that you have found a good job, why don't you marry and fulfil something I

have wanted for a long time.' I replied, 'But that would spoil what I have wanted for a long time. I don't think marriage will go well with this kind of work.' There was no yielding on my side, no matter how much my mother entreated me. I packed my instruments and moved into the heart of this forest.

The prospective horizon of my nation-wide achievement will now light up briefly with a story—that light has some of the qualities of a will-o'-the-wisp, but also those of the pole star. I wandered about in the forest, enquiring of the rocks below the ground what they held for me. The palas trees were in full flower, making drunken splashes of red colour overhead. Bees swarmed around sal blossoms. Men also reaped the harvest, collecting lac from trees, silkworm cocoons from the leaves, ripe mahua berries from where they lay scattered on the forest floor. Inside the woods there was a swift narrow stream of water which fluttered its veil of murmuring sound as it danced away amid boulders. I had named it Tanika. This place was no factory workshop nor college classroom but that enchanted chamber of visionary indulgence where bewitching nature worked her magic upon lonely minds—as she does on the canvas of sunsets.

Perhaps I was permitting myself too many poetic fancies. Lately my work had slowed down and I had to warn myself not to take it too easy. I was afraid that the tropical climate would inevitably draw me into its net I told myself that tropical inertia induced defeat into our blood-streams from birth—I must be on the alert and ward off its sweat-cooled comforts.

The afternoon wore on towards evening. The little river was split in the middle by a sand-bank, and a team of storks stood in silent occupation of this space. Every day this scene signalled to me the conclusion of the day's work. I would turn back towards my bungalow where I carried my day's collection of soil and rock samples for examination in the laboratory. There is an indeterminate period between afternoon and evening, something of a piece of unclaimed land, which is rather difficult for a lonely man to overcome, especially in an uninhabited jungle. That is why I had set aside this hour for my laboratory work. I ran a dynamo for my electricity and sat down in front of a microscope with chemicals and a set of scales. Occasionally, a whole night would nearly pass before I had finished. Today some of the samples seemed to contain a trace of manganese, and I walked a little faster than usual because of

suppressed excitement about my find. Overhead some crows flew across the orange sky and cawed the news that they too were going home.

But I wasn't destined to get back to work so soon today. On my daily route there was a cluster of five sal trees on a mound. The trees were so close to each other that anybody sitting inside their circle would not have been visible to the passer-by except through a small opening between two trunks. That day a strange radiance poured out of the clouds, and a bright beam was flung like a handful of gold into the sal grove. Directly in this golden light sat a girl with her back against a tree, her knees drawn up, totally rapt in what she was writing in a diary-sized book. In that instant an unprecedented wonderment was manifested to me. Perhaps it happens only once in a lifetime. Like waves drawn by the full moon, I sensed an oncoming tide? On the banks of my existence.

I paused out of sight and looked at her. A wonderful picture began etching itself in the gallery of unforgettable pictures of the mind. Until now in my varied and long experience, I had reached the threshold of much that was unexpected and beautiful. I had always passed on and never entered. But today it seemed that I was within reach of something supreme. Such seeming, or even such words in which to convey the feeling, was not a common experience for me. I don't know how it was that I suffered that sudden blow of providence which knocks the unknown and unsuspected being out of one's familiar concept of oneself. I always knew that I was dry and opaque like a mountain. And now a fountain had sprung up within me.

I wanted to say something, but how does one find the right first words of the most glorious meeting of one's life. Perhaps the Christian puranas have the answer—the first utterance of creation: Let there be light, let the unexpressed be expressed. Once it seemed that the girl—I came to know her real name later but I won't use it here; instead let me call her Achira (what does the name mean? It means something which is immediately apparent, without any delay, like lightning)—from her expression it seemed Achira had become aware that someone was watching her. Perhaps there is a silent sound of sheer presence. She stopped writing but would not get up lest she betray she had been disturbed. I thought I should say, 'I beg your pardon'—but pardon for what, what was my misdeed? I stepped back, pretended to dig up something with my

short-handled British spade and put it away in my sack. It was something quite useless. Then I slowly left the place, bending down a little and with my eyes intently looking at the ground, as if continuing my scientific search for samples. But I was fairly certain that I had not succeeded in deceiving the person whom I hoped to deceive. She must undoubtedly have had previous experience of the weaknesses displayed by bemused males. I prayed that she had enjoyed rather than been irritated by my display. If I had crossed the barrier a little more, would it have—I don't know if it would have been better. Would she have been offended, or at least pretended offence? With all these possibilities teasing my mind I came nearer my bungalow, and happened to see on the ground the torn halves of an envelope cover. This was no geological specimen, but I couldn't resist picking up the pieces. The envelope was addressed in a feminine hand to Bhabatosh Majumdar, ICS, at Chapra. The requisite postal stamp was on the envelope but there was no postmark, suggesting some maidenly hesitation. Mine was a scientist's intelligence; I readily inferred that the torn envelope represented the wound of some tragic episode. I was experienced at reading the history of the earth's unrest by examining her broken layers and I now resolved to unravel the mystery of these torn pieces of paper.

At the same time I pondered over the fact how little one knows of one's inner self. I was very surprised to find it was liable to reveal itself in a wholly novel manner in some special circumstance. So far I had known that part of myself which had steadfastly pursued certain objectives of life in many places all over the world. I had accepted that as my true self and would have vouched for the authenticity of its reactions. That there was a part of me, an ignorant unthinking creature, which lay outside the rational control of my familiar self—this I had not suspected until now. I had never suspected that some part of me was of the forest; it was governed by enchantment, not by reason. The forest possesses this supernatural element, expressed in the silent conspiracy of trees and in the reverberations of primal life. It sings a full-throated, wide-ranging tune at noon, but at midnight it speaks in the voice of grave incantation, ringing deep into the very sources of living, overwhelming the intellect with the subtle persuasion of some primordial life.

Even while I carried out my geological studies, this forest-born magic was at work. I was looking for traces of radium which could be prised out of the miserly grip of rock formations; what I saw was

Achira in the clasp of shadows cast by flowering sal trees. I had seen Bengali women before, but never so exclusively and detached from the familiar. Here her soft dusky grace was enhanced by the tender language of the plants and creepers around her. I had seen beautiful women abroad also and had duly appreciated their beauty. But now I felt that I had seen a Bengali girl truly for the first time, that I saw her where she could be seen completely, quite dissociated from various known and unknown commonplaces. She didn't look as if she went swinging a single plait to attend Diocesan School, nor as if she had completed a degree course at Bethune College, nor as if she served tea and high-pitched laughter at Ballyganj tennis-parties. I do not know by what complex avenues of association I was reminded of the songs of Horu Thakur and Ram Bosu I had heard in childhood and forgotten thereafter, the kind of song that one can no longer hear on the radio and which is not played loudly on a gramophone for the benefit of the neighbourhood. The simple melody of that song—*Mone royilo, soi, moner bedona*\*—seemed to represent perfectly the beauty of this Bengali girl. There is a sad picture underlying the melody and that picture now took form before my eyes. Even this had become possible. From the study of geology I knew that tremendous upheavals in the earth's crust caused hot matter to push up to the surface. Now I saw inside myself molten substances from the darkness under the surface that had become visible in the light above. I could never have imagined that the firm inner being of the scientist Nobinmadhav was susceptible to such upheavals.

I realized that she had observed me every evening when I returned to work along this path, but, absorbed in my own thoughts, I had not seen her. When I had gone abroad I was made conscious of my appearance and proud of it. 'O how handsome!' was a remark I had got used to. But many friends who had returned home after living abroad for a while had told me that the preference of Bengali women was for a different kind of man, that they liked softer and near-feminine good looks in men. 'Handsome like Kartik' is a common phrase in Bangla. Whatever mythical identity the Bengali Kartik may have, it is certainly not that of the chief warrior of the gods. A young Frenchwoman had once told me in Paris that the white skin of Europeans was the result of lack of any colouring;

\* 'It remains within, friend, the pain of the heart. Here the 'friend' is a woman.'

whereas they appreciated our colouring, the real colour that the tropical sun bestows upon Oriental\* skin. Such a verdict does not appeal on the shores of the Bay of Bengal, and I had not thought of it again since the time she offered it. But for several days now I have been thinking about it. I was sun-burned, tall and physically energetic. My arms were strong, my strides rapid. I have been told that my sight was keen, while my nose, chin and forehead combined to lend a certain power to my appearance. Epstein had once wanted to carve me in stone but I could not give him the time. I had always known a Bengali as his mother's pet, and such mothers naturally liked their treasured offspring to be like wax dolls. These considerations, as they stirred my mind, angered me. In my imagination I quarrelled in advance with Achira. I told her: 'What you find handsome is the god who has to be immersed in water and given away. Even if he does receive your adoration, it is not for long.' I also said: 'I have spurned approaches from women of many important countries—and now you think you can spurn me?' Then I laughed at the heat growing out of this imaginary and consciously contrived squabble. At the same time, my scientist's rationality continued to try and figure out things. I assured myself it wasn't unimportant that she always sat near the route I took every day. If privacy is what she really wanted, she would have changed her place. At first I used to look at her obliquely, as if I wasn't really looking. Lately we have looked at each other squarely a few times. As far I can tell, this meeting of four eyes hasn't seemed accidental to her.

An even more specific test was held the other day. Earlier I used to finish my work and go home down that Panchavati path only once every day. But recently I had been going up and down that path several times during the day. Achira was old enough to know that these movements had nothing to do with geological search. And my courage grew when I realised that my obvious show of interest did not dislodge her. A couple of times I have looked back suddenly and seen her gazing at my going away, then quickly dropping her eyes to her diary when she realized I had seen her. I guessed that some ebb had slowed down her diary-writing. As usual my rational mind searched for a psychological cause. I concluded that she had filled her mind with thoughts about a man. That man's name was Bhabatosh. He had just returned from England and been

\* The original uses the term 'Oriental' though it is patently wrong here.

posted immediately to Chapra as assistant magistrate. Prior to his going abroad they had been deeply in love with each other, but some unexpected disaster had happened as soon as he joined his post. I had to find out what happened. This wasn't difficult because Bankim, who was with me at Cambridge, was now teaching at Patna University.

I wrote to him: 'There is somebody named Bhabatosh in the civil service in Bihar. It is believed among parents of marriageable daughters that he is most eligible. A friend of mine has sought my help to acquire Bhabatosh for his daughter. Let me know if the way is clear. I shall be grateful for whatever you can find out—especially, what kind of person is he.'

The reply came: 'The way is blocked. And if you are still curious about his character and conduct, listen—When I was in college one of my teachers was Dr. Anilkumar Sarkar. A whole string of alphabets follow his name to show the degrees he holds and honours he has won. While his learning is extraordinary, as a person he is child-like to the same degree. A grand-daughter is the main radiance of his home. If you ever see her you will think that the goddess Saraswati is so pleased with Dr. Sarkar's sadhana that she has not only enhanced his intellect but has also taken the form of his grand-child. That shaitan Bhabatosh entered the professor's paradise. Bhabatosh is sharp of intellect, indefatigable in speech. First the professor was deceived, then his grand-daughter. I used to long to do something destructive when I saw their insufferable intimacy, but there was no way to do anything. Their marriage had been fixed and only waited for him to go abroad and qualify for the civil service. The professor financed the trip and also paid for other expenses. Bhabatosh used to catch cold easily. Some of us prayed twice a day to deaf gods that the man should get pneumonia and die before he could marry. But he didn't die. Instead, he passed the civil service examination and qualified. Immediately after, he married the daughter of some well-placed Government of India official. Out of shame and hurt the professor has given up his post and disappeared with the girl. Nobody knows where they are.'

I read the letter again and resolved that this girl must be rescued from her humiliation.

I waited impatiently for a chance to speak to Achira and make her acquaintance. If I were a man of letters and not a scientist, if I were a modern person from West Bengal and not an East Bengali, I might

have found some way of initiating a conversation with her. But I was overawed by Bengali girls and wasn't quite sure what they were like. I imagined that Hindu women were entirely inaccessible to men they did not know, that to speak to Achira first and without occasion would be akin to violating her person. Such is the blindness of convention. Before joining my job here I had spent some time at Calcutta. There, in my circle of friends and relations, I had seen young Bengali women with painted faces who were seeking careers in films or on the stage, women who were born to be men's friends—but why discuss them? Even without knowing Achira I was aware she was a different kind of woman—she stood outside these times, confident in her pure self-respect, unused to physical contact. I kept wondering how I could begin speaking to her.

At that time a couple of robberies had taken place in the neighbourhood. That, I thought, could be my pretext to go up to Achira and say, 'Let me speak to the raja and arrange a guard for you.' Were she an English girl, she might regard such unprovoked solicitousness as impertinence and, shaking her head, say, 'That is my look-out'. I had no experience to guide me on how a Bengali girl would respond. So many years of living away from Bengal had caused my judgement to get coloured by British habits of thought.

Daylight was nearly over. This was the time when Achira returned home or her grandfather came and took her for a walk. Just then a ruffian, presumably not a local person,\* appeared from nowhere to snatch away Achira's purse and diary. I dashed out from behind the bushes, called to her 'Don't be scared', and pounced upon the man. He dropped his loot and ran away. I picked up the purse and diary and handed them over to Achira.

She said, 'Thank god you were—'

I said, 'But I thank that man too.'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean, he made it possible for me to speak to you. All these days I have wondered what I would say at first.'

'But that man is a miscreant.'

'May be, but he is also my messenger.'

Achira picked up one end of her brown sari and laughed behind

\* The original text uses a phrase which would translate literally as 'a Hindustani obstinate'. While 'obstinate' is undoubtedly meaningful, 'Hindustani' carries the unfortunate implication 'not a Bengali', thus not quite civilized'.

its cover. How sweet the sound of her laughter, like a stream running over pebbles.

When she finished laughing, she said, 'It would be fun if that were true.'

'Fun for whom?'

'For the person who is the object of the misdeed. I have read a story about such a happening.'

'And how would the saviour be rewarded.'

'I would take him home and make tea for him.'

'And what about this false saviour?'

'He doesn't need anything more. All that he wanted was the first word in getting acquainted. Now he has had the second, third, fourth, fifth words.'

'I hope these numbers won't suddenly get exhausted.'

'There is no reason why they should.'

'May I ask what you would have said if you had to speak first?'

'I would have said: What is this childish game of picking up pebbles from wherever you walk? Aren't you too old for that?'

'Why didn't you say this?'

'I was scared.'

'Scared? Of me?'

'Why not? You are an eminent person. Dadu\* has told me. He has read your article in a foreign journal. Whatever he reads he tries to explain to me.'

'Did he explain this one?'

'He tried. But when I heard all those Latin names, I begged him to exempt me. I offered instead to fetch his book on quantum theory.'

'Do you understand that better?'

'Not in the least. But Dadu has an unshakeable conviction that everybody can understand everything. I don't feel like spoiling this conviction. Another strange belief he holds is that women own sharper commonsense than men. I fear I shall soon have to listen to his exposition of how time and space blend with each other. Actually, Dadu is particularly kind to women. While Didima\*\* was alive, she shut her mouth whenever she heard Dadu expounding grave matters. Thus she never gave proof of the extent of women's intelligence. I don't want to disappoint him. I have heard a lot from him

\* 'Dadu' is both a term of address as well as of reference for grandfather.

\*\* The term for grandmother.

and did not understand. I will hear a lot more and will not understand.'

Achira's eyes glistened with affection and amusement. I was hoping that her soft-voiced conversation would not end soon. But daylight had almost faded and the first stars of dusk appeared above the sal trees. From far away came the songs of Saontal women who sang as they went home after collecting firewood for the day.

Then we heard another voice calling out: 'Didi\*, where are you? It's getting dark—not a good time to be out by yourself.'

'I know, Dadu. That's why I have appointed a protector.'

When the professor reached there, I bent to touch his feet and this seemed to embarrass him. I introduced myself: 'My name is Nobin-madhav Sengupta.'

The old man's face brightened: 'I can't believe it. Are you really Doctor Sengupta. But you are just a youngster.'

I said, 'Quite young—no more than thirtysix years old.'

Again that laughter like running water from Achira, her voice playing a sitar movement as it were. She said, 'For Dadu everybody in the world is a youngster—and he is the Agarwala of all youngsters.'

The professor said, 'Agarwala? Must be a new word you have imported into the Bengali language. Where did you get it?'

'From that Marwari student you were so fond of, Kundanlal Agarwala. He used to bring me mango chatni in bottles. I once asked him what the word Agarwala meant. He said it meant pioneer.'

The professor said, 'Now that we have met, Dr. Sengupta, you must visit us.'

'You don't have to urge him, Dadu. He is very keen to visit us. I have told him how you try to improve upon Einstein's discourses.'

I told myself I would have to be careful of this mischievous girl.

The professor grew enthusiastic: 'Are you interested in Time-Space—'

I interrupted him: 'I don't understand a thing about it. And you will only waste your time trying to explain it to me.'

The old man exclaimed, 'Time! I have no lack of time. Let's see—why don't you have dinner with us tonight?'

\* 'Didi' generally means elder sister, but is also used in affectionate address for young girls.

I was about to agree immediately when Achira intervened: 'Dadu, you are being quite irresponsible. How can I produce a proper dinner at such short notice? There is no Firpo's Hotel in the middle of this forest to supply us with the kind of food Dr. Sengupta is used to. He will think I am quite useless. We have to offer him western food. We must arrange for at least some bhetki fish and lamb's meat.'

'All right, all right. Dr. Sengupta, when are you free again.'

'I can be free tomorrow, but I don't want to trouble Achira Devi. I am quite used to simple food. When I go out trekking in the forest or up the mountain I carry some parched rice, bananas, tomatoes, gram—sometimes peanuts also. I shall bring along all this to your place and she can mix them up with curd. If she agrees to this arrangement I shall have no hesitation in coming.'

'Dadu, be careful of this man. He must have read your Bangla article about the presence of vitamins in our regional food. And now he is trying to impress you by saying he prefers parched rice and bananas and curd and so on.'

Again I felt outwitted by this girl. It was quite beyond me to have read an article on vitamins in Bangla. But how could I admit this—especially when the writer of the article asked eagerly, 'Have you read it, really?'

I said, 'It doesn't really matter whether I have read the article or not. The fact is—'

'The fact is, he knows very well that when he comes to dine with us tomorrow, the food is bound to include animal and vegetable, fowl and flesh, and all the rest. So he can safely sing the praise of tomatoes. Looking at him, can you really believe his body was built up on vegetarian food? Dadu, you believe people too easily, even me. I can't even say things in a joke to you.'

We had been walking slowly towards their bungalow while we chatted. Suddenly Achira stopped and told me, 'You can go home now.'

'But I want to see you to your doorstep.'

'Our place is very untidy right now. You will form the impression that Bengali girls can't run proper households. Tomorrow I'll have things tidied up so well that you will think of households run by foreign women.'

The professor said, 'You mustn't take her seriously, Dr. Sengupta. Achi may be talking too much right now, but that is not her nature.'

Because it is so quiet here she keeps me engaged by chattering endlessly. And it has become a habit now. In fact, when she falls silent occasionally, my room seems to echo with unknown fears, so does my mind. She knows that and keeps talking. But others may misunderstand.'

'Let them,' said Achira, holding his arm affectionately. 'I don't want to be beyond criticism. That would be so uninteresting.'

He said with some pride, 'My girl can really say clever things, Dr. Sengupta. I have never known anybody like her.'

'Nor have I, Dadu, known anybody like you.'

I said, 'Before I take my leave, sir, you must promise me something.'

'What is it?'

'Everytime you address me formally\*, I feel most embarrassed. If you were to treat me informally, I would feel honoured and worthy of your regard. Maybe your grand-daughter will help to raise me to this honour.'

'No chance of that. How can a mere grand-daughter like me reach up to where you are. You are so eminent. Perhaps after some time has passed and I am able to ignore your scholarly reputation, maybe it will be possible then. But Dadu can try rightaway. Come, Dadu, say to him: Hey you, young fellow, come and eat with us tomorrow. And even if Didi puts too much salt in the fish curry, you must praise it and ask for more.'

The old man put his hand on my shoulder affectionately and said, 'Son, if you had met Didi a few months ago, you would have realised how shy she is. When she thinks she is obliged to make conversation, she finds herself talking more than is necessary.'

'Now you know, Dr. Sengupta, how sweetly Dadu disciplines me—as if with a stalk of sugarcane. He could easily have said instead: You are a chatterbox, your incessant tongue-wagging is becoming insufferable. But you will defend me, won't you? How will you do that?'

'I can't say that to your face.'

'Will you be very harsh?'

'I think you know what I may say.'

'Then don't say it. You can go home now.'

\* In the original Bangla, Nobin requests that instead of being addressed as *apni* he should be called *tumi*.

'Only after I have settled one more thing. Tomorrow's dinner at your place will be to celebrate my being renamed. Doctor Sengupta will vanish, and only Nobinmadhav will remain. Just like a comet losing its tail but retaining its head, by going too close to the sun.'

'Then it is a name-shearing ceremony, not a name-giving.'

'Agreed.'

That first day ended thus.

How calmly beautiful this old age, how serene its image! The very glance of his eyes was an act of blessing. He wore a long *tasar kurta* and his *dhoti* folds hung elegantly. The *chadar* round his neck was gleaming white and properly folded. He carried a polished walking stick. His hair was thin and grey but combed with care. Obviously, his daily routine as well as his appearance gave evidence of his grand-daughter's artistic touches. Perhaps he bore such excessive looking after without complaint only in order to please the girl.

My scientific research now gave place to finding out more about them. Let me mention the professor's name—Anilkumar Sarkar. He belonged to the previous generation of Ph.D. winners from Cambridge. A few months earlier he had given up the post of principal of a suburban college and come to this estate to take up residence in a dilapidated bungalow he had rented. He had, of course, got it repaired at his own cost and made fit for habitation. This was the historical outline; the rest can be gathered from Bankim's letter.



The introductory part of my story is now over. In a short story there cannot be much gap between introduction and conclusion. Rather than spoil its nature, I shall resist the temptation to spin out things unduly.

The opportunity to speak frankly to Achira did not take long to come. A picnic had been arranged that day beside the Tanika river. The professor asked with child-like candour, 'Nobin, are you married?'

The question was so plainly motivated that anybody else would have avoided asking it. I replied, 'No, sir, not yet.'

Nothing escapes Achira. She said, 'Dadu, those words "Not yet" don't really mean anything. They are intended only to console the guardians of marriageable young girls.'

'How did you conclude that these words don't mean anything?'

'It is a mathematical problem—but not quite one of higher mathematics. We already know you are a thirtysix-year-old boy. I calculated that your mother must have told you half a dozen times, "Son, I want to bring home a daughter-in-law". And you said, "Before that I want to bring home some money." So your mother wiped her eyes and kept quiet. Meanwhile you have achieved so much and gathered all this experience, all except that of being hanged. Finally, when you got a well-paid job on this estate, your mother again pleaded, "Son, you must marry now. I don't have many years left to see you married." And you replied, "My life and my science are one. I shall dedicate it to my country. I shall never marry." Your mother again wiped her eyes but now she waits without much hope. Tell me, have I calculated correctly the mathematical results of your thirty-six years?'

It was quite dangerous to say anything carelessly before this girl. A few days ago Achira had said in another context, 'In this country you men receive women as household companions. Those who do not need households cannot find any use for women either. But in foreign countries men dedicated to science can team up with women of similar dedication, as happened with Professor Curie and Madame Curie. Didn't you come across such a woman while you were abroad?' I remembered Catherine. We had worked together in London. Her name was associated with mine in one of my research publications. I had to concede the point Achira was making. She asked, 'Why didn't you marry her? Wasn't she willing?'

Again I had to admit that the proposition had been initiated from her side.?

'Then?'

'But my work also involved India. It is not just science.'

'That is, the fulfilment of love is not something a sadhak like you would desire. Where the supreme objective of a woman's life is personal, for men like you it is impersonal.'

I could not readily frame a response to this. Finding me silent Achira continued, 'I don't know if you are familiar with Bangla literature. There is a poem in Bangla on Kacha and Devayani which says the same thing.\* Women seek to bind men, but men must cut

\* Rabindranath had written a long poem on this theme long ago. It was collected in the volume entitled *Katha-o-Kahini* (1900).

through such bonds and build a road to immortality. Kacha set off after evading Devayani's request and you have ignored your mother's supplication. There is little difference between these two situations. You have won this perennial contest between man and woman. May your manliness triumph! Let women weep, their tears will be part of their puja offerings to you. Offerings are actually meant for the gods, but the gods remain uninvolved.'

The professor, who was also present, had not grasped the main object of this exposition. He said with some pride: 'Didi states profound truths with so little effort that people who don't know her...' This was his constant worry, that others would misunderstand his grand-daughter. Achira said, 'Such people wouldn't in any case tolerate a woman saying anything serious—don't bother about them. As long as you understand me, Dadu, that's enough.'

Generally Achira stated even grave opinions in a lighthearted manner, but today she was quite serious. It occurred to me that Bhabatosh may have tried to explain that though he had fetched his bride from a constellation in the highest skies of the Government of India, his motivation remained noble and unselfish. From the very storehouse of British administration he would garner the resources with which to serve his own country. But it wasn't easy to delude Achira. That she had not forgotten his duplicity was proved by the torn halves of that envelope.

Achira now said, 'Nobin Babu, do you know the curse Devayani pronounced on Kacha?'

'No.'

'She had said, "You won't be able to use what you learn, but you can pass it on to others." I feel amazed by such an idea. If only Europe had been cursed today like this, she would have been saved. Europeans are being driven to death by their greed because they want to use the whole world's possessions as if these are their own. Isn't that true, Dadu?'

'Very true—but how strange that you have thought of all this!'

'Not entirely on my own. You have often said such things. And you have that great gift of being a Bholanath—you say things, and later forget\* you have said them. It encourages me to put my stamp on stolen goods.'

\* The Bangla words *bhola/bhuley* for 'forget' makes for a pun here on Bholanath, another name for the god Siva.

Achira said, 'So many students of his kept notes of what he told them and later wrote them up as books which made them famous. Dadu reads such books, admiringly and praises the writers. He doesn't know he is praising himself. I often receive my share of such praise. And if I were to ask Nobin Babu he will admit that he has started keeping record of my originality in that notebook of his where he makes notes about the Copper Age and the Stone Age. Do you remember, Dadu, a long time ago—when you were still teaching—you recited to me the poem about Kacha and Devayani? From that day I have conceded in my mind a higher eminence to men, but never admitted this in words.'

'But, Didi, I have never lowered the high position of women in anything I have said.'

'How can you do that? You are a blind votary of woman. I laugh to myself when you sing our praise. Women shamelessly accept such praise. They get used to swallowing cheap admiration.'

None of these exchanges that day was mere conversation. Contained therein were signals of war. There were two sides to Achira's nature and she had two sanctuaries—one, her own home; the other, that grove which I regarded as a Panchavati. By the time we had achieved an easy relationship I decided that in the privacy of that Panchavati I would, amid our usual banter, somehow mention the most recent crisis in my life and push it towards resolution. But the way was barred in that direction. On the first day of our acquaintance I had great difficulty in finding the first words for conversation; and now there were no first words for the Achira who was present here. While dealing with her I just could not find any access to the innermost workings of her mind. At home her cheerful chatter prevented my taking even a single step forward. And in the intimate shade of her grove, my impatience was resisted by her wordless silence. Occasionally, while having tea at their place, a boundary of conversation is reached where one can unburden one's mind at last. But Achira knows that I am approaching the danger zone and her torrent of words grows unnaturally and without any break. I don't get a chance to say what I want to and the atmosphere in general gets inhibiting. I feel very restless mentally and, at the same time, quite ashamed because I am not making much progress in my work. I was hoping to get some more grants sanctioned for research at the budget meeting, but I had not written even one half of the report supporting the request for additional grants. Meanwhile, daily I

listened to discussion of Croce's theory of aesthetics. Achira must have known that the subject was well beyond my comprehension and appreciation. But she egged on her grandfather and laughed at me secretly. At the moment he was explaining all the known objections to behaviourism. The saddest part of such philosophical exposition was that Achira would say 'I have heard all this before' and go off to do some gardening. I would sit there feeling foolish and glance occasionally at the door. One saving grace was that the professor never asked whether I had understood his resolution of more knotty issues. For him everything is as simple as water.

I couldn't wait much longer and sought some opening for speaking my mind. One day, on one of those picnic-like outings, while the professor sat on the steps of a ruined temple reading a book on the introduction of new chemistry, Achira said from her shelter within a clump of short ebony trees: 'There is a blind living force in this ageless forest—I am beginning to fear it.'

I said, 'How strange! I wrote something similar the other day in my diary.'

Achira continued: 'It is like a banyan seed sprouting in some crack in the wall of some old mansion, then putting out roots that ultimately destroy the building. I have mentioned this to Dadu. He said human nature can get overpowered gradually by physical nature when we live far away from human habitation. The influence of some primeval living force tends to get stronger and stronger. I asked what we should do in such a situation. He said, "We can always carry human thought with us. We recognise it much better in these quiet surroundings than amid the noise of crowded places. That's why I brought along these books." It's easy for Dadu to say this. The same remedy may not work for others. What do you say?'

I said, 'All right, I shall say it. And you must give it due consideration. In my opinion, what we need in a place like this is the complete company of a person, inward as well as outward company, which will fulfil human nature. Until I get such company I shall keep losing out to that blind force. If you were like other women, I wouldn't be able to speak the truth ultimately to you.'

Achira said, 'Please do. Don't hesitate.'

I said, 'I am a scientist, so I shall speak impersonally. At one time you loved Bhabatosh very much. Do you love him as much even now?'

'Let us assume I love'

'Then I must have caused your change of position.'

'You may have. But not you alone—that powerful blind force of this forest has also been at work. That is why I feel ashamed at my having changed position, I cannot give it value.'

'Why can't you?'

'It takes a long time and much effort to mould one's inclinations according to some ideal. But it shatters so easily against the blindness of life's force. The love I feel for you, it has been provoked by that blind force.'

'You are a woman, yet you can denigrate love like this?'

'I can, precisely because I am a woman. The ideal of love is something we women worship. Perhaps that is what *satitva*\* means—as an ideal. But it relates to women, to human nature, not to the nature of this forest. All these days amid this quiet I have been worshipping that ideal in spite of being hurt and deceived. Unless I can preserve that ideal, I can't feel clean.'

'Can you respect Bhabatosh?'

'No.'

'Do you ever want to meet him?'

'No. But he is not the same as my first love. That love has become quite impersonal now and doesn't need any object.'

'I don't quite understand you.'

'You won't. For men, your true possession is knowledge—at its highest such knowledge is impersonal. Whereas for women the true possessions are of the heart. Even if they lose all—all that can be touched, indulged in—the ideal of love remains. And that is intangible, perceptible only to the mind. In other words, impersonal.'

'said. Look, there is not much time left for debating. You may

'said in the local newspaper that my work here is over. The

'The zoologist has suggested that we could begin investigating from some distance from here, but

'are not you gone?'

'I should get from you

'are the last words? The first words you have already

\* meaning simply that which exists or that which is true, *satitva* has come to represent the ideal conduct of the vir-

The practice of *satitva*, *sattee*—as the British wrote first—

'That's right.'

'Then let me also try to be frank. From that Panchavati I have watched you at work on many days without your being aware that I am watching. You have toiled the whole day, ignoring the sun and the heat. You haven't needed any company. On some days you were frustrated, you didn't find what you were sure you would. But the very next day you resumed your digging as vigorously as before, with no signs of any mental fatigue. It seemed that a tough mind was using a strong body on some triumphant exercise. I have never seen such a devotee of science before, and I have given you all my respect from a distance.'

'And now—'

'No, let me finish. Then I noticed that as our acquaintance improved, your devotion to work declined. On a number of trivial excuses you interrupted your work. Then I was afraid of myself, of the woman in me. What poison of defeat had I brought along! That is my view of your side of the story. Let me tell you my side now. I too had devoted myself to a cause, almost like a penance. I was sure it would purify my life, make it brighter. But I saw I was falling behind—preoccupied by a restlessness, the source of which is in the breath of these shadowed woods, the force of some raw, primitive life. Sometimes when I am captured by the demoness-like nights we have here, I have imagined that my own self can engender dark forces which will snatch me away from Dadu. When these forces stretch their twenty hands to clutch at me, I jump out of bed and run to our little river to cool my body in that water.'

Even as she was saying this, she called out: 'Dadu!'

The professor dropped his book and came to her immediately 'What is it, Didi?' He asked in his usual affectionate tone.

'Didn't you say that day man manifests himself through truth and devotion and not through any biological act?'

'Yes, that's what I believe. On this earth, uncultured man is of the order of animals. It is only through deep study and thought that he has acquired knowledge. There is a great deal more study and thought ahead of him, a great deal discarding of the gross, and then he will become a god. Our puranas had conceived of godhead, but there are no gods in our past, only in our future—in the last chapter of human history.'

'Dadu, shall I settle something with you now. I have been struggling with it for several days.'

I got up and said, 'I'll take my leave.'

'No, no, please sit down. Dadu, that post of principal in your college is vacant again. The secretary has written a letter practically begging you to return. You show me all your letters but didn't show me this one. I thought there was something wrong, so I read it without your knowing.'

'It was my fault originally.'

'It was no fault at all. I have dragged you down from where you belong. We are born only to drag down others.'

'What are you saying, Didi?'

'I am saying what is true. The creator himself would be idle if the world were not there to create. You feel the same without pupils. Isn't that true?'

'Well, because I have always been a schoolmaster—'

'You are no schoolmaster. You are a preceptor—an acharya. Your devotion to knowledge is not for yourself; it is for giving to others. Nobin Babu, you must have seen how he pounces on me when some idea has entered his head. He has no mercy when he wants to explain, and I can't understand even twelve annas\* of it. When I am not available he catches hold of you. And that becomes even more pitiful. He doesn't know the direction of your mind—he thinks it is towards pure science. Dadu, you badly need pupils, but do be careful in choosing them.'

The professor said, 'Isn't it the pupil who chooses the teacher, since the obligation to learn is the pupil's?'

'All right, we shall decide that later. I have realized only recently that I have turned a teacher into a bookworm. I seem to violate the commitment of others because of my own blind needs. You must take up teaching again, get back to what you are committed.'

The professor gazed uncomprehendingly at Achira. She said, 'Ah, you are worried about what will happen to me? You will happen, what else! Bholanath, if you can't tolerate me any more, I shall have to locate a successor grandmother, buy her some ornaments after selling your library, and then run away somewhere quite far. Unless you are too proud to admit it, you won't be able to do without me for even a single day. When I am not there you imagine fifteenth Aswin is fifteenth October—you invite your colleague to

\* At an earlier phase of currency divisions, sixteen annas made a rupee. So 'twelve annas' means three-quarters.

dinner and shut yourself up all evening in the study to work on some equation—tell the driver to take you to an address where no house has yet been built. Nobin Babu, do you think I am exaggerating?’

‘Not at all,’ I said. ‘From what I have seen of him I have no doubts that you are absolutely right.’

‘Why are you saying so many inauspicious things today? Nobin, have you noticed that this tendency of hers to say whatever comes to her mind has increased lately?’

‘It will subside as soon as you get back to your real work. This patient’s pulse will become normal again and she will stop raving.’

The professor turned to me and asked, ‘What is your advice, Nobin?’

Perhaps because he is a scholar he has such faith in a geologist’s intelligence. I said after some silence, ‘Nobody can give you better advice than Miss Achira.’

Achira came forward and bent down to touch my feet in pranam. I stepped back in embarrassment. She said, ‘Please don’t refuse. I am nobody in comparison with you. This will become clear one day. I want to say good-bye right now. We won’t meet before I go away.’

The professor was very surprised and protested: ‘How can that be, Didi?’

‘Dadu, you may know a lot. But please concede in all modesty that on some subjects I may know more than you.’

I made my pranam to the professor. He embraced me and said, ‘I can see a broad road of achievement ahead of you.’



My own little story finishes here. The rest of it is about the geologist. I went home and unpacked my notes and records. Suddenly I felt happy, and knew this was liberation. When I finished work that day and came out on the verandah I felt like a bird that has come out of the cage but a length of chain was still attached to one foot. It clanked gently at every movement.

## ANNEXURE

The earlier version of this story was entitled "Chhoto galpo" (Small/short story) and it carried an introduction confoundingly called "Sesh katha" (Last words). The story that followed had two proclaimed sections, as indicated by the sub-headings 'Pratham parba' (First part) and 'Anta-parba' (Final part). In this subsequent and definitive version, the text was revised marginally at many places, the introduction was dropped and its heading used as the title of the story. That introduction is presented below in English translation.

Those garrulous vehicles of utterance known as long stories in literature are like animals of pre-geological times. The size of their bodies tend to be four times larger than the mass of their life-spirit, and their tails are like overstatements.

Animals which fatten their bellies by eating too much grass become beasts of burden, destined to pull behind them huge heaps of matter. Long stories, much burdened with material, are of the same caste. Whereas animals whose diet is small but productive do not extend their feeding time by chewing the cud section after section. Short stories belong to this class—meant not for carrying loads but for reaching the innermost realm of being in small jumps.

But a demand has been made for stories of large dimension. Men seem willing to be cheated when they buy large stocks even at high price. This must be a weakness of their unredeemed primitive nature. The same tendency can be seen in our country during marriage celebrations. The same kind of over-ostentation which delights people of the lower strata of society has by some chemical process come to be accepted even in the upper strata without any protest. It would appear that beating the drums of excess is a form of idolatry going well back into our ancestral customs.

Human life is like a large tree. Its shape and size are not harmoniously developed. Day after day its branches and leaves grow by repeating themselves without an objective. Amid this massed tedium, suddenly a fruit is born—perfectly formed and well-rounded, its outside colour red or black, its juice inside sour or sweet. It is condensed, inevitable, and its advent is providential—that is a short story.

Let us take an example. King Edward set out on his travels to many lands. Mobs of charmed sycophants followed him, the baggy space of newspaper paragraphs filled to bursting. Amid all this crowd of ambassadors, statesmen, business magnates and journalists bearing thunderbolt-like pens, through some small opening the king's eye fell upon an American woman of no pedigree. In a moment the far-flung noises of celebration become unreal, a black curtain fell before the countless lamplit theatre-stages of history. Leaving all behind, the short story burned brightly—invaluable and difficult to find. The invisible artist remained outside the tumult and gazed into the unknown depths of the lake of personal life. He waited for some unidentified deep-water fish to get hooked to his line, waited for the short story to emerge with a splash, various colours flashing from its tail.

A tale from puranic times comes to mind—from the akhyana of Rishysringa Muni. His powers of tapasya were nearly unsurpassable, joined as they were with maintaining an unbroken celibacy. He had reached the inaccessible heights at which dwelt Vasishitha and Viswamitra and Yajnavalkya. Suddenly there appeared before him a common woman—neither made clean by ritual nor tested by circumstance and found to be chaste, she brought no tattva or mantra or mukti. She was not even an apsari sent from Indralok. But immediately all ceremony and meditation, all past and future, fused into a short story.

So much as introduction. I am a person fated to be like that Bhil woman who used to collect fallen fruit, ripe as well as green, in the forest and one day happened to pick up a pearl dropped from an elephant's head—a short story.

I shall muster the courage to write it down. The task will not be easy. The outcome will not satisfy the appetite but it may convey something of the taste.

## *Laboratory*

Nandakishor had obtained his engineering degree from London University. He was what is known as a bright student, positively brilliant. Starting at school he was, right upto the end, always the first to pass one examination gate after another. His intelligence was wide-ranging, his needs ample, but his means rather tight.

He managed to get involved in the construction work of two railway bridges. In such projects expenditure always exceeds the sanctioned amount, and this did not set a good example to him. He engaged his right hand as well as his left vigorously in the work, and his conscience did not trouble him. The financial grants and disbursements on projects like these were related to some abstract entity called a company, hence no individual suffered personal loss or gain of money.

He kept flawless accounts and his superiors thought he was a genius at his work. Because he was a mere Bengali he did not get adequate remuneration. He did not enjoy it when European employees of inferior quality patted him on the back patronisingly. He was called upon when hard work was required, but they were summoned to receive the praise and rewards for the work. The result was he made a private calculation of what payment he deserved, then found ways and means of compensating himself.

These fair as well as unfair earnings were never spent on luxuries. He lived in an one-and-half-storeyed house in a lane of Sikdarpara. At home he hardly had time to change his workshop-stained clothes. If anybody made fun of this, he replied, 'These are fit

clothes for Lord Labourer\* that I am'. But he had built a large house where he stored his scientific collection and carried out his experiments. He was so engrossed in this hobby that he did not realise that people were wondering how this mansion had come to be built. Where was the Alladin's lamp that had made it possible?

There is a kind of hobby which is like addiction to alcohol—the addict does not care about what others may be saying of him. Nandakishor was somewhat eccentric and science was his craze. As he turned the pages of a catalogue, his whole being used to quiver with the intensity of his desire to acquire the instruments he saw listed there. From Germany and from America he imported expensive instruments that were not to be found even in the larger universities in India. That was the particular grief of his learning-lusty mind. In his unfortunate country, only the left-over learning of other countries was dished out like the food given to beggars. Those countries could provide for their boys the instruments which our boys never had any opportunity to use. Hence our boys had to make do with what was given on the dry pages of textbooks. He used to assert loudly, 'We have all the power we need in our brains. Where we are weak is in our pockets.' He vowed to himself that he would open up the widest possible road to scientific research for our youth.

The more he acquired rare instruments, the greater grew the moral indignation of his colleagues. Ultimately, the head of his division saved him. The boss had much confidence in Nandakishor's abilities. Also he knew other instances of large sums of money being diverted made from railway construction work by people of ability. Nandakishor had to give up his job. Under the patronage of that European boss, he was able to purchase scrap iron from the railways at low prices and start a workshop. In those days the First World War had created a seller's market. Nandakishor was so clever that he raised tides of profit along various channels from this market.

About this time a new preoccupation began to take up his time.

Nandakishor had gone to Panjab on business. There he acquired a female companion. He was sitting in the verandah, having his morning tea, when this girl appeared swaying her long skirt and approached him without inhibition. She was about twenty. Her eyes were bright and her smile shone like a sharpened dagger. She came quite close to where he was sitting, and said, 'Babuji, I have

\* The original uses the phrase 'Majur Maharaj'; 'majur' is the Bangla version of 'mazdoor'.

been watching you for the last few days and I am most impressed.'

Nandakishor smiled and said, 'If you like watching other creatures, why don't you go to the zoo?'

She said, 'There's no need for a zoo here. All those who should have been put inside are moving around freely outside. That's why I am looking for a human being.'

'Did you find one?'

'Here he is,' she said, pointing at Nandakishor.

He burst out laughing. 'How did you know?' he asked.

She said, 'They surrounded you, all the big seths here—with thick gold chains round their necks, diamond rings on their fingers. They thought you were an outsider, a Bengali, you wouldn't know much business. An easy victim, they thought. But I saw that not one of their tricks worked. Instead, they have stepped into your trap—and don't yet know it. But I do.'

Nandakishor was startled to hear this and realised that she was no ordinary person.

The young woman said, 'Let me tell you about myself—and don't you forget it. There is a famous astrologer in the place where I live. He has studied my horoscope and predicted that one day my name will be known all over the world. He said that my hour of birth carried the influence of Shaitan\*.'

'Really? of Shaitan?'

She said, 'As you must know, Shaitan is the most well-known being in the world. People may condemn him but he is a very genuine creature. My father likes his opium and dozes all the time. He is useless at running our household. But look at our Government\*\*—it has conquered so much of the world not by the power of Christianity but because it had the help of Shaitan. But the Government's people are genuine. That's why they are able to keep what they have conquered. If they ever go back on their own word, Shaitan himself will punish them.'

Nandakishor was surprised into silence.

She continued, 'Babuji, I hope I am not offending you. But you too know how Shaitan's power works and that is why you will win out in the end. I am used to having my way with men, but in you I

\* The term 'Shaitan' as used here has no affinity with the Satan of Christianity, but it does suggest an evil power.

\*\* This, of course, is the British Government of India.

see a man who is fit to command me. Don't let me go, babuji. It will be your loss if you do.'

Nandakishor smiled. 'And what will I have to do to keep you?' he asked.

'You will have to pay off our debts. My grandmother's house—that is my mother's mother—her house is being sold to repay what we owe.'

'How much is it?'

'Seven thousand rupees.'

Nandakishor was startled by the boldness of her demand. He said, 'Suppose I pay up. What will happen after that?'

'After that I shall never leave your side.'

'What will you do there?'

'I shall keep watch—that nobody should cheat you, except me.'

Nandakishor laughed heartily. 'All right, I agree. And here is my ring for you to put on.' On the touchstone of his mind a precious metal had made its mark. He could see within this girl the brightness of her force of character. It was obvious she knew exactly what she was worth. He had agreed without hesitation to pay, and now handed over seven thousand rupees to the grandmother.

She was called Sohini by everybody in that place. Her appearance was beautiful but hard in the tradition of Western India. Of course Nandakishor was not the kind of man who could be won over by mere appearance. He had never had time to bargain away his heart in any market which traded in youth.

The situation Nandakishor brought her out of was neither private nor clean. But he was a headstrong man who didn't care much for society's needs or the measure of convention. When friends asked, 'Have you married her?' They got the reply: 'Yes, but not excessively, only upto the point of toleration.' People laughed at him when they saw he was trying his utmost to train her in his profession. They asked, 'Is she going to take up a teaching job?' Nandakishor said, 'No, she will have to take up my job, and that can't be done by just any girl.' He explained, 'Also, I don't like marriage between different castes.'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean *Manavadharmasastra* has forbidden that the husband should be an engineer and the wife a vegetable-cutter. In every home I see two different castes have been tied together in marriage. I am only making sure about my wife's caste. If you want a wife to

be devoted to her husband, shouldn't their devotions be matched first?'



Nearing old age, Nandakishor died in a laboratory accident while performing a daring experiment.

Sohini stopped all business operations but got surrounded by those whose business it is to gain profit by cheating widows. And lawsuits were filed by others who could claim family relationship with Nandakishor. Sohini applied herself to understanding all the legal complications of her position. Also, she judiciously spread the net of her feminine charm on the right lawyers\*. In the latter activity she possessed uninhibited skill and cared little for convention. One by one she won all the cases filed against her. A distantly related brother-in-law was sent to jail for having forged some document.

A daughter was born to Sohini and Nandakishor, and they named her Nilima. The girl herself had changed this to Neela. That name should not be misinterpreted as a fond cover devised by parents for a dark-complexioned daughter\*\*. This girl was dazzlingly fair. Her mother claimed that their ancestors had come from Kashmir, hence the girl's body had acquired the radiance of Kashmiri white marble, her eyes were tinged with the colour of blue lotus, while her hair had startling tints of brown.

There was no question of arranging this girl's marriage after matching caste and community. The only way was to win somebody's heart and this magical process made short work of scriptural directives. There was a young Marwari boy whose wealth was inherited but education was contemporary. All of a sudden he stepped into the invisible traps set by the god of love. Neela was waiting for a bus near her school-gate when the boy happened to see her. For several days after that he appeared at the same place perhaps to test its air. The girl, out of the commonsense possessed by most women, began to present herself at the school-gate at a time noticeably earlier

\* Perhaps the writer meant judges as well though the term used in the original is *ukilpara* meaning the legal profession in general.

\*\* *Neela* means sapphire in Bangla. Blue is often used as an euphemism for dark, especially with reference to complexion.

than the time when her transport was due. Not the Marwari boy alone, but youngsters of several other communities also began walking back and forth near that spot without any obvious cause. Among them, it was that boy who shut his eyes and plunged into her net—and never came out. They underwent a civil marriage outside the pale of society. But the marriage was not for long. It was his fate that soon after his bride's coming an interruption to their wedded life would be caused by his getting ill with typhoid, which was followed soon after by his ultimate release from life.

Order and disorder continued to feature a disturbed existence. The mother saw her daughter's restlessness. She remembered the fiery, volcano-like feeling of her own desires at this age. She worried and sought to build a fence of books and study around the girl. No male tutor was engaged. Instead, a learned woman was entrusted with the tutoring. The mother too felt the blaze of Neela's youth and the heat warmed up the steam of her own undirected physical desires. Admirers came flocking here as well as there, but the doors were closed. Those longing to befriend Neela sought to invite her to tea or tennis or a film, but the invitations never reached her. Many aspirants hung around like bees in honey-scented air, but none of these luckless beggars could win Sohini's permission. As for the girl herself, she looked around for opportunities, even unlikely ones, when she could. She read books that were not recommended by any textbook committee, secretly acquired pictures that were supposed to help art education. Even her learned tutor got diverted. One day when Neela was returning home from Diocesan College, a good-looking youth with long unkempt hair threw a letter into her carriage. A thrill touched Neela even in her bloodstream. She hid the letter inside her blouse, but her mother found out. Neela was locked inside her room and given no food all day.

Sohini's husband had arranged scholarships for many students, and she searched among them for a possible bridegroom. Nearly all of them had an eye on her wealth. One of them dedicated his thesis to Sohini. She remarked, 'How silly! You embarrass me. I hear your postgraduate studies are coming to an end but you have made your offering at the wrong place. How will you succeed in life if you can't calculate better the object of devotion?' For sometime, however, she had been keeping track of one young man. His name was Rebati Bhattacharya and he was eminently suitable. He already had

a doctorate in science and a couple of his papers had been spoken highly of abroad.



Sohini was an adept at making friends with people. She succeeded in charming professor Manmatha Choudhury who had been Rebatī's undergraduate teacher. After plying him on several occasions with tea and toast, or with an omelette, or with fried hilsa egg, she broached the subject. 'You must be wondering why I ask you so often to tea.'

'That I can assure you, Mrs. Mallik, causes me not the slightest worry.'

Sohini said, 'People think that we women make friends only out of selfish motives.'

'My view, Mrs. Mallik, is this—no matter whose self is being served by the motive, the real gain is the friendship. Besides, it is no small thing that a professor like me can at all further anybody's selfish ends. As a class, professors have allowed their intelligence to fade by not airing it outside of books. I can see you are amused by what I am saying. Which proves I can crack jokes even though I am a teacher. You must take this into account if you plan to invite me to tea again.'

'I shall indeed take it into account and I am much relieved. There are many professors who can't seem to laugh without a doctor's help.'

'Good, you seem to be on my side. Now you can tell me what you really want to discuss.'

'You probably know that my husband's laboratory was his greatest pleasure while he was alive. I have no son, so I am looking for a young man who can take charge of the laboratory. In this connection I have heard of Rebatī Bhattacharya.'

The professor said, 'He is the right person indeed. And the line of research he has taken up will need a lot of money if he has to complete it.'

Sohini said, 'I have heaps of money gathering mould. Widows of my age want to ease open the door to afterlife by paying brokerage to the agents of gods. You may not approve, but I don't believe in any of that.'

Choudhury opened his eyes wide and asked, "In what do you believe, then?"

'If I find a worthy man, I want to pay off all his debts as much as I can. That is my religion and aim of life now.'

Choudhury said, 'Three cheers! A stone floating in water! So even women can sometimes show evidence of intellect. We have a stupid pupil who has just passed his B.Sc. The other day I saw him bending down to touch his teacher's feet and I could see all the intellect coming out of his head like cotton from a burst pod of simul. So you want to instal this person in the laboratory at home? Couldn't it be somewhere else?'

'Professor Choudhury, don't misunderstand me but I am a woman. The laboratory in this home was my husband's place of devotion. If I can find some worthy person to keep a lamp burning below his altar, I know he will be happy.'

Choudhury said, 'By Jove!\* One does hear a woman's voice at last. And it is quite nice to hear. I must caution you that if you plan to support Rebat's work all the way, it may cost a lakh of rupees or more.'

'If it does, I'll still have something left.'

'But I hope it won't displease that person in the next world whom you wish to please. I understand that if they so desire, such persons can jump on to our backs and give no end of trouble.'

'Don't you read newspapers? Whenever somebody dies, his qualities get written up till they spill out of each paragraph. There's nothing wrong in depending on the charity of such dead people. Whoever has collected a lot of money must have gathered a lot of sins as well. What am I here for if I can't shake out the sins from my husband's moneybags and reduce his load. In any case, I have no need of the money.'

The professor got quite excited. 'What can I say! When gold is extracted from a gold-mine it is pure gold, even though it is mixed with other stuff. You are that kind of a lump of gold in disguise. I know you now. What do you want me to do?'

'Persuade that boy to agree.'

'I shall try, but it won't be an easy job. Anyone else would have jumped at your offer.'

'What is the snag?'

'From his childhood, a female force has guided his course. His way is blocked by an immovable agent of non-intelligence.'

\* The original uses this exclamation in English—perhaps to indicate that the professor was quite 'modern' in his speech.

'How strange! Can a man—'

'Its no use getting impatient, Mrs. Mallik. You know what a matriarchal society is like, where the women are superior to the men. At one time in our history this Dravidian influence was at work on Bengal.'

Sohini said, 'Those good days are gone. Some trace may still be there below the surface—and it sometimes confuses the intellect—but men are in sole charge now. They whisper advice into our ear and then twist the same ear. The poor ear is nearly torn off.'

'How clever you are with words! Should women like you assume charge again in a matriarchal situation, I shall happily keep track of clothes sent for washing and get our college principal to pound rice. According to psychological studies matriarchy may not govern life outwardly in Bengal but it is there in every Bengali's blood. Have you heard the men of any other region moo for their mothers? Let me tell you, there is a woman who reigns over Rebati's actions.'

'Is he in love with this woman?'

'That would have been normal and would have proved that some life flows in his veins. At his age it is almost obligatory to surrender one's judgement to a young woman. Instead, at this young age, he has become a bead in the hand of a beads-counting woman. Nothing can rescue him—not youth nor intellect nor science.'

'Do you think I can invite him to tea here? I don't know, of course, whether he will eat in an impure household like ours.'

'Impure! If he doesn't eat here, I'll thrash him so thoroughly that no trace of a brahman will remain in his bones. Let me ask something—is it true that you have a beautiful daughter?'

'I do have a daughter—and the poor girl is quite beautiful. What can we do about it?'

'No, no, you misunderstand me. If you ask me, I certainly favour beautiful girls. Its almost like a mania with me. But for Rebati—his relatives are not sensitive persons and they may get wrong ideas.'

'They need not. I've decided to get the girl married within our own caste.' This, of course, was not at all true.

'But you married outside.'

'And what a lot of trouble it has caused! How many law-suits I had to contest in property matters! The means I had to use in order to win won't bear re-telling.'

'I heard bits of it. Somebody spread rumours about you and an artiled clerk of the opposite side. When you won the case and got

away, that man was ready to commit suicide.'

'How else have women survived through all ages? The art of deception requires a number of strategies, not much less than what a battle needs, but some charm must also be used. That is a nature-given strategy for women.'

'Careful, careful, I think you are misjudging me. We are scientists, not law-court judges. We watch in a detached manner the contest between the types of human nature. Whatever the result, a result gets produced. In your case, the result was nicely calculated and I had said to myself what a remarkable woman you are. I had also thought it was lucky for me I was a professor at that time and not an articulated clerk. The planet Mercury survives because it is that much distant from the Sun. This is a simple matter of mathematics, there is no good or evil in it. You must have learnt to understand such things.'

'Yes, I have, it is indeed something to be learnt—that the planets obey gravitational forces and also evade them.'

'Let me make another confession. While talking to you just now I was mentally calculating something that is also a mathematical issue. Just imagine how dangerous it would have been for me if I were ten years younger. The collision has just missed me, but the vapours are making waves within my heart. Just think, all of creation is a mathematical game.'

As he finished speaking Choudhury slapped his own knees and laughed heartily. What he had no idea of was that for two hours before she met him Sohini had taken great trouble with her toilet in order to look much younger and cheat the creator altogether.



When the professor turned up on the next day he found Sohini bathing a mangy dog which had lost much of its fur and was showing all its bones. She wiped its body with a towel.

Choudhury asked, 'Why so much regard for wretched a creature?'

'Because I have saved its life. It was hit by a car and broke one leg. I put a bandage on that leg and it has healed. Now I have a share in its life.'

'Don't you feel depressed when you have to look at its unlucky appearance everyday?'

'I am not keeping it for its appearance. What I enjoy seeing is that it has been rescued from death. Since I am able to meet this creature's

daily need to live, I don't have to visit the Kali temple dragging along a kid-goat at the end of a rope. I think I shall start a hospital for all those dogs and rabbits on whom you have tried experiments in your laboratories.'

'Mrs. Mallik, the more I know you, the more amazed I am.'

'You'll get cured when you know me a little more. Meanwhile, what about some information on Rebati you had promised.'

'Actually, I am distantly related to his people. That's how I know his background rather well. Rebati's mother died almost immediately after his birth. He has been brought up by his father's sister. This aunt is very orthodox in matters of daily ritual. For the slightest lapse she is prepared to upturn the whole household. There is none in that family who is not afraid of her. Rebati's whole personality has been pulverised by her. If he was late by five minutes in returning from school, he had to spend twentyfive minutes in explaining why.'

Sohini said, 'I have always thought men exercise control while women indulge, and that is how balance is maintained.'

'Maintaining balance is certainly not in the nature of women\*. They tend to lean this way or that way. But even among them there are some who keep their heads steady and walk erect. If you don't mind, Mrs. Mallik, I can give you an example—'

'Never mind. But there is enough of woman in my roots. See how obsessed I've become—obsessed with catching a boy. Otherwise I wouldn't have given you so much trouble.'

'You don't have to apologise. Look at me—I've come away without having prepared for my classes. And I am thoroughly enjoying such dereliction of duty.'

'Perhaps you are partial to women as a breed.'

'Quite possible. But one is bound to be more partial to some women. We can talk about it later.'

Sohini smiled. 'It need not be talked about even later. Meanwhile, let us finish what we were discussing. How has Rebati achieved so much?'

'He has achieved nothing compared to what he could have. Once it was very necessary for him to visit some high altitude place in connection with his research. He decided to go to Badrikashram. But

\* The original text uses the word *maralgamini*, meaning 'one who walks like a swan', which is a conventional term for a woman but here makes reference to the side-to-side sway of a swan's walk.

did he? This aunt of his used to have an aunt herself—her father's sister—and that old lady happened to die on the way to Badrika. So Rebati's aunt ordained that so long as she was alive, he would go nowhere near mountains. Ever since then I have steadily wished something about her which I can't put into words. But what is the use?

'Why blame only the aunts? Will these mother's-darling nephews never grow up?'

'I've already said so. When matriarchy arouses calf-like feelings in the blood, calves can no longer think for themselves. I've told you about only one mishap. When Rebati won a scholarship for going to Cambridge, the same aunt intervened again. She was convinced he was going abroad only to marry a memsahib. I said, what harm is there if he does. I had said this casually but she took it as final. She announced she would hang herself if the boy went abroad. I didn't know the right god to appeal to for finding a rope. All that I could do instead was to abuse Rebati profusely—called him stupid, a dunce, an imbecile. That was all. Since then Rebati has been doing the best he can under Indian conditions.'

Sohini gestured impatiently. 'I feel like breaking my head against a wall. But let me take a vow—one woman has held Rebati down in water; another woman will bring him up to the shore.'

'Let me speak frankly, madam. You are more adept at catching these creatures by the horn and dragging them down, than at holding them by the tail and pulling them up. But you may as well start practising from now. By the way, how did you get so deeply interested in science?'

'Because of my husband, who was interested all his life in every kind of science. His laboratory was an addiction with him—as were Burmese cheroots. He got me to smoke them and nearly made a Burmese woman out of me. I gave up smoking when I found that other men disapproved. There was another addiction he passed on to me. A man generally takes up a woman's full attention by fooling her, but he had taken me over fully with his learning. A husband's faults can't be hidden from his wife. But I tell you, Mr. Choudhury, I never saw anything that was not genuine in my husband. He appeared so great when I saw him from close. And now that I see him from a distance, he seems even greater.'

Choudhury asked, 'Where did you find him at his greatest?'

'Shall I tell you? Not because he was learned but because he had

such pure devotion to learning. He used to live in the light and air of this devotion. For us women, there has to be something tangible which we can worship. So his laboratory itself has become the deity I worship. Sometimes I am tempted to burn incense there and blow on a conch and strike a gong. But I am afraid of his disapproval. When my husband performed his worship, and college students gathered around those instruments to learn from him, I too joined them.'

'Could the boys really pay attention to science with you present there?'

'Those who could were naturally set apart. I have seen young men who were true ascetics. But there were others who practised their literary skills by writing letters under the pretence of taking notes.'

'What did you feel about that?'

'To tell you the truth, I enjoyed it. My husband would go away on work but I was surrounded by the thoughts of those who thought about me.'

'Don't mind my asking—I am a student of psychology—but did they achieve any results?'

'I don't want to admit I have not been innocent. I can still feel the wrench when I remember several young men I had got to know.'

'Several young men?'

'Even the mind can be greedy. It hides the fire of greed under flesh and blood, but bursts into flame as soon as stirred. I had spoiled my name very early, so I'm not afraid to tell the truth. Not all of us have been female hermits all our lives. We get fed up of acting virtuous—all Kuntis and Draupadis behaving like a Sita or a Savitri. You must remember, Mr. Choudhury I had no clear idea of good or bad conduct right from childhood. No teacher instructed me in this. That's why I could plunge into bad conduct so easily—and come out of it just as easily. My body may have got soiled, but no mark was left on my mind. Nothing could cling to me. Eventually, when my husband died, the flames from his funeral pyre set fire also to all my weaknesses. My piled up sins are burning away one by one. That cleansing fire remains alight in his laboratory.'

'You are very brave in being able to tell the truth about yourself.'

'It becomes easy when somebody deserves to be told the truth. You are yourself very simple and honest.'

'What about those young men who wrote letters and gained your

favour—do they still come around?’

‘They used to, and that’s how they helped to wipe clean my mind’s dirt. I realised that they were now coming with an eye on my chequebook. They thought that a woman’s delusion doesn’t end easily, so they could get access to my money through the breach made by love. They didn’t know I wasn’t quite game for this. Mine is a dry Panjabi heart. I can violate any social convention at the bidding of my body, but I shall die before I betray any trust. They haven’t been able to get a paise from my laboratory funds. My whole being is like a solid rock pressing upon the door of my god’s storehouse. They can never melt this rock. He who chose me made no mistake in this regard.’

‘I salute him for his choice—and if I could find those boys, I would twist their ears.’

Before he left that day, the professor went round the laboratory with Sohini. At the end he said, ‘This is where feminine intelligence has been distilled, the false gods have settled below as sediment, the pure spirit has come out on top.’

Sohini said, ‘Whatever you say, I can’t rest assured. Female intellect is an original creation of the supreme creator. When one is young and the will is strong, that one’s intellect hides in the bushes. As soon as one’s blood cools, out comes the traditional aunt within all of us. I hope I shall die before that happens to me.’

The professor said, ‘Don’t worry. I am sure you will die fully in your senses.’



That day Sohini chose to wear a white sari, rubbed powder into her partly gray hair, and polished her face till it gave out a glow of cleanliness and piety. Along with her daughter she arrived by motor-launch at the Botanical Gardens. That girl was dressed in a bluish-green Banarasi sari and a yellow blouse. Her forehead was adorned with kumkum; her eyes were lined subtly with kajal. Bunched up hair leaned over one shoulder. On her feet were black leather sandals with decorative designs in red velvet.

Sohini had heard about the massive tamarind tree below which Rebati spent his Sundays. She located him there and lowered herself to his feet to do pranam. Rebati was duly flustered.

Sohini said, ‘Child, I hope you won’t mind. You are the son of a

brahman, while I am only a chhatri's daughter. Professor Choudhury may have mentioned me to you.'

'He has. Where can I offer you a seat?'

'Where else but on this fresh green grass. You must be wondering what I am doing here. I have come to observe my vow. I can't easily find a brahman like you.'

Rebati was very surprised to hear this. 'A brahman like me!'

'Of course. My guru told me that he is the best brahman in any age who has mastered the best learning of that age.'

Much embarrassed, Rebati said, 'My father knew how to conduct worship. I don't know any mantra or ritual.'

'How can you say that? The mantra you have learnt has helped man to control the world. Are you surprised that a mere woman like me should say such things? Well, I heard them from a man who was truly a man. That was my husband. Will you promise me to visit the place which was the main centre of his achievements?'

'I have no work tomorrow. I'll come in the morning.'

'I see that you are fond of trees and plants. That's a very good thing. My husband once went to Burma in search of some plant. I went along with him.'

She had gone with him but not on any scientific pursuit. Because some base matter used to come to surface occasionally in her own character, she couldn't help inferring that her husband's character was flawed in the same manner. The tendency to suspect was present in every nerve of her body. Once when Nandakishor fell seriously ill, he had told his wife, 'One pleasure of death will be you can't find out where I've gone and bring me back.'

Sohini had said, 'But I can go with you.'

Nandakishor had laughed. 'How terrible!'

Sohini now said to Rebati, 'I brought back a seedling from Burma. The Burmese call it *kkojaitanieng*. Its flower makes a marvellous display. But I couldn't save it.'

Only that morning Sohini had found the name in a book in her husband's library. She had never seen the plant. She was casting a net of learning to catch the learned man.

Rebati was naturally surprised. He asked, 'Do you know its Latin name?'

Sohini replied unhesitatingly, 'It is called *miletia* in Latin.' She continued, 'My husband had no particular spiritual faith. But he strongly believed that fruits and flowers in nature possess a beauty,

and if women in a particular condition were to think steadfastly of that beauty their children would be born beautiful. Do you believe this?’

Needless to say, this was not Nandakishor’s belief at all. Rebati scratched his head and said, ‘Well, I don’t think enough evidence of this has been collected.’

Sohini said, ‘One case I can cite as proof is in my own home. From where did my daughter derive her beauty? Many flowers of spring—but, no, you can judge for yourself when you see her.’

Rebati grew eager to see her. There was no flaw in the stage setting. Sohini had brought her brahman cook dressed like a brahman priest—clad in a silk dhoti, a thick sacred thread round his neck, sandalpaste marks on his forehead, a flower tied to the tuft on top of his head. She called to him and said, ‘Thakur\*, it is almost time now. Will you fetch Neelu?’

Neela had been told by her mother to wait in the motor-launch. It was agreed that she would appear carrying a small basket and let herself be seen for a long time in the light and shade of morning. Meanwhile Sohini scrutinised Rebati’s appearance. His complexion was smooth and light brown, with a tinge of yellow—a wide forehead, from which hair had been pushed up by restless fingers—eyes not large but they drew more attention than any other feature of his face because they shone so brightly with clarity of vision. The outline of his face was soft, almost feminine. From all the information she had gathered about him, one fact was noticeable. Rebati had been sentimentally fond, often tearfully so, of his childhood friends. The somewhat weak beauty of his face could have attracted the more manly boys.

A doubt entered Sohini’s mind. It was her belief that a man did not have to be goodlooking in order to attract women and fasten himself to their hearts as with an anchor. Even intelligence or learning was of less importance. What was needed was the magnetism of manhood. That behaved like radio waves from inside muscle and nerve. It found expression as the unuttered arrogance of physical desire.

She recalled the heady days of her own youth. The man she had drawn or who had drawn her to him had no looks or learning or

\* This is a term of address for brahmans in Bengal. In northern or central India, a thakur is a landlord or rich farmer.

family background. But he radiated an invisible heat which pervaded her imperceptibly and made her feel with her whole body and mind that he was a man. She couldn't rest easy when she thought that such an upheaval would inevitably overtake Neela's life one day. The last days of youth are those when one is most vulnerable, but Sohini had remained diverted at that time by nearly uninterrupted study of science. It was only by chance that the soil of her mind was naturally fertile. Not all women can take interest in learning that is impersonal. That is why Neela's mind had remained untouched so far.

Neela came slowly up the steps of the river ghat. The sunlight lay gently on her forehead and hair, but glinted off the gold-thread strands of her Banarasi sari. Rebati saw her comprehensively at one glance and next moment cast down his eyes. This was how he had been trained since childhood. His aunt's admonitory index finger had kept out of view all beautiful girls whom Mahamaya the goddess offered in play as delusion. Therefore, whenever this nectar to sight happened to become available, it had to be quickly drunk in a single gulp.

Sohini cursed Rebati in her mind and said, 'Why don't you look up?'

Rebati looked up with a start.

Sohini said, 'Do you like it, doctor of science, the way her sari's colour matches the colour of those leaves?'

Rebati said with some embarrassment, 'Oh yes, beautiful!'

Sohini said to herself 'How can I tolerate this!' but spoke aloud: 'That orange-yellow colour inside, and on the outside a greenish blue. Can you think of a flower which has this kind of colour-combination?'

Thus encouraged Rebati saw and filled his eyes. He said, 'I am reminded of a flower, but its outer colour is not bluish—it is brown.' 'Which flower is this?'

'It is the *melina*.'

'I know. It has five petals—one bright yellow and four others quite dark.'

Rebati was astonished. He asked, 'How do you know so much about flowers?'

Sohini smiled. She said, 'You are right, I shouldn't know so much. Knowing about flowers that are not used for puja is almost like knowing men who are not relations.'

Neela reached them, carrying a small basket. Her mother said, 'Don't stand there so stiffly. Touch his feet and do pranam.'

Rebati was duly flustered. He was sitting with his legs crossed under him, so Neela had to search for his feet. At her touch his whole body seemed to shudder.

The basket she had brought contained, below some buds of rare orchid, a silver platter on which were various sweets made from milk\*. Sohini said, 'Neela has made all these herself,' but this was quite untrue. Neela was neither willing nor able to do such work. Sohini again said, 'You will have to taste some. They were made at home specially for you.' In actual fact they had been made by a sweets-shop of Barabazar.

Rebati replied with folded hands, 'Please forgive me, I don't eat anything at this time of the day. But if you will allow me, I can take them home.'

Sohini said, 'That's right, you take them home. My husband made a rule which forbade me from pressing anybody to eat. He used to say that a human being doesn't belong to the same species as a python.'

The sweets were carefully placed by Sohini in various compartments of a large tiffin-carrier. She told Neela, 'Why don't you rearrange the flowers in that basket? Be careful, don't mix up one kind with another. And when you finish, take off that silk scarf from your hair and spread it on the flowers.'

The scientist's view was overtaken by an art-lover's gaze because some matters are beyond the weights and measures of the natural world. Rebati could not help watching Neela's shapely fingers as they moved almost rhythmically among the many-coloured flowers. Occasionally he also stole a glance at her face. Her face was framed on one side by the bright red border of her yellow blouse, on the other by the single strand mingling rubies, pearls and emeralds coiled round her head. Sohini was arranging the sweets but she must have owned a third eye. She did not fail to notice the magic spell that was being woven before her.

From what she recalled of her husband Sohini knew that it was not easy to break through the barriers erected by a passion for

\* The original text names these sweets—almond slabs, *pista barfi*, *chandrapuli*, strips of *khsir*, *malai barfi*, squares of steamed sweet *dahi*.

learning. Today she realised that the fencing was not equally thick for all. She did not quite like this.



On the following day Sohini sent for the professor. She said to him, 'I seem to bother you only for selfish reasons. Perhaps your work gets interrupted too.'

'Not at all, not at all. You should bother me more often. Certainly do so when there are reasons—but it would be even better when there is no reason.'

'You remember how my husband used to lose his head because of his passion for acquiring costly instruments. He even cheated his employers in order to pursue this passion without any motive of profit. He wanted to make sure that there would be no other laboratory like this in whole of Asia. I too developed the same obsession and it kept me going after his death. Otherwise my adulterated blood would have fermented long ago and spilled out all over. You see, Mr. Choudhury, you are that kind of friend to whom one can unhesitatingly reveal the baser side of one's nature. I feel so relieved that there is an outlet for showing one's faults.'

Choudhury said, 'There is no need to hide the truth from those persons who try to view things in their entirety. It is the partial truth that is a matter of shame. I am a scientist, I am used to seeing things whole.'

'He used to say that man stakes his life to remain alive but cannot. So, in order to fulfil the longing for remaining alive, he begins searching for something far more precious than life. For my husband that precious thing was this laboratory. If I cannot keep it alive, I shall cause his final death and become a husband-killer. I want a custodian. For that reason I looked for Rebati.'

'Did you try him out?'

'I think I shall get some results immediately but he may not last.'

'Why do you think so?'

'As soon as his aunt finds out I am drawing Rebati closer, she is bound to rush to his rescue. She may even think that I am plotting to marry off my daughter to him.'

'That wouldn't be a bad thing, would it? But, of course, you have said you won't let her marry outside your community.'

'I told a lie, because I didn't know your mind then. I certainly thought of such a marriage, but I've given up the idea now.'

'Why?'

'I have now realized that Neela is the kind of girl who causes break-ups. Whatever comes into her hands can't remain whole.'

But she is your daughter—she can't be so different.'

'She is indeed my daughter and that is how I know her from the inside.'

The professor said, 'But we can't ignore the fact that women can inspire men to do great work.'

'I know that. Adding meat to men's diet can have good results. But when you add wine as well to that diet, it can be disastrous. My daughter is a jug of wine, full to the brim.'

'What do you propose to do then?'

'I want to make a gift of my laboratory to the public.'

'Even if that means depriving your only daughter?'

'My daughter? If I were to gift it to her I can't imagine what waste she would make of it. No, I'll appoint Rebati president of the trust property. His aunt can't object to that, can she?'

'How do I know? How can anybody born as a man work out the logic of a woman's objection? But, tell me, if you don't want him as son-in-law, why make him president?'

'What shall I do with just the instruments? I want somebody to use them, give them life. There is another thing. We haven't acquired any new instrument after my husband died. This is not because there was no money. Such purchases have to be made with some clear objective. I hear Rebati has worked in the area of magnetism. Let him acquire more instruments for that—money is no consideration.'

'I don't know what to say—but if you were a man I would put you on my shoulders and run around in joy. Your husband had misappropriated the railway company's funds, but you have appropriated your husband's masculine vision. I have never known any grafted knowledge to produce such intelligence. I am surprised that you bother to seek my advice.'

'That is because you are a genuine person and tell me what is right.'

'You must be joking. I am not such a fool that I should tell lies and get caught out by you. But let's get started—make a list of items, bargain about their cost, call a good lawyer who will ascertain your

rights, draw up some rules and regulations, and so on and so forth.'

'All that is your responsibility.'

'Only in name. You know very well I shall say whatever you ask me to say, do whatever you tell me to do. My reward will be that I shall see you everyday. You have no idea how I look upon you.'

Sohini sprang up from her chair, kissed Choudhury quickly and sat down again with an air of utter innocence.

'Has the disaster begun already?'

'If there was the slightest danger of any disaster I would never even have gone near you. What you got just now was your due. You will get it from time to time.'

'Can I take that as a promise?'

'You can. I spend very little for it. And from your expression it would seem that not very much is your due.'

'You mean it is a woodpecker's pecking at dead wood. So be it. And now I'll go to the lawyer.'

'Will you be coming this way tomorrow?'

'What for?'

'To make up Rebati's mind.'

'And to lose my heart.'

'Are you the only one with a heart?'

'There can't be much left of your heart.'

'There is a lot left over.'

'Which must be enough to make a lot of people dance to your wishes.'

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On the following day Rebati arrived at the laboratory nearly twenty minutes before the stipulated time. Sohini was not yet ready for the day, but she came to the room dressed in the casual clothes she wore at home. Rebati realised he had erred somewhat. He said, 'My watch is not keeping right time.' She responded briefly. 'Must be.' A noise near the door made Rebati start and look in that direction. But it was only the attendant named Sukhan bringing the keys of the glass-case.

Sohini asked, 'Shall I ask for a cup of tea?'

Rebati thought it would be proper to say yes. He said, 'I don't mind.'

He was not a tea-drinker by habit. Sometimes, when he had caught a cold, he drank hot water in which bel leaves had been boiled. But he secretly hoped that Neela would bring the tea herself.

Sohini asked, 'Do you like strong tea?'

He said without thinking, 'Yes, please.'

Again he thought saying yes was the right thing in this instance. The tea which came was undoubtedly strong—black as ink and bitter as neem—and it was brought by a Muslim khansama. This was also being done to test Rebati. He could not muster up enough courage to object. Sohini thought poorly of such timidity. She told the khansama, 'Mobarak, pour out the tea. It must be getting cold.'

Rebati had not arrived twenty minutes ahead of time just to be served by a khansama. God knew, perhaps Sohini also knew, the regret with which Rebati sipped his tea. Being a woman after all, Sohini became sympathetic and said, 'You don't have to drink that tea. Here is some milk and fruits. You have come so early, you may not have had time to eat your breakfast.' She was right. Rebati had imagined there would be a repetition of what had happened at the Botanical Gardens. Nothing even remotely like it happened. The bitter taste of strong tea remained in his mouth while his heart filled with the bitter experience of disappointment.

Professor Choudhury entered at this point. On seeing Rebati he slapped him on the back and said, 'What's wrong? Nothing seems to be happening. And you are drinking your milk obediently like a good girl. All this stuff around you—do you think this is a toyshop for little boys? Those who can see will know that the messengers of doom come here for their final act.'

'Why are you scolding him? The poor boy came today without having eaten his breakfast. When he came, he looked quite weak.'

'Good heavens! Aunt Number Two! One aunt slaps him on this cheek, the other aunt plants a kiss on the other. And between them the boy becomes as useless as wet mud. The fact is, the goddess Lakshmi can't be seen when she turns up on her own; but she reveals herself to those who have searched for her all over the world. To get without asking is nearly the same as not getting at all. Tell me, Mrs.—hang your Mrs.—I am going to call you Sohini, whether you like it or not.'

'Why on earth should I not like it? Call me Sohini—if you called

me Suhi, that would be sweeter still.'

'Let me betray a secret. That name of yours—Sohini—rhymes with a word\* the meaning of which is very apt. As soon as I wake up everyday, those two words match and fit each other and play like cymbals in my mind.'

'You are used to matching things in your chemical researches. This must be one of its dangers.'

'People have been known to die while matching chemicals. It isn't safe to play around with the stuff—it's highly inflammable.'

He laughed heartily at his own joke, then restrained himself: 'No, I mustn't talk of such things before this youngster. He hasn't yet served his apprenticeship in any explosives factory. His aunt protects him with the anchal of her sari. That anchal is non-combustible.'

Rebati's effeminate face reddened, while the professor continued: 'Sohini, what I wanted to ask you is: did you feed opium earlier in the morning to this boy? Why does he seem so inert?'

'If I did, it was without knowing that I was doing so.'

'Wake up, Rebu, wake up. Never act shy in front of women. It increases their arrogance. Like a disease, women are always looking for weaknesses in a man. Whenever they find a weakness, they strike and raise his temperature in a rush. I know the subject and must caution all youngsters. They have to learn from people like me who have been affected but survived. Rebu, my boy, I hope you don't mind my saying all this. Those who don't speak out and keep quiet—they are the most dangerous. Come, let's go round this place. These two galvanometres are of the latest design. That is a high vacuum pump and here is a microphotometer. All this is not just an aid to passing examinations. You have only to settle down here and in no time you'll outdo that bald-headed professor of yours—I don't want to name him. Didn't I tell you when you began studying with me that your future is right before your nose? Don't waste it by neglecting opportunities. And when the first chapter of your biography mentions my name in small type, that will be my real reward as your one-time teacher.'

The scientist in Rebati gradually came to life as he went round the laboratory. His eyes lit up, his appearance seemed to change from inside. Sohini was charmed. She said, 'Whoever knows you expects

\* In Bangla that word would be *mohini*, meaning enchantress.

great things from you, things of permanent importance. But the greater our expectation, the bigger all obstacles within as well as without.'

The professor again slapped Rebat's back—so heavily that the youngster's backbone seemed to rattle. He said in his booming voice, 'Look, Rebu, where the future ought to ride on Airavat\*, the miserly peasant often places it on a bullock cart—which sometimes gets stuck in mud. Are you listening, Sohini, Suhi? No, don't worry, I won't pat your back. Tell me truly if I have stated the situation properly.'

'Beautifully.'

'Then write it down in your diary.'

'I'll do that.'

'Did you understand what I said, Rebi?'

'I think I did.'

'You must remember that great talent has to bear great responsibility. It doesn't really belong to anybody, but it is accountable to eternity. Did you hear that, Suhi? How did I phrase that?'

'You phrased it splendidly. If a king of olden days were present, he would take off his necklace—'

'Those kings are dead, but—'

'That "but" hasn't died. I must remember this.'

Rebat said, 'Don't worry, nothing will weaken me.' And he bent down to touch Sohini's feet. She stopped him.

Choudhury said, 'Why should you stop him? Not to do a pious act is wrong, but to prevent a pious act being done is even more wrong.'

Sohini said, 'If you must do a pranam I suggest you do it there,' and pointed to a small bust of Nandakishor on the altar in one part of the room. She added, 'I have read in our puranas about how sinners were rescued. I was rescued by that great man. He had to stoop quite low himself but he raised me at last to a place—I can't say next to him; that would be a lie—just below his feet. He taught me to believe that mankind can be rescued through the cultivation of knowledge. He told me that I must not inflate the self-esteem of our daughter and her husband by throwing on the ash-heap all these treasures he had unearthed. He said, "I leave behind here the means of my redemption and that of my country."'

The professor said, 'Now you know, Rebu. This property will be

\* The white elephant of Indra, king of the gods.

made into a trust, and you will be in charge.'

Rebati responded anxiously, 'But I am not fit to take charge of anything. I can't accept the responsibility.'

Sohini said, 'You can't! Aren't you ashamed to say it. That is not speaking like a man.'

Rebati said, 'I have always been busy with my books—I've never handled any such responsibility.'

Choudhury said, 'No duck swims before coming out of the egg-shell. Today your egg-shell is about to break.'

Sohini said, 'Don't worry. I'll always be with you.'

Thus assured, Rebati went away.

Sohini looked at the professor, who now said, 'Of the many kinds of fool in the world, the worst must be the male fool. Of course, you mustn't forget that nobody becomes worthy of responsibility until he is made responsible. Because he is born with a pair of hands, man becomes man. If instead he was born with hooves, I have no doubt he would also grow a tail ready to be twisted. Are you afraid Rebati has hooves and not hands?'

'I don't like the situation at all. Those who are brought up only by a woman, they never lose their milk-teeth. Its just my luck. Why did I think of anybody else when you were right here?'

'I'm delighted to hear that. Will you explain to me why I am special.'

'You are not greedy.'

'Then I must be at fault. Not to feel greedy about highly desirable objects? Of course I do—'

Without letting him finish, Sohini kissed him on both cheeks and moved away.

'In what account shall I deposit this, Sohini?'

'Since I can't repay the loan you've given, I am only paying you the interest.'

'It was only one that day, now it is two—will it keep increasing like this.'

'Of course it will—it is compound interest.'



Another day Choudhury said, 'Sohini, do you know what you've done? You have turned me into a high priest to conduct the last rites

of your husband. I feel quite scared because it is such a huge task—trying to please someone whom I can never see or hear or touch. This is no routine distribution of gifts—'

'And you are no routine high priest. Whatever way you do can be regarded as the right way. Have you arranged for all the gifts.—'

'I have been doing nothing else for the last few days. I must have visited hundreds of shops. The gifts have all been placed in the larger room downstairs. I have no doubt that the souls inhabiting this world who will appropriate these gifts cannot but be most delighted.'

Sohini went down with Choudhury and saw the gifts meant for all the science students—some instruments, some models, some expensive books some microscope slides, some biology samples. Each item had a card bearing a name and address. For each of the two hundred and fifty boys there was a cheque representing one year's stipend. No expense appeared to have been spared. The total expenditure exceeded what was spent on brahmans who attend the sraddha ceremony of rich persons, but there was not the least show or undue display here.

'You didn't settle what fees\* have to be paid to you for acting as high priest.'

'Your pleasure and satisfaction will be my fees.'

'I have placed this chronometre along with my pleasure. My husband got it in Germany. It proved very useful in his research.'

Choudhury said, 'There are no words that will express what I am feeling. I don't want to say meaningless things—but at least my priestly work has been justified.'

'There is somebody else whom I mustn't forget, especially today—she is our Manik's widow.'

'Which Manik is this?'

'He was the chief mechanic of this laboratory. He had a marvellously gifted pair of hands. Even in the most delicate adjustments he never made a mistake. And his intelligence was unerring in grasping the principles of any machinery. My husband regarded him as a close friend. He used to take Manik with him to bigger and more sophisticated workshops to see how their machines worked. The fellow drank a lot and was disregarded as a low-caste person by my

\* The original text uses the word *dakshina* which means a gift given to a priest or teacher.

husband's assistants. But he used to say that Manik was gifted and such gifts could neither be found nor developed. He gave full respect to Manik. From that you will know why he regarded me so highly till the end. Whatever quality he saw in me was much more important than my shortcomings. The areas in which he fully trusted somebody like me, a person picked up from somewhere, in those areas I never let his trust go waste. I am protecting it even today with my body and soul. He didn't get this service from anyone else. Those aspects of me that were small and mean, he didn't notice them; but those aspects that were large and noble, he respected them in full measure. I don't know to what depths I would have been dragged if my little worth had not drawn his notice. I am quite sinful but I have to say myself that I am good, otherwise he would never have tolerated me.'

'Look, Sohini, I must claim that I knew from the beginning you are very good. Any lower level of goodness would have left a stain where it touched.'

'Never mind, I don't much care how other people judge me. The high place my husband gave me in his regard remains as high even today and it will remain so till my last day.'

'Sohini, the more I see of you the more I realize that you are not that sort of woman who melts as soon as the husband is mentioned.'

'No, not at all. I sensed the power within him, I knew from the first day he was a man. I didn't set out to become a faithful wife as prescribed by shastras. Let me boast that the jewel I indeed am was fit for a pendant only around his neck—and nobody else's.'

At that moment Neela entered the room in some hurry. She said, 'Please don't mind, respected professor, but I have to discuss something with my mother.'

'Not at all, dear girl, I was about to leave anyway. I'll go to the laboratory and check on how Rebati's work is going.'

Neela said, 'You need not worry. His work must be making progress. I have looked in now and then through the window and seen him huddled over his desk, sometimes scribbling away, making notes, and sometimes biting his pen, lost in thought. I am forbidden to enter, lest Sir Isaac Newton's gravitation gets disturbed. Mother was telling somebody the other day that he is working on magnetism—is that why his needle moves whenever somebody passes that way, specially girls.'

Choudhury laughed heartily and said, 'Young lady, there is a

laboratory inside us and work goes on constantly about magnetism. We have to be careful of those who make the needles move and cause misreadings of direction. And now I must be off.'

Neela said to her mother, 'How long will you keep me tied like a corner-knot in your sari? You can't for very long, and then you'll be unhappy.'

'What is it you want to do?'

Neela said, 'This higher study movement that is being organised for girls—you must know about it because you've donated a lot of money to it. Why don't you let me work in that?'

'Because I am afraid you may not move in the right way.'

'But can blocking all roads be the right way?'

'I know it is not—and that adds to my worries.'

'Why don't you stop worrying and let me worry instead for once? You will have to some day. I am not a juvenile any more. You worry about the dangers of a public place where all kinds of people come and go. I'm sure you realise that people won't stop moving about in this world just to please you. And you have no lawful means of preventing my getting to know such people.'

'Yes, yes, I know all that—I know that I can't avert danger by being afraid of danger. So you do want to join their Higher Study Circle?'

'Yes, I want to do that.'

'Then go ahead. I know all the male teachers will be led astray by you. But you must promise me one thing. You mustn't go anywhere near Rebati. And don't enter his laboratory on any pretext.'

'What do you think of me, Ma? I don't have such low taste that I shall go near your Sir Isaac Newton junior—not even if I have to die for not doing so.'

Imitating the way Rebati wriggled his body when he felt embarrassed, Neela said, 'That kind of man won't do for me. It is better to keep him alive for those women who like looking after aged children. He is just not fit to be hunted by me.'

'You are exaggerating, Neela, which means you may not be saying what is in your heart. Never mind, no matter what you feel about him, you won't escape me easily if you spoil him.'

'Ma, I can never understand what you want. You were all set to make me a dressed-up doll to be married to him—you think I didn't realise that? That must be why you are against my mixing with him, so that my paint and polish shouldn't get rubbed off too soon.'

'I'm telling you, Neela, you can never marry him.'

'Then shall I marry the Rajkumar of Motigarh?'

'You do what you want.'

'The advantage is he has married three times already, so my responsibility will be that much less. And since he spends his life getting drunk in night-clubs, I shall have a lot of time to myself.'

'All right. But I shall never let you marry Rebati.'

'Why not? Will I muddle up your Sir Isaac Newton's intelligence?'

'Never mind why. Just remember what I've told you.'

'Suppose he starts chasing me?'

'Then he'll have to leave this place. You can feed him whatever you eat, because he won't get a single paise from your father's account.'

'How terrible! Then good-bye Sir Isaac Newton.'

That day the tussle between mother and daughter did not go any further.



'Other things are running all right, Mr. Choudhury, but I can't rest easy about my daughter. I can't tell in which direction she has now aimed her gun.'

Choudhury said, 'No less worrying are those who have aimed their guns at her. It so happens already word has got around that your husband has left behind huge funds to maintain the laboratory. The amount keeps increasing each time it is mentioned. Now the stakes consist of a kingdom as well as the king's daughter.'

'The king's daughter may be won without much effort. But while I am alive I won't let the kingdom go cheaply.'

'But new aspirants are turning up. The other day I saw our Professor Majumdar come out of a cinema hall holding her hand. He turned his head as soon as he saw me. The young fellow gives public lectures on important issues—and speaks well when the subject relates to the country's welfare. But seeing him turn his head I grew worried about my country.'

'Mr. Choudhury, the barriers are down.'

'They are down indeed. And now poor me will have to guard even the small things.'

'Let the Majumdars go to the devil—my fears are about Rebati.'

Choudhury said, 'You needn't be afraid right now. He is deeply absorbed—and doing very good work.'

'The trouble with Rebati is no matter how great a scientist he is, he is just a novice in that sphere you call a matriarchy.'

'You are right. He has never been inoculated. It will be difficult to save him if he ever catches an infection.'

'You will have to come here everyday and check on him.'

'I hope he doesn't bring the infection from outside. I don't want to fall ill at this age. No, no, I was joking. You may be a woman but I am sure you understand jokes. I have crossed the stage of epidemics—even if I get touched by infection I don't actually get infected. However, there is one problem. Day after tomorrow I have to leave for Gujranwala.'

'Is this another joke of yours? Have pity on a mere woman.'

'No, I'm not joking. My friend Amulya Addy, a doctor, lived there. He had practised for about twentyfive years, made some money and acquired property. He has died suddenly of heart-failure, leaving behind his widow and several children. I have to settle his affairs, sell his property and bring back the family. I don't know how long all his will take.'

'Nothing can be more important than that.'

'Nothing in this life is ever more important than anything else, Sohini. You have to say without hesitation, "Let it, whatever will, happen." Those who believe in fate are not wrong. Scientists also believe that nothing can change the course of what is inevitable. You and I can only keep doing what we can; when we absolutely can't, that's the time to say, "Enough".'

'All right, that is the way.'

'This Majumdar I mentioned, he is not much of a danger. They keep him on their side in order to gain prestige. But of the others in that crowd, as advised by Chanakya even when one is a hundred miles away one must be careful about them. That attorney Banku-bihari, for example. Asking him for help is the same as embracing an octopus. He is the kind of person who relishes the warm blood of rich widows. I thought I must caution you, so that you can take any action that may become necessary. And, above all, don't ignore my philosophy.'

'Forget your philosophy, Mr. Choudhury. if anybody were to harm my laboratory, I won't believe in fate or in any inevitable link between cause and effect. I am a Panjabi woman and know how to

use weapons. I can easily kill, no matter if it is my own daughter or a candidate for the post of my son-in-law.'

From a waistband concealed below her sari she pulled out a dagger and let its blade flash in the light. She said, 'He has chosen me for this. I am not the daughter of a Bengali, I don't weep and whine because I have loved. For love I can give my life and also take a life. This dagger stands between my heart and my laboratory.'

Choudhury said, 'Once I used to write poems. Just now I feel I could write poetry again.'

'You may if you want to, but first take back your philosophy. What should not be accepted I shall refuse till the end. I shall stand alone and fight—and shout as loudly as I can: "I shall win, I shall win. I shall win."

'Bravo, bravo! I hereby withdraw my philosophy. From now on I shall beat a drum along with your march to victory. For the time being I must take leave, but I shall come back. soon.'

Very surprisingly, Sohini's eyes filled with tears on hearing this. She said 'Please don't mind' and put her arms around Choudhury. 'No bonds last in life, even this one is for the moment.' Saying this she bent down and touched the professor's feet respectfully.



What newspapers call a situation forms suddenly and proceeds from combination of events. Most stories in life advance slowly through joys and sorrows. But in the last chapter a collision takes place, the story shatters and falls silent. God himself builds up a story by stages but breaks it with one blow.

Sohini's adoptive mother lived in Ambala. A telegram came: 'Come soon if you want to see her alive.' This was her only living relation. Nandakishor had bought Sohini from this woman.

Sohini told her daughter, 'You had better come along.'

Neela said, 'That can't be.'

'Why not?'

'They have decided to felicitate me and are making arrangements.'

'Who are this "they"?''

'The members of Jagani Club. Don't worry, it's a very decent club. You can see this from the list of members. Very select.'

'What are the objectives of your club?'

'Its difficult to state them clearly. The name itself suggests what we aim to do. The name implies all kinds of intentions—spiritual, literary, artistic. Nabakumar Babu gave a very good exposition the other day. They will come to you for a subscription.'

'Haven't they already collected in full measure? You seem to be entirely in their hands. But that must be all. They've got what I can discard. There's nothing more I can give.'

'Why are you getting angry, Ma? They want to work selflessly for the country.'

'Never mind. I expect you have come to know from your friends that you are independent now.'

'Yes, I heard so.'

'Those selfless people must have explained that you are at liberty to use as you like the money that has been set aside as your husband's share.'

'They have.'

'I have been told that you are preparing to apply for a probate on the will. Is this true?'

'It is. Banku Babu is my solicitor.'

'Has he given you any other hopes and advice?'

Neela did not say anything.

'I'll set your Banku Babu straight if he steps into my territory. By unlawful means if not by law. On my return journey, I shall come back via Peshawar. I have appointed four Sikh guards who will watch the laboratory twentyfour hours. And before leaving let me show you—I am a daughter of Panjab.' She brought the dagger out of her waistband. 'This blade doesn't recognise my daughter nor does it recognise my daughter's solicitor. I'll leave its memory in your care. If it is time to settle accounts when I return, I'll do so.'



A lot of land had been left vacant all around the laboratory building in order to ensure that no sound or vibration from outside caused any disturbance. The relative silence helped Rebati to concentrate and he often came to work at night.

The clock downstairs had just struck the hour of two in the morning. While engrossed in thought about what he was working on, Rebati had raised his eyes to look out of a window when somebody's shadow flitted along the wall near one entrance. Rebati saw

that Neela was inside the room, that she was wearing a thin silk shift-like dress—obviously what she wore in bed. Greatly startled, Rebati was about to get up from his chair but Neela planted herself in his lap and embraced him. He began trembling, his chest heaved violently. He said in a choked voice, 'Go away, from this room.'

She asked, 'Why?'

Rebati said, 'I can't bear it. Why did you come here?'

She hugged him more closely and said 'But don't you love me.'

Rebati said, 'I do, I do, I do. But you must leave this room.'

'At this point the Sikh watchman entered. He said in a scolding tone, 'This is very shameful, Ma-ji. You must go away.'

Rebati had pressed the electric alarm-bell without realising he had done so. The watchman told him, 'Babuji, you are becoming a traitor.'

Rebati pushed Neela away somehow and managed to stand up. The watchman again spoke to her. 'You must go out of this room or I shall carry out my orders.'

Those orders obviously included the use of force. As she was going out Neela said, 'Can you hear me, Sir Isaac? You are invited to tea at my place tomorrow, at four fortyfive. Did you hear? Or have you fainted?' She halted and looked back at Rebati.

'I heard you,' came the reply in a thick voice.

Some trick of lighting showed up the outlines of Neela's perfectly shaped body beneath her nightwear as if she were a sculptured figure. Rebati could not help looking at her in fascination. When she went away Rebati rested his forehead on his desk. He could not have imagined such extraordinary beauty in a woman. Something like electric rain had entered his veins and a stream of fire was moving about. He clenched his fists and tried to tell himself he would not attend the tea-party on the following day. He tried to swear by something serious but could not mouth the words. He wrote 'I won't go—won't go—won't go' on the sheet of blotting-paper before him. He suddenly saw a dark-red handkerchief lying on his desk. One corner of it bore the name 'Neela' in embroidery. He buried his nose in the handkerchief. Its perfume filled his brain and an intoxicated feeling pervaded all his limbs.

Neela reappeared in the room 'There's something I forgot.'

When the watchman confronted her, she said, 'You need not worry, I haven't come to steal anything. I just want a signature.' Then, to Rebati: 'Your reputation is growing—we want you to

become president of the Jagani Club.'

Rebati gestured as if he shrank from such a prospect: 'But I know nothing about that club.'

'You don't have to know anything—except that Brojendra Babu is the club's patron.'

'But I don't know Brojendra Babu.'

'All that you need to know is he is a director of the Metropolitan Bank. And now be a good boy, sweet boy, and sign this.' She put her right arm around his shoulder and held his hand.

He signed, as if in a dream.

As Neela was folding the sheet of paper the watchman said, 'I must see this paper.'

Neela said, 'You won't understand it.'

He said, 'I don't have to.' He took the sheet from her and tore it up. 'If you want to draw up a legal document, do it outside, not here.'

Rebati was secretly relieved. The watchman told Neela, 'Let me see you home now, Ma-ji.' She went with him. He came back after a while and questioned Rebati. 'I had closed all the doors. You must have opened one from inside.'

Rebati felt deeply insulted at this allegation. He protested many times he had not let her in. Then how had she entered? The scientist began investigating. Then he noticed the large window which opened out on the road—its catch had been raised by somebody during the day. The watchman did not respect Rebati enough to think that the latter could be clever enough to arrange something like this. He thought Rebati was a simpleton, fit only for studying. The watchman struck his own forehead and muttered, 'Woman! God himself has made her cunning.'

During the remaining part of the night Rebati vowed several times to himself that he would not attend the tea party.

Crows had begun cawing outside. Rebati went home.



There was no unpunctuality on the following day. Rebati turned up precisely at fortyfive minutes past four for the tea-party. He had imagined it would be an intimate party for two. No notion of fashionable dressing could be conceived by him. He wore his usual

kurta and dhoti, both freshly laundered, and draped around his shoulders a neatly folded chadar. When he arrived he found that the party had already begun in the garden and there was a large throng of well-dressed people quite unknown to him. His spirits drooped, he sought a place to hide. He was about to sit down in a corner when everybody stood up and hailed him: 'Welcome, welcome Dr. Bhattacharya. Your place is over there.'

That place was a high-back, velvet-seat chair at the centre of the gathering. Neela came and placed a garland round his neck, then marked his forehead with sandalwood paste. Brojendra Babu proposed that Rebati should be made president of Jagani Sabha, Banku Babu seconded the proposal, amid much hand-clapping. The writer Haridas Babu dwelt on Rebati's international fame and said, 'The wind of Rebati Babu's fame will fill the sails of our Jagani Club's boat and float it to every port of the western ocean.'

The organisers of the occasion whispered into newspaper reporters' ears: 'Make sure none of these metaphors get left out in your report.'

When nearly all the speakers asserted 'Dr. Bhattacharya has at last gifted Mother India with the triumph of science', Rebati felt his chest swell with pride—he saw himself shining from the noon-sky of the civilized world. He rejected in his mind all those slanderous comments he had heard about Jagani Sabha. On Haridas Babu's saying 'Now that our club has been equipped with the talisman of Rebati Babu's reputation, we can be sure of the club's high purpose', Rebati became keenly aware of the glory and responsibility attached to his name. The veil of reservations fell from his mind. Removing cigarettes from their mouths, young women bent over his chair and said with beguiling smiles, 'We may be bothering you but we must have your autograph.' Rebati thought he had been living within a dream. Now the chrysalis of the dream had opened and the butterfly emerged from it.

Those who had come to the gathering went away in due course. Neela held Rebati back, clutching his hand: 'You must stay on.' Burning hot wine was poured into his veins by her touch.

Day was approaching its end. A green evening grew dark in the bower under the creepers. They sat close to each other on the garden bench. Neela took one of Rebati's hands into her own and asked, 'Doctor Bhattacharya, you are a man—why are you so scared of women?'

Rebati responded arrogantly, 'Scared of women? Never!'

'You are not afraid of my mother?'

'Why should I be afraid of her? I respect her.'

'What about me?'

'Of you I must be afraid.'

'That's good news. Mother says she will never let us marry. Then I'll commit suicide.'

'I won't stop at anything—nothing can stop our marriage.'

Neela rested her head upon his shoulder: 'You probably don't know how much I want you.'

Rebati drew her head more closely to his chest: 'There is no power that can take you away from me.'

'What about your caste?'

'Caste be hanged.'

'Then you should inform the registrar as soon as possible.'

'Definitely—I'll do it tomorrow.'

Rebati's manhood was aroused at last.

Events began to develop rapidly. Sohini's stepmother had a stroke. Death could not be far away. But until she died she did not want to let Sohini go. And Neela's youthful impulses were powerfully stirred as she grasped this opportunity with both hands.

The flavour of Rebati's manliness had faded somewhat under the pressure of learning. Neela did not like him enough. But it was safe to marry him because he would not have the strength to stop her from doing what she liked after marriage. Moreover, there was enough evidence that the laboratory was the target of greed because of the monetary gain it could fetch as property. Neela's well-wishers had told her Rebati was the most fit person to be in charge of the laboratory, hence Sohini would not like to let go of him—that was the inference drawn by intelligent people.

In the meanwhile Rebati braved the abuse of fellow-scientists by confirming to newspapers that he had accepted the presidentship of Jagani club. To Neela's query 'Are you worried?' He replied, 'I don't care a whit'. He became obsessed with convincing everybody that he was a man of his word. 'I correspond with Edington' he said. 'One of these days I'll invite him to our club.' The club members cheered.

Rebati's work at the laboratory had come to a stop; his thinking had got completely disjointed. All the time he found himself waiting for Neela—for Neela to appear suddenly behind him and place her

hands over his eyes, or sit on his chair-handle and put her arms around his neck. He tried to assure himself that this interruption was only temporary, that he would resume work as soon as he recovered. But there was no sign of his early recovery. And there seemed no awareness on Neela's part that by interrupting his work she may be causing some loss to the world of science. In fact, she seemed to regard it all as some comic drama.

The net continued to entangle Rebati. Jagani Sabha had him fully in its clutches and was determined to make him a full man. He could not yet pronounce the unspeakable but he forced himself to laugh when he heard it. Dr. Bhattacharya had become a source of much amusement to other members of the club.

Occasionally Rebati suffered pangs of jealousy. Neela would light her cigarette from the cigar in a bank director's mouth. This was well beyond Rebati's capacity to imitate. He became giddy if he swallowed cigar smoke but he felt sick in mind as well as body at such scenes. Then there was the constant touching and pushing and fondling, about which he could not help protesting. Neela would say, 'We are not bound by this mere body—what value can it have for us. The real thing is love, and that I don't hand out so easily.' And she would press Rebati's arm intimately as she said this. Whereupon Rebati thought that others were the ones deprived—content with the outward form, they never got the inner essence.

The entrance to the laboratory continued to be guarded but there was nobody inside and research work made no progress.



They were in the drawing-room, Neela reclined on a sofa with her legs drawn up, Rebati sitting on the floor but leaning against the sofa. He held a sheaf of foolscap paper covered with writing. Shaking his head in disapproval, he said, 'This is much too flowery and over-stated. I'll be embarrassed to make such exaggerated statements.'

'Since when have you become an expert on language? These words are not chemical formulae. Don't fuss—all you have to do is to get it by heart. Did you know it was written by Promadaranjan Babu, our literary man?'

'I'll find it very difficult to memorize all these long sentences and big words.'

They are not difficult at all. Just by reading them out to you so many times I've got them memorized. This mandar garland from Amaravati which Jagani Club has bestowed upon me at this most auspicious juncture of my life—grand! Don't worry. I'll be sitting quite close to you. I'll keep prompting you.'

'I don't know much of Bangla literature but the way this has been written it seems to make fun of me. If only you would let me speak in English, how much easier that would be. *Dear friends, allow me to offer you my heartiest thanks for the honour you have conferred upon me on behalf of the Jagani Club—the great Awakener\**—etcetera. A few sentences like these would be enough—'

'That won't do. Of course it will sound strange, your speaking in Bangla—especially that part: "I specially call upon the community of the young in Bengal, you who are about to put in motion the chariot of independent action, you who lead the way for those who have snapped their shackles"—how can all this be said in English. And when young Bengalis hear it from a scientist like you, they will spread their hoods like snakes and dance. Come, there is still some time. Let me go over the whole thing with you again.'

Heavy steps could be heard on the staircase as the bank manager Brojendra Haldar, dressed in suit and tie, brought his long and bulky-body up to the first floor. On seeing Rebati he remarked, 'This is intolerable. Whenever I come I find you have captured Nilly. Don't you have any work to do—other than acting like a thorny bush around Nilly to keep her apart from us.'

Rebati said timidly, 'The fact is, I did have some special work—'

'Of course you have work. That's why I left home early so that I have half an hour in hand before I reach office. I thought you must be preoccupied with the arrangements of tonight's dinner. But as soon as I arrived I heard you are busy here. How wonderful! When you don't have work, you do that here. And when you do have work, that also you do here. How can we ordinary working people compete with you? Nilly, is it fair?'

Neela said, 'The trouble with Dr. Bhattacharya is he can't say the real thing emphatically enough. He might say he came because he had work, but that's not true. He came because he can't stay away—that's the truth and it's worth hearing. He has taken over all my time by sheer will-power. That is the secret of his manliness. All of you

\* A pun on the Bangla word 'jagani' which means awakener.

have to take second place to this Bangal\*.'

'So be it, then. We shall also have to use our manliness. Members of Jagani Club will hereafter discuss how to abduct women. The puranic age will return.'

Neela said, 'How nice to hear this! 'Nari-haran' sounds better than 'pani-grahan'.\*\* What will be its method?'

Haldar said, 'I can demonstrate one method?'

'Now?'

'Rightaway.'

And he picked up Neela from the sofa with a hand each under her back and knees. She laughed delightedly and passed an arm round his neck. Rebati's face darkened but he knew he did not have the physical strength either to emulate Haldar or prevent him. He grew indignant within himself that Neela should encourage these savages.

Haldar said, 'My car is ready. I'll take you away to Diamond Harbour, and bring you back before that dinner party tonight. This will be my good deed for the day—leaving Dr. Bhattacharya alone to do his work in peace. I am sure he will thank me for removing an impediment like you.'

Rebati noted that Neela did not struggle at all and made no effort to free herself. On the contrary she held on to Haldar closely and seemed to enjoy the shelter of his chest. As she went she said, 'Don't worry, Mr. Scientist, this is only a rehearsal of abduction. I am not going all the way to Lanka—I'll be back for your dinner.'

He tore up the sheets of paper he was holding. Compared to Haldar's muscle power and uninhibited exercise of rights, Rebati's faith in his own learning seemed futile and worthless.



The dinner that night had been arranged at a well-known restaurant. The host was Rebati Bhattacharya himself, with the specially honoured Neela at his side. A famous film actress had been

\* *Bangal* is a term used often derisively, to identify persons from East Bengal.

\*\* 'Nari-haran' means abducting a woman or women; *pani-grahan* literally means accepting a palm, which is one of the acts performed during a Hindu marriage ceremony.

commissioned to sing. Bankubihari proposed the toast in which Rebati's many virtues were mentioned and Neela's name mentioned along with his. The young women present puffed frantically at their cigarettes to show they were not entirely feminine. The older women had assumed masks of youth for the occasion and outstripped the girls in laughing loudly and in nudging each other.

Against all expectation, Sohini entered. The room full of people fell silent. She looked towards Rebati and said, 'Dr. Bhattacharya, isn't it? I can hardly recognise you. You had asked for money and I sent it last Friday. Now I can see that you have enough for your expenses. I am sorry I have to disturb you—I must check tonight itself that nothing is missing from the laboratory.'

'You are mistrusting me.'

'I didn't mistrust you all these days. But if you have any shame you wouldn't raise the question of trust.'

Rebati was about to get up but Neela pulled at his dress and made him sit down. She said, 'He has invited friends this evening. How can he go away before they have left?'

There was a cruel bite in this remark. Sir Isaac was such a favourite of her mother's—nobody could be trusted more and that is why he and nobody else had been given charge of the laboratory. To rub it in more deeply Neela added, 'There are sixtyfive guests tonight, Mother. They couldn't fit in here, so there's another group in the next room. Can't you hear their noise? This place charges twentyfive rupees per head, including drinks, and you have to pay for the drinks even if you haven't had any. The penalty for all these unfilled glasses must have added up to quite a lot. Anybody else would have backed out. But even the bank director has been impressed by our scientist's lavish hand. Do you know how much that film singer charged? Four hundred for one evening.'

The more he heard the more uneasy Rebati felt. Not a word passed his lips.

Sohini asked, 'What is being celebrated tonight?'

'Don't you know? Associated Press has announced it to all newspapers. He has agreed to become president of Jagani Club and this dinner is in his honour. He will pay the life-membership fee at his convenience.'

'That convenience may never happen.'

A steam-roller was moving up and down within Rebati's consciousness. Sohini now spoke to him: 'So you can't leave right now?'

Rebati looked at Neela. The answering glance from the corner of her eyes aroused his manliness. 'How can I go, all these invitees—'

Sohini said, 'All right, I can wait until they leave. Naserullah, will you stand guard at the door?'

Neela said, 'You can't wait here, Mother. We have to hold a confidential consultation. It won't be proper for you to be here.'

'Look, Neela, you have only started to play games. I don't think you can play better than I can. Don't you think I already know what your consultation will be about? I assure you, I shall be needed most at your consultation.'

Neela asked, "What have you heard? And from whom?"

'The ways of finding out are in the moneybag itself, like the snake inside a hole. There are three legal experts present here this evening. They have been asked to scrutinize all documents of the laboratory trust fund to see whether any loophole can be found. Isn't that so, Nilu?'

Neela said, 'Well, I must admit you are right. It is unnatural that Father should leave behind so much money but give no share to his daughter. That is why everyone suspects—'

Sohini stood up from her chair and said, 'The real root of suspicion goes back further. Who is your father—of whose property are you demanding a share? Aren't you ashamed to claim you are the daughter of such a man?'

Neela jumped to her feet: 'What are you saying, Mother.'

'I am just telling the truth. I hid nothing from him, he knew everything. Whatever he wanted from me he got fully—he will get it even today. He wanted nothing else.'

Ghosh the barrister said, 'Your saying so doesn't amount to proof.'

'He knew that. So he had a statement prepared and got it registered.'

'It's getting late, Banku. No point in waiting. Let's go.' All sixty-five of them disappeared, especially when they saw the Peshawari guard standing outside.

At this point Choudhury turned up carrying a suitcase. He said, 'I came rushing when I got your telegram. What's happened to you, Rebi, baby? Your face has gone pale like parchment. Somebody should fetch his cup of milk.'

Sohini pointed to Neela and said, 'His supplier is sitting right there.'

'Have you started a milkmaid's business, young lady?'

'She has certainly started the business of capturing the milkman. You can see her first captive.'

'You mean—our Rebi?'

'For once my daughter has saved my laboratory. I had judged a man wrongly. But my daughter knew I had turned the laboratory into a cowshed. In a few more days it would have filled with cow-dung.'

The professor addressed Neela: 'Young lady, now that you have discovered a cowherd, you will have to take charge of him. He has everything but commonsense. The absence of that won't be noticed if you stay near him. It will be easiest thing for you to lead a stupid man with a rope through his nose.'

Neela said, 'What about it, Sir Isaac Newton? The notice has already gone to the registrar's office. Do you want to withdraw it.'

Rebati puffed up his chest and replied, 'Never. Not even at the risk of dying.'

'But the marriage will have to be performed at some inauspicious hour.'

'Let it be. Certainly.'

Sohini said, 'And miles away from the laboratory.'

Professor Choudhury said, 'Dear Nilu, he may be stupid but he is not useless. Once he has got over this dizzy spell, he'll have no problem in earning enough to eat.'

'Then you will have to wear some other kind of clothes, Sir Isaac. Otherwise I shall have to cover my head when I meet you.'

A shadow fell on the wall. Rebati's aunt had arrived. She said, 'Rebi, come away.'

Without a word Rebati followed her out, and did not look back even once.

## Afterword\*

Those who have to read Rabindranath's shorter fiction in English translation and perhaps encountered him first in a high-school anthology through "The Cabuliwallah" or "The Postmaster" may not have persisted long enough to reach nearly the last three stories he wrote. These, published individually in magazines during 1938-40, appeared soon afterwards in English translation also in magazines. But while the original Bangla stories were collected in the volume *Tin sangi* (1940), their English versions have not been available as a book until now. This is certainly one of the reasons why they remain so little read and even less discussed.

In fact, if we are to judge by publication history, there was a steep decline in size of the readership of Rabindranath's prose fiction in English translation after the publication in English of *Gora* (1924) and *Broken Ties & Other Stories* (1925).<sup>1</sup> The Macmillan Company in London, which had invested quite profitably in twenty-nine 'Tagore titles' between 1913 and 1925, did not publish any translated novel or short-story collection of his after the latter year. Though Rabindranath wrote at least ten more stories and four novels during 1926-41, only one of these was published in English translation soon after the original had appeared.<sup>2</sup> Of the novels *Sesher kavita* (1929) had to

\* This is a marginally revised version of my article "The Last Three Companions: Rabindranath's 'Tin sangi'", which appeared in the volume *Rabindranath Tagore in Perspective: A Bunch of Essays* (Visva-Bharati, 1989), published to commemorate the 125th birth anniversary of the poet. It is being used here with the kind permission of the publishers.

wait sixteen years for reappearance in English, *Dui bon* (1933) had to wait ten years, *Malancha* (1934) twenty-two years and *Charadhyay* (1934) sixteen years.<sup>3</sup> These long gaps tended to dissociate the translations from their originals and created the impression of Rabindranath's having had a rather odd career as a writer of fiction when read only in English translation. Now that the *Tin sangi* stories are available in book form, they may not correct the English-reading public's impression of Rabindranath as a fiction writer; but they will certainly demonstrate to those who have rested content with reading "The Postmaster" (original published 1891) or "The Cabuli-wallah" (original published 1892) how very different his methods and concerns had become in 1938-40.

For example, the language of these stories has come closest in Rabindranath's prose fiction to what N.K. Sidhanta once described as 'the speech of the educated and the cultured'.<sup>4</sup> This was the culmination of a process which had begun more than fifty years earlier when Rabindranath first applied himself to fashioning a Bangla prose suited to modern fiction. The achievement will not be easily apparent in English translation, but a comparison with earlier English versions would show something. Then, in keeping with its modernist turn of thought, all three stories of *Tin sangi* have at least one important male character who is a scientist or a technician. This is quite unprecedented in Rabindranath's fiction—perhaps even in all of Bangla fiction—despite the fact that many eminent Indian scientists of the time were Bengalis. Again, all three stories are centred on an exceptional woman who not only can think for herself but also acts in a decisive manner to retain control of her relationship with the man in question. There have been female protagonists before in Rabindranath's stories and novels, but none quite as independent or self-sufficient as the three we meet here. It seems that, not satisfied with the many remarkable women he had already created, Rabindranath was seeking to develop them towards even greater autonomy. The very structure of these stories reveals a spirit of search—the author was still searching for the right length and shape for the tale he had to tell. All the *Tin sangi* stories seem set to run into novels before they are suddenly reined back and given short story resolutions. Either out of preference born of practice or on account of ebbing physical stamina, Rabindranath continued to experiment with the long story or novella as a form most suited to his purpose.<sup>5</sup>

No amount of advocacy, however, can hide the fact that these

three long stories are flawed in one way or another. One problem in each case is that the stories lead the main pair of characters into positions that are irreconcilable without sufficient grounds for being so, and a solution is then imposed by some quite arbitrary deed or thought. But despite the flaws, there are elements in each situation that merit far more comment than has been granted to them. It is tempting to find in these stories shadows of earlier stories by Rabindranath, but that does not add much to their merit. What does add to their being interesting is the way they seem to relate to each other. Alokeranjan Dasgupta has observed: 'There is a unifying bond between the three parts, and any two parts can be regarded as subsidiaries to the remaining'.<sup>6</sup> So close a relationship would not be easy to demonstrate, yet, if we were to read the stories one after another, we cannot but get the impression that the author has kept coming back to the same vision or perception.

"Robibar" (Sunday) spans just two Sundays but the happenings in between and earlier use up about ten thousand words. So much space was needed by the writer to show how Abhik fails to persuade Vibha to accept him in marriage. The failure is not wholly one-sided because Vibha cannot ignore the possibility that her dead father would have thoroughly disapproved of Abhik as a son-in-law. Abhik once complained to her:

You want to spare pain to somebody who is dead, but you don't mind hurting somebody who is alive. You hesitate to wound the empty air, but you have no care about injuring flesh and blood. (p. 6)

Vibha cried on hearing him put it thus, and we wonder if some dent has been made in her adherence to her father's ideals. But Vibha weeps again when Abhik refuses her gift of money—he had actually wanted to sell her his watch but she offered to give him the money instead—and we fear she may not get many more opportunities to settle her differences with him. When Vibha weeps a third time, her options have closed and Abhik is out of reach altogether.

By any measure Abhik is a difficult person. Though brought up in an orthodox brahman family, he declares himself an atheist. On some pretext he violates the sanctity of their household deity and is disowned by his rich father. Compelled to discontinue his art-school

studies, he makes a living as a factory mechanic. He cannot understand Vibha's belief in divinity and tells her that if India is to be united as a nation, the job will have to be done by atheists like him and not by those who are ready to kill each other in the name of religion. And all the time he is arguing with Vibha and urging her to accept his devotion to her. She has to be on guard all the time against such pressure.

She must remain firm in her resistance because Abhik is so erratic, even irresponsible, in his ways. The author has endowed him with too many contrary traits to be accepted by somebody like Vibha. Instead of endorsing Abhik's aspirations to be an artist, she prefers to help Amar Babu, a mathematics scholar who, it is believed, 'will become another Ramanujam if he is given adequate opportunity'. Single-minded in his scholarly pursuits, Amar Babu shows no particular weakness for Vibha but Abhik chooses to regard him as a rival in his pursuit of her. His repeated complaint to Vibha is that she does not take him seriously as an artist. When Amar Babu is invited to an international conference in Copenhagen and Vibha plans to fund this visit, Abhik also decides to go abroad and earn a reputation there as artist in order to win Vibha's admiration. He does not let Vibha sell one of her ornaments and contribute towards Amar Babu's travel expenses; instead he makes an anonymous contribution to this fund with money he has misappropriated. And before he himself goes abroad, he steals Vibha's necklace and leaves behind for her a sheaf of his paintings which, as he assures her hopefully, will become priceless some day.

We learn about this last turn of events from the letter Vibha receives from Abhik, written on board the ship on which he is travelling as a stoker. We are not told how Vibha reacts to the letter and the author obviously wants Abhik, otherwise the defeated party, to have the last word.

The last word in the second story "Seshkatha" (Last word) rests with the narrator, who introduces himself as Nobinmadhav, the scientist-hero of the story. He tells us that from being a Bengal revolutionary he had become a qualified geologist who, when the story opens, is engaged in survey work in a small princely state in Chotanagpur. This transformation had happened during a long stay abroad, first in America and then in Europe, but he had retained enough of his patriotic fervour to realise that the discovery of

mineral resources was one way of building up a nation's capacity to sustain itself.

What he does discover in the forest area he is surveying is a beautiful young woman under a tree who is writing something in a notebook with great concentration. He names her Achira in this story and finds out, after they become acquainted, that she is living in a forest bungalow with her grandfather, a much respected professor of physics who seems to have retired prematurely from service. Nobin comes to know from another source of information that Achira had been engaged to marry Bhabatosh, one of the professor's students, who then went to England at the professor's expense to sit for the ICS examination. After passing the examination and returning to India, Bhabatosh married a senior official's daughter to further his own career. The professor and his granddaughter have, out of mortification, exiled themselves to this forest.

In this story the geologist Nobinmadhav is counter-pointed against the cad Bhabatosh, and it is easy for Nobin to win the professor's regard and his granddaughter's esteem. (As in "Robibar", here too there is a strong father-daughter relationship which is crucial to the story.) The grandfather quite plainly indicates that he would bless a marriage between Achira and Nobin. But it is Achira who, even while admitting that she has been won over by Nobin, decides that such an event must not follow. She has seen how her grandfather had to give up teaching because of her. And now she tells Nobin she must not become the cause of his straying from his chosen vocation of geological studies. Nobin accepts the verdict and comments at the end:

My own little story finishes here. The rest of it is about the geologist. I went home and unpacked my notes and records. Suddenly I felt happy, and knew this was liberation. When I finished the work that day and came out on the verandah, I felt like a bird that has come out of the cage but a length of chain was still attached to one foot. It clanked gently at every movement. (p. 46)

A particularly interesting feature of "Sesinkatha" is how aptly the analogy of geological research fits Nobinmadhav's aspirations as a scientist-cum-patriot. The wealth represented by mineral resources is already there, underfoot, in his own land; it does not have to be brought from somewhere else. And this wealth can be acquired

merely by search and not by any process of extortion from or exploitation of somebody else. The narrator also suggests comparison with a somewhat comic mode of burglary (in which the burglar enters by cutting a hole in the house-wall) as well as with the wholly romantic pastime of looking for hidden treasure. Basically, of course, the search here for minerals is a process of self-discovery which may lead to other positive actions.

Since the story is a first person narrative, it remains open to speculation about how much remains untold and how much gets overstated. Thus, Nobin has presented himself in such a favourable light throughout that we may wonder whether there is some reason other than the one stated for Achira's turning him down. Similarly, we see Achira only through Nobin's account of her. When he reports to us, for example, Achira's confession of her fear of her own physical needs, the language seems rather strange for a person like Achira:

Sometimes when I am captured by the demoness-like nights we have here, I have imagined that my own self can engender dark forces which will snatch me away from Dadu. When these forces stretch their twenty hands to clutch at me, I jump out of bed and run to our little river to cool my body in that water. (p. 44).

The strong imagery makes us ask ourselves whether Achira really used such words or has Nobin got carried away by his own feelings about her. These uncertainties attend any first-person account but, as a storytelling mode, it has proved more successful here than the omniscient third-person narrator has in "Robibar". There the authorial voice has to intervene with comment or judgement whenever the action gets stalled, thus gaining an unnatural prominence.

In the more personal drama of "Robibar", the author had posed the artist against the scientist (or the manual worker against the scholar) as individuals pursuing their own predilections. "Seshkatha" offers the scientist and the bureaucrat as alternatives but presents them against a wider historical setting. By underlining Nobinmadhav's evolution from a political activist to a research worker, Rabindranath may be showing the way to educated Indians who are politically minded but not yet politically free. He also makes use of Nobin to comment disparagingly on the ritual peity of Bengalis who weep in devotional ecstasy before an idol but do not make any effort to ameliorate the poverty of people all around them. From his training and work experience abroad Nobin has learnt the value

of self-reliance, and this is what we see him practising in the story. Achira quickly recognises the need, both at personal and at national levels, for Nobin's lonely endeavour and voluntarily stands aside so that he can continue on the course he has chosen after much deliberation.

Self-reliance is also preached in the third story, "Laboretari", where the laboratory in the title has been set up by Nandakishor for the sole purpose of providing opportunity to science students to carry out experiments and not have to depend only on textbooks. Rebati Bhattacharya is a promising scholar and, after Nandakishor's death his widow Sohini, decides to place Rebati in charge of this laboratory. The story deals thereafter with the contest between three women to control Rebati's career. He is manipulated by Sohini, fascinated by her daughter Neela, and ultimately rescued by his aunt. Obviously, no matter how good his training as a scientist might have been, Rebati had little experience of the laboratory that is life.

The third story of *Tin sangi* is somewhat longer than the other two and could easily have been developed into a novel. In the lack of such expanse, Rabindranath has had to take short cuts and effect unexpected transitions in order to complete the story. It begins with Nandakishor, an engineer with a foreign degree, who makes a lot of money by underhand means when he worked on two projects of railway-bridge-building at home. This money he uses to purchase expensive scientific instruments with which to equip and build what he hopes will become the best science laboratory in the country. When he has to give up working for the railway company, he starts his own factory and takes full advantage of the production boom engendered by the First World War. Whether as an engineer with illicit earnings or as a successful industrialist, Nandakishor has no predecessor in Rabindranath's fiction, and it is a pity the author decided to kill him off and shift the focus to Sohini.

Sohini is no less unique among the characters created by Rabindranath. For one thing she is non-Bengali—a Punjabi girl who was about twenty years old when Nandakishor met her during one of his business trips to Panjab. She was probably a part-time prostitute when Nandakishor acquired her, but thereafter she has been as chaste as any conventional wife. What is more, despite her lack of education, she fully understood Nandakishor's vision and devoted herself to fulfilling its objective. As she tells one of her admirers, Manmatha Choudhury, whose advice she has sought,

... don't misunderstand me, but I am a woman. The laboratory in this home was my husband's place of devotion. If I can find some worthy person to keep a lamp burning below his altar, I know he will be happy. (p. 56).

And again, when Choudhury asks her where exactly her husband seemed truly great to her, she replies:

Not because he was learned but because he had such pure devotion to learning. He used to live in the light and air of this devotion. For us women, there has to be something tangible which we can worship. So this laboratory itself has become the deity I worship. (pp. 60-61).

Incidentally, Professor Choudhury was one of Rebati's former teachers and that is why Sohini thought of consulting him. The three long conversations between them are important because they reveal Sohini's mind to us—important also because this represents yet another technique of storytelling adopted by Rabindranath. Choudhury makes no secret of his admiration for Sohini but he knows quite well that she will have no further use for him after Rebati has been recruited.

Sohini makes use of her daughter Neela for recruiting Rebati but she miscalculates in presuming that she can fit Neela into the plan of drawing Rebati into the laboratory. Sohini has been told that the aunt (father's sister) who brought up Rebati exercises such control over him that once he turned down the offer of a scholarship to Cambridge because she threatened to commit suicide if he were to go abroad. As counter-influence Sohini arranges a meeting between Rebati and Neela at a picnic in the Botanical Gardens. Rebati swallows the bait duly, begins visiting the laboratory and agrees to take charge of its operations. Neela seems equally interested in him, but only because through him she will have access to the trust fund that finances the laboratory. Also, she has found out that she can use her discretion about a large sum of money that has been bequeathed for her husband. She has no interest in science or research and does her best to divert Rebati's attention to her own dilettante pursuits.

Rabindranath has been surprisingly unkind to Neela in this story. Quite unlike other young women created by him, she exploits the promise of her youthful body to attract Rebati. In what must be the most explicitly amorous scene in Rabindranath's fiction, Neela enters the laboratory at two o'clock in the morning:

Neela was inside the room, that she was wearing a thin silk shift-like dress—obviously she wore in bed. Greatly startled, Rebati was about to get up from his chair but Neela planted herself in his lap and embraced him. (p. 81).

In due course Rebati's work in the laboratory comes to a stop but he keeps on visiting the place and waits for Neela to turn up unexpectedly, approach from behind and put her hands over his eyes, or sit on his chair-handle and place an arm round his neck. Rebati assures himself that this is only a temporary break in his research, that he will resume as soon as he 'feels better'. But we know that his 'feeling better' is likely to be postponed for a long time. When Sohini discovers that Rebati has been neglecting the laboratory, it is too late for her to take any remedial action because Rebati is fully under Neela's thumb. Or so it seemed, until the aunt turns up without notice at a restaurant where Neela has thrown a party. At a single command from the aunt, Rebati gets up and goes home with her.

The aunt's sudden and quite unbelievable materialisation is a desperate move by the author to get out of the tangle he has got the story into. A conclusive confrontation between mother and daughter would have been more in keeping with the course of events. Or it may be that while Rabindranath has ample admiration for foundation-layers like Nandakishor and Nobinmadhav and even Abhik, he does not think much of men like Amar Babu and Rebati who can build only on a foundation laid by others. We may abstract from all these situations a general truth about science in India which Rabindranath seems to have foreseen—that it would have been better for the country if we had borrowed science less and discovered science more.

However, it is not the scientists of these stories but the women they act and react with who live in our minds long after we have finished reading. They merit places of honour in the large and fairly full gallery of women characters Rabindranath has drawn in his poetry, plays, novels and stories. Vibha and Achira and Sohini—they are the three companions, nearly the last three companions, we find on the long road of Rabindranath's fiction.

## NOTES

1. Even here the gap between the original and the translation is noticeable. The original *Gora* was published in 1910; *Chaturanga*, the original of "Broken Ties" was published in 1916.
2. This was "Samskar" (1928), which was translated by the author himself and entitled "The Patriot" for publication in *The Modern Review* of July 1928.
3. Their respective translations are *Farewell, My Friend* (New India Publishing Company, London, 1948), *Two Sisters* (in *Hindustan Standard Puja Special* of 1943; later as a book by Visva-Bharati, 1945), *The Garden* (Jaico Publishing House, Bombay, 1956; along with a re-issue of *Farewell My Friend*), and *Four Chapters* (Visva-Bharati, 1950). The first three were translated by Krishna Kripalani, who also rendered *Chokher bali* (original 1903) into English as *Bino-dini* (Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 1959).
4. "Rabindranath's short stories", *A Centenary Volume: Rabindranath Tagore* (Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 1961), p. 292.
5. "Nashtanir" (1901) is perhaps the earliest example. It was published in English translation only in 1955 as "Broken Home" in the *Hindustan Standard Puja Annual* of that year. Subsequently it was made into perhaps his finest film (*Charulata*, 1964) by Satyajit Ray.
6. "Fiction, Character and Tagore", *Visva-Bharati Quarterly*, Vol. 48: Nos. 1-4 (May 82-April 83), p. 278.
7. The page numbers here and later have reference to the present book.

