

Satirical Sketches

BOSHIKARAN

Rabindranath Tagore



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ACT ONE

ASHU and ANNADA

ASHU. Well now, Annada, I gather you have become a Brahmo—but why, on that account, did you feel compelled to abandon your wife? A wife is not, after all, one among the three hundred and thirty million gods. That much idolatry you might have kept without any real harm.

ANNADA. True enough. One may renounce one's wife, but one cannot bid farewell to Womankind itself—forsake the wife, and Woman appears before you writ large across the whole universe; the measure of one's private worship only swells the more.

ASHU. Well then?

ANNADA. Then listen. My mother-in-law was no more, and my father-in-law was a ferocious Hindu of the old school. When he learned I had turned Brahmo, he dressed my wife up as though she were a widow, made her a perpetual celibate, and took her off to live in Benares. After that, I hear, mere satisfaction with the entire pantheon of Hindu deities was not enough for him—on top of that he took up occultism, planchette-writing, animal magnetism, subtle bodies, mahatmas, spirit-photography, ghosts and spectres—nothing was left untried—

ASHU. Everything, that is, except you.

ANNADA. Me he dismissed outright as a Brahmo-demon.

ASHU. And have you given up all hope of her entirely?

ANNADA. Hope commits no crime in lingering—but such an entire regiment has entrenched itself behind her that there is no breaking through now. I hear my father-in-law has passed away, and that my wife now goes about rescuing fallen women.

ASHU. Then go fall at her feet yourself—perhaps she'll rescue you too.

ANNADA. I know neither her whereabouts nor do I feel the slightest inclination.

ASHU. Do you mean to go on drifting about like this forever?

ANNADA. No indeed—I am in search of a golden cage.

ASHU. Cage-keepers are not in short supply—it is the gold that proves scarce.

ANNADA. Well, my discussion can wait—but let me hear what you have to say. You've never once found any sanction, in any scripture whatsoever, for the attainment of a good wife. On that subject you fall quite silent. Theosophy has captivated you thoroughly. Mantras, breath-control, hatha-yoga, the channels of Sushumna, Ida, and Pingala—all these you'll surely abandon the moment you marry.

ASHU. You imagine I believe all this blindly—that is not so. I wish precisely to test whether these things are worthy of belief. Even disbelief must rest upon proof.

ANNADA. Sit and do just that, then. Build your foundations of stone for the purpose of erecting a mirage. I must be off now.

ASHU. Where are you going?

ANNADA. Not to practise necromancy upon corpses.

ASHU. That much I know already.

ANNADA. I have got wind of a living creature.

ASHU. Go then, and I shall not stand in the way of good fortune.

ACT TWO

THE LANDLORD and HIS WIFE

WIFE. If she truly is a Holy Mother, then why does she look like that?

LANDLORD. Unless she resembles a Taraka-demoness in looks and manner, I suppose she can't very well be a Holy Mother at all!

WIFE. And why should she not be? But tell me this—if she were a proper Holy Mother, would she be wandering about in the very prime of her womanhood, playing "Holy Mother" to fools like you, instead of staying quietly in her husband's house? Would your own father-in-law have parted with his own "Holy Mother" for that matter? And where, pray, did you come by so much money to squander?

LANDLORD. Oh, my dear—if those who possess yogic powers had neither money nor looks, then what would remain for the likes of you? Never mind—shall we not learn a spell or two from her ourselves?

WIFE. And what good would a spell do you, learning mantras at your age? Whom do you propose to bewitch?

LANDLORD. Whoever it is I have utterly failed to bring under my sway.

WIFE. And who might that be?

LANDLORD. First let me subdue her—then I'll pluck up courage to say the name.

[Enter the HOLY MOTHER]

HOLY MOTHER. I find this house does not suit my convenience at all. You must give me a larger house than this one.

LANDLORD. Apart from this house, I have only one other of any size. It is large enough, but—

HOLY MOTHER. No matter—I shall pay more rent, but it is precisely that house I wish to move into.

LANDLORD. Well, but the day before yesterday a tenant moved in there. A widow of some magistrate or other—come from the west in search of a husband for her daughter—she has taken up residence in my house Number Forty-Nine.

HOLY MOTHER. Forty-nine! That is exactly the number I want. This house of yours has an unlucky number.

LANDLORD. Twenty-two unlucky, Holy Mother? Pray explain the reason to me.

HOLY MOTHER. You would not understand it—two on the back of two—

LANDLORD. Quite right you are, Holy Mother, two on the back of two indeed makes twenty-two! In all this time I never once thought of it that way.

HOLY MOTHER. Two alone completes nothing—three is required. Look how we speak in ordinary conversation—"two or three persons"—

LANDLORD. Quite right, quite right, that is indeed how we speak.

HOLY MOTHER. If "two" alone sufficed, why should we say "three" after it? Consider it well.

LANDLORD. What wisdom have we, that we should understand such things? I knew all this all along, and yet somehow never grasped it.

HOLY MOTHER. And so it is precisely this "two on the back of two" that renders my spells wholly ineffective.

WIFE. (Aside) Long life to my own two-on-the-back-of-two! I want no part of any effective spell.

HOLY MOTHER. No number is quite so auspicious as forty-nine.

LANDLORD. (Aside) Did you hear that, wife?

WIFE. (Aside) What good would hearing do? Your forty-nine passed by a good many years ago.

LANDLORD. But must the Holy Mother move tomorrow, of all days, to that very house?

HOLY MOTHER. Tomorrow, the nineteenth, falls upon a Tuesday. Such an auspicious day will not come again soon.

LANDLORD. Quite true. Tomorrow is both the nineteenth and a Tuesday. What a wonder! Then indeed it must be tomorrow. I shall arrange it so. (Exit HOLY MOTHER) Now, what am I to do with these new tenants of mine? They've only just arrived from the country—where, all of a sudden, are they to find another house?

WIFE. For the present, simply keep them in this house. We might go stay a while at our son-in-law's place in Jhamapukur. As for that mantra-reciting woman of yours—best not to keep her here at all. Send her off elsewhere. It's a household with young children—who knows when some mishap might occur?

LANDLORD. Just as well. Let us coax the new tenants somehow, this very day, out of Number Forty-nine and into Number Twenty-two instead. I shall tell them the plague has broken out in the neighbourhood, and that a plague hospital is to be set up at Number Forty-nine.

ACT THREE

ASHU and ANNADA

ANNADA. That fierce curry of yours has brought tears to my nose and eyes both, my friend! I shall have to think twice before coming to your house again.

ASHU. Wherever did you find such a fierce curry?

ANNADA. Why, that sermon of your Tarkalankar friend. The fellow shook his topknot no end, but did he manage to convey anything sensible?

ASHU. How could the topknot shake at all without some sense behind it? Had you listened with proper reverence, you would have understood.

ANNADA. Had I understood, I should certainly have shown reverence. You, Ashu, went and took your M.A. in Physical Science—if you could but see how vigorously you keep shaking that topknot of yours these days, the whitewashed walls of Presidency College would blush scarlet with shame, free of charge. Now tell me, what was today's lecture about?

ASHU. The learned Pandit was expounding the doctrine of matrimony.

ANNADA. That doctrine has become rather urgently necessary for me to learn. Tarkalankar-mashai was saying that it is one's duty not to attempt to become acquainted with the bride before marriage. I could not quite follow his reasoning.

ASHU. He said that there is a certain secrecy at the heart of all beginnings. The seed lies beneath the soil in darkness, and only afterward, once it has sprouted, does the time come to do battle face-to-face with sun, moon, water, and wind. Before marriage, it is one's duty to keep the maiden's heart wrapped and veiled, rather than dragging it out into the open in the Western manner. One must not cast one's gaze upon it too hastily. It is only when, quite naturally, it sprouts of its own accord and begins secretly to advance its half-opened, bashful glance toward you, that your moment has come.

ANNADA. As for me, that test has already been conducted upon my own fate. Following the English custom, I did drag and haul at the maiden's heart before marriage—but that heart lay in such profound darkness that I never once caught the slightest trace of it, nor, for that matter, did I ever discover whether it sprouted at all. This time I intend to try the opposite experiment—heart first, everything else afterward.

ASHU. When is the day of the trial?

ANNADA. Tomorrow.

ASHU. And the place?

ANNADA. Number Forty-nine, Ram Bairagi's Lane.

ASHU. That number doesn't sound very promising.

ANNADA. Why? Are you thinking of old Forty-nine the wind-bag? He cannot touch me—it would be you who'd be in trouble.

ASHU. The bride?

ANNADA. Her widowed mother has brought her along from the west. I have told the matchmaker that only once he has properly arranged an introduction with the girl shall the question of marriage be settled.

ASHU. But Annada, in the end will you actually go in for polygamy?

ANNADA. I am not one to be frightened off by a mere name, as you people are. Where polygamy contains everything else except multiple wives—why be so alarmed at the sight of it, brother?

ASHU. Still, there ought to be some principle at stake, surely? Polygamy must, after all, be called polygamy.

ANNADA. Wherever my nominal wife happens to be, there too lies my principle. That wife is absent, and the principle remains intact regardless; therefore I shall now go boldly forward and take a second wife—I shan't be frightened by any bogey called "Principle."

[Enter RADHACHARAN]

RADHACHARAN. Ashu-babu!

ASHU. What is it, Radhe?

RADHACHARAN. The other day, when you were arguing with me about mantras, I got the impression that you didn't fully believe that each and every word possesses its own particular occult power.

ANNADA. What's that you say, Radhe? So Ashu's capacity for disbelief hasn't entirely vanished yet! There's still a patch or two left in him!—That words possess power—no Bengali lad believes that anymore!

RADHACHARAN. Tell me then, Annada-babu—do you mean to say that killing-spells, spirit-summoning, bewitchment, and the like are all utter humbug?

ANNADA. Could such a thing ever be true?

RADHACHARAN. Could such things possibly exist at all? Can the world sustain so vast a crop of humbug?

ANNADA. A certain Holy Mother, perfected in yoga, has arrived from the west. I hear she can demonstrate the power of mantras in the most direct and visible manner. I went to see her, but she doesn't reveal herself to just anyone; she says that once she finds a worthy person, she will show him the whole of her art. Ashu-babu, if you make the attempt, you will surely not fail.

ASHU. Where does she live?

RADHACHARAN. Number Twenty-two, Bhera Lane.

ANNADA. Twenty-two might be better than forty-nine, but the location doesn't strike me as promising at all. First bewitchment-craft, and on top of that, "Bhera Lane" to boot. Don't go losing your head at this Holy Mother's place.

ASHU. Nonsense! What are you talking about! She is a holy and virtuous woman—one need have no fear of losing one's head there. You had better mind your own step at Number Forty-nine.

ANNADA. You think Twenty-two utterly harmless, do you? Not so, my friend. Add the special upper dose of two, and that's Twenty-two. You'll come back thoroughly shattered from head to foot.

ACT FOUR

SHYAMASUNDARI, the widowed mother of the maiden, at Number Twenty-two

SHYAMA. The moment I heard "plague," I nearly died of fright. We fled here in such haste! But if Annada told the boy we'd be at Number Forty-nine today, how on earth will he ever find his way here instead? All this trouble I've taken preparing food and drink—I do hope it all won't go to waste! Such a hurry we were in, there was no time even to send word. The matchmaker says the boy wishes to look Nirupama over properly, thoroughly—wants to examine her reading, her music, everything—well, let him. Her father did indeed teach her precisely that way. He always lived in the west, and never kept us confined at all. Still, I don't know what these Calcutta boys are like these days. I do worry that, seeing our ways, he might think us uncouth. Who knows—perhaps they shake hands with young ladies! Perhaps they say "Good morning" in English! I hear they must be handed a lit cigar with one's own hand—that, at least, I cannot manage. The matchmaker says the boy wears hat and coat. My daughter, meanwhile, cannot bear the sight of European dress. I don't know what will come of it. Will she agree to marry after the mantras are recited?

[Enter the SERVANT]

SERVANT. Mistress, a young gentleman has arrived. I told him there was no man of the house present. He said he had come to see the Mother herself.

SHYAMA. Then all is well. That must be the very young man. Bring him in. (Exit SERVANT) I am rather afraid—a Calcutta boy—however am I to behave with him! Whatever will he think of us, savages that we are!

[Enter ASHU]

He places a guinea at Shyamasundari's feet and prostrates himself in full obeisance.

SHYAMA. (Aside) Why, he's offering money along with his obeisance! He doesn't shake hands at all. What a relief! What a well-bred boy! And see how properly he's dressed, in dhoti and shawl!

ASHU. Holy Mother, I never dared hope you would grant me your darshan. This is a very great favour indeed.

SHYAMA. (With affectionate warmth) Why, my child, you are like a son to me—what harm could there be in showing myself to you?

ASHU. Keep me in your affection. Give me your blessing—may I never be deprived of this favour.

SHYAMA. My child, hearing you speak soothes my very ears. I must surely have performed a great deal of penance, that—

ASHU. Holy Mother, this treasure of Nirupama that you have won through your austerities—to me—

SHYAMA. It is precisely to give her to you that I have made myself ready. After much searching I have found a worthy match—now I shall be at ease once I can actually give her.

ASHU. (Taking the dust of Shyama's feet) Holy Mother, you have blessed me beyond measure; that I should attain my desire so easily, I could not have imagined even in a dream.

SHYAMA. What are you saying, my child—whatever eagerness you feel, mine exceeds it by far.

ASHU. Then may I hope for some glimpse today of what I came here longing for—

SHYAMA. You shall have your glimpse indeed, my child—I have no objection to that at all.

ASHU. No objection, Holy Mother? What a relief to hear it—

SHYAMA. All in good time, my child—first, do take some refreshment.

ASHU. Refreshment again! You show me the very affection of a true mother.

SHYAMA. And you too look upon me as your own mother—that is the deepest wish of my heart. I have no son of my own; you shall be as a son to me.

[Enter SERVANT bringing food]

ASHU. What is all this! Such elaborate preparation!

SHYAMA. What preparation have I really made? I had a slight doubt whether you would arrive exactly today, and so—

ASHU. A doubt? Did you then know I would come?

SHYAMA. Of course I knew.

ASHU. (Aside) How extraordinary! Without even knowing me, she was waiting for my arrival beforehand! And still Annada refuses to believe in the power of yoga! If I tell him, he'll surely dismiss it all as a joke.

He begins eating

SHYAMA. (Aside) What a golden lump of a boy! As handsome as Kartikeya himself, and every word dripping honey. He has called me "Holy Mother" from the very start. Perhaps, since we've come from the west, he thinks it improper to call me simply "Mother." (Aloud) You're not eating anything at all, my child!

ASHU. I have eaten more than my capacity truly allows, Holy Mother.

SHYAMA. Then rest a while—I shall go and bring her.

[Exit]

ASHU. Radhe did indeed say that the Holy Mother demonstrates the power of mantras through a virgin maiden. My faith in the science of bewitchment has grown somewhat now. Meanwhile, this maternal affection of the Holy Mother has softened my heart in the strangest way. I have no mother of my own—it feels as though I have found one. What manner of spell is this, who can say! With her tender gaze the Holy Mother seems to have consecrated my whole being. That she should have taken me for her own son at first sight—it feels like the memory of some bond from a previous birth.

[Enter SHYAMA, bringing NIRUPAMA]

ASHU. (Aside) Ah, how lovely! The Holy Mother's art of bewitchment seems embodied in living form! No spell could possibly fail, spoken from such lips as these.

SHYAMA. Go on, don't be shy, my dear! Whatever he asks, answer him.

ASHU. Please, don't feel shy. The Holy Mother has shown me such great favour—you too must look upon me as one of your own. (Aside) How bashful the girl is! My words seem to have made her blush all the more.

SHYAMA. Ask her whatever you wish, my child.

ASHU. I am eager to know in which particular branches of learning you are accomplished.

SHYAMA. She is young yet—how much learning could she really have—still—

ASHU. However little it be, Holy Mother, it will be more than sufficient for one such as I.

SHYAMA. (Aside) Without even having heard any account of her learning, he's so pleased already—it must be that he's simply taken a liking to the girl. What a relief—I was so worried. (Aloud) Niru, my dear, sing him a song, won't you?

ASHU. A song! This surpasses my every hope. You must already know, I imagine, that there is nothing in this world I love better than music. (Aside) Had that great sceptic Annada been here, he might today have witnessed the power of yogic accomplishment with his own eyes. (Aloud, to NIRUPAMA) You have made me your eternal debtor in but a single day—should you sing, I shall be forever in your debt.

NIRUPAMA'S SONG

What words have I to offer you,
O heart, O life, O soul of mine!
Show mercy, come into my heart,
Take me and make me yours entire—
O heart, O life, O soul of mine.
Mere dust am I, mere ash am I,
worthless, having nothing of my own—
yet grant me worth by your own gift,
touch me, and turn me into gem!

In your glory shall be my glory too,
and this I offer, whole and entire—
my heart, my life, my soul, at your feet.

ASHU. (Aside) No mantra is needed now. What more remains of bewitchment! This maiden is surely a daughter of the gods. (Aloud) Holy Mother!

SHYAMA. What is it, my child?

ASHU. Keep me as your own son forever, and never deprive me of the privilege of hearing such nectar-sweet song. Whatever comes of this, I count it the very highest fortune already. I have quite forgotten all about mantras. Now I understand—there is no need of mantras at all.

SHYAMA. Don't say such things, my child! There is indeed need of mantras—otherwise, according to scripture—

ASHU. That is quite true. I don't dismiss mantras at all. I only meant that it isn't mantras alone that captivate the heart—nothing at all can compare with the enchanting power of music. (Aside) The girl has blushed crimson again. How very shy she is!

SHYAMA. (Aside) The boy is very fine indeed. But he does seem to lack a proper sense of shame. It would have been better if he hadn't spoken of captivating hearts in front of the mother-in-law.

ASHU. But please don't be offended—whatever comes to my mind, I shall speak plainly, and then—

SHYAMA. Yes, my child, let all that rest for now. First—

ASHU. I was saying that even the captivation wrought by music is, after all, merely a matter of sound; and if that sound has some connection with the mind, then why should we not equally acknowledge the power of a mantra's sound?

SHYAMA. Quite right. The mantra deserves its due as well.

ASHU. (With enthusiasm) It is perhaps presumptuous of me to speak of such things before you, but the precise nature of the subtle connection between the soul and the power of sound is difficult to determine—Tarkalankar-mashai calls it inexpressible. Why does scripture say that sound itself is Brahman? It is not that Brahman is sound, or that sound is Brahman—but within the practical manifestation of Brahman's being, it is in the form of sound that Brahman's presence seems nearest to us. (To NIRUPAMA) You must have discussed such matters at length yourself—do you not feel that sound, more than form, taste, smell, or touch, is the most immediate object of perception for our very souls? That is precisely why sound is the chief means by which one soul unites with another. What say you? (Aside) How very shy the girl is!

SHYAMA. Go on, my dear, answer whatever he asks. With all this learning you've acquired, can you not even answer this one question?—My child, it's only the first day, that's why she's shy. Don't think she hasn't learned anything.

ASHU. The brilliance of her learning shines forth in her very countenance. I have not the slightest doubt of it.

SHYAMA. Niru, dear, go into that room for a moment.

[Exit NIRUPAMA]

Look here, my child, the girl has no father, so I must answer everything myself—please don't take offense.

ASHU. Take offense! What are you saying! I came here specifically to hear what you had to say—like a chatterbox I've done nothing but babble on myself. Please forgive me.

SHYAMA. If you are willing, then, we must fix a day, mustn't we?

ASHU. (Aside) I had thought everything would be settled today itself. But today is a Thursday, so perhaps that's why it can't be. (Aloud) Well then, suppose you fix it for next Sunday?

SHYAMA. What are you saying, my child? Today is Thursday—that leaves only two days in between.

ASHU. Would that require a great deal of preparation?

SHYAMA. It would indeed, my child—one must do what one can. Besides, one must consult the almanac and fix upon an auspicious day.

ASHU. Quite true, an auspicious day must indeed be found. But the main thing is, the sooner the better. Such is my eagerness that I wish it could be this very moment—

SHYAMA. Well, I shan't delay needlessly, my child! It can certainly be done within the month of Aghran. The girl too has reached marriageable age—she cannot be kept waiting much longer either.

ASHU. Once her marriage takes place, I suppose—

SHYAMA. Then I might return to Benares once more.

ASHU. Then, before that, our own—

SHYAMA. All that must be properly settled.

ASHU. Then please do fix the date.

SHYAMA. And you are agreeable, my child?

ASHU. Entirely so! Had I not been agreeable, why should I have come here at all! Am I making sport of you? That is not my nature at all. I am not one of these modern young men who trifle with such serious matters.

SHYAMA. You won't change your mind again?

ASHU. Never. Touching your very feet, I declare that I shall not rest until I have received from your hands what I have come here to seek.

SHYAMA. No talk of "receiving" is necessary here, my child—

ASHU. Tell me then what you wish.

SHYAMA. What should I wish, my child? Tell me rather what you wish.

ASHU. I wish only for learning—nothing else.

SHYAMA. (Aside) The boy is shameless, I must say! Fie, fie, fie—how dare he speak to me of "learning-beauty"! Does he mean to call my Niru merely "Learning"! (Aloud) Well then, my child, what do you say about the betel-tray?

ASHU. (Aside) Betel-tray! I see this whole affair is conducted entirely by scripture. First a virgin maiden, and now a betel-tray on top of it!

This doesn't sit well with me at all. (Aloud) Well, Holy Mother, please don't take offense—of course, whatever pertains to the ceremony must be performed—but as for that betel-tray you mentioned, that particular task cannot be performed by me.

SHYAMA. My child, you young men of this generation regard it as indecent, but I myself see no harm in it whatsoever—

ASHU. You see no harm in it at all! What are you saying, Holy Mother!

SHYAMA. Well, never mind the betel-tray then, nothing shall be held up on that account—now, as for the marriage itself, is that settled?

ASHU. Whose marriage?

SHYAMA. You quite astonish me, sir! After all this conversation, you ask whose marriage it is! It is your own marriage we've been discussing all along; the moment you heard mention of the betel-tray, you started as though struck. Well, never mind the betel-tray then, let it go.

ASHU. (Bewildered) Oh, yes, I understand now, that's what it was, indeed! (Aside) Some grave error seems to have occurred. Without realizing it, I have become entangled completely. What is to be done now! (Aloud) But surely, such haste is unnecessary—could we not discuss all this more openly on some other day? What do you say?

SHYAMA. What more openness could you possibly want, my child! How much more open could things become on some other day! It was you yourself who was in such a hurry. It was you who wished to fix the date for this coming Sunday.

ASHU. I did indeed wish that.

SHYAMA. It was only because you wanted to look her over properly that I brought the girl out to meet you, let her sing for you too—and now, having heard mention of the betel-tray, if you suddenly balk and draw back, I shall never be able to show my face again. And what will people say of you, my child! Is it proper to treat the daughter of a respectable family this way? What wrong has my Niru done to you that—

She begins to weep

[Enter NIRUPAMA hastily]

NIRUPAMA. Mother, what has happened, Mother? Why are you crying so?

ASHU. (Aside) What utter ruin! Whatever must they think of me now! (Aloud) Nothing at all has happened—I am setting everything right this very moment. Please, don't weep. Tears bring ill fortune to auspicious undertakings. (To SHYAMA) Please, do fix a day—I have no objection whatsoever.

SHYAMA. Then, my child, if it be an auspicious day, let it be as you said—this coming Sunday. I need no elaborate preparation. I shall only be at ease once your resolve is settled.

ASHU. Don't say such things—my resolve never wavers.

SHYAMA. That is exactly what you said, touching my very feet, but not ten minutes had passed before the mere mention of a betel-tray changed your mind entirely.

ASHU. True enough. I simply don't care for betel-trays—

SHYAMA. And why not, pray tell, my child?

ASHU. I cannot quite say precisely—there is something about it that— I suppose, you know—betel-trays seem somehow— who knows why, but the very word itself—hearing it suddenly, I felt as though—but tell me, what is the number of this house?

SHYAMA. Oh, is that what worries you? We are not deceiving you at all, my child. We were indeed at Number Forty-nine, and only yesterday moved here to Number Twenty-two. If you have any doubt in your mind, you may go and inquire at Number Forty-nine yourself.

ASHU. (Aside) Oh, what a blunder I have made! Well, no matter—now at least I've found a way of escape. Once I bring Annada here, the whole tangle will resolve itself. Well, Annada's fortune is good indeed. At times I even feel it would hardly be so bad to see this mistake through to its very end.

SHYAMA. What is it, my child? Why do you brood so? We are respectable people—we did not come all this way from the west merely to deceive you.

ASHU. Please don't say that—I have not the slightest doubt in my mind. I am going now; I shall return within the hour, and before this very day is out I shall arrange something wholly satisfactory—this I swear to you, touching your very feet.

SHYAMA. My child, that oath is unnecessary—you swore another oath, touching my feet, only a while ago—

ASHU. Very well then, I swear upon my own tutelary deity that I shall settle everything firmly before the day is out—nothing else shall I say until then.

SHYAMA. (Aside) The boy speaks well enough, but there's no understanding him at all. One moment he hurries, the next he drags his feet—and yet, looking at his face, one cannot help but trust him.

ASHU. Then, with your permission, I shall take my leave now.

SHYAMA. Go on then, my child.

[ASHU bows and exits]

ACT FIVE

ANNADA

ANNADA. I cannot make head or tail of this business at all. I came, on the matchmaker's word, to view the bride. But the one who appeared before me—judging by her age, she could hardly be the girl's mother at all; judging by her looks, I took her for some celestial nymph—though, come to think of it, I've never actually seen what a nymph looks like before. The moment I extended my hand to shake hers, quick as a flash she tied a length of red thread, knotted with cowries, around my wrist. Anyone else would have made a fuss; but with such a lovely face, how could one possibly object! Still, I cannot fathom what strange local custom all this represents.

[Enter the HOLY MOTHER]

HOLY MOTHER. (Aside) After much searching, I have found him at last. First let me try out my guru-given spell of bewitchment upon him, and only afterward reveal myself. (Pressing a human skull to Annada's forehead) Say: "Hrillim."

ANNADA. Hrillim.

HOLY MOTHER. (Placing a rosary of rudraksha beads round Annada's neck) Say: "Kurbang Kurbang Krang."

ANNADA. (Aside) Fie, fie! This is becoming utterly ridiculous. First a rosary upon my coat-collar, and now these bizarre syllables to top it off!

HOLY MOTHER. Why have you fallen silent?

ANNADA. I'm speaking! Tell me what you said.

HOLY MOTHER. Kurbang Kurbang Krang.

ANNADA. Kurbang Kurbang Krang. (Aside) Ridiculous!

HOLY MOTHER. Bow your head. I must put vermilion on your forehead.

ANNADA. Vermilion! Will vermilion truly suit me, dressed as I am?

HOLY MOTHER. I know nothing of that, but it must be applied.

Vermilion is smeared upon Annada's forehead

ANNADA. Ugh! You've smeared my whole forehead entirely!

HOLY MOTHER. Say: "Salutations to Vajrayogini." (ANNADA repeats accordingly) Now bow. (Which he does) Say: "Salutations to Kurabe Karabe." Bow. Say: "Salutations to Hrimling Ghurmling." Bow.

ANNADA. (Aside) This farce grows richer by the moment.

HOLY MOTHER. Now bind this fragment of Mother Vajrayogini's blessed cloth about your head.

ANNADA. (Aside) Now I must tie this shawl-fragment round my head! Things are getting quite out of hand. (Aloud) Look here, I would rather put on a turban instead, or even one of those caps Bengali gentlemen wear—

HOLY MOTHER. All that may come later; for now, let me simply wrap this round.

ANNADA. Go ahead then.

HOLY MOTHER. Now, please be seated on this low stool.

ANNADA. (Aside) Now I'm truly in a fix. I've come dressed in trousers, after all! Well, no matter, I must sit somehow.

He sits

HOLY MOTHER. Close your eyes. Say: "Khatkarini, Hathabarini, Ghatasarini, Natatarini, Krung." Bow. (He complies) Can you see anything?

ANNADA. Nothing at all.

HOLY MOTHER. Well then, face east, and place your hand on your right ear. Say: "Khatkarini, Hathabarini, Ghatasarini, Natatarini, Krung." Bow. Can you see anything now?

ANNADA. Nothing whatsoever.

HOLY MOTHER. Well then, turn round the other way. Place both hands on both ears. Say: "Khatkarini, Hathabarini, Ghatasarini, Natatarini, Krung." Can you see anything?

ANNADA. Tell me first what I am supposed to see.

HOLY MOTHER. Can you see a donkey?

ANNADA. Indeed I can! I can see it most vividly, quite close at hand.

HOLY MOTHER. Then the spell has worked. Upon its back—

ANNADA. Yes, yes, upon its back I can indeed see someone.

HOLY MOTHER. A beautiful maiden—

ANNADA. Exceedingly beautiful—

HOLY MOTHER. Heading toward the north-east—

ANNADA. I've quite lost my sense of direction—I couldn't say precisely which way she's going. She does seem to be moving off in some hurry, though! The donkey seems quite out of breath.

HOLY MOTHER. Is she getting away, then? Well then, once more—

ANNADA. No, no, why should she get away—tell me exactly which direction you've decided she's headed.

HOLY MOTHER. She's advancing forward, and then retreating backward again.

ANNADA. Precisely so. Advancing and retreating. The donkey's tongue is hanging right out.

HOLY MOTHER. Then all is well. Now the time has come. Ho, Matangini, all of you, come now!

Enter a company of women, ululating and blowing conch-shells

The HOLY MOTHER seats herself to Annada's left and places her hand in his

ANNADA. This part I find quite pleasant. But I still can't quite make out what all this is about.

SONG OF THE WOMEN

Now, my friend, the golden deer
seems ready to be caught at last!
Come, you nymphs of old,
come quickly, one and all.
He ran off thirsting after
the mirage-water's phantom lure—
seize him gently now,
bind him in the hardest noose.
Show him no mercy now, my friend,
such tenderness is not their way.
They'll heed no plea for mercy,
they'll bolt the moment they get free.
This wild deer, cut loose from its tether,
trap it now in illusion's snare,
charm it with the flute's own call,
strip it of its reason and its sense.

ANNADA. My reason and sense have not entirely deserted me. Only the merest trace remains. From what little sense I have left, it strikes me that of all the "wild beasts" spoken of in that song, none, under present circumstances, could possibly be so fortunate as myself. The song is fine, the tune quite pleasant, and the voices, too, cannot be faulted—but do set aside the metaphor for a moment and tell me plainly, in simple prose—what exactly do you all intend regarding me? Don't fear that I'll flee; even were you to chase me off, I wouldn't go. But such grave questions as where I have come from, why I have come, and where I am to go, naturally arise in the human mind.

HOLY MOTHER. Do you sometimes think of your wife?

ANNADA. What good would that do—merely wasted time. Far greater joy comes from beholding your lovely face than from remembering her.

HOLY MOTHER. And if your wife, remembering you, wastes her own time in turn?

ANNADA. Then my advice to her would be this—that no further time ought to be wasted; either let her cease remembering me altogether, or else grant me her presence—time, after all, is precious.

HOLY MOTHER. That very advice deserves to be crowned above all others. I myself am your devoted servant, the lady Mahimohini Devi—

ANNADA. Saved! Whatever grief I felt at heart, had she not been my own wife I should have had to hang myself. But why, then, all this elaborate business for one's own husband?

HOLY MOTHER. Only by first testing upon you the very bewitchment-spell I learned from my guru could I reveal my true identity—now there is no escape for you.

ANNADA. Has this spell ever been tested upon anyone else?

HOLY MOTHER. No, I kept this spell in reserve all this while, for you alone. Today, having witnessed its wondrous effect with my own eyes, I have proven, a hundred times over in my heart, my guru's teaching. An infallible spell. Do you still not believe in its power?

ANNADA. I cannot deny the power of bewitchment. Now I shall feel quite at ease once you've taught me these spells yourself.

A maidservant sets out food before them

ANNADA. This too is part of the bewitchment. Whether it be a wild deer or a city donkey, this is most essential for the taming of any creature.

He begins eating

[ASHU enters hastily; the HOLY MOTHER and companions exit]

ASHU. I say, Annada, a fine muddle has arisen! Why, look at you, sitting there eating so contentedly! What sort of getup is this? (Laughing loudly) What is all this business? A human skull, a chopper, a lamp, a rosary of beads! Are you about to be sacrificed, or what?

ANNADA. It's already been done.

ASHU. Already done, how?

ANNADA. I'll explain all that later. First tell me your news.

ASHU. That maiden you had settled upon for marriage—her family has suddenly moved from Number Forty-nine to Number Twenty-two. Taking the girl's mother for a Holy Mother, I babbled on so foolishly, over and over, that she has become firmly convinced I have agreed to marry the girl. Now, unless you come along, there's no escaping this.

ANNADA. What does the girl look like?

ASHU. Like a daughter of the gods.

ANNADA. Well, no matter—polygamy is against my principles.

ASHU. What are you saying! That day you argued so fiercely—

ANNADA. Far better reasoning has presented itself to me today than on that occasion—

ASHU. Entirely irrefutable?

ANNADA. Entirely irrefutable.

ASHU. Let's see what this reasoning looks like.

ANNADA. Then wait a moment. (Exits, then re-enters with the HOLY MOTHER) This is my wife, the lady Mahimohini Devi.

ASHU. What! She is your—You are our Annada's—How extraordinary! But then, this simply cannot be!

ANNADA. What do you mean, cannot be? It already is—why, then, can it not be again? It happened once before, and now it has happened a second time—and you say it cannot be!

ASHU. No, that's not what I meant. What I meant was—what's to be done about that business at Number Twenty-two!

ANNADA. Is that all? There's an easy solution.

ASHU. Let's hear it, then.

ANNADA. Marry her yourself.

ASHU. Give up everything entirely—my breath-control, my meditation, my mantra-practice—

ANNADA. Never fear—whatever you abandon, I shall gladly take up myself. But never mind that—how did your own bewitchment turn out?

ASHU. Well, not entirely without success. But you're going to find this whole affair rather amusing, I fear.

ANNADA. No more amusement to be had here.

ASHU. Why do you say that?

ANNADA. I too have been thoroughly bewitched.

ASHU. Well then, let's be off. We're expected within the hour. Let's go settle the matter once and for all.