

THE WISH

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As evening drew on, the storm rose to its height. From the terrific downpour of rain, the crash of thunder, and the repeated flashes of lightning, you might think that a battle of gods and demons was raging in the skies. Black clouds waved like the flags of Doom. The Ganges was lashed into fury, and the trees in the gardens on either bank swayed from side to side, sighing and groaning.

In a closed room of one of the riverside houses at Chandernagore, a husband and wife were seated on a bed spread on the floor, discussing intently an important question. Beside them an earthen lamp burned.

The husband, Sharat, was young: 'I wish you would stay a few more days; you would then be able to return home quite strong again.'

The wife, Kiran, was saying: 'I have quite recovered already. It will not, cannot possibly, do me any harm to go home now.'

Every married person will at once understand that the conversation was not quite so brief as I have reported it. The matter was not difficult, but the arguments for and against did not advance it towards a conclusion. Like a rudderless boat, the discussion kept turning round and round the same point: and at last it threatened to be overwhelmed in a flood of tears.

Sharat said: 'The doctor thinks you should stop here a few days longer.'

Kiran replied. 'Your doctor knows everything!'

'Well,' said Sharat, 'you know that just now all kinds of sickness are abroad. You would do well to stop here a month or two more.'

'And I suppose at this moment everyone here is perfectly well!'

What had happened was this: Kiran was universal favourite with her family and neighbours, so that, when she fell seriously ill, they were all very anxious about her. The village wiseacres thought it shameless for her husband to make so much fuss about a mere wife and for him even to suggest a change of air. They asked Sharat whether he supposed that no woman had ever been ill before, or whether he had found out that the folk of the place to which he meant to take her were immortal. Did he imagine that the writ of Fate did not run there? But Sharat and his mother

turned a deaf ear to them, thinking that the little life of their darling was of greater importance than the united wisdom of a village. People are wont to reason thus when danger threatens their loved ones. So Sharat went to Chandernagore, and Kiran recovered, though she was still very weak. There was a pinched look on her face which filled the beholder with pity, and it wrung his heart to think how narrowly she had escaped death.

Kiran was fond of society and amusement; the loneliness of her riverside villa did not suit her at all.

There was nothing to do, there were no interesting neighbours, and she hated to be busy all day with medicine and diet. There was no fun measuring doses and making fomentations. Such was the subject discussed in their closed room this stormy evening.

So long as Kiran deigned to argue, there was a chance of a fair fight. When she ceased to reply, and with a toss of her head disconsolately looked the other way, the poor man was disarmed. He was on the point of surrendering unconditionally, when a servant called out a message through the closed door.

Sharat got up and on opening the door learnt that a boat had been upset in the storm, and that one of the occupants, a young Brahmin boy and succeeded in swimming ashore at their garden steps.

Kiran was at once her own sweet self and set to work to get out some dry clothes for the boy. She then warmed a cup of milk and invited him to her room.

The boy had long curly hair, big expressive eyes, and as yet no sign of hair on his face. Kiran, after getting him to drink some milk, asked him all about himself.

He told her that his name was Nilkanta, and that he belonged to a theatrical company. They were coming to play in a neighbouring villa, when the boat had suddenly foundered in the storm. He had no idea what had become of his companions. He was a good swimmer and had just managed to reach the bank.

The boy stayed with them. His narrow escape from a terrible death made Kiran take a warm interest in him. Sharat thought the boy's arrival at this moment rather a good thing, as his wife would now have something to amuse her, and might be persuaded to stay for some time longer. Her mother-in-law, too, was pleased at the

prospect of benefiting their Brahmin guest by her kindness. And Nilkanta himself was delighted at this double escape from his master and from the other world, as well as at finding a home in this wealthy family.

But very soon Sharat and his mother changed their opinion, and longed for his departure. The boy found a secret pleasure in smoking Sharat's hookahs; he would calmly go off in pouring rain with Sharat's best silk umbrella for a stroll through the village, and make friends with all he met. Moreover, he had adopted a mongrel cur which he petted so recklessly that it came indoors with muddy paws, and left tokens of its visit on Sharat's spotless bed. Then he gathered about him a devoted band of boys of all sorts and sizes, and the result was that not a single mango in the neighbourhood had a chance of ripening that season.

There is no doubt that Kiran had a hand in spoiling the boy. Sharat often warned her about it, but she would not listen to him. She made a dandy of him with Sharat's cast-off clothes, and also gave him new ones. And because she felt drawn towards him, and was curious to know more about him, she was constantly calling him to her own room. After her bath and midday meal, Kiran would seat herself on the bedstead with her betel-leaf box by her side; and while her maid combed and dried her hair, Nilkanta would stand in front and recite pieces out of his repertory with appropriate gesture and song, his elf-locks waving wildly. Thus the long afternoon hours passed merrily away. Kiran would often try to persuade Sharat to sit with her as one of the audience, but Sharat, who had taken a cordial dislike to the boy, refused; nor could Nilkanta play his part half so well when Sharat was there. His mother would sometimes be lured by the hope of hearing sacred names in the recitation; but the love of her midday sleep speedily overcame devotion, and she lay wrapped in dreams.

The boy often had his ears boxed and pulled by Sharat, but as this was nothing to what he had been used to as a member of the troupe, he did not mind it in the least. In his short experience of the world he had come to the conclusion that, as the earth consisted of land and water, so human life was made up of eatings and beatings. And that the beatings largely predominated.

It was hard to tell Nilkanta's age. If it was about fourteen or fifteen, then his face was too old for his years; if seventeen or eighteen, then it was too young. He had either become a man too early or had remained a boy too long. The fact was that,

joining the theatrical band when very young, he had played the parts of Radhika, Damayanti, and Sita, and a thoughtful Providence had so arranged things that he grew to the exact stature that his manager required and then growth ceased.

Since everyone saw how small Nilkanta was, and since he himself felt small, he did not receive the respect due to his years. Causes, natural and artificial, combined to make him sometimes seem immature for seventeen years, and at other times appear a mere lad of fourteen—but a lad far too knowing even for seventeen. And as no sign of hair appeared on his face, the confusion became greater. Either because he smoked or because he used language beyond his years, his lips puckered into lines that showed him to be old and hard; but innocence and youth shone in his large eyes. I fancy that his heart remained young, but the hot glare of publicity had been a forcing-house that ripened untimely his outward aspect.

In the quiet shelter of Sharat's house and garden at Chandernagore, Nature had leisure to work her way unimpeded. Nilkanta had lingered in a kind of unnatural youth, but now he silently and swiftly developed beyond that stage. His seventeen or eighteen years were fully revealed. No one observed the change, and its first sign was this, that when Kiran treated him like a boy, he felt ashamed. When she one day gaily proposed that he should play the part of lady's companion, the idea of dressing as a woman hurt him, though he could not say why. So now, when she called for him to act over again his old characters, he disappeared.

It never occurred to Nilkanta that he was even now not much more than a lad-of-all-work in a strolling company. He even made up his mind to pick up a little education from Sharat's agent. But, because Nilkanta was the pet of his master's wife, the agent could not endure the sight of him. In addition, his restless training made it impossible for him to keep his mind long engaged; sooner or later, the alphabet seemed to dance a misty dance before his eyes. He would sit for hours with an open book on his lap, leaning against a champak bush beside the Ganges. Below, the waves sighed, boats floated past, above his head birds flitted and twittered restlessly. What thoughts passed through his mind as he looked down on that book he alone knew, if indeed he did know. He never advanced from one word to another, but the glorious thought, that he was actually reading a book, filled his soul with exultation. Whenever a boat went by, he lifted his book, and pretended

to be reading hard, shouting at the top of his voice. But his fit of energy passed off as soon as the audience was gone.

Formerly he sang his songs automatically but now their tunes stirred in his mind. Their words were of little import and full of trifling alliteration. Even the feeble meaning they had was beyond his comprehension; yet when he sang—

Twice-born bird! Ah! Wherefore stirred

To wrong our royal lady?

Goose, ah, say why wilt thou slay

Her in forest shady?

he felt transported to another world and to far different folk. This familiar earth and his own poor life became music, and he was transformed. That tale of the goose and the king's daughter flung upon the mirror of his mind a picture of surpassing beauty. It is impossible to say what he imagined himself to be, but the destitute little slave of the theatrical company faded from his memory.

When at even-tide the child of want lies down, dirty and hungry, in his squalid home, and hears of prince and princess and fabled gold, then in the dark hovel lighted by its dim flickering candle, his mind springs free from its bonds of poverty and misery and walks in fresh beauty and glowing raiment, strong beyond all fear of hindrance, through that fairy realm where all is possible.

In this way also, this drudge of wandering players fashioned himself and his world anew, as he moved in spirit amid his songs. The lapping water, rustling leaves, and calling birds; the goddess who had given shelter to him, helpless and forsaken of God; her gracious, lovely face, her exquisite arms with their shining bangles, her rosy feet as flower-petals—all these by some mâtig became one with the music of his song. When the singing ended, the mirage faded, and the Nilkanta of the stage appeared again, with his wild elf-locks. Then Sharat fresh from the complaints of his neighbours, the owner of the despoiled mango-orchard, would come and box his ears and cuff him. The boy Nilkanta, the leader astray of adoring youth, went

forth once more, to make ever new mischief by land and water and in the branches that are above the earth.

Shortly after the advent of Nilkanta, Sharat's younger brother, Satish, came to spend his college vacation with them. Kiran was hugely pleased at finding fresh occupation. She and Satish were of the same age, and the time passed pleasantly in games and quarrels and reconciliations and laughter and even tears. She would suddenly clasp him over the eyes from behind with vermillion-stained hands, or she would write 'monkey' on his back, or else she would bolt the door on him from the outside amidst peals of laughter. Satish in his turn did not take things lying down. He would steal her keys and rings, he would put pepper among her betel, he would tie her to the bed when she was not looking.

Meanwhile, heaven only knows what possessed poor Nilkanta. He was suddenly filled with a bitterness which he felt must be avenged on somebody or something. He thrashed his devoted boy-followers for no fault of theirs, and sent them away crying. He would kick his pet mongrel till it made the skies resound with its whinings. When he went out for a walk, he would litter his path with twigs and leaves beaten from the road-side shrubs with his cane.

Kiran liked to see people enjoying good fare. Nilkanta had an immense capacity for eating, and never refused a good thing, however frequently it might be offered. So Kiran liked to send for him to have his meals in her presence, and ply him with delicacies, happy in the bliss of seeing this Brahmin boy eat his fill. But when Satish joined them, she had much less spare time on her hands and was seldom present to see Nilkanta's meals served. Before, her absence made no difference to the boy's appetite, and he would not rise till he had drained his cup of milk and rinsed it thoroughly with water.

But now, if Kiran was not there to ask him to try this and that, he was miserable, and nothing tasted right. He would get up, without eating much, and say to the serving-maid with tears in his voice: 'I am not hungry.' He thought that the news of his repeated refusal, 'I am not hungry,' would reach Kiran; he pictured her concern, and hoped that she would send for him and press him to eat. But nothing of the sort happened. Kiran never knew and never sent for him; and the maid finished whatever he left. He would then put out the lamp in his room, throw himself on his bed in the darkness, and bury his head in the pillow in a paroxysm of weeping. What

was his grievance? Against whom? And from whom did he expect redress? At last, when no one else came, Mother Sleep soothed with her soft caresses the wounded heart of the motherless lad.

Nilkanta came to the unshakable conviction that Satish was poisoning Kiran's mind against him. If Kiran was absent-minded and had not her usual smile, he would jump to the conclusion that some trick of Satish had made her angry. He took to praying to the gods, with all the fervour of his hate, to make him at the next rebirth Satish, and Satish him. He had an idea that a Brahmin's wrath could never be in vain; and the more he tried to consume Satish with the fire of his curses, the more did his own heart burn within him. And, upstairs, he would hear Satish laughing and joking with his sister-in-law.

Nilkanta never dared to show his enmity to Satish openly. But he would contrive a hundred petty ways of causing him annoyance. When Satish went for a swim in the river and left his soap on the steps of the bathing-place, he would find on coming back for it that it had gone. Once he found his favourite striped tunic floating past him on the water, and thought it had been blown away by the wind.

One day Kiran wished to entertain Satish, so she sent for Nilkanta to recite as usual, but he stood there in gloomy silence. In great surprise, Kiran asked him what was the matter. But he would not answer. And when again pressed by her to repeat some favourite piece of hers, he answered 'I don't remember it,' and walked away.

At last, the time came for their return home. Everybody was busy packing up. Satish was going with them. But to Nilkanta no one said a word. The question whether he was to go or not seemed to be nobody's concern.

The subject, as a matter of fact, had been raised by Kiran, who had proposed to take him with them. But her husband and his mother and brother had all objected so strenuously that she had let the matter drop. A couple of days before they were to start, she sent for the boy, and with kind words advised him to go back to his home.

He had felt neglected for so long that this touch of kindness was too much for him; he burst into tears. Kiran's eyes were also brimming over. She was filled with remorse at the thought that she had created a tie of affection, which had to be broken.

But Satish was greatly annoyed at the blubbering of this overgrown boy. 'Why does the fool stand there howling instead of speaking?' said he. When Kiran scolded him for an unfeeling creature, he replied: 'My dear sister, you do not understand. You are too good and trustful. This fellow turns up from the Lord knows where, and is treated like a king. Naturally the tiger has no wish to become a mouse again. And he has evidently discovered that there is nothing like a tear or two to soften your heart.'

Nilkanta hurriedly left them. He felt that he would like to be a knife to cut Satish to pieces; a needle to pierce him through and through; a fire to burn him to ashes. But Satish was not even scared. It was only his own heart that bled and bled.

Satish had brought with him from Calcutta a very fine inkstand. The inkpot was set in a mother-of-pearl boat drawn by a German-silver goose supporting a pen-holder. It was a great favourite of his, and he cleaned it carefully every day with an old silk handkerchief. Kiran would laugh, and tapping the silver bird's beak would say—

Twice-born bird, ah! Wherefore stirred

To wrong our royal lady?

and the usual war of words would break out between her and her brother-in-law.

The day before they were to start, the inkstand was missing and was to be found nowhere. Kiran smiled, and said: 'Brother-in-law, your goose has flown off to look for your Damayanti.'

But Satish was in a great rage. He was certain that Nilkanta had stolen it—for several people said they had seen him prowling round the room the night before. He had the accused brought before him, in Kiran's presence. 'You have stolen my inkstand, you thief!' he burst out, 'bring it back at once.' Nilkanta had always taken punishment from Sharat, deserved or undeserved, with perfect equanimity. But, when he was called a thief before Kiran, his eyes blazed with fierce anger, his breast swelled and his throat choked. If Satish had said another word, he would have flown at him like a wild cat and used his nails like claws.

Kiran was greatly distressed at the scene, and taking the boy into another room said in her sweet, kind way: 'Nilu, if you really have taken that inkstand, give it to me quickly, and I shall see that no one says another word to you about it.' Big tears coursed down the boy's cheeks, till at last he hid his face in his hands, and wept bitterly. Kiran came back from the room and said: 'I am sure Nilkanta has not taken the inkstand.' Sharat and Satish were equally positive that no other than Nilkanta could have done it.

But Kiran steadily refused to believe it.

Sharat wanted to cross-examine the boy, but his wife would not allow it.

Then Satish suggested that his room and box should be searched. But Kiran said: 'If you dare do such a thing, I will never forgive you. You shall not spy on the poor innocent boy.' And as she spoke, her wonderful eyes filled with tears. That settled the matter and effectually prevented any further molestation of Nilkanta.

Kiran's heart overflowed with pity at this attempted outrage on a homeless lad. She got two new suits of clothes and a pair of shoes, and with these and a currency note in her hand, she went quietly into Nilkanta's room in the evening. She intended to put these parting presents into his box as a surprise. The box itself had been her gift.

From her bunch of keys she selected one that fitted and noiselessly opened the box. It was so jumbled up with odds and ends that the new clothes would not go in. So she thought she had better take everything out and pack the box for him. At first knives, tops, kite-flying reels, bamboo twigs, polished shells for peeling green mangoes, bottoms of broken tumblers and such things as appeal to a boy's heart were discovered. Then there came a layer of linen, clean and otherwise. And from under the linen there emerged the missing inkstand, goose and all.

Kiran, with flushed face, sat down helplessly with the inkstand in her hand, puzzled and wondering.

In the meantime, unknown to Kiran, Nilkanta had come into the room from behind. He had seen the whole thing and thought that Kiran had come like a thief to catch him in his thieving—and that his crime was discovered. How could he ever hope to convince her that he was not a thief, and that only revenge had prompted him to take the inkstand, which he meant to throw into the river at the first opportunity?

In a weak moment he had put it in his box instead. 'I am not a thief,' his heart cried out, 'not a thief!' Then what was he? What could he say? That he had stolen, and that he was still not a thief? He could never explain to Kiran how grievously wrong she was. And then, how could he bear the thought that she had tried to spy on him?

At last, Kiran with a deep sigh replaced the inkstand in the box, and, as if she were the thief herself, covered it up with the linen and the trinkets as she had found them; and at the top she placed the presents, together with the currency note which she had brought for him.

Next day the boy was nowhere to be found. The villagers had not seen him; the police could discover no trace of him. Said Sharat: 'Now, as a matter of curiosity, let us have a look at his box.' But Kiran was obstinate in her refusal to allow such a thing.

She had the box brought up to her own room; and taking out the inkstand, she threw it into the river.

The whole family went home. In a day the garden became desolate. And only that starving mongrel of Nilkanta's remained prowling along the river-banks, whining and whining as if its heart would break.