

Satirical Sketches

BINI POISAR BHOJ

Rabindranath Tagore



AKSHOY BABU, in office attire

(Laughing to himself) Today I have caught him out handsomely! Every day Babu goes about jesting at our expense, free of charge and without so much as a farthing's fee, talking his tall, lofty talk. Sir, for a year now it has been "Today I shall feed you," "Tomorrow I shall feed you" — but of the feeding itself, no sign at all. Had he given even a quarter of what he has promised in hope, by now three great royal feasts might have been held on the strength of it. Well, be that as it may — today, after no small effort, an invitation has at last been wrung out of him. And yet here I have sat two hours already, and still no sign of him. Has he given me the slip, I wonder?

(Calling into the wings) Here, you — what is your name — Bhuto, or Modho, or Hori?

Chandrakanta? Very well then, Chandrakanta let it be. Tell me, good Chandrakanta, when do you suppose your master will arrive?

What's that? Gone to the hotel to fetch food? What are you saying, boy! Then today it will truly be a proper feast! Even my hunger has gathered itself nicely for the occasion. He will polish the mutton-chop bones till they shine like ivory tooth-sticks. There will surely be a chicken curry too — though how long that will last is another matter! And if he sends two kinds of pudding besides, he will scrub the china dishes till they gleam like glass mirrors. And should he think to bring a dozen or two oyster patties, the feast will turn out handsomely indeed. My right eye has been twitching since morning — I daresay the oyster patties are on their way.

Ho there, Chandrakanta, tell me when your master left.

Gone a good while, is he? Then there can't be much delay left now. Meanwhile, fetch me a pipe of tobacco. I have been asking this age, but I see no sign of you stirring.

No tobacco in the house? Has your master locked it away before leaving? I never heard of such a thing! This is no government paper, surely, to be kept under lock and key. What's to be done — I take a little opium now and then myself, but without my tobacco I simply cannot survive. Here, Modho — no, no, Chandrakanta — somehow, from the gardeners or wherever you can manage it, will you not get me a pipeful?

Must it be bought from the market? Money, is it? Very well, so be it. Here — take this, and be quick about buying me a farthing's worth of tobacco.

A farthing's worth won't serve? And why not, pray? Do you take me suddenly for the Nawab of Muchikhola? Even without ambury tobacco at sixteen rupees the bhoi, I manage well enough on my own — a single farthing's worth will do very well.

Must the hookah-bowl be bought too? Has your master locked that away in an iron chest as well? Why did he not simply put it on deposit in the Bengal Bank while he was about it! Ah, dear me — I see I have landed in a fine place indeed. Well, here — take these six farthings I had kept by for the tram fare. When Uday returns, I shall recover the sum from him, principal and interest both. — So this, I take it, is Babu's garden-house; heaven only knows what his proper drawing-room must look like! I only pray the rafters don't come down upon my head. Here's a broken chair among the furniture — it will never bear my weight. I have stood about so long my legs have quite given way beneath me — I can stand no more — let me sit down here upon the ground.

(Wiping the dust away with the hem of his cloth, spreading a newspaper on the floor, sitting, and humming to himself)

If daily one might get
Such a feast, and nothing owed as yet!
Dish upon dish arrayed —
Only mutton, curry, and fish displayed,
With whisky and soda, and royal doses, freely met!
The reckoning that's due

Sticks fast in Wilson's residue —

While glad at heart, with smiling face, who keeps the score, who's true!

Now then! Has the tobacco come? What's this — only the bowl? Where's the pipe-stem? Can one not get a whole hookah for six farthings here? The bowl alone costs two annas? Look here, friend Chandrakanta — I may seem, from the outside, a greater fool than I am. My body may be somewhat stout, but my wits are considerably finer than that.

It becomes clear now why your master keeps his hookah and pipe-stem and tobacco locked away in an iron chest to this very hour. It was his mistake to leave a jewel such as you lying about outside, unwatched. I daresay you shan't be left outside much longer either. The moment the Company-Bahadur gets wind of it, he will set a watch and keep you under lock and close care. Well, no matter — without my tobacco I cannot survive. (Putting the pipe to his mouth, drawing on it, coughing violently) Oh, my good sir, what manner of tobacco is this! One would need a crowbar to draw it. Two puffs of this and Bhola Nath's own skull would crack open, and Nandi and Bhringi themselves would reel with vertigo. Never mind, friend, let it be. Let the master come first. But of the master's coming I see no urgency whatsoever. He is, I daresay, finishing off the patties one by one. Meanwhile my stomach has begun to burn so that I feel my very waist-cloth might catch fire at any moment. I am thirsty besides. But if I ask for water, our Chandrakanta here will insist a glass must first be bought — the master has locked it all away. Never mind — let us have a coconut from the garden instead.

Ho there, good Chandra, can you do one thing for me? Slip into the garden and fetch me a coconut? I am sorely thirsty.

Why? Why should a coconut not be had? I saw plenty of them in the garden myself.

All the trees mortgaged, are they? Well, be that as it may — can not even a single coconut be spared?

Money again! There's none left. Well then, let it be — let the master come, we shall see after that. — I do have my salary about me, but I dare not break into it. I never

knew there existed, in the Company's own employ, so vast a highway robber — well, no matter, if only Uday would come, I should be saved.

Ah — there he comes, surely! I hear footsteps. Ah, saved at last! Ho, Uday! Ho, Uday! — No. Not him. Who are you, then?

Never once set eyes on Uday Babu, have you? Well, wait a little, and I shall satisfy that longing of yours. It won't be long — he's coming.

Coming, is he! And who comes now? Where has this fellow sprung from? Is he invited here too, I wonder?

House-rent? Whose house, sir? This one? Reckoned how?

Seventeen rupees a month? Then calculate, pray, what the rent comes to for three and a half hours.

I am not jesting, sir, nor in any mood for it. I have been invited to this house, and have sat here three and a half hours. If rent must be paid on that account too, reckon it fairly. I have even paid a farthing for the privilege of smoking my tobacco.

No, sir, you have guessed wrongly — you are somewhat mistaken. My name is not Uday but Akshoy. Such a trifling error would matter little at another time, but at the hour of collecting house-rent, it is more convenient to stick by whatever name a man's parents gave to whichever debtor is meant.

You bid me leave the house? Forgive me, but that I cannot do. For three and a half hours I have been dying of hunger, and just as the food is about to arrive you come abusing me — do not imagine I shall quit the house on that account; do not take me for such a fool.

Sit down just where you are, then, and say your say; I shall leave only when I have eaten.

My throat has gone quite dry with all this scolding — I cannot bear it longer. Hunger has withered my very insides. Ah — footsteps again! Ho, Uday, thread of my life, pearl fished from the sea, treasure worth seven kingdoms, come, Uday, come this once! I cannot live much longer!

And who might you be? If you have abuse to offer, sit down and begin. There are others enough gathered here who would relish the hearing of it.

Hari Babu has sent for me? I am overjoyed to hear it. There is no doubt he loves me dearly — but my dearest friends, those who invited me and sent word, I have never once laid eyes on; and those with whom I have no acquaintance whatever are the very ones who, since dawn, have been pestering me so relentlessly — what can be the reason for it? Tell me, sir — why should some gentleman named Hari Babu remember me at so odd an hour, and grow so suddenly out of patience?

What! Am I not returning the jewellery I took from him as a sample, to have bangles made for my wife? Look here — I have a good deal to say on this matter, but for now it will suffice to say only this: I have taken no jewellery from anyone whatsoever, and moreover, I have no wife. As for the rest of what there was to say, forgive me for today — my throat is parched and my chest ready to burst with thirst. Wait but half an hour more, and you shall learn the whole story. (In a loud voice) Ho, Uday! Ho, Udo! Ho, you wretched, luckless, rascally, sneaking, damned swine, you idiot — my belly is on fire, my throat parched, my head fit to split — you vile disgrace of a fellow!

No, no, sirs! I am not addressing you at all. Do not grow agitated so suddenly. It is only the pain in my stomach, the grief in my heart, calling upon the friend of my soul. Pray, be seated.

You cannot stay longer? It has grown late, you say? You need not tell me twice. There is no doubt it has grown late. Then I shall not press you to remain. But do come again some other day, as today. This little while spent in pleasant talk with you has passed happily enough.

But what you are saying now, you are saying rather more strongly than the occasion warrants. Even toward a very dear friend a man feels a sudden reluctance, out of affection, to speak too roughly — yet I confess I feel some shame that you should grow so intimately familiar with me after so brief an acquaintance. Know that I bear you no ill will whatsoever in my heart — but what you expect of me, I am wholly unable to give.

Gentlemen, pray do not press so hard. You have, I daresay, the habit of two regular meals a day, and do not quite know a man's temper when he is famished — that is why you dare provoke me in such a state.

Again! Once more! Look here, my good fellow, you shall not get the better of me. Just because you see my bulk, you think me incapable of understanding! I have held my anger back with great effort, lest I commit some bloody outrage. Come, try to anger me. Let us see your power. You shall not succeed. See here — I sit quite calm and composed.

Oh dear! These fellows have banded together, it seems, ready to come to blows! On an empty stomach, with hunger gnawing so, I cannot bear a beating, that much is plain. Very well, my good fellows, all of you sit down. Tell me how much each of you is owed. — Thank heaven my salary was in my pocket, or else today, quite famished, I should truly have had to run for my life. For now, let me save myself; afterward, the money can be recovered from Uday.

It's not five rupees you're owed, but you've grabbed fifty-one from my pocket, my good man — well, here, take your money.

Ho, my friend, here I settle your hotel bill; should you ever find yourselves in need at some odd hour, remember this kindness.

Three months' house-rent owed, is it? Here is one month's payment for today; take the rest later. You, brother, have paid off your grudge against me in full with your abuse — I daresay your heart is considerably lighter for it now — go home with my blessing.

Ho, my good man, returning your jewellery is no simple matter. Had my wife been living, and had I given her your ornaments, it might yet have been possible to reclaim them; but seeing she does not exist, and I never gave her your jewellery to begin with, you may realize, if you think on it a moment, how much harder it becomes to return. Still, if you insist and press me so, I suppose I must go to your Hari Babu's after all — but I cannot go without first seeing whether the food has come. — Ugh! I can bear no more.

Chandra, ho Chandra — Uday has no part in this matter at all; if even you turn against me now, I see nothing but darkness before me. Chandra! Ho, Chandrakanta! Ah, here you are. Chandra, you know your master — tell me truly, will he return from the hotel today, or tomorrow?

He won't return, you think? By now I believe that statement of yours entirely. Well, never mind — I am dreadfully hungry, and there's no time now for scolding; if you take this half-rupee and quickly fetch something to eat, my life may yet be saved.

This fellow struts about putting on such airs, doing no work at all — we wondered how he managed to keep himself going. Now I understand the business. Digesting so many curses each day, settling so many bills, keeping so many souls fed and famished besides — that is no small feat! The wages hardly repay it; one would find more comfort turning a mill.

What's this — only puffed rice? Nothing else to be had? No money come back at all? Very well then — give me the puffed rice, let it be.

THE MEAL

Ho, Chandra, what shall I say — hunger has made even this stale puffed rice taste like nectar to me! I have dined at many a feast, but never known such pleasure as this. Chandra, you are truly the maker of nectar, though today I find rather too generous a portion of poison mixed in besides. I see you've brought a coconut too — must something extra be given for this as well?

No need? I think there is some kindness left in your heart after all. Now, if you would call me a carriage, I shall take my leave, slowly.

No carriage to be had here? Then indeed I am in a fine fix. Having eaten nothing, weak as I am, I cannot walk a mile and a half; when the hope of a meal lay before me, I managed to get here well enough. — What's to be done! Let us set out.

What calamity is this — must I go to Hari Babu's again, at this hour? Chandra, you have done me great service today; you need do nothing more now — only explain to this gentleman's boy that I am not Uday Babu, I am Akshoy Babu of Ahiritola.

He won't believe you? I cannot blame him overmuch — I daresay he has known you a long time. Well, no matter, there's no use quarrelling further; let us go slowly to Hari Babu's after all. Sir, seeing the state I am in, should some misfortune befall me on the way, the expense of my funeral will fall upon your shoulders — I give you fair warning now.

Chandra, why do you stretch out your hand again, my friend! Thanks to your kindness, I have dined so cheaply today that I shan't feel hungry again for a long while. What more do you want?

Oh — a tip! Best to settle that too, and be done with it. Since I've gone this far, I won't grudge that last trifle either. But I have only one rupee left. Of that, I mean to keep twelve annas for the carriage. If you have change, then let me break it—

No change? (Turning out his pocket and handing over the last coin) Well then, take this, my good man. I come out of your house entirely picked clean — like a wood-apple swallowed whole by an elephant, husk intact but hollow to the core.

But this money I have paid out — how am I to recover it from Uday when he returns! If only I could seize some article of value as security. Among things of value I see that Chandrakanta there — but from what I've observed, taking hold of him is scarcely within my power; he is more likely to tuck me under his arm instead.

(Forcing open a drawer in the corner) Ah, here we are — just the thing. The chain, too, looks quite fine. Well then, let us take possession of this, watch and all.

What's this, Chandra, why in such haste?

The police! Are the police coming?

Must I flee? Why, what crime have I committed! I merely came to honour a gentleman's invitation, and have been punished for it quite sufficiently.

So it's true, I see! Where has Chandra gone? And that fellow of Hari Babu's — I don't see him either! Everyone has fled!

Look here, my good man, keep your hands off me. It will not go well for you. I am a respectable gentleman. No thief, no swindler.

Ugh, what now! It seems that all day I have done nothing but eat puffed rice and wait by the roadside, and I find I have no patience left for this sort of jest from you.

Constable, sir, at least accept some refreshment money. (Feeling in his pocket) Alas, alas — not a farthing left! Inspector, sir, if you wish to catch a thief, come, I shall point him out to you myself. Never, since the founding of jails, has so great a thief walked this earth.

What have I done, tell me. Signed Jibon Babu's name and fetched a watch from Hamilton's shop? Constable, sir — is it fitting that a gentleman should fling so monstrous a charge upon another gentleman's name, so lightly?

What's that! Don't pull at it so! That is not my watch. If the chain gets torn in the end, we shall both be in worse trouble yet.

What? This is the Hamilton watch? Good heavens, is it true? Well then — take it, take it, take it this instant. But why drag me along with the watch? I am no golden chain, surely. I am golden Akshoy indeed — but only in my parents' eyes.

Well, if you truly will not let go of me, then let us go. Everyone loves me so, it seems — today I have had ample proof of it; now if only I can somehow escape your magistrate's love as well, I shall count myself saved this once. —

If daily one might get
Such a feast, and nothing owed as yet!

THE END