

SHORT STORIES

ONCE THERE WAS A KING

Rabindranath Tagore



‘Once upon a time there was a king.’

When we were children there was no need to know who the king in the fairy story was. It didn’t matter whether he was called Siladitya or Salivahan, whether he lived at Kashi or Kanauj. The thing that made a seven-year-old boy’s heart go thump with delight was this one sovereign truth, this reality of all realities: ‘Once there was a king.’

But the readers of this modern age are far more exact and exacting. When they hear such an opening to a story, they are at once critical and suspicious. They apply the searchlight of science to its legendary haze and ask: ‘Which king?’

The story-tellers also have become more precise. They are no longer content with the old indefinite, ‘There was a king,’ but assume instead a look of profound learning and begin: ‘Once there was a king named Ajatasatru.’

The modern reader’s curiosity, however, is not so easily satisfied. He blinks at the author through his scientific spectacles and asks again: ‘Which Ajatasatru?’

When we were young, we understood all sweet things; and we could detect the sweets of a fairy story by an unerring science of our own. We never cared for such useless things as knowledge. We only cared for truth. And our unsophisticated little hearts knew well where the Crystal Palace of Truth lay and how to reach it. But today we are expected to write pages of facts, while the truth is simply this:

‘There was a king.’

I remember vividly that evening in Calcutta when the fairy story began. It had been raining all day long. The whole city was flooded. In our lane the water was knee-deep. I had a straining hope, which was almost a certainty, that my tutor would be prevented from coming that evening. I sat on the stool in the far corner of the verandah looking down the lane, and my heart beat faster and faster. Every minute I kept my eye on the rain, and when it began to abate, I prayed with all my might: ‘Please, God, let it keep on raining till after half-past seven.’ For I was quite ready to believe that the only need for rain was to protect one helpless boy one evening in a certain corner of Calcutta from the deadly clutches of his tutor.

If not in answer to my prayer, at least according to some grosser law of nature, the rain did not give over. But, alas, neither did my teacher!

Exactly to the minute, in the turn of the lane, I saw his umbrella approaching. The great bubble of hope burst in my breast, and my heart collapsed. Truly, if there is, after death, a punishment to fit the crime, then my tutor will be born again in my place, and I shall be born in my tutor's.

As soon as I saw his umbrella, I ran as hard as I could to my mother's room. My mother and my grandmother were sitting opposite each other, playing cards by the light of a lamp. I ran into the room, flung myself on the bed beside my mother and said:

'Mother, my tutor has come, and I have such a bad headache; could I do without my lesson today?'

I hope no child will be allowed to read this story and I sincerely trust it will not be used in textbooks, or primers, for junior classes. For what I did was dreadfully bad, and I received no punishment whatever. On the contrary my wicked request was granted.

Mother said to me: 'All right,' and turning to the servant added: 'Tell the tutor that he can go back home.'

It was quite plain that she did not think my illness very serious, for she went on with her game and took no further notice. And I, burying my head in the pillow, laughed to my heart's content. We understood one another, perfectly, my mother and I.

But everyone must know how hard it is for a boy seven years old to keep up the illusion of illness for long. After about a minute I caught hold of grandmother and said: 'Granny, do tell me a story.'

I had to ask many times. Granny and Mother went on playing cards and took no notice. At last Mother said to me: 'Child, don't bother. Wait till we've finished our game.' But I persisted: 'Granny, do tell me a story.' I told Mother she could finish her game tomorrow, that she must let Granny tell me a story there and then.

At last, Mother threw down the cards and said: 'You had better do what he wants. I can't manage him.' Perhaps she remembered that she would have no tiresome tutor the following day, while I should have to be back at those stupid lessons.

As soon as Mother had given way, I rushed at Granny. I seized her hand, and dancing with delight, dragged her inside my mosquito curtain on to the bed. I clutched the

bolster with both hands in my excitement, and jumped up and down with joy, and when at last I had become a little quieter, said: 'Now, Granny let's have the story!'

Granny went on, 'And the king had a queen.'

That was good to begin with. He had only one!

It is usual for kings in fairy stories to be extravagant in the number of queens they have. And whenever we hear that there are two queens, our hearts begin to sink. One of them is sure to be unhappy. But in Granny's story there was no danger of that. He had only one queen.

The next detail of Granny's story was that the king had no son. At the age of seven I did not think one need bother if a man had no son. He might only have been in the way.

Nor was I greatly excited when I heard that the king had gone into the forest to practise austerities in order to obtain a son. There was only one thing that would have made me go into the forest, and that was to get away from my tutor!

But the king had left behind with his queen a little girl, who grew up into a beautiful princess.

Twelve years passed away, and the king went on practising austerities, and never thought of his beautiful daughter. The princess had reached the full bloom of her youth. The age of marriage had passed, but the king had not returned. And the queen pined away with grief and cried: 'Is my golden daughter destined to die unmarried? Ah me, what a fate is mine!'

Then the queen sent men to the king, entreating him to come back if only for a single night, and to eat one meal in the palace. And the king consented.

With the greatest care, the queen cooked with her own hand sixty-four dishes. She made a seat for him of sandalwood and arranged the food in plates of gold and cups of silver. The princess stood behind his seat with the peacock-tail fan in her hand. After his twelve years' absence, the king entered the house, and the princess, waving the fan, lighted up all the room with her beauty. The king looked in his daughter's face and forgot even to eat.

At last he asked his queen: 'Pray, who is this girl whose beauty shines as the golden image of the goddess? Whose daughter is she?'

The queen beat her forehead and cried: 'Ah, how evil is my fate! Do you not recognise your own daughter?'

For some time the king remained in silent amazement, but at last he exclaimed: 'My tiny daughter has grown to be a woman.'

'How could it be otherwise?' the queen asked with a sigh. 'Do you not know that twelve years have passed?'

'But why did you not give her in marriage?' asked the king.

'You were away,' the queen replied. 'And how could I find her a suitable husband?'

At this the king, strangely excited, vowed that the first man he saw the following day when he went out of the palace, should marry her.

But the princess merely went on waving her fan of peacock feathers and the king finished his meal.

The next morning, as the king went out of his palace, he saw the son of a Brahman gathering sticks in the forest outside the palace gates. He was about seven or eight years old.

The king said: 'I will marry my daughter to him.'

Who can interfere with a king's command? At once the boy was called, and the marriage garlands were exchanged between him and the princess.

At this point I came up close to my wise Granny and asked her eagerly: 'What then?'

In the bottom of my heart there was a devout wish that I might be that fortunate seven-year-old wood-gatherer. The night resounded with the patter of rain. The earthen lamp by my bedside was burning low. My grandmother's voice droned on as she told the story. And all these things served to create in a corner of my credulous heart the belief that I had been gathering sticks in the dawn of some indefinite time in the kingdom of some unknown king, and that in a moment garlands had been exchanged between me and the princess, beautiful as the Goddess of Grace. She had a gold band on her hair and gold earrings in her ears. She

wore a necklace and bracelets of gold, and a golden waist-chain round her waist, and a pair of golden anklets tinkled with the movements of her feet.

If my grandmother had been an author, how many explanations would she not have had to offer of this little story! First of all, everyone would ask why the king remained twelve years in the forest? And then, why should the king's daughter remain unmarried all that time? Such a delay would be regarded as absurd.

Even if my Granny could have got so far without quarrelling with her critics, still there would have been a great hue and cry about the marriage itself. In the first place, it never happened. And in the second, how could there be a marriage between a princess of the warrior caste and a boy of the priestly Brahman caste? Her readers would have imagined at once that the writer was preaching against our social customs in an indirect and unfair way. And they would write letters to the papers.

So I pray with all my heart that my grandmother may be born a grandmother again, and not through some cursed fate be born again in the person of her luckless grandson.

With a throb of joy and delight, I asked Granny: 'What then?'

Granny went on: Then the princess took her little husband away, and built for him a large palace with seven wings, and cherished him there.

I jumped up and down in my bed, clutched the bolster tighter than ever and said: 'What then?'

Granny continued: The little boy went to school and learnt many lessons from his teachers, and as he grew up, the boys in his class began to ask him: 'Who is that beautiful lady living with you in the palace with the seven wings?'

The Brahman's son was eager to know who she was. He could only remember how one day he had been gathering sticks and how a great disturbance had arisen. But all this was so long ago that he had no clear recollection of it.

In this way, four or five years passed. His companions were always asking him: 'Who is that beautiful lady in the palace with the seven wings?' And the Brahman's son would come back from school and sadly say to the princess: 'My school companions always ask me who that beautiful lady is in the palace with the seven wings, and I cannot answer them. Tell me, oh, tell me, who you are!'

The princess said: 'Let it pass untold today. I will tell you some other day.' And every day the Brahman's son would ask: 'Who are you?' and the princess would reply: 'Let it pass untold today. I will tell you some other day.' And so four or five years more went by.

At last the Brahman's son became very impatient and said: 'If you do not tell me today who you are, O beautiful lady, I will leave this palace with the seven wings.' Then the princess said: 'I will certainly tell you tomorrow.'

Next day the Brahman's son, as soon as he came home from school, said: 'Now, tell me who you are.' The princess said: 'Tonight after supper I will tell you when you are in bed.'

The Brahman's son agreed. And he began to count the hours in expectation of the night. And the princess spread white flowers over the golden bed, filled a golden lamp with fragrant oil and lighted it, adorned her hair, and dressing herself in a beautiful robe of blue, began also to count the hours in expectation of the night.

That evening her husband, the Brahman's son, was almost too excited to eat, but when he had finished his supper, he went to the golden bed in the bed-chamber strewn with flowers, and said to himself: 'Tonight I shall surely know who this beautiful lady is in the palace with the seven wings.'

The princess ate what was left over from her husband's supper, and slowly entered the bed-chamber. She had to reveal that very night the identity of the beautiful lady that lived in the palace with the seven wings. And as she went up to the bed to tell him, she found a serpent had crept out of the flowers and had bitten the Brahman's son. Her boy-husband was lying on the bed of flowers, his face pale in death.

My heart suddenly ceased to throb, and I asked with a voice choking with tears: 'What then?'

Granny said: 'Then.....'

But what is the use of going on any further with the story? It would only lead to what was more and more impossible. The boy of seven did not know that even though there were some 'What then?' after death, not even the grandmother of a grandmother could tell us all about it.

But the child's faith never admits defeat, and it would snatch at the mantle of Death himself in an attempt to prevent his approach. It would be outrageous for him to think that such a story told on an evening when his teacher was away could come so suddenly to a stop. Therefore the grandmother has to call back her fairy tale from the ever-shut chamber of the great End. And she does it so simply—merely by floating the dead body down the river on a banana stem, and having some incantations read by a magician. But on that rainy night and in the dim light of a lamp, death in the mind of the boy loses all its horror, and seems nothing more than the deep slumber of a single night. When the story ends, the tired eyelids are weighed down with sleep. Thus it is that we send the little body of the child floating on the back of sleep over the still water of time, and then in the morning read a few verses of incantation to restore him to the world of life and light.