

SHORT STORIES

IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT

Rabindranath Tagore



‘Doctor, Doctor!’

I was startled out of my sleep in the very depth of night. On opening my eyes I saw it was our landlord Dokhin Babu. Hurriedly getting up and drawing out a broken chair, I made him sit down, and looked anxiously in his face. I saw by the clock that it was after half-past two.

Dokhin Babu’s face was pale, and his eyes wide open, as he said: ‘Tonight those symptoms returned—that medicine of yours has done me no good at all.’ I said rather timidly: ‘I am afraid you have been drinking again.’ Dokhin Babu got quite angry, and said: ‘There you make a great mistake. It is not the drink. You must hear the whole story in order to be able to understand the real reason.’

In the niche there was a small tin kerosene lamp burning dimly. This I turned up slightly; the light became a little brighter, and at the same time it began to smoke. Pulling my cloth over my shoulders, I spread a piece of newspaper over a packing-case, and sat down. Dokhin Babu began his story:

‘About four years ago I was attacked by a serious illness; just when I was on the point of death my disease took a better turn, until, after nearly a month, I recovered.

‘During my illness my wife did not rest for a moment, day or night. For those months that weak woman fought with all her might to drive Death’s messenger from the door. She went without food and sleep, and had no thought for anything else in this world.

‘Death, like a tiger cheated of its prey, threw me from its jaws, and went off, but in its retreat it dealt my wife a sharp blow with its paw.

‘Not long after my wife gave birth to a dead child. Then came my turn to nurse her. But she got quite troubled at this, and would say: “For heaven’s sake, don’t keep fussing in and out of my room like that.”

‘If I went to her room at night when she had fever, and, on the pretence of fanning myself, would try to fan her, she would get quite excited. And if, on account of serving her, my meal-time was ten minutes later than usual, that also was made the occasion for all sorts of entreaties and reproaches. If I went to do her the

smallest service, instead of helping her it had just the opposite effect. She would exclaim: "It's not good for a man to fuss so much."

'I think you have seen my garden-house. In front of it is the garden, at the foot of which the river Ganges flows. Towards the south, just below our bedroom, my wife had made a garden according to her own fancy, and surrounded it with a hedge of henna. It was the one bit of the garden that was simple and unpretentious. In the flower-pots you did not see wooden pegs with long Latin names flying pretentious flags by the side of the most unpretentious-looking plants. Jasmine, tuberose, lemon flowers, and all kinds of roses were plentiful. Under a large bokul tree there was a white marble slab, which my wife used to wash twice a day when she was in good health. It was the place where she was in the habit of sitting on summer evenings, when her work was finished. From there she could see the river, but was herself invisible to the travellers on the passing steamers.

'One moonlight evening in the month of April, after having been confined to her bed for many days, she expressed a desire to get out of her close room, and sit in her garden.

'I lifted her with great care, and laid her down on that marble seat under the bokul tree. One or two bokul flowers fluttered down, and through the branches overhead the chequered moonlight fell on her worn face. All around was still and silent. As I looked down on her face, sitting by her side in that shadowy darkness, filled with the heavy scent of flowers, my eyes became moist.

'Slowly drawing near her, I took one of her hot thin hands between my own. She made no attempt to prevent me. After I had sat like this in silence for some time, my heart began to overflow, and I said: "Never shall I be able to forget your love."

'My wife gave a laugh in which there were mingled some happiness, a trace of distrust, and also the sharpness of sarcasm. She said nothing in the way of an answer, and yet gave me to understand by her laugh that she thought it unlikely that I would never forget her, nor did she herself wish it.

'I had never had the courage to make love to my wife simply out of fear of this sweet sharp laugh of hers. All the speeches which I made up when I was absent from her seemed to be very commonplace as soon as I found myself in her presence.

‘It is possible to talk when you are contradicted, but laughter cannot be met by argument; so I had simply to remain silent. The moonlight became brighter, and a cuckoo began to call over and over again till it seemed to be demented. As I sat still, I wondered how on such a night the cuckoo’s bride could remain indifferent.

‘After a great deal of treatment, my wife’s illness showed no signs of improvement. The doctor suggested a change of air, and I took her to Allahabad.’

At this point Dokhin Babu suddenly stopped, and sat silent. With a questioning look on his face he looked towards me, and then began to brood with his head resting in his hands. I too kept silence. The kerosene lamp flickered in the niche, and in the stillness of the night the buzzing of the mosquitoes could be heard distinctly. Suddenly breaking the silence, Dokhin Babu resumed his story:

‘Doctor Haran treated my wife, and after some time I was told that the disease was an incurable one, and my wife would have to suffer for the rest of her life.

‘Then one day my wife said to me: “Since my disease is not going to leave me, and there does not seem much hope of my dying soon, why should you spend your days with this living death? Leave me alone, and go back to your other occupations.”

‘Now it was my turn to laugh. But I had not got her power of laughter. So, with all the solemnity suitable to the hero of a romance, I asserted: “So long as there is life in this body of mine———”

‘She stopped me, saying: “Now, now. You don’t need to say any more. Why, to hear you makes me want to give up the ghost.”

‘I don’t know whether I had actually confessed it to myself then, but now I know quite well that I had, even at that time, in my heart of hearts, got tired of nursing the hopeless invalid.

‘It was clear that she was able to detect my inner weariness of spirit, in spite of my devoted service. I did not understand it then, but now I have not the least doubt in my mind that she could read me as easily as a Children’s First Reader in which there are no compound letters.

‘Doctor Haran was of the same caste as myself. I had a standing invitation to his house. After I had been there several times he introduced me to his daughter. She was unmarried, although she was over fifteen years old. Her father said that he had

not married her as he had not been able to find a suitable bridegroom of the same caste, but rumour said that there was some bar sinister in her birth.

‘But she had no other fault, for she was as intelligent as she was beautiful. For that reason I used sometimes to discuss with her all sorts of questions, so that it was often late at night before I got back home, long past the time when I should have given my wife her medicine. She knew quite well that I had been at Doctor Haran’s house, but she never once asked me the cause of my delay.

‘The sick-room seemed to me doubly intolerable and joyless. I now began to neglect my patient, and constantly forgot to give her the medicine at the proper time.

‘The doctor used sometimes to say to me: “For those who suffer from some incurable disease death would be a happy release. As long as they remain alive they get no happiness themselves, and make others miserable.”

‘To say this in the ordinary course might be tolerated, but, with the example of my wife before us, such a subject ought not to have been mentioned. But I suppose doctors grow callous about the question of life and death of men.

‘Suddenly one day, as I was sitting in the room next to the sick chamber, I heard my wife say to the doctor: “Doctor, why do you go on giving me so many useless medicines? When my whole life has become one continuous disease, don’t you think that to kill me is to cure me?”

‘The doctor said: “You shouldn’t talk like that.”

‘As soon as the doctor had gone, I went into my wife’s room, and seating myself beside her began to stroke her forehead gently. She said: “This room is very hot, you go out for your usual walk. If you don’t get your evening exercise, you will have no appetite for your dinner.”

‘My evening walk meant going to Doctor Haran’s house. I had myself explained that a little exercise is necessary for one’s health and appetite. Now I am quite sure that every day she saw through my excuse. I was the fool, and I actually thought that she was unconscious of this deception.’

Here Dokhin Babu paused and, burying his head in his hands, remained silent for a time. At last he said: ‘Give me a glass of water,’ and having drunk the water he continued:

‘One day the doctor’s daughter Monorama expressed a desire to see my wife. I don’t quite know why, but this proposal did not altogether please me. But I could find no excuse for refusing her request. So she arrived one evening at our house.

‘On that day my wife’s pain had been rather more severe than usual. When her pain was worse she would lie quite still and silent, occasionally clenching her fists. It was only from that one was able to guess what agony she was enduring. There was no sound in the room, and I was sitting silently at the bedside. She had not requested me to go out for my usual walk. Either she had not the power to speak, or she got some relief from having me by her side when she was suffering very much. The kerosene lamp had been placed near the door lest it should hurt her eyes. The room was dark and still. The only sound that could be heard was an occasional sigh of relief when my wife’s pain became less for a moment or two.

‘It was at this time that Monorama came, and stood at the door. The light, coming from the opposite direction, fell on her face.

‘My wife started up, and, grasping my hand, asked: “O ke12?” In her feeble condition, she was so startled to see a stranger standing at the door that she asked two or three times in a hoarse whisper: “O ke? O ke? O ke?”

12. ‘O ke?’ is the Bengali for ‘Who is that?’

‘At first I answered weakly: “I do not know”; but the next moment I felt as though someone had whipped me, and I hastily corrected myself and said: “Why, it’s our doctor’s daughter.”

‘My wife turned and looked at me. I was not able to look her in the face. Then she turned to the new-comer, and said in a weak voice: “Come in,” and turning to me added: “Bring the lamp.”

‘Monorama came into the room, and began to talk a little to my wife. While she was talking the doctor came to see his patient.

‘He had brought with him from the dispensary two bottles of medicine. Taking these out he said to my wife: “See, this blue bottle is for outward application, and the other is to be taken. Be careful not to mix the two, for this is a deadly poison.”

‘Warning me also, he placed the two bottles on the table by the bedside. When he was going the doctor called his daughter.

'She said to him: "Father, why should I not stay? There is no woman here to nurse her."

'My wife got quite excited and sat up saying: "No, no, don't you bother yourself. I have an old maidservant who takes care of me as if she were my mother."

'Just as the doctor was going away with his daughter, my wife said to him: "Doctor, he has been sitting too long in this close and stuffy room. Won't you take him out for some fresh air?"

'The doctor turned to me, and said: "Come along, I'll take you for a stroll along the bank of the river."

'After some little show of unwillingness I agreed. Before going the doctor again warned my wife about the two bottles of medicine.

'That evening I took my dinner at the doctor's house, and was late in coming home. On getting back I found that my wife was in extreme pain. Feeling deeply repentant, I asked her: "Has your pain increased?"

'She was too ill to answer, but only looked up in my face. I saw that she was breathing with difficulty.

'I at once sent for the doctor.

'At first he could not make out what was the matter. At last he asked: "Has that pain increased? Haven't you used that liniment?"

'Saying which, he picked up the blue bottle from the table. It was empty!

'Showing signs of agitation, he asked my wife: "You haven't taken this medicine by mistake, have you?" Nodding her head, she silently indicated that she had.

'The doctor ran out of the house to bring his stomach pump, and I fell on the bed like one insensible.

'Then, just as a mother tries to pacify a sick child, my wife drew my head to her breast, and with the touch of her hands attempted to tell me her thoughts. Merely by that tender touch, she said to me again and again: "Do not sorrow, all is for the best. You will be happy, and knowing that I die happily."

'By the time the doctor returned, all my wife's pains had ceased with her life.'

Dokhin Babu, taking another gulp of water, exclaimed: 'Ugh, it's terribly hot,' and then, going on to the veranda, he paced rapidly up and down two or three times. Coming back he sat down, and began again. It was clear enough that he did not want to tell me; but it seemed as if, by some sort of magic, I was dragging the story out of him. He went on:

'After my marriage with Monorama, whenever I tried to talk effusively to her, she looked grave. It seemed as if there was in her mind some hint of suspicion which I could not understand.

'It was at this time that I began to have a fondness for drink.

'One evening in the early autumn, I was strolling with Monorama in our garden by the river. The darkness had the feeling of a phantom world about it, and there was not even the occasional sound of the birds rustling their wings in their sleep. Only on both sides of the path along which we were walking the tops of the casuarina trees sighed in the breeze.

'Feeling tired, Monorama went and lay down on that marble slab, placing her hands behind her head, and I sat beside her.

'There the darkness seemed to be even denser, and the only patch of sky that could be seen was thick with stars. The chirping of the crickets under the trees was like a thin hem of sound at the lowest edge of the skirt of silence.

'That evening I had been drinking a little, and my heart was in a melting mood. When my eyes had got used to the darkness, the grey outline of the loosely clad and languid form of Monorama, lying in the shadow of the trees, awakened in my mind an undefinable longing. It seemed to me as if she were only an unsubstantial shadow which I could never grasp in my arms.

'Suddenly the tops of the casuarina trees seemed to be on fire. I saw the jagged edge of the old moon, golden in her harvest hue, rise gradually above the tops of the trees. The moonlight fell on the face of the white-clad form lying on the white marble. I could contain myself no longer. Drawing near her and taking her hand in mine, I said: "Monorama, you may not believe me, but never shall I be able to forget your love."

'The moment the words were out of my mouth I started, for I remembered that I had used the very same to someone else long before. And at the same time, from over the top of the casuarina trees, from under the golden crescent of the old moon, from across the wide stretches of the flowing Ganges, right to its most distant bank—Ha ha—Ha ha—Ha ha—came the sound of laughter passing swiftly overhead. Whether it was a heart-breaking laugh or a sky-rending wail, I cannot say. But on hearing it I fell to the ground in a swoon.

'When I recovered consciousness, I saw that I was lying on my bed in my own room. My wife asked me: "Whatever happened to you?" I replied, trembling with terror: "Didn't you hear how the whole sky rang with the sound of laughter—Ha ha—Ha ha—Ha ha? "My wife laughed, as she answered: "Laughter? What I heard was the sound of a flock of birds flying past overhead. You are easily frightened!"

'Next day I knew quite well that it was a flock of ducks migrating, as they do at that time of year, to the south. But when evening came I began to doubt again, and in my imagination the whole sky rang with laughter, piercing the darkness on the least pretext. It came to this at last that after dark I was not able to speak a word to Monorama.

'Then I decided to leave my garden-house, and took Monorama for a trip on the river. In the keen November air all my fear left me, and for some days I was quite happy.

'Leaving the Ganges, and crossing the river Khore, we at last reached the Padma. This terrible river lay stretched out like a huge serpent taking its winter sleep. On its north side were the barren, solitary sand-banks, which lay blazing in the sun; and on the high banks of the south side the mango groves of the villages stood close to the open jaws of this demoniac river, which now and again turned in its sleep, whereupon the cracked earth of the banks fell with a thud into its waters.

'Finding a suitable place, I moored the boat to the bank.

'One day we went out for a walk, on and on, till we were far away from our boat. The golden light of the setting sun gradually faded, and the sky was flooded with the pure silver light of the moon. As the moonlight fell on that limitless expanse of white sand, and filled the vast sky with its flood of brilliance, I felt as if we two were all alone, wandering in an uninhabited, unbounded dreamland, and without

purpose. Monorama was wearing a red shawl, which she pulled over her head, and wrapped round her shoulders, leaving only her face visible. When the silence became deeper, and there was nothing but a vastness of white solitude all around us, then Mono-rama slowly put out her hand and took hold of mine. She seemed so close to me that I felt as if she had surrendered into my hands her body and mind, her life and youth. In my yearning and happy heart, I said to myself: "Is there room enough anywhere else than under such a wide, open sky to contain the hearts of two human beings in love?" Then I felt as if we had no home to return to, that we could go on wandering thus, hand in hand, free from all cares and obstacles, along a road which had no end, through the moonlit immensity.

'As we went on, we came at last to a place where I could see a pool of water surrounded by hillocks of sand.

'Through the heart of this still water a long beam of moonlight pierced, like a flashing sword. Arriving at the edge of the pool, we stood there in silence, and Monorama looked up into my face. Her shawl slipped from off her head, and I stooped down and kissed her.

'Just then there came, from somewhere in the midst of that silent and solitary desert, a voice, saying three times in solemn tones: "O ke? O ke? O ke?"

'I started back, and my wife also trembled. But the next moment both of us realised that the sound was neither human nor superhuman—it was the call of some water-fowl, startled from its sleep at the sound of strangers so late at night near its nest.

'Recovering from our fright, we returned as fast as we could to the boat. Being late, we went straight to bed, and Monorama was soon fast asleep.

'Then in the darkness it seemed as if someone, standing by the side of the bed, was pointing a long, thin finger towards the sleeping Monorama, and with a hoarse whisper was asking me over and over again: "O ke? O ke? O ke?"

'Hastily getting up, I seized a box of matches, and lighted the lamp. Just as I did so, the mosquito net began to flutter in the wind, and the boat began to rock. The blood in my veins curdled, and the sweat came in heavy drops as I heard an echoing laugh, "Ha ha, Ha ha, Ha ha," sound through the dark night. It travelled over the river, across the sand-banks on the other side, and after that it passed over all the sleeping country, the villages and the towns, as though forever crossing the

countries of this and other worlds. Fainter and fainter it grew, passing into limitless space, gradually becoming fine as the point of a needle. Never had I heard such a piercingly faint sound, never had I imagined such a ghost of a sound possible. It was as if within my skull there was the limitless sky of space, and no matter how far the sound travelled it could not get outside my brain.

‘At last, when it was almost unbearable, I thought, unless I extinguished the light, I should not be able to sleep. No sooner had I put out the lamp than once more, close to my mosquito curtain, I heard in the darkness that hoarse voice saying: “O ke? O ke? O ke?” My heart began to beat in unison with the words, and gradually began to repeat the question: “O ke? O ke? O ke?” In the silence of the night, from the middle of the boat my round clock began to be eloquent, and, pointing its hour hand towards Monorama, ticked out the question: “O ke? O ke? O ke?”’ As he spoke, Dokhin Babu became ghastly pale, and his voice seemed to be choking him. Touching him on the shoulder, I said: ‘Take a little water.’ At the same moment the kerosene lamp flickered and went out, and I saw that outside it was light. A crow cawed, and a yellow-hammer whistled. On the road in front of my house the creaking of a bullock-cart was heard.

The expression on Dokhin Babu’s face was altogether changed. There was no longer the least trace of fear. That he had told me so much under the intoxication of an imaginary fear, and deluded by the sorcery of night, seemed to make him very much ashamed, and even angry with me. Without any formality of farewell he jumped up, and shot out of the house.

Next night, when it was quite late, I was again wakened from my sleep by a voice calling: ‘Doctor, Doctor.’