

PLAY

SANYASI OR THE ASCETIC

BY

Rabindranath Tagore



CHARACTERS

- **The Sanyasi (The Ascetic):** The protagonist. He isolates himself from the world to achieve spiritual liberation through cold intellect.
- **Vasanti:** A poor, low-caste orphan girl. She breaks the Sanyasi's emotional walls through her pure love and innocence.
- **Raghu:** Vasanti's deceased father. He was a social outcast whose memory brings scorn upon his daughter.
- **The Village Elders:** Orthodox men. They mock the Sanyasi and cruel-heartedly shun Vasanti due to her caste.
- **The Village Women:** Local citizens. They gossip and actively avoid any physical contact with the untouchable girl.
- **The Travelers:** Ordinary people passing through. They represent the bustling, emotional human world that the Sanyasi tries to reject.

ACT

SCENE I

SANYASI : [Outside the cave.] The division of days and nights is not for me, nor that of months and years. For me, the stream of time has stopped, on whose waves dances the world, like straws and twigs. In this dark cave I am alone, merged in myself, and the eternal night is still, like a mountain lake afraid of its own depth. Water oozes and drips from the cracks, and in the pool float the ancient frogs. I sit chanting the incantation of nothingness. The world's limits recede, line after line. The stars, like sparks of fire, flown from the anvil of time, are extinct; and that joy is mine which comes to the God Shiva, when, after aeons of dream, he wakes up to find himself alone in the heart of the infinite annihilation. I am free, I am the great solitary One. When I was thy slave, O Nature, thou didst set my heart against itself, and madest it carry the Fierce war of suicide through its world. Desires, that have no other ends, but to feel upon themselves and all that comes to their mouths, lashed me into fury. I ran about, madly chasing my shadow. Thou drove me with thy lightning lashes of pleasure into the void of satiety And the hungers, who are thy decoys, ever led me into the endless famine, where food turned into dust, and drink into vapour.

Till, when my world was spotted with tears and ashes, took my oath, that I would have revenge upon thee, interminable Appearance, mistress of endless disguises. I took shelter in the darkness, the castle of the Infinite, and fought the deceitful light, day after day, till it lost all its weapons and lay powerless at my feet. Now, when I am free of fear and desire' when the mist has vanished, and my reason shines pure and bright, let me go out into the kingdom of lies, and sit upon its heart, untouched and unmoved.

SCENE II

SANYASI : [By the roadside.] How small is this earth and confined, watched and followed by the persistent horizons. The trees, houses, and crowd of things are pressing upon my eyes. The light, like a cage, has shut out the dark eternity; and the hours hop and cry within its barriers, like prisoned birds. But why are these noisy men rushing on, and for what purpose? They seem always afraid of missing something, the something that never comes to their hands.

[The crowd passes.]

Enter a VILLAGE ELDER and two WOMEN.

FIRST WOMAN : O my, O my! You do make me laugh.

SECOND WOMAN : But who says you are old?

VILLAGE ELDER : There are fools who judge men by their outside.

FIRST WOMAN : How sad! We have been watching your outside from our infancy. It is just the same all through these years.

VILLAGE ELDER : Like the morning sun.

FIRST WOMAN : Yes, like the morning sun in its shining baldness.

VILLAGE ELDER : Ladies, you are overcritical in your taste. You notice things that are unessential.

SECOND WOMAN : Leave off your chatter, Ananga. Let us hasten home, or my man will be angry.

FIRST WOMAN : Good bye, sir. Please judge us from our outside, we won't mind that—

VILLAGE ELDER : Because you have no inside to speak of.

[They go.

Enter three VILLAGERS.

FIRST VILLAGER : Insult me? The scoundrel! He shall regret it.

SECOND VILLAGER : He must be taught a thorough lesson.

FIRST VILLAGER : A lesson that will follow him to his grave.

THIRD VILLAGER : Yes, brother, set your heart upon it. Never give him quarter.

SECOND VILLAGER : He has grown too big.

FIRST VILLAGER : Big enough to burst at last.

THIRD VILLAGER : The ants, when they begin to grow wings, perish.

SECOND VILLAGER : But have you got a plan?

FIRST VILLAGER : Not one, but hundreds. I will drive my plough share over his household. I will give him a donkey-ride through the town, with his cheeks painted white and black. I will make the world too hot for him, and

[They go.

Enter two STUDENTS.

FIRST STUDENT : I am sure Professor Madhab won in the debate.

SECOND STUDENT : No, it was Professor Janardan.

FIRST STUDENT : Professor Madhab maintained his point to the last. He said that the subtle is the outcome of the gross.

SECOND STUDENT : But Professor Janardan conclusively proved that the subtle is the origin of the gross.

FIRST STUDENT : Impossible.

SECOND STUDENT : It is dear as the day-light.

FIRST STUDENT : Seeds come from the tree.

SECOND STUDENT : The tree comes from the seed.

FIRST STUDENT : Sanyasi, which of these is true? Which is the original, the subtle or the gross?

SANYASI : Neither.

SECOND STUDENT : Neither. Well, that sounds satisfactory.

SANYASI : The origin is the end, and the end is the origin. It is a circle. The distinction between the subtle and gross is in your ignorance.

FIRST STUDENT : Well, it sounds very simple and I think this was what my master meant.

SECOND STUDENT : Certainly this agrees more with what my master teaches. [They go out.]

SANYASI : These birds are word-peckers. When they pick up some wriggling nonsense, which can fill their mouth, they are happy.

Enter two FLOWER-GIRLS, singing.

The weary hours pass by.

The flowers that blossom in the light

Fade and drop in the shadow.

I thought I would weave a garland

In the cool of the morning for my love.

But the morning wears on,

The flowers are not gathered.

And my love is lost.

A WAYFARER : Why such regret, my darlings? When the garlands are ready, the necks will not be wanting.

FIRST FLOWER-GIRL : Nor the halter.

SECOND FLOWER-GIRL : You are bold. Why do you come so close?

WAYFARER : You quarrel for nothing, my girl. I am far enough from you to allow an elephant to pass between us.

SECOND FLOWER-GIRL : Indeed. Am I such a fright? It wouldn't have eaten you, if you had come.

[They go out laughing.]

Comes an old BEGGAR.

BEGGAR : Kind sirs, have pity on me. May God prosper you. Give me one handful from your plenty.

Enters a SOLDIER.

SOLDIER : Move away. Don't you see the Minister's son is conning? [They go out.]

SANYASI : It is midday. The sun is growing strong. The sky looks like an overturned burning copper bowl. The earth breathes hot sighs, and the whirling sands dance by. What sights of man have I seen! Can I ever again shrink back into the smallness of these creatures, and become one of them? No, I am free. I have not this obstacle, this world round me. I live in a pure desolation.

Enter the girl VASANTI and a WOMAN.

WOMAN : Girl, you are Raghu's daughter, aren't you? You should keep away from this road. Don't you know it goes to the temple?

VASANTI : I am on the farthest side, Lady.

WOMAN : But I thought my cloth-end touched you. I am taking my offerings to the goddess, I hope they are not polluted.

VASANTI : I assure you, your cloth did not touch me. [The Woman goes.] I am Vasanti, Raghu's daughter. May I come to you, father?

SANYASI : Why not, child?

VASANTI : I am a pollution, as they call me.

SANYASI : But they are all that, a pollution. They roll in the dust of existence. Only he is pure who has washed away the world from his mind. But what have you done, daughter?

VASANTI : My father, who is dead, had defied their laws and their gods. He would not perform their rites.

SANYASI : Why do you stand away from me?

VASANTI : Will you touch me?

SANYASI : Yes, because nothing can touch me truly. I am ever away in the endless. You can sit here, if you wish.

VASANTI : [Breaking into a sob.] Never tell me to leave you, when once you have taken me near you.

SANYASI : Wipe away your tears, child. I am a Sanyasi. I have neither hatred, nor attachment in my heart, I never claim you as mine; therefore I can never discard you. You are to me as this blue sky is, you are, yet you are not.

VASANTI : Father, I am deserted by gods and men alike.

SANYASI : So am I. I have deserted both gods and men.

VASANTI : You have no mother?

SANYASI : No.

VASANTI : Nor father?

SANYASI : No.

VASANTI : Nor any friend?

SANYASI : No.

VASANTI : Then I shall be with you. You won't leave me?

SANYASI : I have done with leaving. You can stay near me, yet never coming near me.

VASANTI : I do not understand you, father. Tell me, is there no shelter for me in the whole world?

SANYASI : Shelter? Don't you know this world is a bottomless chasm? The swarm of creatures, coming out from the hole of nothingness, seeks for shelter, and enters into the gaping mouth of this emptiness, and is lost. These are the ghosts of lies around you, who hold their market of illusions, and the foods which they sell are shadows. They only deceive your hunger, but do not satisfy. Come away from here, child, come away.

VASANTI : But, father, they seem so happy in this world. Can we not watch them from the roadside?

SANYASI : Alas, they do not understand. They cannot see that this world is death spread out to eternity. It dies every moment, yet never comes to the end.—And we, the creatures of this world, live by feeding upon death.

VASANTI : Father, you frighten me.

Enters a TRAVELLER.

TRAVELLER : Can I get a shelter near this place?

SANYASI : Shelter there is nowhere, my son, but in the depth of one's self. Seek that; hold to it fast, if you would be saved.

TRAVELLER : But I am tired, and want shelter.

VASANTI : My hut is not far from here. Will you come?

TRAVELLER : But who are you?

VASANTI : Must you know me? I am Raghu's daughter.

TRAVELLER : God bless you, child, but I cannot stay. [Goes.

Men come bearing somebody on a bed.

FIRST BEARER : He is still asleep.

SECOND BEARER : How heavy the rascal is!

A TRAVELLER : [Outside their group.] Whom do you carry?

THIRD BEARER : Binde, the weaver, was sleeping as one dead, and we have taken him away.

SECOND BEARER : But I am tired, brothers. Let us give him a shake, and waken him up.

BINDE : [Wakes up.] Ee, a, u

THIRD BEARER : What's that noise?

BINDE : I say. Who are you? Where am I being carried?

[They put down the bed from their shoulders.

THIRD BEARER : Can't you keep quiet, like all decent dead people?

SECOND BEARER : The cheek of him! He must talk, even though he is dead.

THIRD BEARER : It would be more proper of you, if you kept still.

BINDE : I am sorry to disappoint you, gentlemen, you have made a mistake. I was not dead, but fast asleep.

SECOND BEARER : I admire this fellow's impudence. Not only must he die, but argue.

THIRD BEARER : He won't confess the truth. Let us go, and finish the rites of the dead.

BINDE : I swear by your beard, my brother, I am as alive as any of you.

[They take him away, laughing.]

SANYASI : The girl has fallen asleep, with her arm beneath her little head; I think I must leave her now, and go. But, coward, must you run away, run away from this tiny thing? These are nature's spiders' webs, they have danger merely for moths, and not for a Sanyasi like me.

VASANTI : [Awaking with a start.] Have you left me. Master? Have you gone away?

SANYASI : Why should I go away from you? What fear have I? Afraid of a shadow?

VASANTI : Do you hear the noise in the road?

SANYASI : But stillness is in my soul.

Enters a young WOMAN, followed by MEN.

WOMAN : Go now. Leave me. Don't talk to me of love.

FIRST MAN : Why, what has been my crime?

WOMAN : You men have hearts of stone.

FIRST MAN : Incredible. If our hearts were of stone, how could Cupid's darts make damage there?

OTHER MAN : Bravo. Well said.

SECOND MAN : Now, what is your answer to that, my dear?

WOMAN : Answer! You think you have said something very fine, don't you? It is perfect rubbish.

FIRST MAN : I leave it to your judgment, gentlemen. What I said was this, that if our hearts be of stone, how can

THIRD MAN : Yes, yes, it has no answer at all.

FIRST MAN : Let me explain it to you. She said we men have hearts of stone, didn't she? Well, I said, in answer, if our hearts were truly of stone, how could Cupid's darts damage them? You understand?

SECOND MAN : Brother, I have been selling molasses in the town for the last twenty-four years, do you think I cannot understand what you say? [They go out.

SANYASI : What are you doing, my child?

VASANTI : I am looking at your broad palm, father. My hand is a little bird that finds its nest here. Your palm is great, like the great earth which holds all. These lines are the rivers, and these are hills.

[Puts her cheek upon it.

SANYASI : Your touch is soft, my daughter, like the touch of sleep. It seems to me this touch has something of the great darkness, which touches one's soul with the wand of the eternal. But, child, you are the moth of the daylight. You have your birds and flowers and fields what can you find in me, who have my centre in the One and my circumference nowhere?

VASANTI : I do not want anything else. Your love is enough for me.

SANYASI : The girl imagines I love her, foolish heart. She is happy in that thought. Let her nourish it. For they have been brought up in illusions, and they must have illusions to console them.

VASANTI : Father, this creeper trailing on the grass, seeking some tree to twine itself round, is my creeper. I have tended it and watered it from the time when it had pushed up only two little leaves into the air, like an infant's cry. This creeper is me, it has grown by the road-side, it can be so easily crushed. Do you see these beautiful little flowers, pale blue with white spots in their hearts, these white spots are their dreams. Let me gently brush your forehead with these flowers. To me, things that are beautiful are the keys to all that I have not seen and not known.

SANYASI : No, no, the beautiful is mere phantasy. To him who knows, the dust and the flower are the same. But what languor is this that is creeping into my blood and drawing before my eyes a thin mist veil of all the rainbow colours? Is it nature

herself weaving her dreams round me, clouding my senses? [Suddenly he tears the creeper, and rises up.] No more of this; for this is death.

What game of yours is this with me, little girl? I am a sanyasi, I have cut all my knots, I am free. No, no, not those tears. I cannot bear them. But where was hidden in my heart this snake, this anger, that hissed out of its dark with its fang? No, they are not dead, they outlive starvation. These hell-creatures clatter their skeletons and dance in my heart, when their mistress, the great witch, plays upon her magic flute. Weep not, child, come to me. You seem to me like a cry of a lost world, like the song of a wandering star. You bring to my mind something, which is infinitely more than this Nature, more than the sun and stars. It is as great as the darkness. I understand it not. I have never known it, therefore I fear it. I must leave you. Go back whence you came, the messenger of the unknown.

VASANTI : Leave me not, father, I have none else but you.

SANYASI : I must go, I thought that I had known, but I do not know. Yet I must know. I leave you, to know who you are.

VASANTI : Father, if you leave me, I shall die.

SANYASI : Let go my hand. Do not touch me. I must be free.

[He runs away.]

SCENE III

The SANYASI is seen, sitting upon a boulder in a mountain path.

[A shepherd boy passes by, singing.]

Do not turn away your face, my love,

The spring has bared open its breast.

The flowers breathe their secrets in the dark.

The rustle of the forest leaves comes across the sky,

Like the sobs of the night.

Come, love, show me your face.

SANYASI : The gold of the evening is melting in the heart of the blue sea. The forest, on the hillside, is drinking the last cup of the daylight. On the left, the village huts are seen through the trees with their evening lamps lighted, like a veiled mother watching by her sleeping children. Nature, thou art my slave. Thou hast spread thy many-coloured carpet in the great hall where I sit alone, like a king, and watch thee dance with thy starry necklace twinkling on thy breast.

[Shepherd girls pass by, singing.]

The music comes from across the dark river and calls me. .

I was in the house and happy,

But the flute sounded in the still air of night,

And a pain pierced my heart.

Oh, tell me the way who know it,

Tell me the way to him.

I will go to him with my one little flower,
And leave it at his feet,
And tell him that his music is one with my love.

[They go.

SANYASI : I think such an evening had come to me only once before in all my births. Then its cup over brimmed with love and music, and I sat with someone, the memory of whose face is in that setting star of the evening. But where is my little girl, with her dark sad eyes, big with tears? Is she there, sitting outside her hut, watching that same star through the immense loneliness of the evening? But the star must set, the evening close her eyes in the night, and tears must cease and sobs be stilled in sleep. No, I will not go back. Let the world-dreams take their own shape. Let me not trouble its course and create new phantasies. I will see, and think, and know.

Enters a ragged GIRL.

GIRL : Are you there, father?

SANYASI : Come, child, sit by me. I wish I could own that call of yours. Someone did call me father, once, and the voice was somewhat like yours. The father answers now, but where is that call?

GIRL : Who are you?

SANYASI : I am a sanyasi. Tell, me child, what is your father?

GIRL : He gathers sticks from the forest.

SANYASI : And you have a mother?

GIRL : No. She died when I was young.

SANYASI : Do you love your father?

GIRL : I love him more than anything else in the world. I have no one else but him.

SANYASI : I understand you. Give me your little hand, let me hold it in my palm, in this big palm of mine.

GIRL : Sanyasi, do you read palms? Can you read in my palm all that I am and shall be?

SANYASI : I think I can read, but dimly know its meaning. One day, I shall know it.

GIRL : Now I must go to meet my father.

SANYASI : Where?

GIRL : Where the road goes into the forest. He will miss me, if he does not find me there.

SANYASI : Bring your head near to me, child. Let me give you my kiss of blessing, before you go.

[Girl goes.

A MOTHER enters, with two children.

MOTHER : How stout and chubby Misri's children are. They are something to look at. But the more I feed you, the more you seem to grow thin every day.

FIRST GIRL : But why do you always blame us for that, mother? Can we help it?

MOTHER : Don't I tell you to take plenty of rest? But you must always be running about.

SECOND GIRL : But mother, we run about on your errands.

MOTHER : How dare you answer me like that?

SANYASI : Where are you going, daughter?

MOTHER : My salutation, father. We are going home.

SANYASI : How many are you?

MOTHER : My mother-in-law, and my husband and two other children, beside these.

SANYASI : How do you spend your days?

MOTHER : I hardly know how my days pass. My man goes to the field, and I have my house to look after. Then, in the evening, I sit to spin with my elder girls. [To the girls] Go and salute the sanyasi.

Bless them, father.

[They go.

Enter two MEN.

FIRST MAN : Friend, go back from here. Do not come any further.

SECOND MAN : Yes, I know. Friends meet in this earth by chance, and the chance carries us on together some portion of the way, and then comes the moment when we must part.

SECOND FRIEND : Let us carry away with us the hope that we part to meet again.

FIRST FRIEND : Our meetings and partings belong to all the movements of the world. Stars do not take special notice of us.

SECOND FRIEND : Let us salute those stars which did throw us together. If for a moment, still it has been much.

FIRST FRIEND : Look back for a minute before you go. Can you see that faint glimmer of the water in the dark, and those casuarina trees on the sandy bank? Our village is all one heap of dark shadows. You can only see the lights. Can you guess which of those lights are ours?

SECOND FRIEND : Yes, I think I can.

FIRST FRIEND : That light is the last farewell look of our past days upon their parting guest. A little further on, and there will remain one blot of darkness. [They go away.

SANYASI : The night grows dark and desolate. It sits like a woman forsaken, those stars are her tears, turned into fire. O my child, the sorrow of your little heart has filled, forever, all the nights of my life with its sadness. Your dear caressing hand has left its touch in this night air, I feel it on my forehead, it is damp with your tears. My darling, your sobs that pursued me, when I fled away, have clung to my heart. I shall carry them to my death.

SCENE IV

In the village path.

SANYASI : Let my vows of sanyasi go. I break my staff and my alms-bowl. This stately ship, this world, which is crossing the sea of time, let it take me up again, let me join once more the pilgrims. O the fool, who wanted to seek safety in swimming alone and gave up the light of the sun and stars, to pick his way with his glow-worm's lamp! The bird flies in the sky, not to fly away into the emptiness, but to come back again to this great earth. I am free. I am free from the bodiless chain of the Naya. I am free among things, and forms and purpose. The finite is the true infinite, and love knows its truth. My girl, you are the spirit of all that is, I can never leave you.

Enters a VILLAGE ELDER.

SANYASI : Do you know, brother, where Raghu's daughter is?

ELDER : She has left her village, and we are glad.

SANYASI : Where has she gone?

ELDER : Do you ask where? It is all one to her where she goes. [Goes out.]

SANYASI : My darling has gone to seek a somewhere in the emptiness of nowhere. She must find me.

A CROWD OF VILLAGERS enter.

FIRST MAN : So our King's son is going to be married tonight.

SECOND MAN : Can you tell me, when is the wedding hour?

THIRD MAN : The wedding hour is only for the bride-groom and the bride. What have we got to do with it?

A WOMAN : But won't they give us cakes for the happy day?

FIRST MAN : Cakes? You are silly. My uncle lives in the town I have heard from him that we shall have curds and parched rice.

SECOND MAN : Grand.

FOURTH MAN : But we shall have a great deal more water than curds. You may be sure of that.

FIRST MAN : Moti, you are a dull fellow. Water in the curds at a prince's wedding!

FOURTH MAN : But we are not princes ourselves, Panchu. For us, poor people, the curds have the trick of turning into water most parts.

FIRST MAN : Look there. That son of the charcoal-burner is still busy with his work. We mustn't allow that.

SECOND MAN : We shall burn him into charcoal, if he does not come out.

SANYASI : Do you know, any of you, where is Raghu's daughter?

THE WOMAN : She has gone away.

SANYASI : Where?

WOMAN : That we don't know.

FIRST MAN : But we are sure that she is not the bride for our prince.

[They laugh and go out.

Enters a WOMAN, with a child.

WOMAN : My obeisance to you, father. Let my child touch your feet with his head. He is sick. Bless him, father.

SANYASI : But, daughter, I am no longer a sanyasi. Do not mock me with your salutation.

WOMAN : Then who are you? What are you doing?

SANYASI : I am seeking.

WOMAN : Seeking whom?

SANYASI : Seeking my lost world back. Do you know Raghu's daughter? Where is she?

WOMAN : Raghu's daughter? She is dead.

SANYASI : No, she cannot be dead. No. No.

WOMAN : But what is her death to you. Sanyasi?

SANYASI : Not only to me; it would be death to all.

WOMAN : I do not understand you.

SANYASI : She can never be dead.