

PLAY

THE TRIAL

Rabindranath Tagore



ACT I

KHIRI the maid servant.

KHIRI : Some people have the means to be good in gorgeous comfort and others like us groan under the burden of their goodness Their charity grows fat in their easy chairs, while we carry out their mission with the sweat of our brows. They reap undying fame and we early death.

[A voice from without: Khiri! Khiri!

KHIRI : There she calls! No time for poor me even to nurse my Grievance!

Enters RANI KALYANI.

KALYANI : Sulky as usual!

KHIRI : That proves I am made of flesh and blood.

KALYANI : What is your latest grievance?

KHIRI : That I made a wrong choice when I chose you for my mistress. Why should I come to a Rani's house, if I must serve a whole world of ragged riffraffs, cook for a needy neighbourhood bred in dirt, and wear out my fingers washing their dishes? And all this with nobody to help me!

KALYANI : Help you could have enough if your tongue did not sting out all the servants I brought to my house.

KHIRI : You are right. I have a sensitive mind, and cannot bear the least wrong around me. This fastidious delicacy of mine dooms me to solitude. The servants you had were pure-blooded robbers, blessed with a dangerously innocent look.

KALYANI : And what about yourself?

KHIRI : Holy Mother! I never claim to be an exception. I freely take all that I can lay my hands on. Yet I have but a single pair of them. The Creator made these to grab and to hold; therefore if you multiply hands about you, you divide your possessions.

KALYANI : But your solitude seems to be bursting with a crowd of nephews and nieces and a miscellaneous brood of cousins.

Hasn't each of them a pair of hands for their share? You anger me and yet make me laugh.

KHIRI : If only you laughed less and got angered more, possibly you could have changed my nature.

KALYANI : Your nature change! Not even when you are dead.

KHIRI : This is encouragingly true. It makes me hope that death will be cautious about claiming me. There! look at that lazy crowd waiting at your gate. Some of them have the story of a sick husband, who obligingly never dies, and some of an uncle, whose death remains forever fresh with its endless claim to funeral rites. They bring their bags full of lies, to exchange them for solid silver. I never cease to wonder how certain people can have a special relish for being cheated.

KALYANI : The poor cheat because wealth is often meaner than poverty. However, tell me why, last evening, when I fed the poor, sweets were scarce and also milk.

KHIRI : Very likely the pastryman and the milk-vendor like to give you a fair chance to be cheated.

Enter neighbouring WOMEN.

WOMEN : [They shout] Long live Rani Kalyani!

KHIRI : Listen to that! If their stomachs had missed their fill of good fare yesterday, their lungs would show it this morning.

KALYANI : Who is that girl with you, Piari? I never saw her before.

SECOND WOMAN : It is the new bride come to our house. I have brought her for your blessing.

KHIRI : It is easy to guess what you mean by blessing.

KALYANI : She has a sweet face.

SECOND WOMAN : But not a particle of jewelry has she brought from her father's house.

KHIRI : 'They are all safely stored in your own chest,' whisper those who are in the secret.

KALYANI : Come with me into my room.

[Kalyani goes with the Woman and the bride.

FIRST WOMAN : The uncommon cheek of that woman.

KHIRI : It is tiresomely common.

THIRD WOMAN : But this surpasses anything that we know.

KHIRI : Because it benefits somebody else but you.

THIRD WOMAN : Your wit makes our sides burst with laughter.

FIRST WOMAN : Whatever we may say, our Rani has the biggest heart in the world.

KHIRI : In other words, she is the biggest fool under the Sun.

FOURTH WOMAN : That is true. You remember how blind Andi was loaded with money, merely for fun, it seemed to me.

THIRD WOMAN : And that old witch of a potter woman took away from her a real woolen rug as a reward for her facility in weeping.

FOURTH WOMAN : There is no harm in charity, but must it be foolish?

FIRST WOMAN : But she has such a sweet nature.

KHIRI : A great deal of one's sweetness belongs to one's pocket.

FOURTH WOMAN : What I object to in her is her familiarity with vulgar people.

THIRD WOMAN : She could easily have a better companion, to say the least, than Kedar's mother.

FOURTH WOMAN : It is simply courting the applause of the vulgar.

KHIRI : Such is the way of the world. It is all give and take. She supplies food to our mouths, to gather back praise from them. She gets the best of the bargain. For food is vulgar, but praise is for the great.

FOURTH WOMAN : There they, come back from the Rani's room, that woman with the bride.

FIRST WOMAN : Show us what you have got.

SECOND WOMAN : Nothing but a pair of bracelets.

THIRD WOMAN : It sounds like a practical joke.

FOURTH WOMAN : You remember Piari got for her newly married daughter a gold chain besides a pair of earrings.

SECOND WOMAN : Pity is not for the poor, but fortunate are they who have the reputation for it.

FOURTH WOMAN : The generosity of the rich is a mere hobby, it is only to please themselves.

KHIRI : If only Lakshmi, the Goddess of Luck, were kind to me, I would show how to be kind in proper style.

SECOND WOMAN : We pray that your wish may be fulfilled.

FIRST WOMAN : Stop your chatter! I hear the Rani's footsteps!

FOURTH WOMAN : [Loudly] Our Rani is an angel of mercy.

THIRD WOMAN : Wealth has been blessed by the touch of her hands.

Enters KALYANI.

KALYANI : What are you all so busy talking about?

KHIRI : They have been furiously ploughing the ground of your good fame, harrowing, hoeing and raking, weeding out every green thing that bore flowers.

KALYANI : Before you go home remember that if gifts had to flow parallel with expectations they would have run dry and disappeared from the world within a few days of creation. [She leaves the room.

FOURTH WOMAN : Isn't that spiteful? She must have been eavesdropping.

KHIRI : No need for that. She is old enough to know by this time that the praise that grows to excess before her face is generally pruned thin behind her back.

FOURTH WOMAN : Really, you people ought to control your tongues.

THIRD WOMAN : If only you can do it, it won't matter much if the rest of us fail.

KHIRI : Enough for the day's work of detraction. Now you can go home with eased hearts and try to forget the smart of receiving favours. [The women go.—she calls] Kini, Bini, Kashi!

The girls come.

KASHI : Yes, Granny.

KINI & BINI : Yes, aunt.

KHIRI : Come and take your meal.

GIRLS : We are not hungry.

KHIRI : For eating hunger is not essential, but opportunity is. You will find some milk in the cupboard and some sweets.

KASHI : You are doing nothing but eat all day. Appetite has its limits.

KHIRI : But good things are immensely more limited. Bini, why don't I see the silver comb you had in your hair?

BINI : Poor Khetu's girl—

KHIRI : I understand. Benevolence! The plague is in the air in this house! It is fatal for a girl of your circumstances. Our Rani indulges in wasting her means only to prove that they can never be exhausted. But for you to give is to lose forever, do you not see the difference? Now then, off to bed.

[They go.

Enters KALYANI.

KHIRI : Life has become a burden to me, Rani.

KALYANI : You seem to bear it with wonderful ease.

KHIRI : I swear by your feet, I am serious. I have news from home, that my aunt, my father's youngest sister, is on her death-bed.

KALYANI : A year is hardly past since I paid you the funeral expenses of this very same aunt, the youngest one.

KHIRI : What a pity! But you seem to have a keen memory only about my poor aunts.

KALYANI : Does it choke you to ask from me? Must you lie?

KHIRI : Lies are necessary to give dignity to begging. Truth would be monotonous and mean.

KALYANI : But, have I ever denied you, when you asked?

KHIRI : To neglect our weapons, when not needed, is the sure way to miss them in the time of need. But I must tell you that you encourage lies by believing them.

KALYANI : They will fail this time.

KHIRI : I shall not despair about my next chance. Till then, my father's youngest sister shall never be mentioned again.

[Kalyani goes out laughing.

Mother Goddess of Luck, your favourite bird, the owl, must have daily carried you to this house. Could it by mistake alight on my shoulder, I would feed it with choice morsels of mice flesh till it became languid and lay at my door.

Enters Goddess LAKSHMI.

KHIRI : Visitors again!

LAKSHMI : I am willing to leave, if I am not wanted.

KHIRI : I must not be rash. That seems to be a regular crown on your head. And yet you don't look ridiculous with it as a real queen would do. Tell me who you are.

LAKSHMI : I am Lakshmi.

KHIRI : Not from the stage?

LAKSHMI : No, from my heaven.

KHIRI : You must be tired. Do take your seat, and do not be in a hurry to leave. I know full well you have no mercy for those who have brains. It is, I suppose, because the clever ones need never die of starvation and only fools need your special favour.

LAKSHMI : Are you not ashamed to make your living by cheating your mistress?

KHIRI : It is because you are perverse in your choice that those who have minds live upon those who have money.

LAKSHMI : Intellect I never despise, only the crooked minds I avoid.

KHIRI : The intellect, which is too straight, is only another name for stupidity! But if you promise me your favour, I give you my solemn word that henceforth my dullness will delight your heart. I shall be content to remain a perfect bore shunned by all intelligent people.

LAKSHMI : Do you think you will ever be able to spend a farthing in charity?

KHIRI : With pleasure. For when charity grazes only at the fringe of one's surplus, it adds to the beauty of the view—and it can also be made paying by good

management. Only change our mutual position, and you will find the Rani developing a marvellous talent for devising means to get what is not her own. On the other hand, I shall become perfectly silly in swallowing lies and parting with my possessions, and my temper will grow as insipid as that of an egregious saint.

LAKSHMI : Your prayer is granted. I make you a Rani. The world will forget that you ever were a servant unless you yourself help it to remember.

ACT II

KHIRI the Queen.

KHIRI : Where is Kashi?

KASHI : Here I am.

KHIRI : Where are your four attendants?

KASHI : It is a perfect misery to be dogged by servants day and night.

KHIRI : Should the elephant ever complain of the weight of its tusks? Malati!

MALATI : Yes, Your Highness!

KHIRI : Teach this girl why she must be followed by attendants.

MALATI : Remember that you are a Rani's grand-daughter. In the Nawab's house, where I used to serve, the Begum had a litter of pet mongooses; each of them had four maids for their attendants, and sepoy's besides.

KHIRI : Kashi, do you hear?

ATTENDANT : Moti of our neighbourhood craves audience.

KHIRI : Malati!

MALATI : Yes, Your Highness!

KHIRI : What is the form of salutation expected from visitors in your Begum's house?

MALATI : They have to walk forward, salaaming by touching the earth at each step, and then retire walking backward, salaaming again.

KHIRI : Let Moti come before me in proper style.

MALATI brings in MOTI.

MALATI : Bend your head low. Touch the floor, and then touch the tip of your nose. Once again—not so fast—step properly.

MOTI : Ah my poor back! How it aches!

MALATI : Take dust on the tip of your nose three times.

MOTI : I am rheumatic.

MALATI : Once again.

MOTI : Long live Rani Mother. Today, being the eleventh day of the moon, is for fasting and for almsgiving.

KHIRI : Your Rani Mother can ascertain the phases of the moon even without your help, if she finds it profitable.

MOTI : Let me receive alms from our Rani and take leave singing her praises.

KHIRI : The first part of your prayer I prefer to ignore; therest I graciously grant. You may leave immediately singing my praises. Malati!

MALATI : Yes, Your Highness!

KHIRI : Let this woman take her leave in proper style.

MOTI : Then I go.

MALATI : Not so easily. Bend your head down. Take up the dust of the floor on the tip of your nose. Once again. Once more.

[Moti goes.

KHIRI : Bini, what happened to the ring you had on your forefinger? Has it been stolen?

BINI : Not stolen.

KHIRI : Then lost?

BINI : Not lost.

KHIRI : Then someone has cheated you of it?

BINI : No.

KHIRI : You must admit that a thing either remains, or is stolen, or lost, or...

BINI : I have given it away.

KHIRI : Which plainly means that someone has cheated you of it. Tell me, who has it?

BINI : Mallika. She is the poorest of all your servants, with her children starving. I have such a heap of rings, I thought...

KHIRI : Listen to her! Only those of moderate means earn fame by spending in charity, while the rich in doing it earn ingratitude. Charity has no merit for those who possess too much. Malati!

MALATI : Yes, Your Highness.

KHIRI : Mallika must be dismissed at once.

MALATI : She shall be driven away.

KHIRI : But not with the ring on her. What music is that outside my palace?

AN ATTENDANT : A marriage procession.

KHIRI : A marriage procession in front of the Rani's house! Suppose I happen to object, what is there to prevent me? Malati!

MALATI : Yes, Your Highness!

KHIRI : What do they do in a Nawab's house in such a case?

MALATI : The bridegroom is taken to the prison, and, for three days and nights two amateur flute players practice their scales at each of his ears, and then he is hanged if he survives.

KHIRI : Ask my guards to give everyone of the party ten strokes with a shoe.

FIRST ATTENDANT : Only ten strokes! It almost sounds like a caress.

SECOND ATTENDANT : They ought to rejoice at this happy ending.

THIRD ATTENDANT : Our Rani has the gift of humour, for which God be praised.

Enters a MAID.

MAID : My pay has been in arrears for the last nine months. To slave and yet to borrow money to feed oneself is not to my taste. Either pay up my wages or allow me leave and go home.

KHIRI : To pay up your wages is tolerably good, but it saves a lot of trouble to allow you to leave. Malati!

MALATI : Yes, Your Highness.

KHIRI : What is your advice?

MALATI : Let her be fined at least a hundred rupees.

KHIRI : As she is poor I remit fifty rupees out of her fine.

FIRST ATTENDANT : Rani, you are kind.

SECOND ATTENDANT : How lucky for her to get fifty rupees for nothing.

THIRD ATTENDANT : You can as well count it nine hundred and fifty rupees out of a thousand.

FOURTH ATTENDANT : How few are there whose charity can be such a drain.

KHIRI : You do make me blush. [To the Maid] Now you may go away with proper ceremony and finish the rest of your weeping at leisure outside my palace.

[Malati takes away the Maid making her walk backwards with salaams.

Re-enters MALATI.

MALATI : Rani Kalyani is at your door.

KHIRI : Has she come riding on her elephant?

MALATI : No, walking. She is dusty all over.

KHIRI : Must I admit her in?

FIRST ATTENDANT : She should sit at a proper distance.

SECOND ATTENDANT : Let her stand behind your back.

THIRD ATTENDANT : She can be dismissed by saying that. Your Highness is tired.

KHIRI : Malati!

MALATI : Yes, Your Highness!

KHIRI : Advise me what to do.

MALATI : Let all other seats be removed but your own.

KHIRI : You are clever. Let my hundred and twenty slave girls stand in a row outside that door. Sashi, hold the state umbrella over my head. Malati!

MALATI : Yes, Your Highness!

KHIRI : Is it all right?

MALATI : Perfect! like a picture!

KHIRI : Bring her into my presence.

[Malati goes out and returns with Kalyani.

KALYANI : Are you well?

KHIRI : My desire is to keep well, but the rest of the world tries its best to wreck me.

KALYANI : I must have a talk with you in private.

KHIRI : Nothing can be more private than this. Only yourself and I. These are mere servants. Malati!

MALATI : Yes, Your Highness!

KHIRI : Is it possible to send them away?

MALATI : I shudder to think of it.

KALYANI : Then let me tell you briefly. Our Pathan King has forcibly robbed me of my lands.

KHIRI : You are not joking? Then those villages Gopalnagar, Kanaiganj and...

KALYANI : They no longer belong to me.

KHIRI : That's interesting. Haven't you some cash left?

KALYANI : Nothing whatever.

KHIRI : How funny! That sapphire necklace and those wonderful diamonds and that chain of rubies, seven rows deep...

KALYANI : They are all taken away.

KHIRI : Doesn't our scripture say that wealth is unstable like a water drop on a lotus leaf? And your jewelled umbrella, and that throne with its canopy—I suppose they also have followed the rest.

KALYANI : Yes.

KHIRI : This is instructive. Our sages truly say that prosperity is like a beautiful dream that makes the awakening all the more dismal. But have they left you your palace?

KALYANI : The soldiers are in possession.

KHIRI : It does sound like a story—a Rani yesterday and today a beggar in the street. Malati!

MALATI : Yes, Your Highness!

KHIRI : What do you say?

MALATI : Those who grow too high must have their fall.

KALYANI : If I may have shelter here for a short time I can try to recover my lost fortune.

KHIRI : How unfortunate! My palace is crowded with my servants no space left where a needle can be dropped. Of course I could leave you my room and try to rough it in my country-house.

FIRST ATTENDANT : Absurd!

SECOND ATTENDANT : It will simply break our hearts.

KALYANI : I cannot dream of putting you to such inconvenience. I take my leave.

KHIRI : Must you go so soon? By the by if you still have some jewelry left, you may leave it with me for permanent safe keeping.

KALYANI : Nothing has been saved.

KHIRI : How late it is. It gives me a headache if I am made to talk too much I feel it already coming on. [Kalyani goes.] See that my State chair and footstool are carefully put back in the store-room. Malati!

MALATI : Yes, Your Highness!

KHIRI : What do you think of this?

MALATI : It makes one laugh to see the frog turning into a tadpole again.

AN ATTENDANT : A woman craves your audience. Shall I send her away.

KHIRI : No, no, call her in. I am in a delightful mood today.

Enters the WOMAN.

THE WOMAN : I am in trouble.

KHIRI : You want to pass it on to others?

THE WOMAN : Robbers came to my room last night.

KHIRI : And you must take your revenge on me!

THE WOMAN : I ask for your pity.

KHIRI : Pity for what you have lost yourself and nothing for what you ask me to lose?

THE WOMAN : If you must reject my prayer, tell me where I may get it granted.

KHIRI : Kalyani is the proper person to suit you. My men will go and show you her place.

THE WOMAN : Her place is well known to me,—I go back to her! [Revealing herself]
I am the Goddess Lakshmi!

KHIRI : If you must leave me, do it in proper style.—Malati, Malati, Tarini! Where are my maids?

Enters KALYANI.

KALYANI : Have you gone mad? It is still dark, and your shouts bid fair to wake the whole neighbourhood.

KHIRI : What ugly dreams I have had all night! It is a new life to wake up from them. Stay a while, let me take the dust of your feet. You are my Rani, and I am your servant forever.