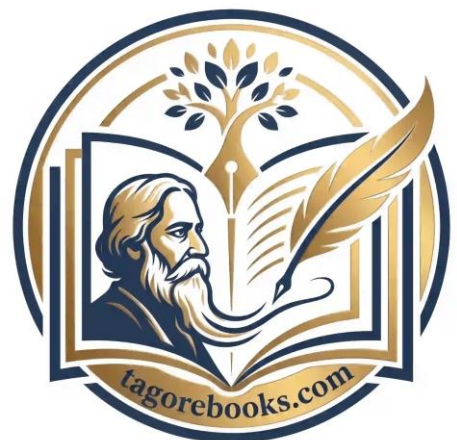


SHORT STORY

MY LORD THE BABY

Rabindranath Tagore



1

Raicharan was twelve years old when he came as a servant to his master's house. He belonged to the same caste as his master and was given his master's little son to nurse. As time went on, the boy left Raicharan's arms to go to school. From school he went to college, and after college he entered the judicial service. Until the time of the boy's marriage, Raicharan was his sole attendant.

But when a mistress came into the house, Raicharan found that he had two masters instead of one. All his former influence passed to the new mistress. This was compensated for by a fresh arrival. Anukul had a son born to him and Raicharan by his unsparing attentions soon obtained complete hold over the child. He would toss him up in his arms, call to him in absurd baby language, put his face close to the baby's and withdraw it again with a laugh.

Presently the child was able to crawl and venture outside the house. When Raicharan went to catch him, he would scream with mischievous laughter and try to evade him. Raicharan was amazed at the profound skill and exact judgement the baby showed when pursued. He would say to his mistress with a look of awe and mystery: 'Your son will be a judge some day.'

New wonders came in their turn. It was to Raicharan an epoch in human history when the baby began to toddle. When he called his father Ba-ba and his mother Ma-ma and Raicharan Chan-na, then Raicharan's joy was boundless. He wanted to let the whole world know.

After a while Raicharan was asked to show his ingenuity in other ways. He had, for instance, to play the part of a horse, holding the reins between his teeth, and prancing with his feet. He had also to wrestle with his little charge; and if he could not, by a wrestler's trick, fall on his back defeated at the end, a great outcry was certain.

About this time Anukul was transferred to a district on the banks of the Padma. On his way through Calcutta, he bought his son a little go-cart, and at the same time a yellow satin waist-coat, a gold-laced cap, and gold bracelets and anklets. Raicharan

loved to take this finery out and put it on his little charge whenever they went for a walk, and this he did with great pride and ceremony.

Then came the rainy season, and day after day the rain poured down. The hungry river, like an enormous serpent, swallowed terraces, villages, and cornfields, covering with its flood the tall grasses and wild casuarinas on the sandbanks. From time to time there was a deep thud as the river-banks crumbled. The unceasing roar of the main current could be heard from far away. Masses of foam, carried swiftly past, proved to the eye the swiftness of the stream.

One afternoon the rain stopped. It was cloudy, but cool and bright. Raicharan's little despot did not want to stay indoors on such a fine afternoon. His lordship climbed into the go-cart. Raicharan, between the shafts, dragged him slowly along till he reached the rice-fields on the banks of the river. There was no one in the fields, and no boat on the stream. Across the water, on the farther side, the clouds were rifted in the west. The silent ceremonial of the setting sun was revealed in all its glowing splendour. In the midst of that stillness, the child suddenly pointed in front of him and cried—'Chan-na! Pitty fow.'

On a mud-flat closeby stood a large Kadamba tree in full flower. My lord the baby looked at it with greedy eyes, and Raicharan knew immediately what he wanted. Only a short time before he had made, out of the flower-balls of this tree, a small go-cart and the child had been so happy dragging it about by a string, that for the whole day Raicharan was not asked to put on the reins at all. He was promoted from being a horse to being a groom.

But Raicharan had no wish that evening to go splashing knee-deep through the mud to reach the flowers. So he quickly pointed in the opposite direction, and cried: 'Look, baby look! Look at the bird!' And with all sorts of curious noises he pushed the go-cart rapidly away from the tree.

But a child, destined to be a judge, cannot be put off so easily. And besides, there was at the time nothing to attract his eyes. And you cannot keep up for ever the pretence of an imaginary bird.

The little Master's mind was made up, and Raicharan was at his wit's end. 'Very well, baby,' he said at last, 'you sit still in the cart, and I'll go and get you the pretty flower. Only mind you, don't go near the water.'

As he said this, he bared his legs to the knee, and waded through the oozing mud towards the tree.

The moment Raicharan had gone, his little Master's thoughts raced off to the forbidden water. The baby saw the river rushing by, splashing and gurgling as it went. It seemed as though the disobedient wavelets themselves were running away from some greater Raicharan with the laughter of a thousand children. At the sight of their mischievous sport, the heart of the human child grew excited and restless. He got down stealthily from the go-cart and toddled off towards the river. On his way he picked up a small stick and leant over the bank of the stream, pretending to fish. The mischievous fairies of the river with their mysterious voices seemed to be inviting him to enter their play-house.

Raicharan had plucked a handful of flowers from the tree and was carrying them back in a fold of his cloth, his face wreathed in smiles. But when he reached the go-cart, it was empty. He looked round on all sides, but there was no one there. He looked back at the cart, and there was no one there.

In that first terrible moment, his blood froze within him. Before his eyes the whole universe swam round like a dark mist. From the depths of his broken heart he gave one piercing cry: 'Master, Master, little Master!'

But no voice answered, 'Chan-na.' No child laughed mischievously back: no scream of baby delight welcomed his return. Only the river ran on with its splashing, gurgling noise as before, as though it knew nothing at all, and had no time to attend to such a tiny human event as the death of a child.

As the evening crept on, Raicharan's mistress became more and more anxious. She sent men out everywhere to search. They went with lanterns in their hands and reached at last the banks of the Padma. There they found Raicharan rushing up and down the fields, like a stormy wind, shouting in a voice of despair: 'Master, Master, little Master!'

When they got Raicharan home at last, he fell prostrate at the feet of his mistress. They shook him, and questioned him, and asked him repeatedly where he had left the child: but all he could say was that he knew nothing.

Though everyone held the opinion that the Padma had swallowed the child, there was still a lurking doubt left. For a band of gipsies had been noticed outside the

village that afternoon, and some suspicion rested on them. The mother went so far in her wild grief as to think it possible that Raicharan himself had stolen the child. She called him aside with piteous entreaty and said: 'Raicharan, give me back my baby. Give me back my child. Take from me any money you want, but give me back my child!'

Raicharan only beat his forehead in reply. His mistress in her anger ordered him out of the house.

Anukul tried to reason his wife out of this wholly unjust suspicion: 'Why on earth', he said, 'should he commit such a crime as that?'

The mother only replied: 'The baby was wearing gold ornaments. Who knows?'

It was impossible to reason with her after that.

2

Raicharan went back to the village of his birth. He had no son, and there was no hope that a child would now be born to him. But it came about before the end of a year that his wife gave birth to a son and died.

An overwhelming resentment at first grew up in Raicharan's heart at the sight of this new baby. At the back of his mind was an indignant suspicion that it had come as an usurper in place of the little Master. He also thought that it would be a grave offence to be happy with a son of his own after what had happened to his master's little child. Indeed, if it had not been for a widowed sister, who mothered the new baby, it would not have lived long.

But gradually a change came over Raicharan's mind. A wonderful thing happened. This new baby in turn began to crawl about, and venture outside the house, bent on mischief. It also showed an amusing cleverness in making its escape to safety. Its voice, its laughter and tears, its gestures, were those of the little Master.

Sometimes, when Raicharan listened to its crying, his heart suddenly began thumping wildly against his ribs, and it seemed to him that his former little Master was crying somewhere in the unknown land of death because he had lost his Chan-na.

Phailna (for that was the name Raicharan's sister gave to the new baby) soon began to talk. It learnt to say Ba-ba and Ma-ma with a baby accent. When Raicharan heard those familiar sounds, the mystery suddenly became clear. The little Master could not cast off the spell of his Chan-na and therefore he had been reborn in his house.

The three arguments in favour of this were, to Raicharan, altogether beyond dispute:

The new baby was born soon after his little Master's death.

His wife could never have accumulated such merit as to give birth to a son in middle age.

The new baby walked with toddling steps and called out Ba-ba and Ma-ma. There was no sign lacking—this was certainly the future judge.

Then suddenly Raicharan remembered that terrible accusation of the mother. 'Ah,' he said to himself in amazement, 'the mother's heart was right. She knew I had stolen her child.'

When once he had come to this conclusion, he was filled with remorse for his past neglect. He now gave himself over, body and soul, to the new baby and became its devoted attendant. He began to bring it up as if it were the son of a rich man. He bought a go-cart, a yellow satin waist-coat, and a gold-embroidered cap. He melted down the ornaments of his dead wife and made gold bangles and anklets. He refused to let the little one play with any child in the neighbourhood and became himself its sole companion day and night. As the baby grew to boyhood, he was so petted and spoilt and clad in such finery that the village children would call him 'Your Lordship', and jeer at him; and older people regarded Raicharan as unaccountably crazy about the child.

At last the time came for the boy to go to school. Raicharan sold his small piece of land and went to Calcutta. There with great difficulty he found employment as a servant and sent Phailna to school. He spared no pains to give him the best

education, the best clothes, the best food. Meanwhile, he himself lived on a mere handful of rice and would say in secret: 'Ah, my little Master, my dear little Master, you loved me so much that you came back to my house. You will never suffer from any neglect of mine.'

In this way twelve years passed away. The boy could now read and write well. He was bright, good-looking, and in perfect health. He paid a great deal of attention to his personal appearance and took great care in the parting of his hair. He was inclined to extravagance, and spent money freely in finery and enjoyment. He could never quite regard Raicharan as a father because, though he had the affection of a father, his manner was that of a servant. A further fault was this, that Raicharan kept secret from everyone the fact that he himself was the father of the child.

The students of the hostel in which Phailna was a boarder, were greatly amused by Raicharan's country-manners, and I am afraid that behind his father's back, Phailna joined in their fun. But, in the bottom of their hearts, all the students loved the innocent and tender-hearted old man, and Phailna also was very fond of him. But, as I have said before, he loved him with a kind condescension.

As Raicharan grew older and older, his employer was continually finding fault with him for his incompetence. He starved himself for the boy's sake, so that he grew weaker in body and was no longer up to his daily task. He began to forget things and became dull and stupid. But his employer expected the work of a fully capable servant, and would listen to no excuse. The money that Raicharan had brought with him from the sale of his land was now exhausted and the boy continually grumbled about the state of his clothes and continually asked for more money.

3

At last Raicharan made up his mind. He threw up his work as a servant, and left some money with Phailna. Before leaving, he promised Phailna that after seeing to some necessary business in his native village, he would immediately return.

He went off at once to Baraset where Anukul was magistrate. Anukul's wife was still broken down with grief for she had no other child.

One evening Anukul was resting after a long and weary day in court. His wife was buying from a mendicant quack at an exorbitant price, a herb which, so the quack assured her, would ensure the birth of a child. Suddenly, in the courtyard, Anukul heard a voice raised in greeting, and he went out to see who was there. There before him stood Raicharan, and when he saw his old servant, Anukul's heart was softened. He asked him many questions, and offered to take him back into his employ.

But Raicharan only smiled faintly and said in reply: 'I merely want to make obeisance to my mistress.'

Anukul accompanied Raicharan into the house, but the mistress did not receive him as warmly as his old master had done. Raicharan took no notice, but with his hand clasped in appeal, said: 'It was not the Padma that stole your baby. It was I.'

'Great God!' Anukul exclaimed: 'What! Where is he?'

Raicharan replied: 'He is with me. I will bring him the day after tomorrow.'

It was Sunday, and so the magistrate's court was not sitting. From early morning both husband and wife were gazing expectantly along the road, waiting for Raicharan's appearance. At ten o'clock he came, leading Phailna by the hand.

Anukul's wife, without questioning his identity, took the boy on her lap and was wild with excitement, laughing, weeping, touching him, kissing his hair, and his forehead, and gazing into his face with hungry, eager eyes. The boy was very good-looking and was dressed like a gentleman's son. The heart of Anukul brimmed over with a sudden gush of affection.

Nevertheless the magistrate in him asked: 'Have you any proofs that he is my son?'

Raicharan said: 'Proof? How could there be any proof of such a deed? God alone knows that I and no one else in the world stole your boy.'

When Anukul saw how eagerly his wife clung to the boy, he realised how futile it was to ask for proofs. It would be wiser to believe. And then—where could an old

man like Raicharan get such a boy? And why should his faithful servant deceive him? He could surely hope for no gain from such deceit!

Still, he could not forget his old servant's lapse from duty, so he exclaimed: 'Raicharan, you must not remain any longer here.'

'Where shall I go, Master?' said Raicharan, in a voice choking with grief. Then with hands clasped imploringly, he added: 'I am old. Who will take an old man as a servant?'

The mistress said: 'Let him stay. My child will be pleased, and I forgive him.'

But Anukul's magisterial conscience would not let him permit this. 'No,' he said, 'he cannot be forgiven for what he has done.'

Raicharan bowed to the ground and clasped Anukul's feet. 'Master,' he cried, 'let me stay. It was not I that did it. It was God.'

Anukul's conscience was more shocked than ever when Raicharan tried to put the blame on God.

'No,' he said, 'I cannot allow it. I can trust you no longer. You have acted treacherously.'

Raicharan rose to his feet and said: 'It was not I that did it.'

'Who was it then?' asked Anukul.

Raicharan replied: 'It was my fate.'

But no educated man could take this for an excuse, and Anukul remained obdurate.

When Phailna saw that he was the wealthy magistrate's son, and not Raicharan's, he was at first angry, for the thought that he had been cheated all this time of his birthright. But seeing Raicharan in distress, he generously said to his father: 'Father, forgive him. Even if you don't let him live with us, let him at least have a small monthly pension.'

On hearing this, Raicharan was speechless. He looked for the last time on the face of his son. He made obeisance to his old master and mistress. Then he went out and mingled with the numberless people of the world.

At the end of the month Anukul sent some money to his village. But the money came back, for no person of the name of Raicharan could be found there.