

SHORT STORY

THE BABUS OF NAYANJORE

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Once upon a time the Babus of Nayanjore were famous landholders. They were noted for their princely extravagance. They would tear off the rough border of their Dacca muslin, because it rubbed against their delicate skin. They would spend many thousands of rupees over the wedding of a kitten. And on a certain grand occasion it is alleged that in order to turn night into day, they lighted countless lamps and showered silver threads from the sky to imitate sunlight.

Those were the days before the flood. The flood came. The line of succession among these old-world Babus, with their lordly habits, could not continue for long. Like a lamp, with too many wicks burning, the oil flared away quickly, and the light went out.

Kailas Babu, our neighbour, is the last flicker of this extinct magnificence. Before he grew up, his family had very nearly burned itself out. When his father died, there was one dazzling outburst of funeral extravagance, and then insolvency. The property was sold to liquidate the debt. What little ready money was left was altogether insufficient to keep up the ancestral splendours.

Kailas Babu left Nayanjore and came to Calcutta. His son did not remain long in this world of faded glory. He died, leaving behind him an only daughter.

In Calcutta we are Kailas Babu's neighbours. Curiously enough our own family history is just the opposite of his. My father made his money by his own exertions, and prided himself on never spending a penny more than was necessary. His clothes were those of a working man, and his hands also. He never had any inclination to earn the title of Babu by extravagant display; and I, this only son, am grateful to him for that. He gave me the very best education, and I was able to make my way in the world. I am not ashamed of the fact that I am a self-made man. Crisp notes in my safe are dearer to me than a long pedigree in an empty family chest.

I believe this was why I disliked seeing Kailas Babu drawing his heavy cheques on the public credit from the bankrupt bank of his ancient Babu reputation. I used to fancy that he looked down on me, because my father had earned money by manual labour.

I ought to have noticed that no one but myself showed any vexation towards Kailas Babu. Indeed it would have been difficult to find an old man who did less harm than he. He was always ready with his kindly little acts of courtesy in times of sorrow or

joy. He would join in all the ceremonies and religious observances of his neighbours. His familiar smile would greet young and old alike. His politeness in asking details about domestic affairs was untiring. The friends who met him in the street were ready perforce to be button-holed, while a long string of remarks of this kind followed one another from his lips:

‘I am delighted to see you, my dear friend. Are you quite well? How is Sashi? And Dada—is he all right? Do you know, I’ve only just heard that Madhu’s son has got fever. How is he? Have you heard? And Hari Charan Babu—I have not seen him for a long time—I hope he is not ill. What’s the matter with Rakhal? And er—er, how are the ladies of your family?’

Kailas Babu was neat and spotless in his dress on all occasions though his supply of clothes was sorely limited. Every day he used to air his shirts and vests and coats and trousers carefully, and put them out in the sun, along with his bed-quilt, his pillow-case, and the small carpet on which he always sat. After airing them he would shake them, and brush them, and put them carefully away. His little bits of furniture made his small room presentable, and hinted that there was more in reserve if needed. Very often, for want of a servant, he would shut up his house for a while. Then he would iron out his shirts and linen, and do other little menial tasks. He would then open his door and receive his friends again.

Though Kailas Babu, as I have said, had lost all his land, he had still some family heirlooms left. There was a silver cruet for sprinkling scented water, a filigree box for otto-of-roses, a small gold salver, a costly antique shawl, and the old-fashioned ceremonial dress and ancestral turban. These he had rescued with the greatest difficulty from the moneylenders’ clutches. On every suitable occasion he would bring them out in state, and thus try to save the world-famed dignity of the Babus of Nayanjore. At heart the most modest of men, in his daily speech he regarded it as a sacred offering, due to his rank, to give free play to his family pride. His friends would encourage this with kindly good-humour, and it gave them great amusement.

The people of the neighbourhood soon learnt to call him their Thakur Dada. They would flock to his house and sit with him for hours together. To prevent his incurring any expense, one or other of his friends would bring him tobacco and say:

‘Thakur Dada, this morning some tobacco was sent to me from Gaya. Do try it and see how you like it.’

Thakur Dada would smoke it and say it was excellent. He would then proceed to tell of a certain exquisite tobacco which they once smoked in the old days at Nayanjore that cost a guinea an ounce.

‘I wonder,’ he used to say, ‘if anyone would like to try it now. I have some left, and can get it at once.’

Everyone knew that, if they asked for it, then somehow or other the key of the cupboard would be missing; or else Ganesh, his old family servant, had put it away somewhere.

‘You never can be sure,’ he would add, ‘where things go to when servants are about. Now, this Ganesh of mine—I can’t tell you what a fool he is, but I haven’t the heart to dismiss him.’

Ganesh, for the credit of the family, was quite ready to bear all the blame without a word.

One of the company usually said at this point: ‘Never mind, Thakur Dada. Please don’t trouble to look for it. The tobacco we’re smoking will do quite well. The other would be too strong.’

Then Thakur Dada would be relieved and settle down again, and the talk would go on.

When his guests got up to go away, Thakur Dada would accompany them to the door and say to them on the doorstep: ‘Oh, by the way, when are you all coming to dine with me?’

One or other of us would answer: ‘Not just yet Thakur Dada, not just yet. We’ll fix a day later.’

‘Quite right,’ he would answer. ‘Quite right. We had much better wait till the rains come. It’s too hot now. And a grand dinner, such as I should want to give you, would upset us in weather like this.’

But when the rains did come, everyone was very careful not to remind him of his promise. If the subject was brought up, some friend would suggest gently, that it

was very inconvenient to get about when the rains were so severe, and therefore it would be much better to wait till they were over. Thus the game went on.

Thakur Dada's poor house was much too small for his position, and we used to condole with him about it. His friends would assure him they quite understood his difficulties: it was next to impossible to get a decent house in Calcutta. Indeed, they had all been looking out for years for a house to suit him. But, I need hardly add, no friend had been foolish enough to find one. Thakur Dada used to say, with a sigh of resignation: 'Well, well, I suppose I shall have to put up with this house after all.' Then he would add with a genial smile: 'But, you know, I could never bear to be away from my friends. I must be near you. That really compensates for everything.'

Somehow I felt all this very deeply indeed. I suppose the real reason was that, when a man is young, stupidity appears to him the worst of crimes. Kailas Babu was not really stupid. In ordinary business matters everyone was ready to consult him. But with regard to Nayanjore his utterances certainly seemed void of common sense. Since, out of amused affection for him, no one contradicted his impossible statements, he refused to keep them within bounds. When people recounted in his hearing the glorious history of Nayanjore, with absurd exaggerations, he would accept all they said with the utmost gravity, and never doubted even in his dreams, that anyone could disbelieve it.

When I sit down and try to analyse the thoughts and feelings that I had towards Kailas Babu, I see that there was a still deeper reason for my dislike; which I shall now explain.

Though I am the son of a rich man, and might have wasted time at college, my industry was such that I took my M.A. degree at Calcutta University when quite young. My moral character was flawless. In addition, my outward appearance was so handsome, that if I were to call myself beautiful, it might be thought a mark of self-esteem but could not be considered an untruth.

There could be no question that I was regarded by parents generally as a very eligible match among the young men of Bengal. I myself was quite clear on the point and had determined to obtain my full value in the marriage market. When I pictured my choice, I had before my mind's eye a wealthy father's only daughter, extremely beautiful and highly educated. Proposals came pouring into me from far and near; large sums in cash were offered. I weighed these offers with rigid

impartiality in the delicate scales of my own estimation. But there was no one fit to be my partner. I became convinced with the poet Bhabavuti, that:

In this world's endless time and boundless space

One may be born at last to match my sovereign grace.

But in this puny modern age, and this contracted space of modern Bengal, it was doubtful whether the peerless creature existed.

Meanwhile my praises were sung in many tunes, and in different metres, by designing parents.

Whether I was pleased with their daughters or not, this worship which they offered was never unpleasing. I used to regard it as my proper due, because I was so good. We are told that when the gods withhold their boons from mortals, they still expect their worshippers to pay them fervent honour and are angry if it is withheld. I had that divine expectancy strongly developed.

I have already mentioned that Thakur Dada had an only grand-daughter. I had seen her many times, but had never thought her beautiful. No idea had ever entered my mind that she would be a possible partner for me. All the same it seemed quite certain to me that some day or other Kailas Babu would offer her, with all due worship, as an oblation at my shrine. Indeed—this was the inner secret of my dislike—I was thoroughly annoyed that he had not done so already.

I heard that Thakur Dada had told his friends that the Babus of Nayanjore never craved a boon. Even if the girl remained unmarried, he would not break the family tradition. It was this arrogance of his that made me angry. My indignation smouldered for some time. But I remained perfectly silent and bore it with the utmost patience, because I was so good.

As lightning accompanies thunder, so in my character a flash of humour was mingled with the mutterings of my wrath. It was, of course, impossible for me to punish the old man merely in order to give vent to my rage; and for a long time I

did nothing at all. But suddenly one day such an amusing plan came into my head, that I could not resist the temptation to carry it into effect.

I have already said that many of Kailas Babu's friends used to flatter the old man's vanity without stint. One, who was a retired Government servant, had told him that whenever he saw the Chota Lât Sahib he asked for the latest news about the Babus of Nayanjore and the Chota Lât had been heard to say that in all Bengal the only really respectable families were those of the Maharaja of Cossipore and the Babus of Nayanjore. When the monstrous falsehood was told to Kailas Babu, he was very proud and often repeated the story. And wherever after that he met this Government servant in company, he would ask, among other things:

'Oh! Er—by the way, how is the Chota Lât Sahib? Quite well, did you say? Ah yes, I am so delighted to hear it! And the dear Mem Sahib, is she quite well too? Ah, yes! And the little children—are they quite well also? Ah yes! that's very good news! Be sure and give them my compliments when you see them.'

Kailas Babu frequently expressed his intention of going some day and paying a visit to the Lât Sahib. But it may be taken for granted that many Chota Lâts and Burra Lâts also would come and go, and much water would flow under the Hooghly bridges, before the family coach of Nayanjore would be furbished up to take Kailas Babu to Government House.

One day I took him aside and whispered to him: 'Thakur Dada, I was at the Levee yesterday, and the Chota Lât Sahib happened to mention the Babus of Nayanjore. I told him that Kailas Babu had come to town. Do you know, he was terribly hurt because you hadn't called? He told me he was going to put etiquette on one side and pay you a private visit this very afternoon.'

Anybody else would have seen through this plot of mine in a moment. And, if it had been directed against another person, Kailas Babu would have understood the joke. But after all that he had heard from his friend, the Government servant, and after all his own exaggerations, a visit from the Lieutenant-Governor seemed the most natural thing in the world. He became very nervous and excited at my news. Each detail of the coming visit exercised him greatly—most of all his own ignorance of English. How on earth was that difficulty to be met? I told him there was no difficulty at all; it was an aristocratic foible not to know English; besides, the

Lieutenant-Governor always brought an interpreter with him, and he had expressly mentioned that this visit was to be private.

About midday, when most of our neighbours were at work, and the rest were asleep, a carriage and pair stopped before the lodging of Kailas Babu. Two flunkeys in livery came up the stairs, and announced in a loud voice: 'The Chota Lât Sahib!' Kailas Babu was ready, waiting for him, in his old-fashioned ceremonial robes and ancestral turban, with Ganesh by his side, dressed for the occasion in his master's best clothes.

When the Chota Lât Sahib was announced, Kailas Babu ran panting, puffing and trembling to the door, and led in with repeated salaams, a friend of mine, in disguise. As he did so, he bowed low at each step and walked backwards as well as he could. He had spread his old family shawl over a hard wooden chair on which he asked the Lât Sahib to be seated. He then made a high-flown speech in Urdu, the ancient court language of the Sahibs, and presented on the golden salver a string of gold mohurs, the last relics of his broken fortune. The old family servant Ganesh, with an expression of awe bordering on terror, stood behind with the scent-sprinkler, simply drenching the Lât Sahib, and touching him gingerly from time to time with the otto-of-roses from the filigree box.

Kailas Babu repeatedly expressed his regret at not being able to receive His Honour Bahadur with all the ancestral magnificence of his family estate at Nayanjore. There he could have welcomed him with due ceremonial. But in Calcutta, he said, he was a mere stranger and sojourner—in fact, a fish out of water.

My friend, with his tall silk hat on, very gravely nodded. I need hardly say that according to English custom the hat ought to have been removed inside the room. But my friend dared not take it off for fear of detection; and Kailas and his old servant Ganesh were sublimely unconscious of this breach of etiquette.

After a ten minutes' interview, which on his part consisted chiefly of nodding the head, my friend rose to depart. The two flunkeys in livery, as had been planned beforehand, carried off in state the string of gold mohurs, the gold salver, the gold ancestral shawl, the silver scent-sprinkler, and the otto-of-roses filigree box; they placed them ceremoniously in the carriage. Kailas Babu regarded this as the usual habit of Chota Lât Sahibs.

I was watching all the while from the next room. My sides were aching with suppressed laughter. When I could hold myself in no longer, I rushed into a room further off, suddenly to discover, in a corner, a young girl sobbing as though her heart would break. When she heard my uproarious laughter, she stood tense in passion, flashing the lightning of her big dark eyes in mine and said with a tear choked voice: 'Tell me! What harm has my grandfather done to you! Why have you come to deceive him? Why have you come here? Why—'

She could say no more. She covered her face with her hands and broke into sobs.

My laughter stopped instantly. It had never occurred to me that there was anything but a supremely funny joke in this act of mine, and here I discovered that I had given the cruellest pain to this tender little heart. All the ugliness of my cruelty rose up to condemn me. I slunk out of the room in silence, like a whipped dog.

Hitherto I had only looked upon Kusum, the grand-daughter of Kailas Babu, as a somewhat worthless commodity in the marriage market, waiting in vain to attract a husband. But now I found, with surprise, that in the corner of that room a human heart was beating.

The whole night through I had very little sleep. My mind was in a tumult. Very early next morning, I took all those stolen goods back to Kailas Babu's lodgings, to hand them over in secret to the servant Ganesh. I waited outside the door, and, finding no one, went upstairs to Kailas Babu's room. I heard from the passage Kusum asking her grandfather in the most winning voice: 'Dada dearest, do tell me all that the Chota Lât Sahib said to you yesterday. Don't leave out a single word. I am dying to hear it all over again.'

And Dada needed no encouragement. His face beamed with pride as he related all the compliments that the Lât Sahib had been good enough to utter concerning the ancient families of Nayanjore. The girl was seated before him looking up into his face, and listening with rapt attention. She was determined, out of love for the old man, to play her part so well as to allow no suspicion to enter his mind.

My heart was deeply touched, and tears came to my eyes. I stood there in silence in the passage, while Thakur Dada finished his account, with embellishments, of the Chota Lât Sahib's wonderful visit. When at last, he left the room, I took the stolen goods, laid them at the feet of the girl and came away without a word.

Later in the day I called again to see him. According to our ugly modern custom, I had been in the habit of making no greeting at all to this old man when I came into the room. But today I made a low bow and touched his feet. I am convinced the old man thought that the coming of the Chota Lât Sahib to his house was the cause of my new politeness. He was very much gratified by it, and benign serenity shone from his eyes. His friends had looked in, and he had already begun to tell again at full length the story of the Lieutenant-governor's visit with still further adornments of a most fantastic kind. The story of the interview was already becoming epic, both in quality and in length.

When the other visitors had taken their leave, I humbly made my proposal to the old man. I told him that, 'though I could never for a moment hope to be worthy of being received into such an illustrious family in marriage, yet...etc. etc.'

When I made my proposal clear, the old man embraced me and broke out in an excess of joy: 'I am a poor man, and could never have expected such great good fortune.'

That was the first and last time in his life that Kailas Babu confessed his poverty. It was also the first and last time in his life that he forgot, if only for a single moment, the ancestral dignity of the Babus of Nayanjore.